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"In the Polish Way": Social Service and Professional Social Work Development in Contemporary Poland

Alice E. Smith, PhD

With increasing frequency, professional social workers from the United States are traveling to teach and to practice social work in other countries. This trend will likely intensify as schools of social work attempt to comply with Council on Social Work Education's Curriculum Policy Statement of 1994, which explicitly states that "Effective social work education programs recognize the interdependence of nations and the importance of worldwide professional cooperation" (CSWE, 1994, B3.6, M3.6; Asamoah, Healy, & Mayadas, 1997).

The purpose of this study is to identify and discuss some key ideological and methodological issues that influence professional social work and social services in Poland, one country frequented by professional social workers from the United States. Poland is representative of other Central and Eastern European countries which are developing and recreating their identities following the dissolution of the United Soviet Socialist Republics. Thus, it is crucial that social workers from the outside understand the practice issues resulting from contemporary ideological, economic, and political realities in Poland (Constable & Frysztacki, 1994) and in other "Eastern Block" countries. Specifically, visiting social workers from the United States must recognize both the similarities and differences in Eastern European social services and social work education.

Basic Values and Social Science Paradigms for Polish Professional Social Work

Only since the "fall" of Communism in 1989, has Poland recognized social problems involving both state-sanctioned and privately-supported social policies and programs. During this time of transition, there have been many real changes, and as well as what appears to be a recreating of the "old" systems, as social policies and programs are developed. What is clear is the fast paced, dynamic nature of the changes and the high level of excitement

on the part of social policy analysts and professional social workers alike at the opportunities for social development. This atmosphere attracts foreign educators who often are encouraged to participate in this change. These guest educators have a unique opportunity for cross-cultural learning, but it is an opportunity which comes with the responsibility to be sensitive to the impact of their own values. The value systems of visitors and hosts have two major areas of potential difference. The first is the identification of "the problem" for which social policies and programs are created; the second is the dominant way in which formal social policies are created and implemented.

Fundamental Values

With respect to fundamental value differences, two aspects bear mentioning: the first is the whole idea of officially recognized social problems; the second is the way in which the concept of social problems is framed. With respect to the former, social work in the United States has been recognized as a profession since the National Conferences of Charities and Corrections, established in the late 1800s (Hollis & Taylor, 1951; Tourse, 1995). Since that time, many schools of social work have been created to address the multiple social problems recognized in this country. On the other hand, under communist-controlled socialism in Poland, there was no official recognition of social problems. The official position was that the government provided for the social needs of citizens through centrally planned social services. Other than the Department of Applied Sociology and Social Work, established within the Institute of Sociology at Jagiellonian University in Krakow in 1970, it is only since 1989 that the concept of social problems and, therefore, the profession of social work has developed in that country. Today, Polish social workers and their clients are very much excited about the official recognition of

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social problems and are seeking ways to solve them "in the Polish way" (Mellibruda, personal communication, June 17, 1997).

Secondly, although social work schools in both countries teach the importance of understanding the individual in the social environment, the emphasis is different in the two countries. Emphasis on the individual is the focus of social policies in the United States; emphasis on the environment is characteristic of Polish policies. This generalization does not mean that there is no emphasis on the individual in Poland, or that there is no emphasis on the social environment in the United States. Rather, it means that social policies and programs are generally oriented in different ways in the two countries. Such orientation is not static. There is great movement toward some individualism in Poland, and some movement toward systems programming in the United States. However, these overall characteristics prevail.

Social policies and programs regarding alcoholism provide a good example of the ideological difference in emphasis between the United States and Poland. Social work students in the United States are taught that the individual is at the center of several concentric circles, including the family, the local community, and the larger society (Lewin, 1936; Norton, 1978; O'Neil, 1984). The individual is the target for intervention. If the individual has difficulty with abusing alcohol, it is his/her responsibility to address the problem. Thus, most formal "harm reduction" policies and program interventions are targeted at the individual (Rotgers, Keller, & Morgenstern, 1996). In Poland, the formal social policy and resulting interventions for alcohol abuse are treated very differently. Alcoholism is seen in Poland as a problem that negatively impacts the individual, the family, and the workplace. In the Polish model, "the problem" is the alcoholism, not solely as it affects the individual, but also as it affects those around him/her. According to Dr. Jerzy Mellibruda, Director of the Central Planning of Alcoholism for Poland (personal communication, June 17, 1997), the recognition of the problem

as the center of the concentric circle model, is the Polish way of viewing alcoholism. Therefore, formal programs address the individual, but also the family, the community, and the workplace. The focus of alcohol treatment, then, is through education that addresses the entire population, rather than on individual treatment. A similar emphasis on group, rather than individual, treatment can be seen at community-based social programs in Social Assistance Centers throughout Poland. These Centers treat such diverse groups as the chronically mentally ill, the ambulatory elderly, and the homeless along with privatized or partially publicly subsidized programs for substance-abusing youth and after-school programs for economically poor children and their families (personal observation of such programs in Warsaw and Krakow, June 16 through 20, 1997).

Social Science Paradigms

Another way of understanding social policies and programs in Poland is through the use of five well-recognized social science paradigms — sets of assumptions that guide thinking and research. These paradigms are lenses through which social policies and programs can be understood (Kuhn, 1970). The first of these, grounded in the traditions of Comte, Spencer, Durkheim, and Merton, is the *Structural/Functional* Paradigm. It is a macro-level paradigm that perceives society as a relatively stable system that is based on widespread consensus as to what is morally desirable; each part of such a system has functional consequences for the operation of society as a whole. The questions related to this paradigm are: How is the society integrated? What are the major parts of the society, and what are the consequences of each for the operation of society? (Macionis, 1995.) Closely related is the *Social Conflict* Paradigm, from DuBois & Marx, which asks the question, How is society divided?

Prior to 1989, social problems in Poland were officially recognized and confronted at the central governmental level. Large social systems were cre-

ated to address these problems. Since 1989 and the fall of Communism, many social welfare acts have been created to address social problems. This change is the result of the commodification of social policies and programs, and the creation of civil legislation to support them. Primary among these legislative actions is the Social Assistance Act of 1990 and the Mental Health Act of 1994 (implemented in early 1995). Like the former centrally planned social service systems, these legislative acts concern social policies and centrally funded programs to be implemented at the local level. The assumption underpinning these acts is that through the provision of social programs to meet basic human needs, such policies reduce the likelihood of social conflict, promote stability, and enhance the probability of social control by the state.

Recently, there has been much enthusiasm regarding the development of meso-level or middle-range social programs which "fill the gaps" not covered, or insufficiently funded, by the macro-level policies and programs of the public sector nor addressed at the local level. Called non-governmental organizations (NGO's), these are often privatized organizations that are primarily funded by public monies, with some private and Church resource support. There is an emphasis on voluntarism. NGO's support the extant and highly developed networks of Polish families and communities (*gmina*) (Constable & Mehta, 1994). Typical examples of groups served by these social programs are drug-addicted youth, children and families in poverty, and the chronically mentally ill. Such social programs are often located in the poorer sections of large cities, such as the Brudno section of Praga in Warsaw and the Kazimierz section of Krakow.

The contemporary social science paradigm that most effectively assists the social worker in understanding such programs is the *Rational-Utilitarian* Paradigm. This paradigm, based on exchange and distributive justice theories, asks the question: How are individuals and groups motivated to effect society positively in ways that will maximize both their

interests and those of others? (Collins, 1994). NGO's rarely can count on a single steady funding stream, so creativity and the capacity to maximize resources to "satisfice" the greatest number of people are critical for programmatic success. For these reasons, this paradigm offers particular relevance to those thinking about why programs are developed and how to maximize resources.

What has not yet been developed in Poland is a strong social work orientation at the micro-level practice. Little is being done presently to assess the individual consumer's perceptions of social policies or the service quality of social programs. The social science paradigm that could be helpful in understanding consumer perceptions is the *Symbolic-Interaction* Paradigm. This paradigm views society as an ongoing process of social interaction based on symbolic communications. It assumes that individual perceptions are both valid and dynamic. Among the early theorists elucidating this paradigm were Cooley, Mead, and Thomas (Collins, 1994). The paradigm asks the question: How is society experienced? (Macionis, 1996.) This paradigm has great utility for countries with a value base emphasizing individualism and a tradition of consistent freedoms of speech and press, such as the United States. However, it is not as highly developed in countries where the value of individualism and the freedoms of speech and press have been suppressed. Therefore, at the present time, this paradigm is perhaps more relevant to the United States than it is to Poland and other Eastern European countries.

Related to the Symbolic-Interaction Paradigm is the *Phenomenological* Paradigm of ethnomethodology, discussed by Garfinkel (1967). This paradigm asks the question, How do people understand their experience of society? (Wallace & Wolf, 1989.) Obviously, as society goes through major ideological, social, economic, and political changes, as is the case in Poland since 1989, so, too, is there the opportunity for citizens to recreate and modify their interpretation of these changes. Society is dynamic, as is citizens' interpretation of its mean-

ing for them. As seen in other phenomena, the reality of society's relationship to its citizens "is in the eye of the beholder." In the case of Poland today, there is an opportunity for citizens to reinterpret the meaning of society, and therefore its social welfare structures and functions, more closely to fit the needs of citizens. This will require that citizens be more assertive about what they want for Poland's social service structure and functions, and how they would like to see social services delivered. It is this citizen assertiveness regarding social welfare issues that has not been encouraged in Poland's recent past. Today, there is the possibility of change to support more clearly citizen participation in social welfare structural and functional changes. However, to be effective, this participation should be the result of clearly defined and sophisticated social work education, grounded in relevant and salient knowledge and skills. And, importantly, this change must occur "in the Polish way."

The Role of Polish Professional Social Work

The term "social work" as it is understood in the West, is often confusing to Polish people. Until recently, the term denoted a person working in industry whose job it was to determine holiday and sick days for employees. Since the fall of Communism, a number of civil laws have been enacted. One of the most far-reaching for social services, is the Social Assistance Act of 1990. This law provides not only a social safety net for vulnerable populations in Poland, but also provides for the establishment of professional social work positions in government. Social workers in these positions determine financial eligibility for social services and assist recipients in personal and social development. As a result of this Social Assistance Act, several Social Assistance Centers were created throughout Poland. Social workers located in these Centers mainly provide case management services. In order to educate persons for these positions, the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy, and others, have created schools located throughout the coun-

try which train social workers about the rules and regulations needed to practice case management tasks. These schools, first created in the 1960s, are comparable in the United States to an Associate's Degree plus approximately six more months of education. Little theory is taught, and professional identification is low in these schools.

There is no link between the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, the education community, and the Ministry of Education. The upper-level and graduate level schools of social work, such as those located at the University of Warsaw and Jagiellonian University in Krakow, have been incorporated within existing structures — the former, partly within the Institute of Social Policy, the Institute of Social Prophylaxis, and the Institute of Pedagogy, and the latter within the Department of Philosophy. Formal standardized curriculum includes content in traditional social work theory and professional self-regulation.

Many social workers employed in Social Assistance Centers are pleased that they have been able to find employment. However, they long for the higher level skills and theoretical knowledge of university social work schools. On the other hand, students graduating from social work departments in traditional Polish universities enjoy a higher level of professional knowledge and skills, but may have difficulty finding social work positions outside of Social Assistance Centers. This tension between professional social work theory and practice, as is demonstrated by the split between the Polish Ministries of Education and of Labor and Social Affairs, has yet to be resolved.

Potential Developments for Professional Social Work in Poland

Social work education, the profession of social work, and the social service system in Poland are developing quickly in the contemporary scene. The result is that there is growth and development in all these areas, but this movement is neither consistent nor integrated. It is an exciting, but confusing, time for all concerned. Listed below are some ideas that

may assist both visiting and Polish social policy analysts and professional social workers as they struggle to make order of the present confusion.

For Social Work Practice

Social work practice can be categorized by the system level (macro, meso, and micro levels) within which practice occurs and by the social science frames (structural/functional, social conflict, symbolic/interactionist, and rational/utilitarian) utilized in explaining particular social phenomena.

Systems-Level Assessments and Interventions. Contemporary social work practitioners in Poland currently are familiar with a macro-level "top-down" approach to social planning. This approach is traditional and compatible with previous communist practice. For this reason, the development of Social Assistance Centers was well within the experience of Polish social planners. What is new is that recent ways of planning and development for vulnerable populations in Poland involve meso-level and micro-level approaches to social planning as well. Because of the recent investment in formal approaches of voluntarism and the private sector, primarily through NGO's, the meso-level approaches to planning are very popular. The meso-level sector is growing and developing quickly.

There is not yet developed a strong social work presence in micro-practice. There are probably many reasons for this lack of presence. Foremost is the ideological difference between the United States and Poland regarding the emphasis on individualism versus systems-level interventions. It is also true that if social workers were to become more involved with individual treatment they would be in direct competition for service delivery with psychiatrists and psychologists, who have held this "turf" for many years in Poland. On the other hand, social workers, with their "person-in-environment" perspective, can provide an ideological perspective different from psychology and psychiatry. This framework is unique to social work among the helping professions. Of particular relevance is the social worker's practice of considering not only a

differential diagnosis/assessment of an individual's intrapsychic and behavioral self, but also family and community influences. Such diagnoses/assessments do not compete with the more medically-oriented tasks of psychiatry, or the more quantitative orientation of psychology. However, such a perspective raises the chances that an individual will be correctly assessed regarding therapy and case management planning needs. Of course, such sophisticated assessment/intervention planning requires a therapist or case manager with extensive social work education that addresses professional knowledge, value system, and skills.

Not only do social work practitioners have the opportunity in Poland to practice at multiple system levels, they also could consider all five of the described social science paradigms as appropriate ways for framing social phenomena. No one paradigm offers complete explanations of social phenomena, but each contributes to a more complete understanding of such phenomena. Poles might look beyond the Structural/Functional Paradigm that fits their present model of delivery so well, and consider models that support meso- and micro-practice. Whether or not they decide that these other models are suitable, consideration of the social science paradigms might help them prepare for the stresses and strains of their new economic and civil legal system.

For Social Work Education

The social work profession — a comparatively new profession in contemporary Poland, is intimately tied to social services development there. Therefore, the development of professional social work must be congruent with the growth of social service planning and policy-making and the identification of the social needs of that country. An intriguing question to visiting Americans and, to some extent, to Polish social work educators, is the prospect of the development of a western style social work profession. Listed below are three specific possible interventions relevant to Polish professional social work education.

1. The development of a western style profession of social work will require a social work education that prepares social workers for practice at the macro-level, meso-level, and micro-levels of practice. Communist Poland had a long history of macro-level social assistance, although it was not called "social work." In addition, Poland has a long pre-Communist ideological identification with meso-level approaches to service, most recently re-popularized by the re-introduction of the writings of Helena Rublinska and others who were leaders of the ideology of community-based social work and advocacy in Poland between World Wars I and II. These writers, closely allied with the traditional western view of professional social work, have merit. More importantly, they are indigenous authors, well respected in their time, whose works still have validity in the present. In addition, as the world moves toward an international economy based on the free market system, as Poland becomes more capitalized, and as individual concerns become more prominent, micro-level systems for dealing with "private troubles" also bear consideration. This area could be seen as a growth industry for the profession of social work, if appropriate measures are taken to ensure the quality of professional expertise.

2. A social work education adequate for macro-level, meso-level, and micro-level practice will require a wide range of courses. Today, professional social workers can be found in positions such as social policy analysts, parliamentarians, and agency administrators at the executive and middle-management levels as well as clinical supervisors, clinical case managers and clinical mental health workers with individuals, families, and groups. Social work education should prepare students in social work to be proficient in all of these areas. In addition, professional identification, quantitative and qualitative research, writing,

speaking and critical thinking, knowledge, and skills should also be requirements of professional social work education. Ideally, the sophistication and complexity of employment, as well as professional status and relative financial remuneration, should be related to the degree of education, ensuring opportunities for professional development. The present system may well be cheaper for a poor country. However, along with recent political changes and economic expansion, there are increasing opportunities for professional development. Such development could be accomplished through education and degree programs, but would require the coordination of the Ministries of Education and of Labor and Social Policy. Indeed, these two Ministries could split the responsibility for professional social work, with the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy providing educational offerings related to the most basic of services required to accomplish the tasks related to case management at the Social Assistance Centers. The Ministry of Education could then be responsible for coordinating the more advanced curricula, including knowledge and skills related to research and the content and standards of the profession.

3. A Polish social work profession will require a national association of social workers and/or an association of social work education that offers support, advocacy, and educational opportunities for the social work profession. There are two possibilities for such an organization: 1) through the profession, itself, similar to the NASW, and 2) through the system of education, such as CSWE in the United States. Persons familiar with the Polish Association of Social Workers (personal communication with a representative from Polish Association of Social Workers, June 18, 1997) report that there was great enthusiasm for the Association at the inception of the Social Assistance Law of 1990. At that time, social

workers believed there would be professional growth opportunities linked to the Social Assistance Centers. However, this has not come to pass. Instead, those most active in the Association have taken responsible positions in the Centers and have become disinterested in the Association. Others have not taken their places, although the reasons for this lack of professional organizational involvement are not apparent. The other possibility lies with the universities. The University of Warsaw, Jagiellonian University, and the University of Lodz all have professional/graduate-level courses in social work and there already exists a Polish Association of Schools of Social Work. Standards could be established for basic professional courses among all of these schools without jeopardizing the unique strengths of each institution. Schools with an emphasis on graduate level programs, such as Jagiellonian University, could offer advanced courses beyond these basic levels. The European Community standard and procedures may impel this process.

Conclusions

As professional social workers travel throughout the world, they frequently compare social policies and programs in other countries with those of the United States. This is natural. However, it is critical that these world travelers also understand social policies and programs through the lenses of the country they are analyzing. One way to recognize and characterize the values and expectations of other countries is via universal social science paradigms. This article suggests several paradigmatic and ideological frames for viewing and attempting to understand social policies and programs in Poland. It considers the contemporary role of social work and social services in that country, as well as developmental opportunities for the social work profession there.

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