DEVELOPING ETHICAL SUPPORT FOR DUTCH SOCIAL PROFESSIONALS IN CRISIS SITUATIONS

Research report based on focus group meetings

'To what extent can I openly be critical of the national policy, which is also propagated by the municipality I work for? And to what extent can and may I allow my own common sense and professionalism to prevail and thus not follow guidelines?'

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Developing ethical support for Dutch social professionals in crisis situations

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Introduction

International research among more than 600 social workers in over 50 countries has shown that the first phase of the COVID-19 pandemic caused ethical challenges for social professionals (Banks et al., 2020). Additional research has provided some insight into the extent to which these challenges have occurred in the Netherlands (De Jonge et al., 2021). Based on this research, we were interested in the ethical needs of Dutch social professionals. What ethical support would have helped them to cope with the ethical burden? Because it is a question that is difficult to be asked directly due to the fact that some ethical expertise is required to be able to answer this question, we have distinguished five ideal types of ethical support and have presented these to professionals in focus group meetings. Below we first describe the classification into different types of support, followed by the presentation of brief reports of the focus group meetings and finally we formulate our conclusions based on the findings.

Five ideal types of support

We are looking for ethical support for social professionals, but what kind of support are we actually referring to? For the purpose of this study, we have made a distinction between five different types of support. In theory, these types can be clearly distinguished from each other, but in practice this is hardly possible; not in the least because all kinds of hybrid forms occur. The distinction is therefore mainly intended to gain some insight into what forms of ethical support are possible, also in order to be able to determine what the needs of social professionals are in particular.

These are the five ideal types of support that we have distinguished.
- *Procedural frameworks* (how) offer support on how to act. Think for example of flow charts and step-by-step plans to deal with moral issues.
- *Substantive frameworks* (what) contain substantive support, such as concrete rules of conduct, general standards or fundamental values. Think for example of legislation, professional codes of conduct or the global definition of social work.
- *Process-oriented frameworks* (who/how) offer support when taking decisions; they emphasise the interaction dynamics between all parties involved as a basis for action.
- *Communicative frameworks* (who/how) offer support during substantive exchange and coordination between all parties involved. All kinds of variants of moral deliberation are highly communicative in nature.
- *Reflective frameworks* (why) offer support for the development of relevant substantive and eventually also interactive considerations, for instance for decision-making.

As already noted, the ethical support used in practice is usually a hybrid form of the various types of support. A protocol for physical meetings with clients during a so-called lockdown, for example, does not only contain hygiene rules, but also instructions for consultation or coordination with a colleague or manager. As mentioned, moral deliberation is highly communicative in nature, but the other forms can usually be recognised in this as well. Moral deliberation calls on the reflective capacity of the participants, usually consists of a number of steps that are completed successively, whereby some steps are substantive in nature, for example by referring to relevant ethical principles, values and standards, and whereby the participants as a group usually go through a joint (learning) process.

The focus group meetings

The focus group meetings took place based on an agenda.

[1] Information about the study, introducing ourselves as researchers and asking permission to record audio and to use the data collected in our research.

[2] Introductory round of professionals/respondents, breaking the ice at the same time (and going in-depth):
- Who are you and where do you work, in what position?
- Can you describe a situation you have experienced in recent months that has stayed with you? This could be a situation that made you anxious, but also a situation that made you feel happy.

[3] Explanation of the theme of this study: what ethical challenges are social professionals facing during this COVID-19 pandemic and what ethical frameworks could be helpful in the process?
- By ethical challenges, we mean situations that give rise to professional concerns or in which it is difficult to determine the appropriate course of action. In the process, principles, values and standards may be at stake or even conflict.
- Different types of ethical frameworks can offer support, they can overlap or exist in a 'hybrid' form:
  - *Procedural* frameworks (such as a flow chart)
  - *Process-oriented* frameworks (which steps are followed, who are involved in the process)
  - *Substantive* frameworks (what is 'right' and what is 'wrong'; which standards do you apply)
  - *Communicative* frameworks (who can you consult with and when)
  - *Reflective* frameworks (tools to consider an issue from different perspectives individually and/or together with colleagues in order to reach an informed position)

[4] Discussing the case studies of the participants more in-depth based on the following questions.
- What frameworks gave you support?
- Did you miss frameworks? If so: what did you need (which types of frameworks); from whom would you like to receive these frameworks: the national or municipal government, the professional organisation, your own organisation, knowledge organisations?
- Why are you looking for such frameworks, how do you think they will be of use to you?
- In which situations do you feel insecure or do you experience stress (being afraid to act)?

[5] Questions following survey responses:
- With regard to the changed rules of engagement: *would you like to return to the 'old normal' (direct contact with clients) or do you accept that it is what it is, and what do you need if that is the case?*
- Many professionals (41.3%[1]) have experienced the impact of COVID-19 on the professional relationship as 'very stressful'. *So what makes it stressful? What do you notice yourself and/or what do you notice with colleagues?*
- A large majority of professionals (69.8%) has not made more or less use of ethical guidelines. It is also striking that about half of the professionals make little or no use of ethical guidelines (50.8%). *What ethical guidelines do you use? (Do you ever look up the professional code? Do you ever deliberate morally? etc.)*
- 1/3 of the respondents do not feel supported by the organisation; *are you supported by your organisation and how? What are you satisfied with and what do you miss?*
- 'Collaboration was not or hardly existent in a substantial minority of cases (41.2%), and advocacy for the rights and interests of individuals or groups (49.2%), the passing on of signals to responsible authorities (52.3%) and the involvement of volunteers, networks or communities (55.6%) even in about half of the cases'. *How does this happen? Is this typical for this situation (or is it perhaps because of the way of working within the social domain)?*

[6] Conclusion. Are there any important points of interest in connection with our development work that we should not forget about? (Would you perhaps like to play an active role in this?)

Report: focus interview 1 (08-10-2020)

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[1] The meetings took place before the survey was fully completed. The percentages mentioned are therefore based on the preliminary results of this survey (63 respondents). Please refer to the research report for the final figures (108 respondents).

Five professionals participated in the first focus group meeting. The conversation was characterised by a high degree of *autonomy*, both in substance and in conduct. This is not surprising, since the majority of the five participants work as self-employed worker without employees (ZZP'er) within the social domain. This characterised their attitude towards frameworks: they possess a high degree of autonomy and freedom, the freedom to think outside the box and to create their own frameworks. This elevated the discussion on ethical frameworks that can offer support in times of crisis to a higher level. Five elements can be distilled from the discussion:

- *Drive*. Drive was not only the message in the discussion, the participants also exuded it. A participant with a military background spoke of the 'commander's intent': in case of uncertainty and ambiguity, you go back to the intended objective of the activity. Theories on professionalism also refer to the mission (De Jonge, 2015). The central question then is: what do you want to achieve, and for whom? If you have a clear picture of that, you can also properly motivate what you do and why. The participants shared the view that the service user is central. At the same time, more social themes emerged in the discussion in reference to the pandemic, such as the failure of public services to respond by closing shop and not responding or the increasing inequality in society and in the world. As such it could be concluded that the mission is a mix of focusing on the individual person whom you work for in their own context on the one hand and keeping an eye on social and societal relations on the other. When handling frameworks, this drive means that the focus must always remain on this dual perspective you are committed to.

- *Integrality*. The participants stressed the importance of an integral view of the issues you are working on. To a large extent this is already woven into the previous point. When you put the service users first, you have an eye for the complex interwovenness of all aspects of their life, so for all living areas, and doing so within the social and societal context. This integrality also heavily calls for cooperation, because in complex situations no worker can do it alone. Knowing how to find each other, sharing relevant information, creating an overview and a clear division of tasks are crucial in an integral approach. In respect to the use of frameworks, integrality quickly means that no single framework can cover everything and that they must therefore be combined and also exceeded.

- *Urge for action*. The participants expressed a strong urge to face a situation and to tackle it. They also have an urge to act as soon as possible, on the front line so to speak, also in the sense of prevention and early signalling. Such a proactive approach means that you don't sit around waiting for frameworks but that you are ahead of the curve. This was also evident from their response at the beginning of the lockdown: immediately springing into action and doing what needs to be done. By the way, this urge for action goes hand in hand with a good dose of reflection and common sense, which certainly doesn't mean running around like a headless chicken.

- *Creativity*. The creativity of the participants is based on the attitude: how can we do it regardless? This is actually already evident from the previous point. 'Working smarter' and 'turning actions positive' were mentioned. Which can be done within frameworks. For example, the GDPR (or, in the Netherlands, the AVG) or the 'Participatiewet' (Participation Act): not only knowing its boundaries, but especially also seeing its possibilities. It can also occur in between frameworks. One participant, for example, outlined how different types of frameworks were successively developed and combined during the beginning of the lockdown, for example: how can we reach each other (communicative framework). She also described that a kind of 'loop' emerged, a cycle in which different types of frameworks were developed further and further. Finally, it can also occur outside of frameworks, as the above has already shown.

- *Safety*. Finally, safety as a minimum played an important role in the discussion, not only for the service users but also for the professionals themselves. The participant with a military background remarked: 'You cannot help others if you are not safe yourself'.

That way, the meeting has resulted in a solid start for what one of the participants described as an 'assessment framework'.

Report: focus interview 2 (09-10-2020)

Six professionals participated in the second focus group meeting. We discussed (ethical) frameworks for working during the pandemic. In the discussion, examples of frameworks that work and those that do not emerged. What does not work are mainly frameworks created at a distance from the work floor, which do not take into account the nature of the work performed: 'Decision-making by the municipal executive is done by people who have been working from home for a long time.' It is important that professionals and organisations themselves can contribute to the creation of frameworks: 'Freedom is what got us through', was one of the remarks. At the same time, clear rules of organisations for professional handling of safety risks are important. The difference in rules and how to deal with them between and even within organisations was discussed. It was also noted that the crisis can be used as an opportunity to put aside constricting frameworks.

The common thread of the discussion was *direct contact*, as a crucial element of good work in the social domain. This direct contact plays a central role in various aspects of the work.

- Direct contact with the *service users*. First of all, of course, it is about direct contact with the people for whom the work is performed. The importance of meeting was emphasised. That is when you can 'read' people, it was noted. Direct contact is important to meet the needs of the service users. In the discussion, it appeared in various ways that these individuals can be quite different, and that there can also be shifts in service user profiles, such as an increase in numbers. Some service users, for example, turn out to be more self-reliant than expected, while others appeared to be more vulnerable. Some have mainly material needs, while others have a need for contact. Sometimes networks are created, while social isolation can also increase. Direct contact is also important because many service users do not have sufficient digital skills, and a language barrier can be more easily bridged during direct contact.
- Direct contact by the *professional*. Direct contact is not only important for the service user, but also for the professional. Without direct contact, it is much less possible to get a clear picture of how the service user is actually doing. Gestures and behaviours, non-verbal signals and environmental signals are missing. You are also less able to support your substantive message with emotions and gestures. Communication is less smooth. Practical matters such as exchanging documents are also made more difficult and are often delayed.
- Direct contact within the *organisation*. Although degrees vary, professionals also need direct contact within their own organisation, including for consultation and possibly also for socialising. This is not only about contact with colleagues, but also about attention from the supervisor. In that context, 'empathic leadership' was brought up.
- Direct contact during *collaboration*. Direct contact is also important for good collaboration. In the discussion, examples came to light of people being able to find each other quickly when needed, but also of polarisation because different organisations and professionals take different positions in a collaborative arrangement. In the latter case, it was noted that dialogue is crucial.

In addition, the discussion focused on the need for self-regulation in the sense of disciplined work rules for yourself, also in the sense of a clear separation of work and private life. At least as far as the circumstances permit, because when working from home in combination with your children at home while attending school online, everything soon gets mixed up.

Report: focus interview 3 (15-10-2020)

Two professionals participated in the third focus group meeting. An important common thread in the discussion was the gap between policy and implementation, between 'the people who think things up' and 'the people who undergo those things'. Not everything is doom and gloom, but guidelines are often developed from a great distance to the performance practice. This has consequences for the support that professionals should be offered.

On the subject of *procedural frameworks,* a participant noted that these are often imposed while not always being well thought through. However, the other participant said that procedures are regularly adjusted during the crisis. So it is possible: procedures are necessary for the smooth running of working practices, but they are

a means and not an end in themselves, which means that they can be adapted to changed circumstances if necessary.

Something similar applies to *communicative frameworks*. About the communication by the government during the crisis, it was noted that it should be less ambiguous and also less non-committal with regard to measures (e.g. face masks). The information on procedures such as the TOZO (a temporary financial allowance for self-employed entrepreneurs) was also too simplistic. It was noted that media coverage of the social domain is often unreliable. One participant implicitly made a clear distinction between *horizontal and vertical communication*. In the event of a crisis, a kind of moral reflection quickly takes place within the team and between organisations on a horizontal level; on a vertical level on the other hand, he feels like he has to 'crawl through a funnel' and that even 'the screws are put to' him whenever he thinks it is necessary to deviate from the usual procedures. Professional associations can also play an important role in quickly scaling up problems during execution.

One of the participants formulated three recommendations: 'Use your common sense' (reflective framework), 'mutual consultation' (communicative framework) and 'the development of a crisis manual' (procedural framework). The discussion provided good pointers for developing the right balance between these frameworks.

Report: focus interview 4 (15-10-2020)

Five professionals participated in the final focus group meeting. The main focus of this discussion was *communication*, its importance and the limitations due to the pandemic: how do you make and maintain real contact, how do you easily stay accessible? This is first and foremost about contact with service users. Digitally, there are still many barriers. A walk with the service user was mentioned as an alternative, but also the difficulty of outreach work and the need for safe meeting rooms. But the importance of contact with colleagues, especially peer feedback, was also mentioned. So a combination of communication and reflection. One participant indicated that she misses exchanging ideas with colleagues; you don't call them as easily. Another participant had discovered that colleagues are now more likely to approach like-minded people, which leads to loss of the diversity of perspectives. A third participant reported from their own experience that digital peer feedback works quite well. In addition, the example was given of an ethics committee that had been at a standstill.

It was a new perspective that this group paid attention to the *facilitation* of service provision, from both local and national government. Regulations do matter; now there are even differences between professionals in the same team. But it is also important to make implementation possible. Think, for example, of safe meeting rooms or suitable workplaces at home, but also of room for flexible customisation, for example in the case of debt problems.

The discussion ended on a positive note, which was a plea to retain what this crisis has brought: flexibility, creativity and inventiveness of professionals as well as their trust in the capabilities of service users.

Conclusions

An important conclusion from the focus group meetings is that the somewhat abstract distinction between the five ideal types of ethical support is recognised by the participating professionals. When asked about the types of ethical support used in their own professional practice, several participants immediately stated that it was a combination of all types. They spontaneously substantiated this answer by naming concrete examples of the types of ethical frameworks that are used in their own practice. An example of a detailed explanation:

What it [describing the different frameworks] elicited for me, was that a kind of order emerged to the frameworks that we needed.

- *Just when the lockdown started, I thought with a colleague: okay, 16 March, now we're going to get started. The weekend before, I had already written a policy paper for the management and the alderman with: okay, what will this mean for entrepreneurs, for our clients, for the number of people on benefits, what will we have to deal with, what do we have to think about, what could the consequences be? On Monday, my colleague and I really went into the mode of: we are going to sort it all out. Meaning procedural, so: what are we going to do, who is going to do what, how are we going to arrange it, calling each other every morning?*
- *Then I noticed that we got into the processes, because the person who has to apply for benefits, where should they go? That process is going to be different, so we had to discuss it with the income counsellors and the account managers: okay, add the administration and we had a framework right there.*
- *Then we sat down with the income counsellors and the account managers: how are we going to do this, how do we reach our clients? So that was a kind of a communicative framework, where we, towards our clients but also internally... How are we going to get in touch with each other? You can use WhatsApp, WhatsApp video, and you can also add more people... Youngsters were going wild those first few months, where the older folks thought: how am I going to do that, with MS Teams and all that?*
- *And finally the older people took over and they went wild. And those youngsters who thought: help, but I'm having conversations with clients now, I don't really know what to do anymore. They had not stocked up on experience yet, and they needed some kind of mentorship from the older people. So then, in this whole communicative framework, there was also a bit of a reflective framework and some type of peer feedback groups were requested, so that our own account managers and consultants could talk to each other in small groups on a weekly basis, so that they felt comfortable to speak out and name bottlenecks. I often joined as a process manager. And it is one thing to name a bottleneck, but what are we going to do about it? Turning it into a positive action, which released a lot of energy.*

And this 'loop' repeated itself a few times. So when you talk about frameworks, I see what you mean. At one point we had to decide: home visits or not? How do we encourage them to go to work, to accept help? The NIPHE (RIVM-)framework was of great use there.

Also noticeable in the participants' reactions to the way in which the various forms of ethical support are used in professional practice, is that professionals are definitely not averse to procedural and process-related support in their work, and even explicitly indicate that they need it. All too often, however, they experience a gap between policy and practice, between - as one participant put it - 'those who think things up' and 'those who undergo those things'. Procedures and processes often seem to be developed from a (too) great distance from the work floor; they are not geared towards the specifics of professional practice, so that they hinder professionals from providing customised services in an autonomous and flexible, creative and innovative, quick and decisive manner to help their service users achieve their full potential. This is a recurring theme in times when the functioning of implementing bodies is under the magnifying glass of parliament (think of the problems surrounding the granting of benefits by the Tax Authorities). Lipsky (1980) pointed to political tensions before, tensions that lead to ambiguous policy frameworks for work at the front line.

It is also striking that there is a great need for communicative forms, often in combination with reflective forms. Especially peer feedback with colleagues is often mentioned as valuable, either because the professionals are missing it at this point, or because it has somehow been possible to continue this form of coordination and support, for example in a digital manner. One of the participants in the study emphasised the importance of this as follows:

We are [from a higher professional education institution] in the process of organising reflection meetings. Because what I often hear back from people is that it is precisely in times when contact with colleagues is less a matter of course, what remains in the end is contact with colleagues who are

like-minded, who often share the same perspective. And what we are looking for, together with those service professionals, is: how do you also maintain those contacts with those important others, with those others who have a slightly different approach, who are perhaps slightly more care-oriented or more concerned with procedures, so that you can keep your own perspectives open? I am currently trying to have online reflection meetings with them, in which we especially invite the different perspectives and departments and really talk to each other on a case-by-case basis and also discuss some of the bigger issues. And that works very well; people also say that it is nice to exchange ideas with someone other than the three colleagues you normally call. And that is one form, but that is also something that quickly comes under pressure and is first cancelled when the boom in applications starts coming in. It is important for the individual but also for the organisation. What can you do as a manager to keep an eye on that too? Where do you keep your perspective open? Get in touch with colleagues you would normally not talk to.

From this findings, the contours of a suitable type of ethical support that meets the ethical needs of social professionals and consists of the right combination of ideal types of frameworks for ethical support emerge. Ideally, the basis for ethical support is a solid local practice of communication and reflection, especially within teams, but also in the contact with managers and collaboration partners. On top of this horizontal basis, there are more vertically established procedural and process-oriented policy frameworks. However, these policy frameworks are in turn preferably also subjected to local practice of communication and reflection, so to speak, both preventively and curatively, with the objective of calibrating the frameworks and learning from user experiences. Before policy frameworks are implemented, they are subject to discussion among the implementing professionals. Changes are made based on a vertical dialogue between professionals and policy makers, if necessary, before they are implemented. Once the policy frameworks are in place, they are monitored for their effectiveness and adjusted if necessary. In this way, a vertical dialogic interaction between practice and policy is created.

What remains somewhat underexposed in the focus group meetings are the substantive frameworks. The impression that has emerged is that professionals have mastered those, but mainly in their professional acting and less in their reflection (unconscious competence). Especially in crisis situations, however, it is important to be able to fall back on substantive ethical principles. As one of the recommendations to social professionals in the international study reads (Banks et al., 2020, p. 22):

> *Revisit the ethical values and principles outlined in the international statement on ethics and national codes of ethics. These values and principles remain constant, but how they are applied in practice may change in new circumstances.*

Unconscious competence thus quickly leads to (sometimes even unconscious) incompetence in crisis situations. In fact, this is a problem that is probably not specific to the social domain but occurs more broadly and is probably related to the structure of vocational training (Van Stekelenburg, Smerecnik, Sanderse, & De Ruyter, 2020).

Ethical support - also in crisis situations - consists primarily of a locally strongly anchored communicative and reflective practice, which is complemented in a communicative and reflective way by procedural and process-oriented policy frameworks from the organisation and the government, whereby the substantive focus of professional practice is leading. This connection can be visualised as the ethical basic structure for professional functioning in crisis situations.
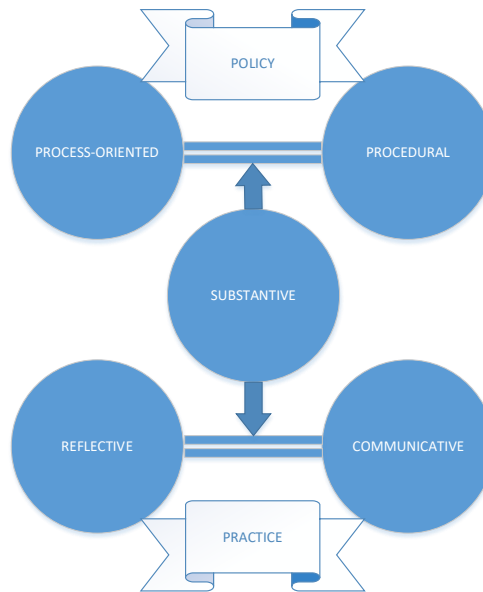
Clearly, such a model for ethical support cannot be implemented in welfare organisations overnight, especially not in crisis situations. An important conclusion based on this insight into the connection between the various types of support is therefore that the ethical basis for dealing with crisis situations should ideally be laid before the crisis manifests itself, just as a roof needs to be repaired before it starts raining. A good example of a working practice where the development of an ethical climate was actively worked on in a sustainable way, has been described elsewhere (Kanne, & De Jonge, 2020). On the other hand, it is also said that everything becomes fluid during a crisis and that a good crisis should not be wasted. A crisis situation can therefore also be used to make improvements to the ethical basic structure of professional organisations. It is desirable that an ethical guide contains incentives for such improvements.

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