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**ETHICAL DILEMMAS OF HELPING PROFESSIONS GENERATION Z STUDENTS DURING PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE**

**Abstract.** Professional practice is a key component of professional education in the helping professions, particularly in nursing and social work. In clinical and field practice settings, theoretical knowledge is linked with practical experience, and students' professional identity is gradually formed. However, students may encounter situations during their placements that are ethically challenging and may give rise to moral dilemmas or moral stress. These experiences take on particular significance in the context of the current generation of students, particularly Generation Z, who are entering the helping professions with a marked sensitivity to issues of ethics, justice, and the quality of the professional environment. The article aims to highlight the significance of the ethical dilemmas that students in the helping professions may encounter during their clinical placements, and to draw attention to their connection with the process of professional training in the context of the generational characteristics of today's students. The article is based on an analysis of the professional literature and reflects the authors' experiences from clinical and teaching practice, supplemented by interviews with students. The text highlights situations where, during their placements, students observe a discrepancy between the standards of care taught in theory and the actual practice of healthcare or social workers, which can lead to uncertainty, moral tension, and a questioning of professional values. The conclusion emphasises the importance of a supportive clinical educational environment, mentoring, and reflection on practical experience for the development of ethical sensitivity and professional identity among Generation Z students.

**Keywords:** ethical dilemmas, helping professions, professional practice, moral distress, Generation Z.

**Introduction.** The training of professionals in the helping professions is a key prerequisite for ensuring high-quality care and support for people in various life situations. Professional training for students in fields such as nursing or social work, therefore, involves not only the acquisition of specialist knowledge and practical skills, but also the development of professional identity and ethical competence. As stated by Ivánková [10], in the broader context of healthcare quality, investments in the education of healthcare personnel and the development of technical infrastructure are also important for the use of modern innovations that can contribute to improving treatment outcomes, patient satisfaction, and the sustainability of healthcare systems.

**Analysis of recent research and publications.** The professional training of students in fields such as nursing or social work is closely linked not only to the acquisition of specialist knowledge and practical skills, but also to the development of professional identity and ethical competence. Professionals in these fields are obliged to act in accordance with fundamental ethical principles, which include, in particular, respect for human dignity, individual autonomy, and responsibility for the quality of care provided [6]. In addition to professional knowledge, a helping professional should also possess personal qualities that predispose them to perform their

work professionally and humanely. These characteristics include, in particular, empathy, respect for the dignity of others, the ability to make ethical decisions, and responsibility for one's own actions [3].

In the context of healthcare professions, needs related to a sense of security, social recognition, and self-esteem are also significant. Social respect is considered one of the key motivational factors in the professional practice of healthcare workers [14].

In the current context of education for the health and social care professions, these aspects are also gaining significance in relation to the values of the current generation of students. Generation Z students often enter these professions with a marked sensitivity to issues of justice, equality, and respect for human rights, which may influence their perception of ethical situations during their professional practice.

The **purpose** of this article is to highlight the significance of ethical dilemmas that may arise during the professional practice of students in the helping professions. The text draws attention to the role of clinical and field settings in shaping students' professional identity and emphasises the need to devote greater attention to this area in the process of professional education.

**Methods of research:** analysis of the professional

literature and reflection of the authors' experiences from clinical and teaching practice, supplemented by interviews with students.

#### **Presentation of the main research material.**

Professional practice is a significant component of the professional training of students in the helping professions. Clinical placements in healthcare facilities and field placements in social services provide students with the opportunity to apply theoretical knowledge in real-life professional situations whilst developing their professional competencies and professional identity. Through these experiences, students gradually become familiar with the professional culture, values, and norms of the given work environment.

Students' experiences of ethically challenging situations should not be viewed as a marginal or natural side effect of professional practice, but as a significant part of their professional learning. It is therefore important that teachers and mentors reflect on these experiences and actively work with them within the framework of teaching and the supervision of professional practice. Open discussion of ethical dilemmas, the opportunity to share experiences, and support for reflection can help students better understand the complexity of professional situations and develop their ethical sensitivity. At the same time, such an approach contributes to strengthening students' professional identity and preparing them for responsible decision-making in their future professional practice. Ignoring or downplaying these experiences, on the other hand, can lead to students' uncertainty, increased moral stress, and a weakening of trust in the professional values being taught.

As Mc Kenzie [9] points out, education in the helping professions cannot be understood merely as a process of acquiring knowledge, but primarily as a process of gradual integration into the professional community. Students learn not only through university teaching, but also through daily interaction with professionals in practice.

At the same time, however, clinical practice may expose students to situations that are ethically challenging and may conflict with the values presented during their studies. Encountering such situations can give rise to ethical dilemmas and contribute to students' experience of moral stress [5; 8].

During clinical practice, students quite often find themselves in an internal conflict relating in particular to adherence to professional standards of nursing care. As part of their theoretical training, they are taught to work according to standardised procedures designed to ensure patient safety and the quality of care provided. However, the reality of the clinical environment can be different. Students sometimes witness situations where these procedures are not consistently followed in practice by some healthcare professionals. As a result, nursing interventions may be carried out in various ways, which students perceive very keenly. In such situations, they often find it difficult to navigate and are unsure which of the procedures corresponds to correct professional practice.

These findings are based not only on the authors' long-term teaching and clinical experience, but also on interviews with students conducted during their clinical placements. These interviews reveal that students sometimes encounter situations where certain professionals discourage them from adhering to the procedures they have learnt. They argue, for example, that strict adherence to standards is time-consuming or leads to greater consumption of medical supplies. Similar experiences among nursing students are also described in international studies, which highlight the

gap between theoretical teaching and the reality of clinical practice [1; 5]. For some students, this approach may be acceptable to a certain extent, as it allows them to work more quickly and, at the same time, corresponds to the working methods of healthcare professionals whom the students perceive as experienced professionals and natural role models.

This situation can be illustrated, for example, by a case where a student breached sterility protocols during clinical practice whilst connecting an infusion set to a patient's inserted cannula. She responded to the reprimand by stating that such a procedure was common practice on the ward and that other nurses carried it out in the same way. According to the accounts of some students, this is indeed a procedure they encounter repeatedly in practice.

Research also shows that it is precisely such experiences that can raise doubts among students about professional standards and complicate the process of their professional socialisation [2]. At the same time, however, there is a group of students who perceive such situations as problematic and difficult to accept. These students become direct witnesses to professional misconduct by healthcare workers and are confronted with a moral dilemma. They find themselves in a situation where they are unsure how to react appropriately. They consider whether to draw attention to the inappropriate conduct, whilst at the same time realising the possible consequences of such action in an environment where they are in a subordinate position in relation to the staff. Such experiences can cause moral stress, anxiety and internal tension in students. Moral stress arises particularly when an individual knows what course of action would be ethically correct but cannot implement it due to organisational or hierarchical constraints [4; 5].

Encountering these situations thus represents not only a significant professional experience, but also an important ethical challenge in the process of professional socialisation for students in the helping professions.

The issue of ethical dilemmas faced by students during their professional placements is the subject of specialist research in the fields of healthcare and social care education. Studies show students in the helping professions frequently encounter situations during clinical or field placements that raise ethical questions or conflicts between professional values and the organisational realities of the workplace [1; 15]. Current research also emphasises that the quality of the educational environment and the way teaching is organised can significantly influence not only students' academic performance but also their ability to cope with challenging professional situations. For example, a recent study [12] published in the journal *BMC Medical Education* highlights the importance of academic engagement, self-efficacy, and self-regulated learning as key factors influencing the success of students in non-medical healthcare disciplines. The results show that higher levels of engagement in studies, confidence in one's own abilities, and the ability to manage one's own learning process are significantly associated with academic success and students' readiness for their future professional careers. These factors are also significant in the context of clinical practice, where students face not only professional but also ethical challenges. Supporting student engagement, reflection on practical experiences, and the development of the ability to critically evaluate one's own decision-making can help students better manage the ethically challenging situations they encounter during their practical training. Educational institutions should therefore create a learning environment that supports students' active

engagement in the learning process, the development of their professional self-confidence, and their ability to reflect on their own practical experiences.

In the field of nursing education, research focuses primarily on the issue of students' moral stress and the influence of the clinical environment on their professional socialisation. For example, a study by Gonella et al. [5] shows that nursing students often experience ethical tension when observing situations where patients' dignity or the principle of patient-centred care is not fully respected.

Social work students also describe similar experiences during their field placements. They may encounter conflicts between respect for the client's autonomy and the duty to protect vulnerable individuals or to adhere to institutional rules [8; 16].

The quality of the educational environment, the availability of mentoring, and the opportunity to reflect on practical experiences also play a significant role in managing ethical dilemmas [2].

*Generational context.* Generational differences currently represent an important factor influencing the process of professional education and students' experiences during professional placements. Students entering the helping professions today predominantly belong to Generation Z. This generation grew up in different social, technological, and cultural conditions than previous generations, which is reflected in their values, expectations, and learning styles [18].

Generation Z, which includes those born around 1997 or later, is the first generation to have grown up entirely in a digital environment. Digital technologies, social media, and instant access to information significantly influence their communication, information-gathering, and learning styles. Students of this generation are often characterised by a high degree of adaptability, the ability to search for information quickly, and a preference for interactive and participatory forms of education [17].

In the helping professions, generational characteristics are particularly important in relation to professional values and ethical issues. Research suggests that Generation Z students place significant emphasis on ethical integrity, transparency, and a respectful working environment. This generation also tends to be more sensitive to issues of social justice, equality, and the protection of human rights [18].

This sensitivity may influence their perception of ethical dilemmas during professional practice. If students of this generation observe situations during clinical or field placements that conflict with the values presented during their studies, these experiences may give rise to greater moral tension or frustration. Some studies show that both nursing and social work students may feel uncertain in such situations as to whether they should draw attention to problematic situations or whether they should respect the authority of more experienced staff [5; 8]. At the same time, it appears that Generation Z expects greater support from mentors and teachers in their professional education. Students of this generation value structured feedback, the opportunity to reflect on practical experiences, and a safe environment for discussing ethical issues [2]. From an educational perspective, it is therefore important for educational institutions to consider the specific characteristics of today's generations of students. Promoting open communication, mentoring, and reflective learning can help students better understand the ethical aspects of their future profession and develop their professional identity.

Understanding the generational characteristics of students can thus contribute to more effective educational

strategies and, at the same time, help educators and mentors to respond better to the ethical challenges students encounter during their professional practice. In recent years, the issue of moral stress among Generation Z students has also attracted significant attention. This generation enters the helping professions with a high degree of ethical sensitivity and with the expectation that the professional environment will respect the values of transparency, respect, and social justice. If students encounter situations during their professional placements that do not uphold these values, such experiences can cause significant moral distress. Research shows that Generation Z students often reflect more intensely on ethical conflicts between professional ideals and the reality of the work environment. Such situations can lead to the experience of moral stress, particularly if students feel they lack sufficient scope or authority to address the situation [5; 11].

*A positive clinical teaching environment.* Healthcare staff play a significant role in creating a suitable learning environment for students. If students perceive the clinical setting as an environment where they are accepted, supported, and where their role within the team is respected, this can significantly reduce their levels of stress and uncertainty. A sense of belonging to the work team, the opportunity to actively participate in the healthcare team's activities, and the experience of high-quality teamwork are important factors supporting students' professional development [7].

The opportunity to work in a well-organised healthcare team, where communication is open and where healthcare professionals share their knowledge and experience, has a significant influence on nursing and social work students' positive perception of their future profession. Similarly, Pearcey and Elliot [13] report that students feel more comfortable in workplaces where there is a pleasant working atmosphere, where they are perceived as part of the team, and where staff appreciate their contribution to the workplace. At the same time, however, it must be emphasised that maintaining such a supportive clinical environment is becoming increasingly difficult. Staff shortages, high workloads, and organisational pressures can negatively affect the atmosphere in workplaces and the scope for providing individual support to students during their placements.

*The role of educational institutions.* The organisation and management of clinical placements by educational institutions is also a key factor in their success. Faculties and schools training future healthcare and social care professionals should pay greater attention to the stress factors students encounter during their placements. It is important to create conditions that enable students to safely apply the knowledge they have acquired and develop their practical skills.

These measures should include support for mentoring, supervision, and reflection on clinical practice experiences. Indeed, the experiences gained during clinical practice significantly influence not only students' professional competencies, but also their relationship to their future profession and their career decisions [13].

From the perspective of current generations of students, it is therefore important to create an educational environment that fosters open communication, the sharing of experiences, and reflection on the ethical and professional challenges students encounter during clinical practice.

**Conclusion.** Ethical dilemmas are a natural part of professional practice in the health and social care professions. Encountering ethically challenging situations can be demanding for students, yet at the same time presents an important opportunity for the

development of their ethical sensitivity and professional identity. Understanding students' experiences during professional practice is important for the further development of educational strategies in nursing and social work. Educational institutions should therefore support the reflection on practical experiences, the

development of mentoring, and the creation of a safe environment for discussing ethical issues. Such an approach can contribute to the preparation of professionals who will be able to respond sensitively and responsibly to the ethical challenges of contemporary practice.

**Requirements for research involving humans, animals, or their biological materials, personal data, or confidential data.** All procedures were performed in compliance with the principles of voluntary consent and confidentiality.

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## ЕТИЧНІ ДИЛЕМИ СТУДЕНТІВ ДОПОМІЖНИХ ПРОФЕСІЙ ПОКОЛІННЯ Z ПІД ЧАС ПРОХОДЖЕННЯ ПРОФЕСІЙНОЇ ПРАКТИКИ

**Анотація.** Професійна практика є ключовою частиною професійної освіти в допоміжних професіях, особливо в сестринській справі та соціальній роботі. В умовах клінічної та польової практики теоретичні знання поєднуються з практичним досвідом, і професійна ідентичність студентів поступово формується. Водночас, під час практики, студенти можуть зіткнутися з ситуаціями, які є етично вимогливими та можуть спричинити моральні дилеми або моральний стрес. Цей досвід набуває особливого значення в контексті сучасного покоління студентів, особливо покоління Z, яке вступає в допоміжні професії з сильною чутливістю до питань етики, справедливості та якості професійного середовища. Метою статті є привернути увагу до важливості етичних дилем, з якими студенти допоміжних професій можуть зіткнутися під час професійної практики, та вказати на їх зв'язок з процесом професійної підготовки в контексті поколінних характеристик сучасних студентів. Стаття базується на аналізі професійної літератури та водночас відображає досвід авторів з клінічної та педагогічної практики, доповнений інтерв'ю зі студентами. У тексті вказується на ситуації, коли студенти спостерігають невідповідність між теоретично викладеними стандартами медичної допомоги та реальною практикою медичних чи соціальних працівників під час їхнього стажування, що може призвести до невизначеності, моральної напруги та сумнівів у професійних цінностях. У висновку наголошується на важливості сприятливого клінічного освітнього середовища, наставництва та рефлексії над практичним досвідом для розвитку етичної чутливості та професійної ідентичності студентів покоління Z.

**Ключові слова:** етичні дилеми; допоміжні професії; професійна практика; моральний дистрес; покоління Z.