

RETURN OF SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION IN ESTONIA

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The specialty of social work is new in the newly independent Estonia. Tartu University started with a curriculum for social workers in 1992, Tallinn Pedagogical University in 1991. One can study social work as higher vocational education in Tallinn Pedagogical College, Rakvere Pedagogical School and Pärnu College of Tartu University. Although the identity of social work is still to be determined, young people have been intensively aspiring to study social work. For instance, in the summer 2000 there was more than 10 young people standing for one vacancy for social work course in Tartu University and Tallinn Pedagogical University. In 1999 the number of people aspiring to study social work was all-time high – 32 for one vacancy. That caused active discussion in media about the conditions of choosing the specialty of social work. There was no answer to the question to what extent the choice had been a conscious one, and to what extent it had been guided by the novelty of the specialty, excitement and former contact with social work situations. The author of the current article is also interested in how much do those young people studying social work associate their future with social work, and what is the status of social work in today's Estonia to their assessment.

The goal of this article is to study the conditions of choosing the profession of social work, how much the specialty has been acknowledged, and to what extent social work students connect social work to their future. 21 social work students studying at Tartu University were interviewed using the qualitative interview method, in spring 2000. Eleven of them were first-year students (including 6 men and 5 women), and ten of them were fourth-year students (including 2 men and 8 women, accepted to be students by age census of 21 years). The average age of the respondents was 25 years, varying from 18 to 32.

1. Motives for choosing the specialty

1.1. Information about the specialty

When choosing the profession previous information about the specialty plays an important role in making the decision. Majority of the answers indicated that the specialty was new and that there was little information about it. Lack of initial idea about the specialty was predominantly pointed out by the first-year students. There were cases of total abeyance and lack of preliminary information, for example:

“Most people didn't know what social work is all about. Everybody was telling me to prepare for social work but I had no idea what it was.” (male, 1st year, 2nd preference)

It came out from the interviews that some first-year students have a clear picture of the specialty, but there are also people that have chosen social work as a result of vocational

guidance.

“...I went to see a vocational adviser. The result was that I have preconditions for three specialties, including social work. I sorted the other two out.” (female, 4th year, 1st preference)

High motivation to study social work was indicated by one respondent who became a student with her second attempt as at the first time the commission considered her to be too young.

1.2. Popularity of the specialty

Studying social work is usually considered to be self-educating because the curriculum consists several subjects of practical psychology and the amount of methods of work with a client. It has been said that studying social work makes one understand himself/herself better, and, therefore, helps to understand others better as well. The explanation to the high competition rate was that the specialty is popular among young people because it is novel and offers self-realization, and because it is a good career option.

“A novel and expanding specialty. People believe that they can get a job. Charity is trendy and has governmental support. And the popularity nourishes itself as people see that the competition is fierce, so it must be good too.” (female, 4th year, 1st preference)

There were also people of the opposite opinion. It was said that the fierce competition does not necessarily mean that the specialty is popular because young people do not know what it is all about.

1.3. Other reasons (not based on the specialty) for studying social work

For many respondents social work was their last chance to be accepted to the university. Randomness is indicated mostly among the first-year respondents. It is said to be like a lottery that one ended up studying social work.

“...completely by chance. My idea was to come to the faculty of social sciences, as long as there was the word ‘social’. Getting in here was more like a raffle.” (female, 1st year, 2nd preference)

Some respondents had social work as their second preference and they were not accepted to their first preference. Both first- and fourth-year students emphasized the existence of this factor. People believe that one would (at least) get in there. First-year students said that to become a student in the Tartu University and receive academic education were very

important motives for them.

“Tartu University as such overshadowed social work.” (male, 1st year, 2nd preference)

Several interviews indicate a somewhat negative side of the specialty, for example, that it is easier to get to study social work because the academic results do not have to be so good compared to other fields.

1.4. Previous experiences and contacts as preconditions for choosing the specialty

Previous experiences of helping situations have a very important, mostly emotional part, in choosing the profession. For some people, previous charity work, religious beliefs and contacts with diaconic work have been the inducement for choosing the profession.

“I care very deeply about orphans. My mother worked at a children’s hospital and there were very many orphans.” (female, 4th year, 1st preference); *“I used to live in an abbey in Germany. The everyday doings of the nuns made a severe impression on me.”* (female, 4th year, 1st preference)

It is also important to have a personal experience in needing help that might lead people to increased need for helping others. An accident that has happened to a member of the family or to a relative, to an acquaintance, or to a friend can also become an incentive.

“I had problems in my own family. My dad was an alcoholic, he used to beat us up and so on. I needed help but didn’t know whom to turn to. I have been through those sufferings and I know the feeling.” (female, 1st year, 1st preference); *“My brother got a concussion in the army. He needs help but I don’t know how to help him. Studying social work I would like to help him.”* (female, 1st year, 1st preference); *“It started from my childhood when the house of a classmate of mine was burnt down, we gave them clothes and food, like a village community. When someone got sick in our class then my Samaritan soul wanted to write at least 30 letters to that person. Home, from one hand, and precondition for the helper’s role, on the other.”* (female, 1st year, 1st preference)

Home and parents were mentioned as direct influencers on several occasions. Parents usually had similar professions.

“My mother is a social worker in the parish, she doesn’t have special education for that. There was no options for special training on this specialty when she started with her job.” (female, 4th year, 1st preference)

It came out from the interviews that only the fourth-year students made the connection between their childhood and social work, first-year students did not point that out.

2. Conceptions of the specialty

2.1. Conception of social work

The respondents understood social work differently. One thing that seemed important was the growing importance of social policy, which is most clearly expressed in the role of a mediator between the state and citizens.

“Social workers should help to bring the state closer to its citizens.” (female, 1st year, 1st preference)

The study indicated that social work is associated with raising people’s coping capacities in the society, the preventive function of social work is acknowledged. However, a big part in today’s social work is to provide social assistance: clients and changing their environment receive less attention.

“I think that the emphasis in our today’s social work is all wrong, too much is dealt with handing out money and too little with improving the social environment. Instead of being so engaged in giving social assistance, there could be certain free services: school meals, free hobby centres, counselling, educational projects etc. For mothers and children there could be more privileges instead of child benefits. For example, free transport, cheaper theatre tickets, etc.” (female, 4th year, 1st preference)

Several synonyms were used to describe clientele for social work: needy persons, people that are stuck with their lives, outcasts, problematic persons, troubled people, people that have not managed to cope in the society.

2.2. Assessment of people working in the social field

Specialists working in the social field are by far negatively assessed by students. It is a common understanding that many people without specialized education work in the social system today, and therefore, they drag down the reputation of social work as a specialty. Students also complain that there are small chances of getting a job after graduating the university because current (and without specialized education) social workers have occupied the positions. It seems that to a significant degree this understanding has been generated by the university teachers.

“I have been told that there are many incompetent people in this field. There are not many chances of getting a job after graduation, the current ones have the positions.” (female, 1st year, 2nd preference)

Students perceive the conflict between them and present social workers. On one hand, the respondents feel that they are not needed as new and educated specialists, on the other hand, the respondents are acquiring the higher education that every social worker should have, according to the law.

“It is just that there are too many social workers by name, they are unable to counsel, they just hand out money. They use and enjoy the power they have. For instance, the social workers in Viljandi prison have nightmares about educated social workers coming. They can’t even imagine that they themselves could be equal to prisoners in the human sense.” (male, 1st year 2nd preference)

The respondents believe that the deficiencies in a networking of different specialists are a serious problem.

“Well, none knows what has to be done. None knows what to do when a kid who is high on drugs is brought to a shelter. There should be more work within the network, in order to understand where one’s rights begin and where they end.” (female, 1st year, 1st preference)

All in all, the interviews reflected the understanding that if social work were organized more rationally, the status of social workers would be more clear.

2.3. The reputation of social work

Students think that the reputation of social work is low in Estonia. Lobby work and good relations with media are seen as options for promoting the specialty. Students believe that the initiative should come from social workers themselves, key words being progressiveness, skills to communicate with media, and efficiency. They believe that the reputation in the society would improve once the specialty is more valued.

“Social work as a specialty should be valued. Lets even say, by salaries, so that the motivation for this work would be higher.” (male, 1st year, 2nd preference)

Students believe that the understanding of social work as a specialty and of social workers has not yet developed in the general public, and for that reason the understanding might differ a great deal from the reality. People picture social workers as caretakers. Media has also produced this attitude as the stereotypical “motif of bedpan” has become a constant subject.

“People picture social workers as someone who go and clean the homes of the elderly. More like patronizing nurses. I don’t think that people in general make the difference between, e.g., sociologists and social workers.” (female, 4th year, 1st preference) *“Papers draw a rather tearful picture of social work this past summer, that it is all about changing bedpans etc.”* (male, 4th year, 2nd preference)

Social work is also often associated with voluntary work and no difference is made whether there is a professional worker or not.

2.4. Work future perspectives

Opinions differ when it comes to finding a job. It is interesting to note that first-year students are more optimistic about getting a job after graduation. They believe that there is lack of social workers with higher education and that they are welcome to the labour market. However, about half the respondents were uncertain and fearful about getting a job in the field of social work.

“I have seen that it is not easy to get a job. It has been said that the Republic of Estonia needs social workers but, well, it doesn't! Sometimes it feels like after graduating from social work one has to go to work as a teller in a bank. “ (male, 4th year, 1st preference)

As finding a job in the field of social work was considered to be troublesome, some people decided for a job outside the specialty.

“I am not planning to wait for a job that would correspond to my specialty, I'll take something else then.! (female, 4th year, 1st preference)

3. Discussion

The reasons for choosing social work for a profession are not uniquely understandable. The analysis of the study results indicated that every student has his or her personal pattern of reasons for studying social work in Tartu University. There are factors that basically do not concern the specialty (novel specialty, second preference, i.e. back-up etc.), and there are also factors that correspond to the specialty very closely (altruistic wish to help other people, personal contact with assistance work).

Comparing the answers of the first- and fourth-year students it seems to the author that there are completely different reasons for choosing the profession, completely different understandings of the work. One factor here is definitely the different background and age of the respondents. As a rule, the fourth-year students had prior information about the specialty when they started their studies, experience of a personal kind was an influencing factor. Interest in the profession has been increasingly evolving, none of the respondents plan to turn their back to the specialty. Controversely, professional motivation is more of an incidental kind in case of the first-year students. On frequent occasions people felt after high school that they should continue their education at a university, and the easiest way to get accepted seemed to be choosing social work.

Fourth-year students believe that social work is a popular profession and that demand for people with this profession will increase in the future, they also made the connection between high competition to get in and its popularity. First-year students perceived social work as a perspective specialty as well but they did not acknowledge the connection between the competition and popularity. Social work has room for growing and today's social work definitely differs from the social work in ten years. The question that remains is whether the labour market will constantly need social workers with the bachelor's degree.

In the circumstances of today's Estonia, social work is still about assisting those people and families that are absolutely poor, that have fallen or are falling through the safety nets. It could be called correcting mistakes, work for which one often has no time nor strength to analyse the problems more closely, not to mention, to look for systematic solutions. However, students believe that preventive work is an area that is more and more important in social work. The overall understanding is that social work is a profession with perspectives and the demand for jobs will increase in the future.

Graduation is connected to the process of looking for a job and finding it. Students perceive that despite special higher education it is difficult to find a job because of the protective circle of current workers. There is too much bureaucracy that prevents the modernization of working methods. The current social protection system and newly graduated social workers contrast to each other at this point. The only solution to the present situation is considered to be change in requirements of competence and need for professional evaluations.

One established direction in the society is underpayment of social workers that is above all associated with voluntary or semi-voluntary work, in any case, with a field which is important but unremunerated. The study indicated that a counteracting factor in the field of social work is the low wage level of the jobs. It is a serious problem for future fathers who have a social responsibility to earn more and sustain the family.

Data collected in the study supported the opinion that in case the search for professional work has failed, a job outside the specialty that still requires higher education is a suitable output. The education is broad enough to get a suitable job in a field other than social work.

A serious problem that came out from the study is the conflict between current social workers and social work students. The conflict is expressed in the negative attitude of the students towards current social workers. Students reproach current social workers for excessive formality and weak communication skills. The education level of the current social workers varies, and it will be an impediment to a newly graduated person in raising common goals.

Media has drawn a relatively one-sided picture of social work. It is not so often that one can find an analytical article about social issues in mass communication. One can rather find situation descriptions in a certain emotional tone. According to the stereotype that the society has designed, a social worker is someone with the function of caring and "soup-giving".

It is often a surprise to the general public that one has to study at the university to become a social worker. Social workers are perceived with stigmatising influence, they are perceived to be someone that are dealing with the most unpleasant sides of the society. They are not perceived as support givers and above all the controlling aspect of their work is noticed. Some people perceive social workers only as public servants and as representatives of local authorities.

Both first- and fourth-year students consider the reputation of social work to be low in Estonia. They believe that in addition to media the reputation is also shaped by those persons who practice social work today as they have passive attitude towards the relations with media and they have not understood the importance of lobby work in their field. Current social workers are often incompetent, they do not know the methods of social work and they are under the influence of clichés.

The contradiction between the fierce competition to get to the university and low reputation of social work is sometimes somewhat explicable with good faith of students and their hope to improve that reputation in the future. Students perceive the novelty of the specialty, and sense the opportunity to take decisive steps and form their own careers.