

Case of Social Work's Profession: Local Social Welfare Administration in the Estonian Small Local Government

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An abstract

After the restoration of independence social work became part of the post-communist society again in 1995. The occupation of social worker is still not specified on the level of local government of Estonia in the beginning the 21st century. On the national level there is no law or legal standard setting the requirement to employ a civil servant as a social worker in local government. (This study does not include the new requirements for child protection workers). As a consequence of this problem many municipal employees in the field of social work lack professional training. Gray& Gibbons (2007) have argued that ethical guidelines do not guarantee ethical social work practice when professional intervention requires professional knowledge. Using a general name "social care (welfare) administration," the administrations employ non-professionals, professionals of other fields or non-educated employees. Even more disputable is the practice of including the members of the local council's Committee of Social Affairs who lack any professional knowledge in the decision-making process of clients' cases.

Keywords: Estonia, local government, profession, social work

Introduction

The elements of social work have existed before it began to develop as a profession (Raudava 2013). The adoption of the Social Welfare Act in 1925 could be considered as the starting point of professional social work in Estonia. Also, it could be the founding of the Institute of Social Affairs and Home Economics by Estonian Women's Union in 1935. During the 1930s, ever-expanding social welfare services, especially the development of child protective services, led to the growing need for workers with expertise. The natural process of development of the profession of social work was halted during the Soviet period.

During the communist period there were no professional social workers in Estonia. That is why there were no professional social workers in local governments from 1992 to 1995 (Raudava 2007). The Estonian Universities and the non-profit organizations initiated a new start of the training and practice of social work. They made first contacts with different countries in Europe and elsewhere in the world in the 1990s. Academic education in social work began at the Tallinn Pedagogical Institute (the predecessor of the University of Tallinn) in 1991. A year later, in 1992, the University of Tartu also started the training in social work (Raudava 2013a).

Two colleges of the universities were established in 1999: Rakvere College of the University of Tallinn and Pärnu College of the University of Tartu. Rakvere College has focused its curriculum on social pedagogy. The professional higher education (Est: rakenduskõrgharidus) study programs of social work were established in Pärnu, Narva, Tallinn and Lääne-Viru Colleges in 2006 and 2007. The vocational training of social care, the practice-based education with an emphasis on the development of everyday work skills, was started in Tallinn, Valga and Kuressaare in 1995 (Raudava 2005).

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Until 2020 the only law defining the term "social worker" is The Social Welfare Act. The definitions of "welfare worker" and "social worker" have remained unchanged in the Social Welfare Act, adopted on 8.02.1995. (RT I 1995, 21, 323) entered into force on 1.04.1995 and amended by the Supreme Court on 21.01.2004 by the decision of the Constitutional Review Chamber Court (No 3-4-1-7-03 (RT III 2004, published 2/20/2004, 5, 45, entered into force 01.21.2004)).

Professional qualification is important in the societal process of developing a profession (Ferguson and Ramsay 2010). The first professional standard for social workers was adopted on October 22, 2001 (Raudava 2013a). The 8-step qualification framework has put our system of professions into accordance with the European Qualification Framework (EQF) and provided the opportunity for our qualification system to be comparable with the systems of other European countries (<http://www.accreditedqualifications.org.uk/european-qualifications-framework-eqf.html>). The Code of Ethics for Social Affairs' workers, adopted by the III Congress of the Estonian Association of Social Work on November 30, 2005, is an important component of the development of the profession (Ferguson & Ramsay 2010, Frost 2008). At the same time, the general standards and the aims of social work are still missing in Estonia.

Methodology

The aim of current research is to explore how social work has become an independent profession in local government of Estonia during the past 20 years.

The methodology is based on configurative-idiographic studies (Mills 2010). The material is largely descriptive and reflects the concatenation of circumstances surrounding the events. While providing insights into the relationships among the component elements in the case, they do not easily lead to direct general theoretical interpretations. Description is balanced by analyses and leads into interpretation.

Theoretical overview

The term "profession" typically refers to paid employment or any occupation. Its sociological usage to refer to a special kind of occupation with status and privileges appears increasingly divorced from social reality (Lester 2009; Pieczka & L'etang 2001; Freidson 1986). Some scholars have argued that professions are in a state of decline, becoming subordinate and indistinguishable from other forms of expert labour (Adams 2010). Studies of the professions clearly illustrate the intricate interplay between general conceptions of society and history, sociological theory, definitions of social categories, empirical research and political values – or more briefly: between theory, "facts" and politics (Bryant & Peck 2007; Brante 2010, 1988).

According to the General Working Definition, five components are included: value, purpose, sanction, knowledge, and methods. According to Ferguson and Ramsay (2010), *occupation* might be defined as the principal activity one engages in to earn money.

Weiss-Gal & Welbourne (2007) defined professions as occupations that hold a dominant position of power in the division of labour in their practice and thus have control over the content of their work. The professions as occupations have achieved control over various aspects of their operations. These include: the key components of their work; the choice and development of the techniques employed; the selection, training, and licensing of members; and autonomy in defining the nature of services and who is entitled to receive them. The "power" approach has been central to the study of social work in recent decades.

The professional belongs to a closed community of people with similar knowledge and expertise. This community is characterized by shared norms and values, institutions for socialization, and regulation of professionalism, which is almost always portrayed as requiring some sort of control over the access to a certain field of knowledge. This field of knowledge is deemed to be the main source of professional power (Fargion 2006). Sociological delineations of the realm of professions, in terms of higher education, formal certification, full-time activity, earning a living, organization, professional society, code of ethics and related, abound (Kasher 2005). According to Randall & Kindiak (2008) the professions "strike a bargain with society" - they exchange competence and integrity against the trust of the client and community, relative freedom from lay supervision and interference, protection against unqualified competition, as well as substantial remuneration and a higher social status.

Saks (2010) claims that with this approach the sociology of professions becomes far more of a subdiscipline of the broader sociology of work and occupations, than the sociology of culture or the sociology of law. According to Evetts (2009, 1999), it is necessary also to add two further complicating factors.

First, there are important differences between Anglo-American and continental European perceptions of the profession. In Europe, professions do not represent such a dramatically different occupational form.

For the most part in Europe it is the close association of some (privileged) occupations with states and state bureaucracies and administrations which mark them as different and give them additional powers as well as special authority. Second, it is widely argued that occupations and professions share most features in common, including aspects of their processes of formation, identity construction, work cultures and regulatory aspirations. The processes by which work becomes paid work, becomes an occupation, and achieves different forms of occupational control, which might be perceived as professional, apply to both occupations and professions. Also, these processes are highly complex, diverse, and variable both from one sector to another, as well as within and between different societies.

Evetts has suggested that the discourse of professionalism is used as a marketing slogan (e.g. “have the job done by professionals”) and in advertising to attract new recruits (e.g. “join the professionals” – the army) as well as customers (2011). There has been a shift from ‘pure’ professionalism to ‘hybrid’ professionalism that blends professional and managerial values (Reinders 2008). However, the challenge of neo-liberalism as an economic and political ideology has profound implications for the professions as coherent occupational entries that control task domains and exercise discretion over the performance of complex tasks for the benefit of clients and the larger society (Smith 1990).

Theoretical understanding of the profession of social work

The paradigm of the profession includes a broad orientation toward people being served. It identifies social work as a community of like-minded people with a shared understanding of the profession and the ways of its practice. According to Brandsen (2009), the professional has specific knowledge and expertise, based on the application of systematic theoretical principles.

Professional social workers have the responsibility to further the principle of social justice by challenging discrimination on all levels, including discrimination based on one’s socio-economic status (Higham 2006; Sewpaul & Jones 2005).

Social workers must work together to abolish the social conditions that contribute to economic inequalities by challenging unjust policies and practices at every level. This includes, but is not limited to, making sure that those most in need receive resources first, and that the resources offered are distributed fairly. Social workers are ethically committed to promoting social justice and social change while honoring cultural and ethnic diversities. The purpose of professional regulation is to protect the public. Regulation enacted by statute sets the terms for who can practice a profession and call themselves a member of it by delineating the needed qualifications and competencies (Dominelli 2004).

Social workers should be knowledgeable about the profession’s history and committed to the enhancement of the profession and their own professional conduct and growth (Hepworth, Rooney, Rooney & Strom-Gottfried 2013). The International Association of Schools of Social Work has defined the main objectives of the social work profession:

To ease the life of socially excluded, downtrodden and at-risk groups of people, verbalising and changing barriers in an unjust society (IASSW 2014, P.2).

The status of the profession today reflects country-specific historical pathways, a specific institutional framework, and political decisions regarding social policy.

According to the NASW Code of Ethics:

Social workers should engage in social and political action that seeks to ensure that all people have equal access to the resources, employment, services, and opportunities they require to meet their basic human needs and to develop fully. Social workers should be aware of the impact of the political arena on practice and should advocate for changes in policy and legislation, to improve social conditions in order to meet basic human needs and promote social justice (Rome 2010).

In this profession, attention is paid to recognizing the importance of empowerment, self-determination, equality, and diversity. Social workers have the responsibility to further the principle of social justice by challenging discrimination on all levels, including discrimination based on one’s socio-economic status.

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The realities of professionalism “from above” are quite different. The effects are not the occupational control of the work by the worker practitioners but rather control by the organizational managers and supervisors (e.g. health and social care work). Wirth (2009) suggests the specific characteristic of social work be called “addressability management.” Combined with new public management, professionalism becomes a prison house of standards that are promoted outside of academia, professional organizations and the professional itself. This leads to the classical discussion of professions being turned on its head. No longer is it a matter of autonomous professions controlling society, but of society controlling the professions. Professionalism is being imposed “from above”, rather than “from within”. If professions can be said to have lost control over the criteria of professionalism, then there is, indeed, nothing special about them. Rosenberg & Rosenberg (2006) pointed out that increasing the profession’s effectiveness means perfecting social work expertise, and this requires that different strategies be employed to develop each category of expertise.

Referring to Powell & Gilbert (2007), the essential part of the professionalization project involves the constitution and operation of social work as a discipline, appeals to “become professional”, or claims to professionalism, which are all ideologically loaded (Williams 2008). Leveridge and Gilchrist (2007/2008) argue that the last example of social work as a postmodern activity is the social worker’s role in the self-policing of the policing of society.

According to Reisch (2013) and Higham (2006, 98), the new professionalism of social work is based on: 1) Promoting the social model of intervention with people who use services and care; 2) working with other professional models and with support workers; 3) intervening to protect vulnerable people when appropriate; and, 4) promoting human growth and developing individual capabilities. Gorman and Sandefur (2011) pointed out that four central attributes of professionalism emerge from this body of scholarship: (a) expert knowledge; (b) technical autonomy; (c) a normative orientation toward the service of others; and, (d) high status, income, and other rewards. However, social work is an authority-based profession (Gambrill 2011). Social workers should be knowledgeable about the profession’s history and commit to the enhancement of the profession and their own professional conduct and growth (Hepworth, Rooney, Rooney & Strom-Gottfried 2013).

The requirements of profession differ between the national states and the specific fields; therefore, the historical and social-economical contexts have given the impacts to the current situation. In Europe, professions do not represent such a dramatically different occupational form. For the most part in Europe it is the close association of some (privileged) occupations with states and state bureaucracies and administrations which mark them as different and give them additional powers as well as special authority (Evetts 2009, 1999). Still, in modern Europe, social workers are represented within a great number of different professional groups. For example, they are united within one (in Finland and UK), in some countries social work is not legally recognized (Sweden). Estonia has been influenced by their neighbour, Finland, especially in the early years after re-independence.

In Finland, certain degrees and diplomas give access to the profession. Social work has been developed as a scientific discipline that has its own issues, own starting points concerning theory of science, own research objects, and own ways to generate knowledge (Mäntysaari&Weatherley 2010). Social work is a research-based professional activity that aims to prevent and diminish social problems (Karvinen-Niinikoski, Hoikkola& Salonen 2007; Juhila 2007, 2006; Pietilä 2000; Satka&Karvinen 1999). Finnish scholars have pointed out that social work has been strongly interconnected with the service system of the welfare state and especially to municipal social service (Rostila, Mäntysaari, Suominen 2011; Sellers &Lidström 2007, Mäntysaari 2005, 2003; Rauhala 1996, Metteri&Rauhala 1993); afterwards, social work has spread out to other societal areas (Perttula, Vaananen, Godvadas, Malinauskas&Guidliauskaite-Godvade 2010).

Estonian case: The Administration of Social Services in Local Government

The local government has a hierarchical structure with its representative body and the executive body (the political and administrative units). The two bodies describe the obligations of service, but they do not determine who should be implementing the specific duties. The Social Welfare Act sets forth the general title "Social Care/Welfare Administration"; § 8 defines the *Duties of Local Governments in the Administration of Social Care/Welfare*.

The representative body (the political unit) is the township council (Est: vallavolikogu). It is the legislative body of the local government. The council is elected at general, uniform, and direct elections by secret ballot for the term of four years. The current council determines the number of members in the following council. The number depends on the population of the local government with a minimum of seven members.

The chairman (Est: esimees) is the head of the council (Est: volikogu). The majority of the council elects the chair of the council by secret ballot. The chair organises the work of the council, represents the council and fulfills other duties imposed by law or municipal statute.

The executive body is the municipal government. The government is appointed to governing for the period of the authority of the municipal council. The head of a government is the Mayor (*linnapea, vallavanem*), who is elected and terminated by the council. The members of the government are confirmed to office on the recommendation of the municipal mayor. The mayor leads the government according to the law. The government may include municipal employees or political appointees. Members of the council cannot be members of the government. The council has the right not to confirm the members of the government; however, it may not alter the membership of the government at its own initiative.

The mayor is the head of the local government's administration. Usually, the administration consists of departments and offices (*kantselei*). The municipal staff is employed by the mayor. The town or rural municipality secretary (*linnasekretär, vallasekretär*) is the head of the office. The main tasks of the secretary are to prepare the materials for the sessions of the government and the council. The secretary is also responsible for ensuring that the regulations that are being passed are legally correct. In Tallinn and in other larger local authorities, the council office is separated from the government office.

The Committees for Social Affairs

The council may form both standing and ad hoc committees (*alaline/ajutinekomisjon*) as determined in the statute of the local government. The law prescribes only the formation of an audit committee (*revisjonikomisjon*). The chairmen of all committees and all members of the audit committee must be elected from the council members.

The legislative base for the municipal council's Social Affairs Council lies in the Local Government Organisation Act that was passed on 2.06.1993 RT I 1993, 37, 558 and became effective in accordance with § 47 Council committees. The main points are as follows:

- 1) *The council may establish standing committees and ad hoc committees. Chairs and Vice-Chairs shall be selected from among the council members. Each council member has the right to be a member of at least one of the committees. Other members of the Committees will be confirmed by the chair of the committee.*
- 2) *The basis of the council committees and its procedures are provided by the statutes of the rural municipality or city.*

Section § 67 states:

- 20) *The formation and dissolution of council committees, their selection of chairs and vice chairs from among the council members and committee members shall be approved.*

In local government the most important legislation governing its activities is the municipal statute, which also defines the rules of procedure for the committees. The decision about establishing a committee is a strategic question for the municipality.

Municipal statutes do not directly regulate the forming of the Social Affairs Committee, but in practice, the Social Affairs Committee's Chairman is a council member, who selects the members of the Committee. The collected data suggests that either 1) the territorial principle (each village), 2) a sectorial approach (school, day care, pensioners, etc.), or 3) the principles of professionals (schoolteacher, the kindergarten teacher, the nurse) are followed. In any case, it appears that the elected people have a wide variety of professional qualifications, life experience and understanding of social welfare and work.

In my research data the Social Affairs' Committee of the municipal council exists only in one township. One of its duties is deciding the disbursement of benefits. Thus, the township has two committees: the township council's Social Affairs' Committee and the township government's social affairs' committee. The data suggests that one township has neither a council's nor a government's Social Affairs' Committee. At the same time another township has both a council's and government's Social Affairs Committees.

The position of social worker

As it follows from the sociological approach, the progress of the social worker's profession, historic impact, and inconsistency have influenced the development of the profession of social work in Estonia. Professional social caregiver's or social worker's positions in the local governments did not exist before 1995.

There is no law or standard on the national level setting requirements for local governments to employ a professional social worker. The only exception is for child protection workers since 2014.

It is impossible to understand by the job title if the employee is a trained social worker or not.

According to the current study, the following job titles exist: there are six social advisers (*sotsiaalnõunik*), one social worker (*sotsiaaltöötaja*), one social consultant (*sotsiaalkonsultant*), and one manager of the social department (*sotsiaalosalokonnajuhataja*). The title of "social adviser" (*sotsiaalnõunik*) is widespread in Estonia, but the connection between the title and the occupation is ill-defined (see Case 1). The employee in charge of case work with a professional master's degree bears the title of *social adviser* (*sotsiaalnõunik*), while his non-degree holding subordinate's job title is *social worker*.

The responsibilities of the social worker were often shared with another official of a different field. A common practice in Estonia was to combine the responsibilities. The townships have used the job titles like "education, sports and social adviser" or something similar. Therefore, it's impossible to indicate by the job title if the employee holding the position represents the profession of social work and has any education in social work. Also, it is impossible to understand the extent of the social worker's accountability to the township. Among the analysed cases were two cases where the officially employed workers were also the elected members of the municipal government at the same time.

The models of the structure of social service administration

The structure of the administration involves several units: the township council; the township government; the township council's Social Affairs Committee or/and township government's Social Affairs Committee; and the employee doing social work. The Ministry of Social Affairs has gathered statistics from the local governments using the web-based application "STAR" since 2010. The ministry demands from social workers reports of client work in addition to the statistical data.

I have pointed out that the position of employees in the field of municipal social work is ambiguous. The decision-making process of resolving a case is unfavorable to the client. While social workers must protect and advocate for the best interests of their clients, a breach of client confidentiality might occur. The members of the Social Affairs' Committees are all ordinary local inhabitants. They become aware of the details of the client's case, and they have no confidentiality obligation. In the discussions within the municipal council or government meeting the client's case can become even more public. The third level of disclosure comes from the new web-based application of the Ministry of Social Affairs' requiring client reports.

According to the example of small local governments in Estonia, I have pointed out the following: 1) there are no clear requirements for training, standards and licenses of social work; 2) the responsibilities are shared between administrative and political units; 3) the Social Affairs' Committees involve professionals of other fields or non-degree members; 4) the position of the employees in the field of social work is ambiguous - they are not included in local government's decision-making; they cannot protect the rights of their clients in the decision-making process; 5) the concept of collective responsibility, represented by the institution of the Social Affairs' Committees, lives on into the 21st century, without giving the profession of social work the opportunity to grow; 6) consequently, the practice of social work becomes politicized.

Discussion

Social work qualifies for acceptance into the fold of professional occupations where the theoretical knowledge base for professional qualification is 'academic knowledge' (van Heugten 2011; Heggen 2008).

Modern practice and literature distinguish between the professional practice of social work professionals and amateurs/non-professionals who are generally associated with charitable work (Hughes 2008). According to Koukoul, Papadaki and Philalithis (2007) the status of the profession today reflects country-specific historic pathways, specific institutional frameworks, and political decisions regarding social policy.

According to "Regulated professions and competent authorities in Estonia", the profession of social worker does not exist in the legal recognition system of professions. According to this document, there are only two types of social work professions: 1) a person providing victim support services (Est. ohvriabiteenust osutav isik) and 2) a member of a rehabilitation team (Est. rehabilitatsioonimeeskonna liige) (Professions Act 2008 RTI, 13.06.2008, 24, 156).

During the period from 1995 to 2016, the only law defining the term "social worker" appears in "The Social Welfare Act." According to "Regulated professions and competent authorities in Estonia" the social worker did not exist in the legal system of professions.

As shown in the research results, a qualified social worker in local government is legally not required. About the staff of the local government, there are no regulations dictating: a) which positions need to exist; or b) what is required in terms of education (except for the municipal clerk). From 1995 to 2013, the position of the social worker could not be found in the regulation entitled "Designations of Local Government Officials Position Titles" (No. 50, adopted 20/02/1996), which listed the position titles of the senior staff. The new law "Civil Service Act" (Passed 13.06.2012 RT I, 06.07.2012, 1 Entry into force 01.04.2013, §§ 108-110 and 136 entered into force 16.07.2012) has not changed the situation.

According to Weber, a necessary element of the public organization is a qualified professional (Meijer, Bannister & Alfano 2011; Hughes & Wearing 2012; 2007). However, Nass (1986) has argued that the role of a professional in the bureaucracy should not be modelled as a simple variant of the classic role of a civil servant, because a professional is not a bureaucratic official. A group of professionals in a bureaucracy is an autonomous organization, sub-contracted by that bureaucracy to achieve a given set of goals. Ferlie & Geraghty (2005) has indicated that the role of professionals within large bureaucracies is limited. However, the relationship between a professional and the bureaucracy may be expected to be the same as for any organization that is under an exclusive contract with a larger organization.

Organizational structure can be differentiated by task specialization, known as the division of labour. People are assigned to specific positions within an organizational structure to increase the specificity of tasks and the reliability whereby they are performed. Organizational structure is both 1) an outcome resulting from interactive processes between elements within the organizations, as well as between the environment and the organization; and 2) a determinant of those interactive processes (Senior 2002). Given that social work is a knowledge-based profession, the position and functions of each employee at the local government level should be clearly formulated (Kidd 2010; McAuley, Duberley & Johnson 2007; Hatch & Cunliffe 2006). I argue that the Social Affairs Committees are irrelevant for the profession of social work.

The Social Affairs Committees could be regarded as a community-based working method. Their activities should be limited to solving strategic matters. The practice of committee members being directly involved in client work and having rights of making decisions concerning the clients is outdated. Local governments need social workers who could act in the manner of professional intervention and use their own knowledge of the complex and diverse world (Wensing, Bosch & Grol 2010; Hall & Slembrouck 2009; Danto 2008).

According to Kanter & Brinkerhoff (1981) an efficient public organization means reasonable structure, professional employees, and appropriate organizational structure and process. Public agencies today must demonstrate that they value diversity, understand and respect diverse cultures, and plan and provide culturally relevant and responsive programs and services (Tomescu & Popescu 2013; Sims 2010; Chow & Austin 2008). The foundation of practice includes an understanding of the process of identification and development of the client system, as they are adapted to work with individuals, families, groups and communities.

The European Union is an open labour market. However, the social workers are protecting their profession by using national certification. The Code of Ethics for Workers of Social Affairs, adopted by the III Congress of the Estonian Association of Social Work on November 30, 2005, is an important component of the development of the profession (Ferguson & Ramsay 2010; Frost 2008).

In the modern approach, the certificates and licenses regulate the profession of social work. The Estonian Association of Social Work has the right to issue the certificates of professional social workers. Applying for the certificates is often voluntary, as the local governments do not give any weight to professional certification.

At the beginning of the 21st-century the professional standards of social workers were not in compliance with the European professional standards. It is necessary to rework the professional standards in order to be in accordance with the European standards and to maintain and develop the profession by placing it into a European context. However, the public discourse in Estonia does not yet show any signs of interest in the progress of the profession of social worker.

Moreover, The Estonian Association of Social Workers has sent a letter of inquiry to the Office of the Chancellor of Justice and has received an answer pointing out that recruitment of qualified social workers in the local governments is not required (<http://www.eswa.ee/index.php?picfile=934>, 2013).

Conclusion

The positions of professional social caregiver or social worker did not exist in the local governments before 1995 (Tulva 1996). During the past twenty years the situation in the local governments has changed, although not necessarily for the better. For example, only 50% of the social workers employed by local governments in 2006 have professional training (Raudava-Salveste 2006; Raudava 2013c). There is no regulation concerning the educational requirements for the employees of local governments. The daily work of a social worker/counselor includes different tasks. A professional social worker must have knowledge and a broad range of skills in order to complete these tasks. Developing the skills of social work and the identity of the social worker requires professional training that shapes daily practice. According to “Local Agenda for Social Work and Social Development for the Next Decade” the professional autonomy of social workers is built upon the basis of professional knowledge and competence (The Joint World Conference 2010).

Twenty-five years is a short time for a profession to grow up. I argue that there is still no interest in the progress of social work in the Estonian public space. The Estonian state should begin with clearly defining the social worker’s position as a position which can be held only by a qualified social worker with appropriate training.

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