

“A Salary is not Important Here”: The Professionalization of Social Work in Contemporary Russia

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Abstract

Helping professions address the growing number of social problems which have emerged, along with contextual changes in Russian society, culture and state social policy. Social work only emerged in Russia in 1991 and it still lacks recognition by public opinion and by other caring professions. This paper addresses the current development of the social work profession in Russia, considers its context and reviews the main issues affecting processes within social work practice and education. Many social work agencies are in search of new forms of organization and are trying to develop new philosophies of service, in order to build positive relations with communities. However, given the 70 years of the Soviet era when social protection was highly centralized and bureaucratized, the organizational cultures of the new social services sometimes reproduce old patterns of bureaucracy, especially where employees lack professional education. The reflective practitioner type of professionalism is here argued to be more appropriate for social workers in today's Russia. The paper includes an analysis of interviews with social workers and administrators in a large Russian city and considers the results of an ethnographic study of social services in the same city.

Keywords

Social work practice; Social work education; Russia

Social Work in Russia in the 1990s: Issues of Professionalization

Functional social work and dysfunctional social environment

There are different approaches to the concept of professionalization (see Reeser and Epstein 1996; Larson 1977; Jones and Joss 1995). Some sociologists have described it as a positive and progressive force which promotes “general

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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 labour and poses the question of which of the needs of society are met by the occupational functions of the professions (Etzioni 1964; Parsons 1951).

From this perspective, social work exerts a substantial influence on the exploration of the nature of social problems, shaping of the values of a civil society. In Soviet Russia, some social work functions had been carried out by various agencies in the domains of four ministries—Education, Health Care, Social Promotion and Internal Affairs. Comparable functions had also been undertaken by Communist Party organizations, the Komsomol (Youth Communist Organization) and trade unions. However, this whole system of work had been arranged according to departmental and bureaucratic principles, which in many cases reduced its effectiveness. Certainly, during the cold war period, social programmes in the USSR proved chronically incapable of decreasing poverty, crime and mortality rates. The huge state appeared unable to solve these problems. By contrast, the 1990s witnessed considerable political, economic, social and cultural change in Russia, the scope and depth of which has had a dramatic effect on the lives of ordinary people.

It was in response to these changes that the new educational programmes and caring professions emerged and developed their extensive networks throughout the country. Thus, as a profession and educational programme, social work was introduced in Russia in 1991. It appeared in the academic and professional sphere 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. According to the Social Service Federal Law of 1995, "Social service is an activity of social service agencies providing social support, everyday household support, social-medical, psychological-pedagogical, social-juridical services and material help, providing social adaptation and rehabilitation of citizens in a difficult life situation". The main concepts in this Federal Law include the following: "*Social service agencies* are governmental and non-governmental, profit and non-profit organizations which provide social services as well as citizens who engage in social service without establishing an organization. *A client of a social service agency* is a citizen in a difficult life situation, who as a result of this is provided with social service. *Social services* are the activities involved in providing the client of a social service agency with help according to this Federal Law. *A difficult life situation* is a situation that objectively hinders the life activity of a citizen (disability, inability to look after oneself because of old age, illness, orphanhood, neglect, low income, unemployment, homelessness, conflicts and abuse within the family, loneliness and the like) which (s)he cannot overcome unaided".

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 centres. According to the Social Service Federal Law (1995), "organizations of social

services include the following: (1) multi-task centres of social services for the population; (2) territorial centres of social help for families and children; (3) centres of social services; (4) social rehabilitation centres for children and youngsters under 18; (5) centres for helping children who are left without parents; (6) social shelters for children and adolescents; (7) centres for psychological-pedagogical help to the population; (8) centres for acute psychological help by telephone; (9) centres (units) of social assistance to households; (10) night-stay hostels; (11) special homes for lonely elderly; (12) residential social services (nursing homes for elderly and disabled, psychoneurological nursing homes, nursing homes for mentally retarded children, nursing homes for children with physical defects); (13) gerontological centres; (14) other organizations providing social services”.

Thus the network in Saratov, for instance, includes more than 130 different agencies of the social services, including the Employment Centres, nursing homes, centres for social services; night-stay facilities for homeless people; centres for social rehabilitation of abandoned children; centres for the rehabilitation of children and adolescents with disabilities; summer camps and sanatoria for the war-injured, disabled, war and labour veterans, disabled children and their parents; a sport and treatment school for children with disabilities; a driving school for people with disabilities; a centre for the repair of vehicles for people with disabilities; and a factory for orthopaedic items (see also Iarskaia-Smirnova 1999). But the vast majority of employees in the centres of social service in Saratov have not got a diploma in social work.

The activity of social workers was considered important in the 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. According to the Social Service Federal Law (1995), the main groups of clients identified as those to whom social services should be provided free of charge included: “(1) citizens who are unable to look after themselves because of old age, illness, disability and who are without relatives able to provide assistance and care—provided the income of such citizens is lower than the subsistence minimum established for their place of residence; (2) citizens in a difficult life situation because of unemployment, natural disasters or injuries suffered in armed and inter-ethnic conflicts; (3) children and youngsters under 18 in a difficult life situation”.

Arrangements for the 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 arrival of social work as a new educational discipline coincided with the restructuring of social sciences and humanities in Russian universities. This revival and animation of social thought in Russia, supported by the Russian government as well as by private initiatives and international foundations, has resulted in widespread public discussion on matters of social inequality, exclusionary practices and social problems. The professionalization of social work, however, has been hindered by several parallel developments, or dysfunctions, both internal and external to social work itself.

First, inadequate financial resources at federal and local level have affected the quality of the services and the motivation of employees. Low salaries do not contribute to the prestige of social work as a profession. While the need for social work professionals is still extensive, their salary and status remain extremely low. This means less stability in the construction of the professional identities of those who teach and work in the field. More than eight thousand specialists had graduated by 2000; however, a very limited number of these graduates have gone on to work in social services, due to the low salary. On average, less than 30 per cent of social work graduates in Russian regions are employed according to their diploma. 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 the Federal Ministry. There may also be a position *Social Worker* within the staff of a particular organization. For example, there are no such positions required in nursing homes for the elderly, but they are required in social service agencies and in social security departments. Such social workers are meant to be undertaking home help, and their position is lower than that of specialists in social work. The specialist in social work's salary is about \$200 per year, which is about the same as a nurse and two-thirds of a schoolteacher's salary. The social worker's salary is about \$120 per year (November 2001). 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.

Second, while the number of social services is growing, different agencies do not perform at the same level of efficiency and many of them are at the earliest stages of development. Furthermore, the public's perception of social work in today's Russia is partly based on the Soviet history of social services. In the Soviet Union, people used to name the state system of social protection and such organizations with one short word *sobes*. *Sobes* meant a bureaucratic world of impolite clerks whose responsibility was to deal with pensions and special payments (for example, on funerals). The functions of these employees did not require a professional qualification; rather they performed according to instructions. The organizational culture of some social services today has inherited features of *sobes*. Certain agencies have simply changed their names while not significantly changing their staff or directorate. Old practices of administration, including patterns of recruitment and organizational socialization in such agencies, support an extremely rigid power hierarchy; the interests of clients are subordinated to bureaucratic norms and looked down upon. Such an organizational culture resists innovative processes which might threaten the bureaucratic base. This is why initiatives and attempts to update the principles on which the social welfare of the family and children are built, sometimes only serve to lead practitioners into a dead end of outmoded techniques and concepts. Nevertheless, further qualification programmes for social services employees can in many cases lead to fruitful exchange and successful partnerships between practitioners and university teachers.

Third, it is not only the organizational but the larger cultural environment which produces discriminatory attitudes towards people with social problems and hampers the professional performance of social workers. Such attitudes may be evident in everyday interactions, the mass media, professional literature and education (see Iarskaia-Smirnova 1999).

Fourth, although a lot has been done in Russia since 1991 within social work education and practice, much needs to be revised in the light of good experience. As remarked above, the arrival of social work as a new educational discipline coincided with the restructuring of social sciences and humanities in Russian universities. Faculties of Marxist-Leninist philosophy, scientific communism and history of the Communist Party were renamed as those of philosophy, sociology, and national history. Many such faculties initiated new educational programmes in social work (or sociology). During Soviet times, Marxist philosophy had served as basic knowledge for social studies and the humanities. Thus uncertainty about the content of social work, coupled with the fundamental writing traditions of Soviet philosophers, explains why the language of the first textbooks on *theory, methodology and technologies* of social work lagged far behind practice and could be overburdened with heavy theoretical constructions. Such old explanatory models are still in evidence in academic discussion on social work. However, in general there has been a remarkable trend in Russian academia towards research and educational programmes which focus on issues of social inclusion and human rights. Many new and young faculty members, competent in modern knowledge of the social sciences and humanities have been hired by the university departments of social work.

Fifth, an obstacle to the development of social services and the professionalization of social work in Russia, has been lack of professional knowledge and the necessary skills. From the very beginning of this profession in Russia, the lack of communication and collaboration between university departments of social work and the social work agencies became an established pattern, because the education programmes were started while social work positions were still occupied by non-professionals. Even today, ten years after the beginning of social work education in Russian universities, certain representatives of social welfare still cannot understand why a social worker needs to have a relevant university educational background; they are not aware of social work theory or of the classification of social work methods. In spite of this, social work graduates are now in great demand in many regions. If in the early 1990s, university departments of social work could find it difficult to arrange a field placement for a social work student in a local social work agency, by the end of this decade the links between education and practice had become much stronger.

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.

Since 1915 when Abraham Flexner—a scholar and consultant to the medical profession—developed a list of attributes to distinguish the ideal type of a profession, social scientists have still not reached consensus on this subject (see Reeser and Epstein 1996: 70–2). Flexner 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, the application of knowledge through techniques that are educationally communicable, self-organization, altruistic motivation, and possession of a professional self-consciousness (Reeser and Epstein 1996: 70–1). 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? It seems that social work in Russia has nearly all the attributes in Millerson's list. However, each of the traits can only be attached to a separate field of social work education or practice. For example, students are getting education and training while practitioners are performing a service. Whether or not they are providing a service using skills based on theories, depends on whether or not the practitioner possesses a professional qualification. But during the time when the first cohort of social work students were getting their professional education at universities, the newly opened positions in social services were being occupied by anyone seeking a job and acquainted with a director of a service. Those who happened to be directors of the new services, had often started from zero level, knowing very little about social work. Often the informal criteria of good relationships were more important for recruitment than the relevant qualifications of candidates. If, in the case of hiring a medical professional or psychologist, the corresponding diploma was a pre-requisite, this was not true for "social worker" or "specialist in social work". Thus former pre-school teachers, ex-*nomenklatura* (employees of the Soviet administration), demobilized officers, unemployed engineers and many others became the first generation of "specialists in 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. Understanding this problem, the Russian Ministry of Social Protection (later reorganized into the Ministry of Labour and Social Development) required social services directors and employees to gain professional qualifications through systems of higher education, vocational training and further qualification programmes. However, such attempts to retrain staff have been obstructed by lack of resources.

Educational reform in Russia has meant that two standards for social work have been adopted: a five-year programme leading to the diploma of "specialist in social work" and a four-year programme leading to the BSW

degree. It is possible to develop the latter into an MSW program, as is being done for instance at Saratov State Technical University. This situation has given rise to a lot of debate among educators and practitioners concerning "whether or not we need bachelors and masters?" and "who are they?" Meanwhile, however, the admission of students to the departments of social work is usually subject to high levels of competition since, analogously with the social sciences and humanities, this educational programme has recently become very popular. 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. Yet still there is an overall shortage of literature for students and practitioners. Up until 2001, for instance, only a few relevant books had been translated into Russian from Swedish, English and Norwegian.

At the same time as social work was being established under the domain of the Ministry of Education, the professional and educational programme of social pedagogy (for work in schools and other educational institutions) was also being established. 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: *Rossiiski zhurnal sotsial'noi raboty* (*Russian Journal of Social Work*), *Sotsial'noe obespechenie* (*Social Promotion*), *Sotsial'naya zashchita* (*Social Protection*), *Rabotnik sotsial'noy sluzhby* (*Worker of Social Service*). The main concern of the professional organization entitled "Association of Social Services Employees" is to become a labour union for its members, to protect the rights of its members, to promote values of professional education, to provide its members with psychological support, to work on ethical standards, to encourage and reward its members for excellence in the job, etc. Ethical issues are one of the concerns of the association of social services employees, which recently has called for discussion to revise a code of social work ethics for Russia. In many agencies lists of duties or lists of advices to clients are compiled in a process of constructing a professional identity at the local level.

However, it is not the Association but the Federal government which has jurisdiction over the profession. The Social Services Federal Law (1995) claims that "the system of social service agencies includes organizations under the control of both Federal and regional authorities, in addition to municipal systems which involve municipal organizations of social services. Social service can also be provided by organizations and citizens representing different sectors of the economy." According to this same Social Service Federal Law, "Social service is based on the following principles: (1) focus on the concrete situation of the individual client; (2) accessibility; (3) voluntary agreement; (4) humanity; (5) priority for children and youngsters under 18 who are in a difficult life situation; (6) confidentiality; (7) preventive orientation".

Professional self-consciousness may be an attribute in the Flexner list of professional traits, but the main obstacle to the development of social work in Russia would seem to be an unclearness of professional identity. The first social workers, at the beginning of the 1990s, were expected to perform home help functions in respect of those (elderly or disabled) who could not live without assistance. It was at this time that people got used to seeing somebody in the shops with the ID of "social worker" who could buy food and other necessities without queuing. In order to distinguish such "social workers" from social services employees possessed of a professional diploma, the Ministry of Social Protection invented the rank of "specialist in social work". But the very term "social work" had already acquired the meaning, for many, of an unqualified activity which could easily be done by anyone.

Defining the boundaries of social work

A third approach to professionalization is represented by critical perspectives, including Marxist 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). This occupational control approach originates from conflict theories, from an action model of society, in which competing groups struggle to secure their own interests (see Jones and Joss 1995: 18). This model explains the reasons for difficulties in collaboration between professionals from different occupational areas in the following way.

Every profession tries to define clearly a circle of issues which relate to professional competence, thus limiting its world view but enabling it to claim unique and legally supported spheres 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 a 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 1995: 18).

A social construction of social work thus implies an activity in the social sphere primarily associated with the realization of social policy through the distribution of social pensions and benefits. Psychosocial support is done by practical psychologists (Belicheva 1997). Working with children in schools is the prerogative of social pedagogues, while advocacy and group work with women, people with disabilities and others whose rights are violated, is provided by NGOs. The period of the 1990s was also conspicuous for the rise of church activity whose humanitarian endeavours included, for example, the provision of shelters for abandoned children.

This development of church, NGO and grassroots organizations is a very recent phenomenon for Russia; one which could amount to another important resource for social services. Although the structure is an unfamiliar one, public agencies for social work are sometimes getting financial help from different sponsors and non-governmental foundations. In Moscow, for example, there are many NGOs dealing with support for people with disabilities, families with many children, lonely elderly people, etc. However, volunteers are recruited usually only amongst those students who are conducting their field placements at the agency. Private sector organizations (such as the Crisis Centre for Women, which is internationally financed) do not always allow for a social worker position in their staffing plans. Social work students and graduate students simply work as volunteers. The most popular and powerful figure in crisis centres, hotlines, rehabilitation centres, family centres, for both public and private sectors, tends to be a psychologist or MD (in the case of rehabilitation centres for disabled children). There are quite a few NGOs providing social services right now, but they practically never employ social workers and do not describe their activities as "social work".

In short, there is still a tendency to define social work as home help and welfare services, not applicable to counselling and patient-connected services. To be sure, since 1994 there has been a trend to relate social work to rehabilitation teamwork practices as well as to employment services. Yet social workers in rehabilitation agencies and schools are often seen by other professionals, administrators and clients as primarily to do with registration, that is, not too involved in treatment and community-oriented functions. Social workers and the administrators of social services tend to be unaware of the professional community of social workers and the international experience of social work. They lack access to publicity, public relations, inter-agency cooperation. They feel isolated when they have no contacts even with other services working in the same field in another city. At the same time, there may be a hidden competition for financial resources taking place between similar agencies within the same city.

However, it is not yet an open-market competition, where the professional competence of an agency or of an individual worker is a social and political phenomenon. In today's Russia, the current dominant approach to competency and evaluation of service delivery is still rooted in the old practices of administrative revision, where informal negotiations between agency director and ministry official contributed to the continuation of poor service performance.

University departments of social work are intimately involved in the concern with the enhancement of the profession, but there is no openly voiced

criticism either of social work education or of its incongruency with social work practice. The question is debated, within academia and public agencies, whether social work should be considered a distinct field of theory and practice, as opposed to a mixture of psychology, pedagogy and welfare services as well as health and community services. Meanwhile, social, economic, medical and vocational services for children with special needs, the disabled, the aged, young people, remain fragmented.

Perceptions of professional performance

Jones and Joss (1995: 21–7) have distinguished three main professional models: *practical professional*, *technical expert* (with its “variant”—managerial expert) and *reflective practitioner*. So let us see how the dimensions of professional performance are reflected and constructed by social services employees as interviewed in Saratov, Russia, by staff from the Department of Social Work at Saratov State Technical University, in 1998. The interviewees were nineteen women and one man in the age range 24 to 51. The group of respondents included five heads of the departments of social services, eight specialists in social work and seven social workers. Their experience of working in social service ranged from 2 to 8 years. None of them had a diploma in social work. Information was collected via semi-structured interviews.

When talking about the role of knowledge in social work, the informants mentioned medical, pedagogical, judicial, and psychological knowledge, but not in relation to concrete skills. Their method of professional development was by experience—the respondents having noted that systematic knowledge in social work is not necessary: “*Worldly experience helps a lot . . . One needs kindness, sympathy for people. Knowledge has nothing to do with that.*” In their relations with clients, social workers said, they have a strong sense of moral debt and experience empathy. In these moments, emotions have been strongly expressed: “*It seems like we ourselves perceive this pain . . . Even if a person was strong, he [or she] anyway goes through this.*”

Consensual exchange with clients was reported in the following excerpts: “*It is my pleasure to talk with them . . . I myself learn from them. It is interesting to visit these families, to communicate with them . . . I am a very ill person, too, and look how the others handle a similar situation.*” This fragment also points to a self-image of social workers which does not fit exactly with any of the definitions from the Jones and Joss classification: social workers are neither experts nor facilitators. A growing number of publications on the history of Russian social work have contributed to the emphasis on craft or practical professionalism in the construction of social work in Russia. The focus is on charitable activities, sponsorship (Iarskaia 1995), the values of orthodox religion—relating to the period before the socialist revolution of 1917—and to the formation of the system of social security during Soviet times (Kholostova 2001). Even so, the self-presentation of social workers in the interviews is only partly reminiscent of the “craftsman” or the “master” image of professionalism. Rather, this looks like an “apprentice” learning from the client.

Clients in this situation seem rather to play the role of craftsmen because, during the Soviet era, people had been used to keeping their many problems

to themselves and often to handling them without professional help. Social work thus raises an unusual prospect of not correcting or curing but *helping* people—and hinges on the unfamiliar practice of sharing private concerns with the representative of a public agency. The practice of individual confession in church or in the office of a psychoanalyst may have a long history in the West, but they were absent in Soviet culture. Modern Russian people are still not oriented towards getting services of such a kind. If need be, they apply to the more familiar agencies—health care organizations or the militia—and consider social services as another name for the former system for social promotion (*sotsial'noye obespechenie* = *sobes*). While talking about the social value of their work, informants emphasized this ambiguity of its status—social work may be important for society, but the people at large have no idea of it so long as the mass media keep silent: “*This work is necessary. Little is known about this service.*” “*Advertising it is not enough about our service, if [one says] ‘social worker’, then at once [people respond] ‘sobes’, categorically.*”

What brings people to this work and what keeps them here? It is obviously not the money or prestige. “*Small, miserable salary . . . In this business salary does not matter . . .*” Nevertheless, “*For a woman it is certainly low, but acceptable. Though it is ‘crumbs’, they are constant and there is less risk.*” The respondents mentioned that the work was not difficult; rather, it was interesting. Another important value of their work for them was self-realization: “*This work helps me to survive, to overcome my own difficulties.*” It helped to fulfil their own needs: “*I always wanted to work with children,*” “*I am of an age when one starts to look for the meaning of life and one’s vocation . . . would like to leave a trace in people’s hearts.*” Flexible working hours permitted women social workers to take care of their children or to look after sick relatives. Besides, these positions were open while there was not much chance of finding another job: “*There are not very many options to find jobs, no choices.*” “*It doesn’t matter where we work, let only the record of service continue.*” “[I am] *working temporarily here, until I have found other work.*” “*My girl is frequently sick, there is nobody to look after her. Besides, I am more than thirty years old now, they do not hire me anywhere else, so you will work [here], whether you want to or not.*” At the same time, the central motive evinced in all the interviews was related to the idea of being useful to people: “*I would like to help, [with] some kindness, not even material [support], just purely psychological.*” “[We have a] *large effect—both mums and children leave with shining eyes—it inspires us a lot!*” Some of the interviewees reported that they got accustomed to their clients, developed friendly relationships with them, and could not imagine any other work: “*I have got so used to them . . . I already could not [be] without these families.*”

What are the positive implications of this situation for Russian social work? Radical approaches to social work and studies on professionalism in social work (see Reeser and Epstein 1996: 104) warn that greater professionalization can result in decreased activism and increase the gap between professionals and clients. Therefore, in Russia the best chance might be to integrate efforts of universities, public social work agencies and citizen activism. The non-profit sector can facilitate the development of a new philosophy of social services and ensure that the centre serves the margins. However, the successful collaborative integration of different public and private organizations

dealing with social services will require a cycle of experiential learning (see Kolb 1984) which involves concrete experience, reflective observation, theoretical conceptualization and active experimentation, sensitive to the specific contexts of professional practice. A great help could be provided by regular seminars jointly organized by university teachers, researchers, administration of social services, and service providers. In order to increase their efficiency, different social work agencies could use their mutual efforts to arrange for innovative projects and they can exchange experiences and ideas with a view to lobbying parliament at the local or federal level.

The Street-level Bureaucracy of Social Services

Bureaucracy and power in social services

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 the high workload and the emotional nature of the occupations. When Lipsky discussed the decisions made by street-level bureaucracy and their effect in society, he concluded that the probability of mistakes in service delivery and the power of street-level bureaucrats increased in proportion to the increase in organizational complexity.

Organizational culture and the language of a profession

Our research shows that, by now, bureaucratic structures in social work are becoming fully formed and fixed. This means that the speed of social services transformation since the transition from Communism is bound to be slow, while 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 a certain guild. The peculiarities of shared language help the experienced member of a social group to distinguish “us” from “them”. At the same time, the language helps newcomers adjust to a new cultural context, through identification with “us”, “our” norms and rules of action. 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, there are several areas of agency jargon in such organizations. The first relates to definitions of the

clients. In the divisions dealing with services for the elderly, the most popular terms to describe service users are: *babushki* (old women), *dedushki* (old men), *pozhiyl'e grazhdane* (old citizens), as well as *babul'ki* (old women) and *dedul'ki* (old men)—the latter variants being particularly paternalistic. Class differences may not be very large between Russian social workers and their clients; however, about the clients they say “they are paupers” and distinguish the most irritating clients who require special attention as “*oni uzhe i s marasmom i s polnym buketom* (they are already in decay and the whole bouquet)”, “*bol'noi na golovu* (sick in his head)”, “*u nikh s golovoi ne vsyo v poryadke* (they have problems with their head)”, “*lyudi s obostreniyami* (people with acute condition)” or those who seem to demand too much attention: “*ruki vykruchivaiut* (enforce oneself)”. Normal discourse is dominated by the definition of clients, while normality itself is not strictly determined: “*eto normal'naia sem'ia* (this is a normal family)”, “*oni tam sovershenno nenormal'nye* (they are absolutely abnormal there)”, “*tam invalid—nenormal'nyi chelovek* (a disabled over there—an abnormal person)”. A client here is perceived as a marginal person, (s)he is marginalized in this institution. An employee comments looking through the window: “*kakaya-to strannaya tyotya t nam idyot—naverno, klient!* (what a strange woman is coming to us, she is a client, perhaps!)” Another specialist complains about stress: “*Skoro sami klientami stanem! Sami sebia obsluzhivat' budem* (soon we'll become the clients of this centre ourselves!)” It seems that the agency considers its function to some extent to be one of social control and normalization.

There is a latent practice of transferring clients “from one hand to the other”, trying to get rid of them. Such clients are labelled ironically as “*babushki perekhodyashee krasnoe znamya* (old women—challenge cup)” referring to the Soviet tradition of awarding one working team after another by the same honour red standard for their success in socialist competition. The peculiarities of the social workers' routine is a much-discussed theme. Latent dissatisfaction with laborious paperwork 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 and have to go long distances round the district without means of transportation—call themselves “*raznoschiki uslug* (service-borrow-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 vchera* (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 ironic remarks: “*tri kopeiki* (three kopecks, an idiomatic expression meaning a tiny sum of money, 1 kopeck = 0.01 rouble)” —which emphasize the insignificance of the payment.

In those social services where the medical profession has a strong influence, medical discourse will play an important role in the lexicon of social workers. It is seen, for example, at the rehabilitation centre for children with disabilities, where the children are called in reports “*oblechenmye* (cured)”. Those who for a long time have not been getting in touch with rehabilitation

specialists are called “*zapushchennye deti* (neglected children)” or “*zapushchennye sluchai* (neglected cases)” as in medical practice.

It is rather important to analyse a discourse which frames clients’ problems and social workers’ needs according to a certain knowledge base. The dominant types of professionalism relevant to social work tasks would seem to be those of psychologist, lawyer and medical doctor. Almost all our respondents talked about it regardless of their position. Some of them, even while talking about social work education, thought this was conducted in departments of psychology. Such understanding of the profession is not occasional. It inherits stereotypes concerning social problems and attitudes towards treatment of those problems. When social workers talk about such problems, they usually stress the personality of the client—“*neprisposoblennye k novym ekonomicheskim usloviam* (unadjusted to the new economic conditions)”, “*babushki byvauiut raznye—griaznye, gnevnye, dobrye, veselye* (old women can be different—dirty, angry, kind, cheerful)”—or emphasize rather narrowly formulated methods of treatment: “*obratit’sya k psikhologu chtob ne muchitsya ot odinochestva* (to apply to a psychologist in order not to suffer from loneliness)”, “*obratit’sya k yuristu, chtob pomog s rabotoi* (apply to a lawyer, so he will help you get a job)” [*sic!*].

In several organizations where we conducted our interviews and observations, it was possible to characterize relationships between social workers and clients in the following way: often the borders between them are removed, they exchange telephone numbers, congratulate each other on birthdays. Meanwhile, social workers and their managers think that a woman has advantages in understanding clients, in getting close to them, she builds home-like relations with service users. The working place of a social worker in an organization is thus influenced by “feminine” organizational culture: a lot of green plants, flowers, calendars with pussy-cats, photographs of pop-stars and relatives.

The fact that social work is often understood by street-level bureaucrats as not a specific professional activity so much as low-paid domestic chores, has different consequences for everyday working activity. In some cases, it can be a positive sign of a low distance, the absence of social and class barriers between the recipients of social help and the representatives of the agency. But at the same time, it can lead to damage in professional relations because too short a distance may have negative effects. It can hinder the rational performance of service providers who copy the model of familial relations in their communication with clients. Furthermore, everyday norms dominate rather than professional ethics, when social workers break confidentiality by discussing clients’ problems openly and using their names.

Empathy vs. knowledge?

The restructuring of industry in Russia led to the appearance of a large number of unemployed people in the labour 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 women. Only 1.5 per cent of the labour force in social work agencies is men;

they work as drivers and plumbers, and a few as administrators. The main occupations that social workers had before they came to social services, were industrial labour, accounting, engineering and education (pedagogy). As a rule, no special training was provided for them. A similar situation has been reported in other Russian regions. In the words of the deputy chief of the St Petersburg municipal geriatric centre, who is responsible for medical-social work and is possessed of higher social education, "professionalism includes a skill of empathy with the other person, to understand how to help him and not harm yourself" (see Poniatovskaia 1998: 35). She was talking about sick-nurses "which are in great demand even in our pauper times". In this article these nurses are called "social workers", who are recruited "nowadays from unemployed teachers and engineers from the closed-down research institutes". Among the service users of this geriatric centre, as the journalist admits, there are not only "old Petersburg intelligentsia like academician Dmitri Likhachev, but also people with damaged mental health, with impaired speech". Geriatric help is understood here as being a combination of medical and social components; but the functions of social workers who are taught in-service include simply to "listen without interruption" and "cope with bedsores". 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 programmes in social work within the city and region. At one centre of social services, not one out of 172 employees had a diploma in social work—including a manager who had been originally trained as an engineer in a polytechnic institute and who had acquired additional training in economics. Six employees are currently part-time students at social work departments in two universities. But at another service centre, not one out of 250 employees has any such training.

We found out that, in spite of the high turnover of employees in social services (which in centres of social services is about 15–20 per cent per year), the managerial personnel of these organizations was quite stable. In other words, representatives of the managerial "clan" demonstrate horizontal mobility (they can be transferred from one top position to another within the city); whereas social workers and specialists in social work are among those who are hired and fired quite often. In nine cases out of ten, managers had come to be directors of social services from the Soviet administrative bodies—they had been heads of departments in district or city executive committees or worked as officials in Communist Party bodies. In such conditions managers become key figures in the production and reproduction of meanings of social work and methods of administration. These meanings are rather restrictive; they have inherited from Soviet times a perception of social assistance as something secondary in comparison to industry; an activity which is equivalent to the "natural" social functions of taking care of the weak, elderly and needy.

It seems that vertical mobility inside such organizations can be determined more by informal relations with an agency director than by such formal attributes as education and the ability to invent new methods of work. 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. For instance, a head of the human resource department of the Russian Ministry of Labor and Social Development Mr V. Sudarenkov (cited in Poniatovskaia 2001: 10) declares that for university graduates it is necessary to work for three years in low-paid positions in order to gain practice experience (in spite of the fact that their training will have included a practice component). At the same time, many officials and managers of social services are dissatisfied with the level of knowledge of social workers because of the absence of formal training in their career path. Research conducted in different regions of Russia bears this out: most employees do not have the necessary knowledge, which influences the quality of their labour. It is important to solve this issue, because short-term classes do not satisfy employees and do not give them enough of the desired knowledge.

In respect of recruitment strategy, the administration of social services emphasizes the professional and personal qualities of an employee; yet it seems the main condition is a capability "*vlit'sya s kollektiv* (to reinforce a unit)". Obviously, this circumstance determines the fact that almost three out of four employees (about 70 per cent) have been recruited to their organization due to acquaintance with its administration or personnel. Therefore, relationships between leader and employees are based upon interdependence. Employees feel obliged and loyal to those who helped to find the job. Because of the deficit of such direct and rational criteria as the status of the profession, high income or career possibilities, indirect motivation is taking place. This includes informal relations at the workplace and the justification of low pay by the moral cliché concerning the importance of work for lonely elderly people. Informal relations with team leaders and managers are very significant when there is a lack of formal monetary and other professional stimuli. The administrator herself decides who may get an additional workload and higher payment, who is eligible for privileges and awards. In a nursing home, for example, it is possible to eat and feed one's entire family in the dining hall for residents, or to get some food at the kitchen.

Centres of social services have become the major organizations for developing social work practice in the Russian regions. They are primary social work organizations, according to classification of H. Wayne Johnson (1995). The working conditions and everyday problems here are similar to those throughout Russia. For example, social worker activity is rather autonomous and staff deal mainly with their team leader or director of organization. They do not communicate with each other, almost never meet all together, and have considerable freedom to make decisions on their own. These workers conduct home visits and serve their clients in a free regime, and they provide their team leader with a weekly report. This kind of organization does not usually include or favour collective activity. The annual staff turnover is about 15–20 per cent (higher in rural than in urban areas).

The professional practice of dealing with social problems at a micro-level and at the level of the social group is being demanded more and more in today's Russia. Such traditional professions as medicine, psychology and the law have long-established systems of education and codes of ethics. Social

work is much younger in Russian society and its content, system of training and code of ethics are known only to a narrow group of educators and graduates. As a result, typical professionals in the spheres of health care, welfare, and penitentiary systems are not oriented towards a social model of understanding crime, drugs and disability. The Russian system of higher education itself needs to correct the curricula for medical professionals, lawyers and psychologists so that they will be aware of the problems of structural social inequality, capable of explaining and solving individual problems, taking into account complex factors of social environment. Otherwise, social problems will be perceived as private ones and domestic violence will still be dealt with by psychologists; there will be attempts to cure substance abuse by medical means; while the cure of unemployment and poverty will be looked for in changing personal attitudes.

Yet the competition for professional expertise is being lost by social workers. Their interdisciplinary training is perceived as semi-professional both by other professionals and by those responsible for recruitment in the social services and for determining spheres of expertise and responsibility in social politics. Russian society can benefit if only social workers will come into different spheres of activity—hospitals, community health centres, schools, prisons, etc. In such a situation there might be a redistribution of symbolic, material and power resources between the new and the traditional helping professions. But right now this is difficult to envisage, due to existing institutional conditions, administrative circumstances and social attitudes. These factors not only hinder the definition of certain activities as the domain of social work but also block channels of employment for university graduates with training in social work.

Conclusions

The various approaches and research findings discussed above are not to be taken as isolated theoretical perspectives. On the contrary, each of them sheds some light on the problem of professionalization. Only in combination can they offer a multifaceted vision of the process by which a society starts defining a given occupation as a profession, and, importantly, the occupation starts defining itself as a profession.

In Russia nowadays, we cannot expect social workers to become immediately what the theorists would like them to be. It seems, rather, that the most appropriate model of professionalism for the social work practitioner in Russia is one which emphasizes the importance of experiential learning as the means by which professional competence is to be acquired and refined. Jones and Joss argue that the model of the reflective practitioner is “highly appropriate where questions of equity and non-oppressive and non-discriminatory behaviour are paramount” (1995: 29). The reflective practitioner type of professionalism, more appropriate for today’s social work, involves a combination of theoretical and practical knowledge, values, cognitive and behavioural competencies in specific contexts through the negotiation of 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 programmes have been established for students and practitioners working in public and non-profit 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 fund-raising activities. It is finally 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.

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