



Professional development of social work in Russia¹

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Introduction

The aim of the paper was to get an understanding about how the profession of social work explains its relevance and legitimacy in today's Russia, to enlighten the importance of socio-political, professional and educational contexts in explaining the societal position of the social work profession in Russia. This paper begins with the analysis of the processes of legitimization, professionalization and constitution of social work in today's Russia. In addition to functionalist and critical perspectives on these three processes, in its second part the paper employs phenomenological approach looking into everyday life theory of social work that is constructed in routine work at the social service agencies. The third part of this paper talks about the issues of social services and social work with family and children in contemporary Russia.

1. Legitimization, professionalization and constitution of social work in today's Russia

Legitimization of social work

Legitimization is a process, in which social work acquires its recognition, its functions and purposes are being defined, understood and negotiated in the society. However, different segments of a society, including other professionals, politicians and public sometimes have different definitions of the same issues.

The 1990s in Russia witnessed considerable political, economic, social and cultural change in Russia, the scope and depth of which has had dramatic effect on the lives of ordinary people.

It was in response to these changes that the new educational programs and caring professions emerged and developed their extensive networks throughout the country. Thus, as a profession and educational program, social work was introduced in Russia in 1991. It appeared in the academic and professional fields at a time of significant political reforms, in the midst of a long-term economic crisis, and in the context of increasing social differentiation. New legislation relating to social services was adopted and new concepts were brought to light.

The 1990s in Russia witnessed the growth of social services in a variety of forms. A wide network of social services was established under the responsibility of the Ministry of Labour and Social Development. The Ministries of Education and Health Care introduced social pedagogues and social workers into regular and special education, hospitals and mental health centers. Many social work agencies are in search of new forms of organization and trying to develop new philosophies of services, in order to build positive relationships with communities.

The activity of social workers was considered important in context of the transition period in Russia, when many people had become socially excluded on grounds of age, sex, poverty, disability or place of living.

Education and professional training of social workers have now been established in more than 120 higher education institutions all over Russia. The quality of such education has achieved good standards of performance, thanks to intensive national and international exchange. The legitimization of social work, however, has been hindered by several parallel developments, or disfunctions, both internal and external to social work itself.

Inadequate financial resources at federal and local level have effected the quality of the services and the motivation of employees. Low salaries do not contribute to the prestige of social work as a profession. The vast majority of employees in the centers of social service have not got the diploma in social work.

The title of “*Specialist in social work*” is given to a graduate upon her/his successful graduation from university. There is also a position “*Specialist in social work*” which may or may not be included in the staff of an organization, depending on this organization’s Charter, as approved by local administration as well as by Federal Ministry. There may also be a position “*Social Worker*” within the staff of a particular organization. The specialist in social work’s salary is about \$540 per year, which is about the same as a nurse and 2/3 of a school teacher’s salary. The social worker’s salary is about \$360 per year (June 2003). Even so, university graduates (not necessarily from a social work programme) sometimes take up such a low paid position, because of the lack of other jobs available.

In the context of post-communist Russia, social work is an important partner alongside other professions, together with the State and citizens’ initiatives, for insuring that the common good is not neglected. Now that the Russian population is facing dashed hopes and broken promises, the urgent need for effective social work services becomes ever more obvious. But the quality of social work performance will largely depend on the level of professionalism of those who perform their functions under this umbrella title.

A. Flexner (see Reeser and Epstein 1996: 70-72) in 1915 considered the following to be the most important traits of a profession: engagement in intellectual operations involving individual responsibility, the use of science and learning for a practical goal, applying knowledge through techniques that are educationally communicable, self-organizing, altruistic motivation, possession of a professional self-consciousness (Reeser and Epstein 1996:70-71). A later example of the listing of professional attributes is Millerson’s list (1964), which includes the use of skills based on theoretical knowledge; education and training in these skills; the competence of professionals proved by examinations; a code of conduct to ensure professional integrity; performance of a service that is for the public good; a professional association that organizes members.

What set of traits would be appropriate for Russian social work? Although more university graduates each year will come to the different social work agencies, many graduates will be aiming for higher paid jobs. So the qualification of employees continues to be a painful problem in the development of social services in Russia.

Conferences on theoretical and practical issues are regularly arranged in Moscow and in regional centres; and new textbooks for students, together with collections of conference proceedings and periodicals are being published.

Social work and social pedagogy are very similar in terms of when and how they originated in this country, in their curricula for professional training and in their declared goals. Sometimes both of these sets of specialists can be found in the same setting, which can make the division of their tasks seem odd. During the early 1990s four professional associations were created (Association of Social Pedagogues and Social Workers, Association of Social Workers, Association of Social Services Employees, Association of Schools of Social Work), special periodicals were developed and established anew.

Constitution of social work

Constitution is a process in which educational policy shapes the practice of social work and, at the same time, practice challenges the education. Professional social workers have been educated since 1991, when social work was introduced in Russia as a profession and educational program. National Standard exists to regulate the content of education. Today social work education exists in different formats: 5 years ‘speciality’ programme which is traditional for Russian educational system; 4 years Bachelor programme at some universities; 2 years Master programme at 3 universities in Russia; 1 year International Master programme at private school: Moscow school of social and economic sciences.

Such situation causes a lot of debates both among educators and practitioners concerning the meaning and necessity of such programs. In the meanwhile, the admission of students to the departments of social work is usually associated with high level of competition among the candidates. Analogously with social sciences and humanities, this educational program has recently become very popular.

There is not PhD program in SW. But it is possible to defend PhD on social work issues in sociology and related disciplines (psychology, pedagogy). Example of Saratov: *Social work education* in Saratov has existed since 1991 at the Department of Social Work at Saratov State Technical University (SSTU). The following programs are offered in the Department: MSW, BSW, Graduate Diploma in Social Work (five years programme), Candidate of Sociology, and Doctor of Sociology. The research interests of the faculty are focused on social inequalities, exclusionary practices, deviance, youth cultures and subcultures, the effectiveness of social policies, issues of unemployment, ageing, disability, gender relations and cultural representations. Gender studies were introduced into the curriculum of masters' students in social work and postgraduate students in sociology.

The students are getting education and training while practitioners perform a service. Whether or not they provide service using skills based on theories depends on whether or not a practitioner possesses a professional qualification. Many of them do not have appropriate educational background. Service providers consider university education as mainly theoretical but by the late 1990s-early 2000s admit the necessity of further qualification, they express the wish to have SW graduates as their colleagues, and they want to learn about new approaches in working with people.

We consider as the most important topics the following: too little time is devoted to the field practice in the national standard for SW education, poor relation between education and practical arenas, the absence of good textbooks written in student-friendly language and based on reflexive practice, incongruence between Western and Russian understanding of SW theories, the students by the time of graduation do not see good career opportunities as the salary of professional social worker (a specialist in social work) is very low in public services, while private social work is underdeveloped.

Professionalisation of social work

Professionalization is a process in which the social work practice is shaped by the profession. There are different approaches to the concept of professionalization (see Reeser and Epstein 1996; Larson 1977; Jones and Joss 1995; Iarskaia-Smirnova and Romanov 2000). Some sociologists have described it as a positive and progressive force which promotes "general health of the social body" (Durkheim 1933:29) and fosters social change in ways that minimize social conflict and disintegration. This approach deals with the issue of division of labor and poses the question of what needs of society meets the occupational functions of the professions (Etzioni 1964; Parsons 1951).

Another approach to professionalization is represented by critical perspectives, including Marxists and neo-Marxist visions of professions as supporting the status quo in their attempt to maintain or acquire power and status in the class system (see for example Mills 1953; Freidson 1970; Larson 1977). Every profession tries to clearly define a circle of issues which relate to professional competence, thus limiting its world view but enabling itself to claim unique and legally supported areas of competence. This basic strategy of professionalization may cause serious conflicts between professionals and those who attempt to break their monopoly of status and expertise. Regarding social work, there are two main points of such conflict.

First, graduates of social work departments often encounter hostility when coming to work within social services where the majority of positions are occupied by people with an inappropriate educational and professional background. Those "professionals" who started work without diploma have not merely been occupying positions presumably open to qualified social workers; they have also been shaping written and non-written criteria of professional activity and notions of quality of service: practices which may or may not correspond with existing models of social work.

Second, social work as a new profession overlaps with new and traditional ones which may also be experiencing renovation. Examples of these are social pedagogy and practical psychology. Simultaneously with the rise of social work, there was great concern over "practical psychology" in Russia. Many universities started providing education and short training programmes for therapists.

Hence: “Where different professions have similar areas of work, the boundaries between them may overlap and result in conflict. This often expresses itself through the different value sets held by different professions, with each group claiming legitimacy for its own theoretical paradigms or methods of working” (Jones and Joss:18).

2. Everyday life of social work

The restructuring of industry in Russia led to the appearance of a large numbers of unemployed in the labor market. These people became the nuclei of social services in 1990s. In Saratov, where we conducted our research, the creation of jobs in the “social services sphere” opened a perspective of employment for hundreds of people, the vast majority of them being women. In our study throughout several agencies it was difficult to find a single social worker possessed of university training in social work, despite the fact that there existed three university programs in social work within the city and region.

It seems, that vertical mobility inside such organizations can be determined more by informal relations with agency director than by such formal attributes as education and the capability for inventing new methods of work (Blau, 1963). One explanation of this situation is that such an organizational order has been constructed by the street-level bureaucracy in order to protect its own interests. However, the higher levels of hierarchy within the social work domain also agree that formal training is a secondary factor for careers in social work.

Centers of social services have become the major organizations for developing social work practice in the Russian regions. The working conditions and everyday problems here are similar throughout Russia. The annual staff turnover is about 15-20% (higher in rural than in urban areas).

The notion of street-level bureaucracy was coined by Michael Lipsky (1980) who did research in schools, police and welfare agencies, legal and other services. The employees of such services in different countries have similarities both in the content of their duties and in working conditions. The work of social services employees is characterized by high autonomy and constant stress because of high workload and emotional type of their occupations.

Our research shows that, by now, bureaucratic structures in social work are becoming completely formed and fixed. It means that the speed of social services transformation since the transition from communism is bound to be slow, whilst practices of administrative control in the agencies have become stable and widespread. Such practices reflect the peculiarities of social welfare in modern conditions; the specific organizational culture inherited from the soviet *sobes* (welfare agency); and also the influence of Western social work experience evident at both the federal and the local level in Russia.

One of the attributes of organizational culture is language. As a rule, when people perform an activity jointly for a long time, they invent special terms, jargon, idioms, which mark the attachment of people to certain guild. For the social scientist the language of an institution helps deconstruct the ideology of the profession, its symbolic features that are so often taken for granted and not discussed. Besides, the terms which describe social problems, are not just the products of social relations but also the tools which construct social order.

According to our ethnographic observations in two Centers for Social Services in Saratov, there are several areas of agency jargon. The first area relates to definitions of the clients. A client here is perceived as marginal person, (s)he is marginalized in this institution. The peculiarities of the social workers’ routine is a much-discussed theme. Latent dissatisfaction with laborious paper work is related to filling in a large number of reports which can drive a social worker crazy: she calls her duties “*bumazhki sobirat*’ (collecting papers)”, “*eti bumazhki s uma svedut* (those papers will drive one mad)”. Home helpers – social workers who assist the elderly and disabled in their homes, have to go long distances round the district without means of transportation – call themselves “*raznoschiki uslug* (service-barrow-people)”, who are “working by feet” when they go around on home visits.

Among social services employees it is difficult to find anyone satisfied with their salary. That is why they usually say with a grin: “*zarplata – plakali vtchera* (salary – we’ve been crying yesterday)”. Even those additional payments and small rewards which sometimes are given to those people who face

human misfortune, poverty, weakness, are not considered by them as a real financial incentive. About such rewards one hears ironical remarks: “*tri kopeiki* (three kopecks)”² – which emphasize the insignificance of the payment.

Development and perspectives of social policy and social work in the sphere of child protection in Russia

The much discussed topic in social policy and social work perspectives in the 90s in Russia was debate over family values. This debate emphasized the family as a problem for society with little reference to either needs or rights of family members. Any debate over the family soon becomes a debate over the state, and what role if any it should play in regulating family affairs. Because boundaries between state and family are often confused there is backgrounds for conflict over state intervention in family life.

The main arguments for crisis are erosion of family values leading to moral and social disintegration, failures to carry out family socialization, reproduction, care and protection in ways acceptable to society, decreasing of marriage rate, raising of divorce rate, rejecting of parental obligations, decreasing of personal satisfaction with family life. The more vulnerable victims of family crisis are children.

Since 1993 Russia adopted more than 120 legislation acts concerned to family. The contents and target group of these documents, and also direction of financial flows clearly demonstrate priorities of family policy which is child protection policy.

Despite sharp falls in the birthrate in the country since the late 1980s, the total number of children living permanently or temporarily in orphanages and similar child institutions or placed with foster parents has increased; currently there are about 400 000 children in public care across the country. These children are mostly still living in large-scale institutions: infant homes, orphanages, homes for the disabled and hospitals.

Traditional family support system offering cash benefits and in-kind services have weakened considerably in Russia, and evidence shows that in many cases they do not reach the needy or provide the necessary help.

The main problems of modern social work agencies working with children and their families are following:

- Insufficiency of financing
- Restricted and inert reforms
- Systematic problems in the field of functional, organizational, methodological and procedural clearness, definition of priorities, measures of implementation of national, local and regional policies; planning and budget distribution; lack of human resources, control, reporting and assessment)
- Lack of focusing on the preventive programs
- Problems of decentralization
- Lack of coordination of efforts (problem of intersectional interaction and social partnership).

The main actors on scene of social work with family and children are the following social services:

- Local centers of the social support of family and children;
- Centers of the psycho-pedagogical support of population;
- Centers of the emergency psychological support.

These services deal with providing of the charge-free support for the adolescents and their families, showing up the adolescents, which are in a socially dangerous situation, and families with children, who need social support; providing the needed support and implementation of individual rehabilitational programs, contributing in organization of health care programs and leisure time for the adolescents who need the state support, providing of individual preventive measures for adolescents,

who are not looked after, material aid and in-kind assistance, day care services for children from poor families, helping in seeking a job.

Specialized social work institutions work with children in risk or with ones who have appeared in a difficult life situation, providing social rehabilitation, the emergency social support, temporary residential care and organization of their further placement, preventing of child homelessness and child neglect.

The inefficient forms of children placement include institution care system, specially in cases of long-term care for children in risk (abandoned children, children with special needs). Number of children living in long-time residential care institutions increased up to 66% during the period from 1993 to 2002. In 1999 about 400 thousand abandoned and homeless children and children with special needs lived in more than 3 thousand orphanages and children homes.

Despite of changes in legislation, ideology and policies which are giving priority to placement of children in family environment, rising public comprehension about negative effects of institutional care on children, decreasing of children population in Russia, understanding of high costs of institutional care in comparison with the family-type care institutional care remains one of the most widespread forms of work with children in risk - about 30 % of children who need to be looked after are placed in the orphanages and children's homes.

Now responsibility for family and child well-being is distributed between the several ministries; that results both in inconsistency and ineffectiveness of developing and introducing of policies and measures, and also to apparent duplication of tasks. Such dissociation slows down development of unified policy directed at improvement of family and children well-being, first of all because of the struggle between the ministries for spheres of influence and financial resources.

Conclusion

The various approaches to legitimation, constitution and professionalization, are not to be taken as isolated perspectives. On the contrary, each of them sheds some light on the functions, methods and status of social work as a profession. The reflective practitioner type of professionalism is more appropriate for today's social work, and involves a combination of theoretical and practical knowledge, values, cognitive and behavioural competencies in specific contexts through negotiating shared meanings.

The necessity of the partnership between education and practice as well as within different sectors of practical social work and other caring professions is being recognized. In order to strengthen the capacity of these partnerships and training mechanisms it would be helpful to expand information-sharing and networking activities, and to assist the development of non-governmental social services - including direct services, advocacy groups and associations. The job market for social work graduates is now quite large and diverse; educational programs have been established for students and practitioners working in public and non-governmental agencies dealing with social services. But there is a growing need for appropriate professional literature as well as for the popularization of civil society and social work values by the mass media. An effective mechanism for the independent evaluation of social services is also needed, to make it possible to target educational and fundraising activities. It is important for government, foundations and the academic community to focus more resources and attention on critical issues in social welfare and on the importance of developing conflict resolution skills, to support the development of social services research.

Notes:

¹ This paper is based on the materials of the research projects "Legitimation and professionalization of social work" (project leader Rolv Lyngstad, University of Bodoe, Norway) and "Post-Soviet Welfare and professionalization of social work in Russia" (project leader Elena Iarskaia-Smirnova, Saratov State Technical University, Russia)

² Three kopecks – an idiomatic expression meaning a tiny sum of money (1 kopeck = 0.01 Rouble = 0.03 cents)

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