

NAVIGATING ETHICAL GREY AREAS: A QUALITATIVE INQUIRY INTO DECISION-MAKING DYNAMICS IN ROMANIAN SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT: *Social work practice operates within a complex moral landscape, where professional decisions directly influence the well-being and fundamental rights of beneficiaries. This study explores the typology of ethical dilemmas and the decision-making mechanisms employed by social workers in Romania, within a context characterized by institutional constraints, legislative ambiguity, and limited resources. Employing a qualitative methodology based on semi-structured interviews with 12 practitioners from various fields of intervention (child protection, older adults, and disability services), the research highlights the discrepancy between theoretical normative frameworks and the on-the-ground reality. Results indicate a prevalence of conflicts between confidentiality and the duty to report, tensions between autonomy and paternalism in working with vulnerable populations, as well as emerging challenges related to digital ethics. The study identifies the phenomenon of "ethical bricolage" – the ad-hoc adaptation of rules to serve the beneficiary's best interest – and underscores the necessity of transitioning from intuitive ethics to a reflective one, supported by the institutionalization of ethical supervision.*

Keywords: *ethical dilemmas; social work; moral decision-making; supervision; digital ethics; reflective practice.*

1. Introduction

Social work is fundamentally defined by its commitment to social justice, human dignity, and the protection of individuals in vulnerable situations. However, current professional practice does not occur within an ideal vacuum, but rather at a complex intersection of rigid legislative frameworks, fluctuating public policies, chronic limitations of institutional resources, and difficult social realities.

In this context, the ethical dimension of the profession acts not as an accessory component or a mere intellectual exercise, but as a central pillar of intervention, as social workers' decisions generate direct, profound, and often irreversible consequences on the lives of beneficiaries.

The professional relationship between the specialist and the social service beneficiary is not morally neutral. Beyond the technical and administrative aspects of "case management," the act of social work implies an intrinsic ethical responsibility.

Every decision—from the institutionalization of a child to the refusal of financial aid or the reporting of a risk situation—carries a significant value weight.

1.1. Theoretical Framework: The Nature of the Ethical Dilemma

Specialized literature defines an ethical dilemma as a complex decision-making situation in which two or more moral principles, values, or professional obligations come into conflict, and choosing one option inevitably implies compromising the other (Loewenberg et al., 2012). Unlike an "ethical problem" (where the solution is clear but difficult to implement), a dilemma does not have an obvious correct answer.

In social work practice, theorists such as Reamer (2018) and Banks (2021) distinguish between three major paradigms guiding decision-making:

Deontological Ethics (Kantianism): Emphasizes adherence to rules and duties (e.g., "I never lie," "I respect confidentiality at all costs"), regardless of the consequences.

Teleological Ethics (Utilitarianism): Focuses on the consequences of the action, seeking "the greatest good for the greatest number of people," even if this entails violating a rule.

Ethics of Care: Proposed as a feminist alternative, this paradigm prioritizes human relationships, empathy, and context rather than abstract principles.

Beauchamp and Childress (2001) propose a method of moral justification based on "Reflective Equilibrium" and "Common Morality." They argue that one should not start from a single grand ethical theory (such as utilitarianism or Kantianism), but rather seek coherence between moral intuitions, generally accepted principles, and ethical theories.

Practitioners are often caught between these paradigms: the Code of Ethics imposes strict rules (deontology), while the reality of the field demands pragmatic solutions for the beneficiary's survival (utilitarianism).

Professional ethics encompasses the totality of principles, values, and standards regulating practitioner conduct. In social work, central pillars include respect for human dignity, personal autonomy, social justice, responsibility, and confidentiality.

1.2. The Romanian Context

Although ethical dilemmas have been extensively analyzed in international literature—with recent studies from Greece (Chatzifotiou & Papouli, 2022) and Israel (Segal et al., 2023) highlighting similar conflicts—empirical approaches directly investigating the perspective of practitioners in Romania are limited. The Romanian context presents specific particularities: a social services system undergoing a continuous process of post-communist reform, high bureaucratic pressure that often stifles the professional act, and a governance of ethical codes still in the process of consolidation (Lazăr, 2015).

In Romanian social work practice, an ethical dilemma is viewed as a complex problem arising within the context of professional practice, requiring identification and careful analysis by reference to two fundamental landmarks: the legislative framework and the profession's Code of Ethics. An ethical dilemma constitutes a critical professional situation that compels the social worker not to act automatically, but to reflect, analyze the conflict of values through the lens of the law and deontology, and seek reasoned solutions, often with the support of a supervisor or a multidisciplinary team.

From a theoretical standpoint, the issue of ethical dilemmas in Romanian social work has been adopted by the academic environment; consequently, courses on deontology were

introduced at the Universities of Bucharest and Cluj as early as 2001.

In the work "Child Protection: Dilemmas, Conceptions, and Methods" (Protecția Copilului: Dileme, Concepții și Metode), author Maria Roth-Szamosközi addresses the fundamental ethical dilemma of social work: the tension between the right to privacy/family autonomy and society's duty to intervene for the protection of the child.

The present study aims to fill this knowledge gap by thoroughly investigating the subjective experiences of practitioners. We aim to understand the phenomenology of the decision-making process: How do social workers feel moral pressure? What resources do they mobilize? How do they navigate between law and conscience?

2. Methodology

The investigative endeavor aimed to explore and analyze the ethical dilemmas encountered by social work specialists in their direct interaction with beneficiaries, as well as the decision-making strategies adopted to manage these situations. The study pursues to highlight how contextual, institutional, and personal factors influence the moral deliberative process, while simultaneously identifying the needs for professional support and continuing education in the sphere of applied ethics.

To answer these questions and capture contextual subtle differentiations that cannot be statistically quantified, the study adopted a qualitative, exploratory, and applied research design, oriented towards a deep understanding of subjective experiences and professional strategies. The qualitative approach is considered the "gold standard" in ethics research (Creswell & Poth, 2018), as it allows for the exploration of the depth of human experiences and the meanings subjects attribute to their actions.

2.1. Participants and Selection Procedure

The sample was constituted using purposive sampling, aimed at maximizing professional and institutional diversity to obtain a holistic perspective. Twelve social workers participated, recruited from both the public system (DGASPC, SPAS) and the private sector (NGOs) between August 1, 2025, and August 31, 2025. The

inclusion criteria were rigorous:

- Completed undergraduate or master's studies in social work.
- A minimum of 3 years of professional experience (considered necessary to have encountered a variety of complex situations).
- Current activity involving direct interaction with beneficiaries from vulnerable categories.

Sample Profile: The final structure included specialists from child protection (n=4), community social work (n=3), residential services for older adults (n=2), services for persons with disabilities (n=2), and mental health/addictions (n=1). Participants ranged in age from 26 to 54 years, with an average professional experience of 8.5 years.

2.2. Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, conducted face-to-face or via video platforms. The interview guide was constructed around four major thematic axes derived from specialized literature:

- Professional Context: Familiarization with the work environment and case typology.
- Concrete Ethical Experiences: Soliciting the narration of critical incidents ("Critical Incident Technique"), where participants described a specific dilemma step-by-step.
- Influencing Factors: Exploration of internal pressures (values) and external pressures (institution, law).
- Ethical Reflection: Evaluation of the use of decision-making models and the Code of Ethics.

The interviews had an average duration of 55 minutes, were recorded with the participants' agreement, and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

2.3. Data Analysis

The analytical process followed the stages of thematic analysis described by Braun and Clarke (2006) (Fig. 1).

In the first phase, the researcher familiarized themselves with the data through repeated reading of the transcripts. Subsequently, initial codes were generated (e.g., "fear of error," "conflict with the law," "lack of time"). These codes were grouped into potential themes, which were reviewed and refined to generate a "thematic map" of ethical dilemmas in Romania. A coding matrix was utilized to ensure consistency.

2.4. Rigor and Ethical Considerations

To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, strategies proposed by Lincoln and Guba were employed: credibility (through prolonged engagement and member checking), transferability (thick description of the context), and confirmability (researcher reflexivity).

The study strictly adhered to ethical norms. Participants signed detailed informed consent forms. To protect identities, all names used in the presentation of results are pseudonyms, and specific details that could lead to the identification of institutions were generalized.

2.5. Limitations of the Research

As this is a qualitative research study, the results cannot be statistically generalized to the entire population of social workers. Additionally, self-representation biases (social desirability) may exist, as respondents might be tempted to present situations where they acted ethically correctly. Furthermore, selection based on availability may



Fig. 1. Stages of thematic analysis

favor professionals who are more involved and open to reflection.

3. Results and Analysis

The data analysis revealed a complex ethical landscape in which dilemmas are not isolated incidents, but rather a constant "background music" to professional practice. Five major themes were identified that structure the ethical experience of Romanian social workers.

3.1. "The Silence That Protects vs. The Silence That Kills": Confidentiality and Reporting

This was the most frequent and intense dilemma reported, particularly by practitioners in child protection and mental health. The tension arises between the deontological obligation to maintain professional secrecy (the basis of trust) and the legal (Law 272/2004) and moral obligation to protect life (duty to warn/protect).

A paradigmatic case was recounted by "Elena" (P4), a social worker in a public service, regarding a 16-year-old adolescent victim of emotional abuse. The minor conditioned the disclosure of the trauma on absolute secrecy.

"It was a moment of paralysis. The girl was crying and telling me: 'If my dad finds out I told you, he'll kill me. Promise me you won't tell!' I saw the imminent risk, but I knew that if I called the police or filed the standard report, I would sever the only thread of trust she had built with an adult. I felt like a traitor, no matter what I chose." (Elena, 8 years of experience)

The analysis shows that social workers do not apply the law mechanically. They resort to a strategy of "negotiated transparency." Instead of reporting automatically "over the head" of the beneficiary, they invest time in convincing the victim, explaining the legal limits of confidentiality. The final decision often involves a formal report, but accompanied by intense support measures, demonstrating a shift from a purely bureaucratic ethics to a relational one.

3.2. Between Respect and Rescue: Autonomy vs. Paternalism

A dominant theme in services for older adults is the conflict between the right to self-determination and the duty to protect the

beneficiary from self-neglect. These situations are complicated by the lack of community resources (insufficient home care), which transforms institutionalization into the only "rescue" option—an option often refused by the elderly.

"Mihai" (P2), a worker in a service for older adults, described the case of Mr. G., a 78-year-old man with incipient dementia, living in squalid conditions, who categorically refused the residential center:

"He always told me: 'It's my house, it's my dirt, it's my life. I prefer to die here of cold than in a clean bed at the care home.' My dilemma was heart-wrenching: do I let him exercise his autonomy until death-what society would call negligence on my part-or do I intervene paternalistically, forcing an admission that will crush his spirit, just to keep his body alive?"

Results indicate that in Romania, the pressure of the medical and social systems often pushes towards paternalistic solutions (institutionalization), perceived as legally "safer" for the professional.

However, experienced social workers attempt to build informal support networks (neighbors, church) to prolong the stay at home, assuming the risk of "imperfect monitoring" in the name of human dignity.

3.3. Ethical Dissonance: Institutional Loyalty vs. Social Justice

A distinctly evolving theme was the conflict between the real, human needs of beneficiaries and the rigidity of organizational policies. Participants frequently described situations where bureaucratic eligibility criteria exclude people in deep crisis. This generates "moral distress"—the professional knows the correct action but is institutionally prevented from performing it.

A relevant example is offered by "Ana" (P7), from a community assistance center, faced with the eviction of a single mother who did not qualify for emergency aid due to a rigid administrative criterion regarding the number of children:

"The rule was clear: you need three children for the score. She had two. But eviction meant the street. I asked myself: to whom am I loyal? To the City Hall that pays me to follow regulations, or to this desperate mother? I chose to act in the 'grey area.' I called NGOs, applied internal pressure, and 'embellished' the social report a bit to highlight the vulnerability. Sometimes, being

ethical means being a small saboteur of bureaucracy."

This behavior, which the literature terms "responsible insubordination" or "guerrilla advocacy," demonstrates that Romanian social workers often become the buffer between the harshness of the system and the vulnerability of the citizen.

3.4. Pandora's Box: The Challenges of Digital Ethics

The study identified a new category of dilemmas associated with the accelerated digitalization of social services (integrated databases – The Child Observatory, communication via WhatsApp with beneficiaries). Participants signaled major concerns regarding data confidentiality and informed consent.

Participant P10 noted: *"The system requires us to upload the beneficiary's entire history to the cloud. But who has access? Can a tax office clerk see that this young person was abused in childhood? There is no 'forget' button. The dilemma is how we protect privacy in an era of total data transparency."*

Another professional highlights that, in the case of identifying a minor at risk, legislation mandates that family data be registered in the national application, The Child Observatory (Observatorul Copilului). However, there are increasingly frequent cases where the family does not consent to the registration of personal data in this application, or communicates only partial data, such that the case transmission for the drafting of the service plan cannot be finalized, and implicitly, intervention cannot occur. This theme highlights a major gap between technology and the professional and ethical training of the staff.

3.5. Decision-Making Solitude: The Deficit of Supervision

Perhaps the most alarming result is the absence of formalized support mechanisms. 9 out of the 12 participants stated that they do not benefit from structured ethical supervision. Life-and-death decisions are often made individually or in informal corridor consultations.

"After the abuse case, I had sleepless nights. I woke up wondering if I did the right thing. Without a supervisor, you feel alone in front of an

impossible choice. The boss just wants the paperwork in order; he doesn't care about your moral turmoil. This leads to exhaustion, to cynicism." (P9).

The lack of supervision transforms the ethical dilemma from an opportunity for professional growth into a source of trauma and burnout. In contrast, the absence of this mechanism generates a state of insecurity and isolation.

"Without a supervisor, you feel alone facing an impossible choice, without the certainty that you have correctly protected the beneficiary." (Participant 12).

3.6. Determinants of Ethical Decision-Making

The decision-making process is not isolated but profoundly influenced by a cluster of contextual and subjective factors. Most interviewees indicated institutional pressure (time deficits, resources, or lack of managerial support) as the main obstacle to composed ethical deliberation. Additionally, professional emotions—fear of error or intense empathy for the beneficiary—play a catalytic role.



A respondent highlighted the pragmatism forced by circumstances: "Unfortunately, decisions are often dictated by time crises, not by profound ethical analysis." (Participant 1).

4. Discussion

The results of this study validate the premise that ethics constitutes the nucleus of practice, yet they reveal major structural vulnerabilities within the Romanian system. The analysis of the interviews suggests that social workers in Romania are not mere implementers of social policies, but moral agents who permanently renegotiate the boundaries of the system.

4.1. From "Law Enforcement" to "Street-Level Bureaucracy"

A major finding of the study is the discrepancy between normative rigidity and the flexibility required in the field. The phenomenon of "ethical bricolage" identified among participants (see the case of "Ana" and the manipulation of the report to prevent eviction) can be interpreted through the lens of the "street-level bureaucracy" theory.

In the Romanian context, characterized by limited resources and occasionally contradictory legislation, social workers become, *de facto*, micro-level public policy makers. They do not merely implement the law, but adapt it to make it "human." This "responsible insubordination" is not an act of rebellion, but a survival mechanism of the system: without the moral flexibility of practitioners, bureaucratic rigidity would leave numerous vulnerable cases outside any support (Buzducea, 2017). However, this bricolage carries major risks: it transforms beneficiary rights (which should be universally guaranteed) into privileges dependent on the courage or individual creativity of the social worker.

4.2. Normalizing the "Grey Area"

In contrast with normative theoretical frameworks (Reamer, 2023) that propose clear decision-making algorithms, the Romanian reality is dominated by pragmatism. Social workers operate in a permanent "grey zone," where the law is often incomplete or contradictory to human interest.

This finding aligns with the study conducted by Chatzifotiou & Papouli (2022) in Greece, which also identified that in countries with limited resources, professionals are forced to prioritize the beneficiary's survival to the detriment of procedural purity.

Ethical decisions are frequently conditioned by exogenous factors. Institutional pressures, the chronic deficit of resources, overload, and excessive bureaucracy limit the moral autonomy of practitioners.

In the absence of flexible procedures, social workers are forced to operate in the "grey areas" of practice, placed in the position of choosing between procedural compliance and social justice.

4.3. The Invisible Burden: Moral Distress and the Privatization of Ethics

The study highlights a worrying correlation between the lack of supervision and the emergence of "moral distress"—the painful psychological state that arises when the professional knows the correct ethical action but is prevented by institutional constraints from implementing it.

Unlike countries with a consolidated tradition in social work, where dilemmas are debated in multidisciplinary teams or clinical supervision (Kadushin & Harkness, 2014), in Romania, we observe a "privatization of ethics." The social worker carries the burden of the decision home, into the private sphere. This decision-making solitude partially explains the high rates of professional burnout signaled in profile studies (Lazăr, 2015).

When the institution does not assume ethical responsibility, it falls exclusively on the individual's shoulders, generating cynicism or emotional withdrawal as defense mechanisms.

4.4. Cultural Particularities: Dual Relationships

A particular aspect of practice in Romania, highlighted by the study, is the tension between Western ethical standards (which impose strict professional boundaries) and the local culture of hospitality and interdependence, visible especially in rural environments.

Classical codes of ethics warn against "dual relationships" (Reamer, 2018). However, study participants showed that the rigid refusal of small gestures of gratitude (a coffee, an invitation into the home) is culturally interpreted as arrogance or rejection, compromising the therapeutic alliance. Romanian social workers practice an "ethics of proximity," navigating a grey zone where they must balance professional distance with the cultural intimacy necessary to gain trust.

This suggests the necessity of contextualizing the Code of Ethics (CNASR, 2022) to reflect the anthropological realities of the Romanian space. Romanian social workers must navigate these boundaries with superior cultural finesse, negotiating a balance between professionalism and community belonging.

4.5. The Urgency of Digital Ethics

The emergence of digital dilemmas confirms Reamer's (2023) warnings. The profession is at an inflection point. Without clear protocols regarding data protection in the era of AI and Big Data, social workers risk becoming, unwillingly, agents of surveillance, undermining the principle of self-determination.

Our study confirms that the digitalization of social services in Romania has outpaced the ethical training of personnel. The dilemma is no longer just about "who has access to the file," but about the capacity of vulnerable beneficiaries to provide real informed consent for the storage of their data in governmental cloud systems. Social workers find themselves in the ungrateful position of collecting sensitive data without being able to guarantee its long-term security, potentially violating the principle of non-maleficence. The absence of clear protocols regarding the "right to be forgotten" in social databases represents a ticking time bomb for human rights in social work.

In his recent analysis regarding the intersection of technology and social services, Reamer (2023) emphasizes that while Artificial Intelligence (AI) offers significant opportunities for risk assessment and intervention, it introduces ethical challenges not yet sufficiently explored in specialized literature. The author argues that adopting AI requires a reevaluation of traditional ethical standards, particularly regarding informed consent, data confidentiality, and algorithmic transparency. Reamer proposes a shift from passive technology adoption to an active strategy of ethical governance, which includes digital oversight committees and strict protocols to prevent diagnostic errors or client abandonment in automated interactions.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

This study has demonstrated that within Romanian social work, ethical dilemmas are not "system errors" or isolated incidents, but an inherent structural component of practice. In an environment marked by limited resources and complex social challenges, social workers frequently operate in "grey areas," where strict compliance with the letter of the law often conflicts with the spirit of social justice.

The research highlighted the phenomenon of "**ethical bricolage**"-the practitioners' ability to improvise moral solutions to bridge system gaps. While this adaptability demonstrates remarkable professional resilience, it comes at a high psychological cost: moral distress and professional burnout. The study confirms that, in the absence of institutional support mechanisms, ethical responsibility is "privatized," falling exclusively on the shoulders of the individual, who must navigate alone between the duty to protect (paternalism) and the duty to respect freedom (autonomy).

To strengthen the status of the profession and protect both beneficiaries and specialists, a transition is necessary from an ethics based on intuition and individual heroism to one based on support systems and reflexivity. In this regard, we formulate the following strategic recommendations:

1. Institutionalization of Ethical Supervision It is imperative that supervision no longer be confused with administrative control (file checking). The social work system must integrate the supportive and educational supervision model (Kadushin & Harkness, 2014), offering a safe space where practitioners can "deconstruct" dilemmas without fear of sanctions. Ethical supervision must become mandatory, not optional.

2. Operationalizing the Code of Ethics The **current Code of Ethics** (CNASR, 2022) offers valuable but abstract principles. It is necessary to develop operational best practice guides, adapted to Romania's cultural realities (e.g., managing dual relationships in small rural communities) and the specifics of intervention (e.g., distinct guides for child protection vs. older adults), as well as specific guides for recurrent dilemmas (e.g., "Guide for Ethics in Digital Intervention," "Protocol for Refusal of Services by Older Adults").

3. Education for Uncertainty University programmes must be oriented towards developing critical thinking and moral reasoning, using complex case studies and simulations, to the detriment of rote memorization of legislation. Students must be prepared not for an ideal world, but for the real ambiguity of the field.

4. Protection of Internal "Integrity Whistleblowers" Creating an organizational culture where social workers who signal system dysfunctions in the beneficiary's interest are

protected, not sanctioned. Promoting a climate that values ethical debate and protects professionals who act in the best interest of the beneficiary, even when this conflicts with standard procedures.

5. Protocol for the Use of Digital Ethics

According to Reamer (2023), implementing an ethical protocol for Artificial Intelligence requires a structured approach, starting with the establishment of clear governance principles and the constitution of a digital ethics committee responsible for overseeing system design.

To ensure process integrity, the author recommends rigorous validation of algorithms through simulations, peer review, and consultation with diverse focus groups-essential measures for identifying and mitigating bias before clinical use.

In the operational stage, the protocol requires continuous training for social workers to use technology solely as decision-making enablement, coupled with maintaining a performance monitoring log and transparent communication of risks to beneficiaries. In the specific context of Romania, operationalizing this protocol would require the National College of Social Workers (CNASR) to update the Code of Ethics to include explicit digital standards, concurrently with the establishment of ethics commissions at the level of DGASPCs and DAS/SPAS, and the development of strategic partnerships with the academic environment for the impartial auditing and cultural calibration of algorithms used in social services.

Final Reflections

Ethics in social work is not a theoretical luxury, but a sine qua non condition of professional dignity. It cannot be reduced to compliance with a set of rules but must be understood as a reflexive, contextual, and profoundly human capacity. Ethical dilemmas, although uncomfortable, represent catalysts for professional growth, consolidating the autonomy and integrity of the social worker.

In a constant changing world, professionals in the field are called upon not merely to respect procedures, but to understand the moral meaning of their actions. As has been put forward by the adaptation from Reamer (2018), ethics means not only doing what is right but also understanding why it is right, assuming responsibility for every decision that touches the life of a fellow human being.

In conclusion, ethics in social work means more than avoiding mistakes. Being ethical does not merely mean avoiding malpractice; it means having the courage to stand by the beneficiary in the most difficult moments, assuming responsibility for imperfect decisions in an imperfect world. The future of the profession in Romania depends on the system's capacity to recognize that the social worker is not a simple bureaucrat implementing procedures, but a professional managing destinies. Protecting the moral health of the social worker is, ultimately, the best form of guaranteeing the quality of services offered to the most vulnerable among us.

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