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Social professionals' perceptions of activating citizenship

Sociale professionals over actief burgerschap

Sotsiaalala professionaalide arusaamad kodanike aktiviseerimisest

Reeli Sirotkina & Hans van Ewijk

This article reports on qualitative research among 48 social professionals, managers and policymakers and their perceptions of activating citizenship, social work roles and responsibilities, carried out in Utrecht and Tartu. Professionals from both countries agreed to the idea of activating citizenship but stressing the perspective of personalised or lived citizenship, each person to his own capacities and embedded in the personal context. Nearly all respondents were critical about the recognition of social workers as a full profession, about the new management way of steering social work and about cooperation between different groups of professionals and services. Although both countries have quite different historical and cultural backgrounds, the authors found many similarities among social workers regarding their ideas on support, participation and commitment to the people they work for and work with. International research projects contribute to a more strongly recognised social work theory and social work practice by getting a better understanding, in particular of the way social work adapts to different contexts but from a highly recognisable international discourse within social work.

Keywords: Citizenship; Cooperation; Elderly Care; New Management

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Het artikel is gebaseerd op een kwalitatief onderzoek onder 48 sociale professionals, managers en ambtenaren. Centraal staan hun percepties van activerend burgerschap, de rollen van de verschillende partijen in lokaal sociaal beleid en zorg en welzijn en de vraag naar de verantwoordelijkheden. Het onderzoek is eerst uitgevoerd in Utrecht en daarna herhaald in Tartu. Professionals van beide landen herkennen zich in actief burgerschap maar benadrukken dat burgerschap geen absolute maar een relatieve standaard is, ieder burger naar zijn vermogen. Bijna alle respondenten meenden dat social workers nog niet ten volle als professionals herkend worden, dat op nieuw management gebaseerde sturingsprincipes niet goed functioneren in de praktijk en dat samenwerking op dit moment erg diffuus. Hoewel Nederland, als welvarend West-Europees land en Estland als relatieve jonge welvaartstaat met een geheel andere traditie, nogal verschillen, valt op hoe sociale professionals in beide landen herkenbare ideeën en waarnemingen hebben. Internationaal onderzoek kan helpen de professie meer te profileren en te articuleren en beter te begrijpen hoe sociaal werk zich steeds weer aan verschillende contexten aanpast maar tegelijk met een herkenbare basis.

Trefwoorden: Burgerschap; Samenwerking; Ouderenzorg; Nieuw Management

Käesoleva artikli eesmärk on anda ülevaade Tartus ja Utrechtis praktiseerivate sotsiaalala spetsialistide arusaamadest kodanikuks olemisest, sotsiaaltöö rollist ja vastutusest. Kvalitatiivses uuringus osales kokku 48 sotsiaaltöö professionaali, kesktaseme juhti ja poliitika kujundajat. Mõlema riigi professionaaliid nõustusid ideega kodanike aktiviseerimisest, kuid keskendusid enam individualiseeritud kodanikuks olemisele (e.g. personalised or lived citizenship), kus iga inimene panustab vastavalt oma võimetele ja kontekstile. Enamus respondente leidsid, et sotsiaaltööd ei tunnustata kui terviklikult välja arendatud eriala. Samuti olid nad kriitilised uue haldusuhtimise kontseptsiooni osas, mis on toonud sotsiaaltöösse enam kontrolli ja järelevalve mehanisme. Respondentide arvamused olid kriitilised ka erinevate professionaalse koostöö osas. Kuigi mõlemal riigil on erinev kultuuriline ja ajalooline taust, leidsid artikli autorid palju sarnasusi kõikide küsitletute arvamustes, mis puudutasid toetust, osalust ning pühendumist inimeste heaks, kellele ning kellega sotsiaaltöötajad töötavad. Sotsiaaltöö iseenesest hõlmab teatud kindlat teadmiste ja oskuste kogumit, mis on suures osas ühine erinevates maades. Rahvusvahelised uurimisprojektid võimaldavad paremini aru saada kuidas sotsiaaltöö kohaneb teatud kindlas kontekstis ning sõltuvalt klientidest. Samuti aitavad taolised uurimused kaasa senisest enam tunnustada sotsiaaltöö teoriat ja praktikat.

Märksõnad: Kodanikuks Olemine; Koostöö; Eakate Hoolekanne; Uus Haldusuhtimine

Introduction

In this article we report on qualitative research among 21 social professionals and 27 social managers and social policymakers in the Netherlands and Estonia. The research

started in the Netherlands, was carried out in three municipalities and covers the whole field of social work—youth, social care and community work (Waal, 2008). The results were highly relevant in the Dutch context, where new ideas about citizenship, localisation and privatisation are affecting social policy and social work practice to a high degree (RMO, 2000a, 200b). Confusion about roles and the interplay between the public sector, the social work sector, the market and citizens was felt by all respondents in the research project. On the other hand, in the post-socialist countries, economic restructuring has affected the social security system and it has been necessary to revise social policy and adapt it to the new, changing situation (Aidukaite, 2003). In the meantime, Estonia has become a middle-income and very young country, following a Baltic States welfare mix of the liberal American model and the Scandinavian welfare model (Grønningaeter, 2003). The Estonian parallel research—starting from the same questionnaire—focused on social workers in (elderly) care as a pilot (Külvet, 2008) and was carried out in Tartu and Tartu County. The Estonian social workers are pioneers in social work and elderly care, fighting for their clients and fully obsessed by doing their work properly and in that sense sometimes missing the more political discourses and implications. The research tried to understand how social professionals, their managers and policymakers are reflecting and acting on the transformation process.

Transformation processes aiming at an activating welfare state

Estonia in the East and the Netherlands in the West of Europe are both in the middle of an intense transformation process. Both are moving in the direction of the Active Welfare State or Enabling State (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1989; Giddens, 1998; Ascoli, 2006). Basically, the Enabling State is promoting room for citizens, for civil society and the market for growth, innovation and development. More than the American Model the European Social Model tries to balance economic, social, environmental and knowledge objectives and sectors (ICSW, 2005). Compared to the traditional welfare state, the Activating Welfare State focuses more on activation, participation and individual responsibility for dealing with living and working conditions and the (economic) risks in life (Beck, 1986; Giddens, 1991, 1998; EC, 2004; Ascoli, 2007). Globalisation and demographic changes, like ageing, were important arguments in this respect. The three dominant strategies can be identified as privatisation, promoting active citizenship and localisation. Privatisation aims to transform public services into privatised services, and implies new ideas about new management and new roles and responsibilities for different actors. Active citizenship emphasises the personal responsibility and the social responsibility of citizens. It is trying to create an alternative to pure individualism and to a mere collective social equality. It emphasises the individual as a responsible being, taking into account his own responsibility and behaviour and his commitment to the community and society (Chanan, 1997; Knijn & Kremer, 1997; Putnam, 2000; EC, 2005). Social rights are mainly rights to have access to education, the labour market, housing, health and social security (Lister, 1997; Ife & Fiske, 2006). Localisation is the

third strategy. The idea is that universal systems and the massive collective categorisation of people into target groups and problems are not answering the contextual problems that people face. In the welfare society, exclusion, poverty, illiteracy and homelessness are seldom due to social economic mechanisms alone, but are related to an interactive process of personal competences, the strength of networks and community, and the connection between people and social systems. To intervene in those contexts you should do it locally, in the direct world where people live (Cannan & Warren, 1997; Skinner, 1997; Ewijk, 2008). To some extent the idea of equality or equal treatment has been changed into a strategy of unequal treatment because each context is different and asks for its own solution.

In Eastern Europe, the starting position was totally different for post-socialist countries. The Eastern European 'welfare' state has experienced an entirely different process of development starting from a socialist order for 50 years. This historical and cultural background influenced both economic development and the mentality of the population of these countries. At the beginning of the transition period in many East European countries, it was believed that the market economy would be able to solve economic problems as well as social problems (Aidukaite, 2003). The transformation process did not start from an 'overdone' welfare state but from a confused, chaotic and relatively poor situation, as it was there in the early 1990s. The universal systems were by far not covering a minimum income basis and social services were hardly there. Setting up, constructing and reconstructing systems was the first thing to do, mostly strongly led by the state. The social security system was built up very quickly and Estonia is now catching up with other EU states and even leading in the field of parental leave with a 'last-salary' guarantee for 15 months. Recently, localisation and privatisation are getting more attention and urgency in Estonia, which affects social work and care (EC, 2003).

In our research project it was important to be aware of the different positions and self-awareness of social professionals in both countries. In Estonia, social work has a short tradition; social workers are hardly recognised and available only in small numbers, approximately 500 qualified social workers. Social work is strongly client oriented and individualised. To date, the public authorities are partly mistrusted and politics are not linked to the micro situation that people are in. The Netherlands is a country with a long and strong social work tradition. Social workers are recognised, representing one of the biggest 'service industries', but highly differentiated and fragmented with over 20,000 qualified social workers. Cooperation is much more the tradition, and authorities and professionals are on a more equal footing, albeit recently in a series of conflicts about steering principles and the effects and outcomes.

The research design

Research questions

A range of researchers give evidence that social workers feel themselves more confronted with protocols, bureaucracy and detailed work schemes, and with clients

who are becoming more critical and more customer-like (Hayes, 2006; Kremer & Tonkens, 2006; Lans, 2008; Waal, 2008). Social professionals are seen as trapped between the critical customer and the prescriptive bureaucracy (Tonkens & Duyvendak, 2003). On the other hand, policymakers in the municipalities are expected to implement social policy and to supervise, control and monitor its actions and outcomes. At the same time, they should move from a system of permanent or semi-permanent subventions to a system of tendering and negotiating, and they are supposed to identify the problems and to allocate the budgets. Managers of social services should deal with the local authorities, look for new financiers, direct their professionals to be client or customer oriented and to be entrepreneurs. In our research we expected to find confusion about roles and responsibilities and we were curious about the perspectives and perceptions of the professional actors in local social work.

The overarching research aim was to describe and to understand 'how social professionals, civil servants (as preparing and implementing local policies) and managers in social services perceive their core tasks, their clients and their role and responsibility'. This aim was laid out into four research questions for investigation:

1. What are, according to the respondents, the core (societal) assignments in social work?¹
2. Do the respondents agree with the idea of activating citizenship and what are the implications for social work?
3. What are the dominating steering principles and practices in their community and how do the respondents reflect on it?
4. What are the experiences and ideas about cooperation between policymakers, social workers and managers of social services?

Respondents

In selecting respondents for this qualitative research we applied non-probability purposeful sampling (Alston & Bowles, 1998). Purposeful sampling seeks information-rich cases which can be studied in depth (Patton, 1990). In the Netherlands, 36 professionals were interviewed, 16 of them being social workers in youth care, long term care or in social work agencies (non-governmental organisations), 11 managers in a social service unit (non-governmental organisation) and nine policymakers in the departments for social welfare, located in Utrecht, Amersfoort and Lopik. In Estonia 12 professionals from Tartu and Tartu County were interviewed: five social workers in elderly care, four managers within a non-governmental organisation or public service provider agency, and three policymakers. In Estonia social services are mostly part of the public sector and there is not such a clear division between social workers, managers and policymakers. It was rather difficult to put people in one of the three categories because some managers take part in local government and some professionals are at the same time social workers and engaged in local policy, and the boundaries between front

line social workers and managers are blurred. The fact is that in the small and developing social work sector social workers quite often have mixed tasks and work on different levels at the same time. An important restriction in the Estonian research was to focus on social workers in elderly care for practical, budgetary reasons. To keep the study comparable, we used from the Dutch research, which had included a wider range of professional backgrounds, mainly the research data referring to the social care professionals.

Collecting, testing, analysing data

Qualitative methods are usually relatively unstructured or semi-structured, relying on open-ended questions or themes to elicit responses in questionnaires, surveys, interviews, observations and text analysis (D'Cruz & Jones, 2004). The questions for the interview were worked out by Dutch researchers and due to the cooperation between two universities the research was transferred to the Estonian context. The main topics were questions about: (1) the current dominant ideas on privatisation, citizenship and localisation; (2) cooperation, mutual expectations between social workers, managers and policymakers, perceived problems in working together and social policy making processes; and (3) what the respondents perceived as the most important core competences of social professionals, social policymakers and social managers. The research in both countries was done by qualitative semi-structured interview with an average length of about 1.5 hours, a method chosen to fit with the aim of the research. The semi-structured interview is suitable when researchers would like to get more additional information or new ideas and subjects during the interview. All interviews are fully recorded and transcribed. The interviews were carried out by senior researchers and masters students. The thematic analysis (by at least two researchers) involved transferring the responses into categories or themes by coding the texts (D'Cruz & Jones, 2004). The preliminary categories were tested and changed repeatedly as new themes and patterns emerged. The same 'code tree' and methodology was used in both research sites. Full reports of both were published separately (Külvet, 2008; Waal, 2008). Our interest in this article is the self-perception of social workers with regard to transforming societies and changing local social policies against the background of the differences between the West and East of Europe based on the same questionnaire and research methodology.

International understanding

There is a lack of research data concerning the concepts, processes and institutions which affect citizens of both sides of Europe in their social functioning (Maydel *et al.*, 2006). On the other hand, a series of research data is to be found on changes in social work and social care (e.g. Kröger, 2001; Cambridge & Ernst, 2006; Cameron & Moss, 2007; Groenningsaeter & Kiik, 2009). However, we have not found cross-border research among social workers, their managers and local policymakers regarding the

way the transformation into an active welfare state is perceived by those professionals. This small-scale case study explores the transformation in the East and the West in a specific way. Both countries are, in that respect, comparable in that both are driven by a pragmatic mix of social democratic and Nordic State concepts and more US and UK driven (neo) liberal concepts.

To understand the outcomes of both pieces of research we should consider different aspects.

1. The Dutch questionnaire could not be fully equally translated into Estonian. This related not only to technical problems arising from language differences, but also to different concepts of social work and different understandings of transition and transformation processes. We even had problems translating 'citizenship' into an Estonian equivalent. As a matter of fact, we decided to choose two words: 'being citizen' (Lagerspetz, 2007).
2. The mutual analyses of the interviews were impossible because of language. From the Dutch and the Estonian sides we informed each other and discussed the research strategy, methodology and in particular the outcomes. That was done by translating about 50 interview quotes from both sides into English and informing each other about the national outcomes analyses, conclusions and reflections.
3. From much cross-country and cross-cultural research we know that problems with language, context and mutual understanding are hindering or challenging researchers (Kröger, 2001). In our research the debates on findings in both research sites, similarities and differences, were the most intriguing part of the research. To explore and to explain similarities and differences based on a qualitative research is a fragile enterprise. A reflective, critical and constructive process of looking into the materials, selecting the core findings, discussing the findings, analysing the similarities and differences and coming to construction and understanding for discussion, is the process we went through.

Reliability and validity

The number interviewed, the random selection of respondents, and the careful double coding and dialogue between Estonian and Dutch researchers cannot guarantee that the respondents are representative of social workers, managers and policymakers in Estonia and the Netherlands. However, certain issues (see quotations below) are reflected in a highly similar way by professionals from different positions, from different fields of activities and from the two countries, and in some respects we found remarkable characteristic differences between professionals in the Netherlands and Estonia. Despite the restrictions mentioned above, we think that the 48 professionals interviewed do represent the feelings and reflections of practitioners, managers and policymakers in the social work domain, and represent certain differences, characteristic for Western welfare states and Eastern states in transition, as argued in the next section.

Reporting the research outcomes

In reporting the research findings we restrict ourselves in this article to two basic issues. The first issue is about active citizenship as a basic concept in transformation. The second issue is about mutual perceptions and expectations and cooperation between social workers, managers and policymakers.

Activating citizenship

Background

In the Netherlands ‘activating citizenship’ is a dominant concept in the social domain and is related to the process of transformation into an activating welfare state. In the field of social care, in the Act on Long Term Care (Algemene Wet Bijzondere Ziektekosten) and the Act on Local Social Support (Wet Maatschappelijke Ondersteuning), it is made clear that local authorities, civil society and individual citizens together are responsible for social care and social welfare. Citizens with serious problems are entitled to professional care after a centralised assessment. In other cases, local governments have the task of taking care of their vulnerable citizens. At the same time, there is a lot of political pressure to empower citizens in self- and mutual responsibility. In Estonia social work is a young profession ([Kiik, 2006](#)) and social care is seen as a family business. The Family Law Act stipulates: ‘A child who has become an adult is obliged to maintain his or her parent(s) who needs assistance and is incapacitated for work’. It implies social support, social care and also financial support. The role of the state and local government is rather thin in this respect. Therefore citizenship as conceived in the West European countries is differently felt in the East European states, having no extensive welfare regime in social care at all. At the same time the politicians are promoting the activating welfare state and modern citizenship but the debate is much more on the social security system than on social care and social work.

Findings

Estonia.

We are here to offer a better life for our people. (Estonian social worker)

In the answers to the interview questions we find the different contexts reflected. The Estonian social workers formulate the essence of social work in terms of improving daily life, in helping people and in treating them as human beings. They hardly recognise the concepts of citizenship, responsibility and activating welfare state, partly due to a lack of comparable words in the Estonian language but particularly as a direct response to the current Family Law Act, which states that families must take responsibility for their own members, and the lack of a welfare and social care tradition. Therefore, it is not surprising to find a number of answers referring to the

problem of recognition and status. Social care is associated with home care and is felt to be marginalised in the Estonian context. And within social work, elderly care has a low status as well.

What about solidarity between generations? Child care is seen as social investment, however care for the elderly is not considered as an investment at all.

What is needed is attention, care and communication. It is about the essentials of life and it requires investment. We need sufficient budget.

The Estonian social workers interviewed feel themselves to be outsiders, fighting for recognition of the people they work for, fighting for recognition for their profession and most of all fighting for larger budgets for elderly people and elderly care. As case and care managers in complex situations, social workers are supposed to bridge the gaps between cure and care, and act as professionals who empower their 'clients'. They experience the political world as not interested in their work. They contest a word such as 'social service' as being 'cold', because, as one of the managers argued,

we offer socialising activities.

The Estonian policymakers interviewed connect more obviously to the language of citizenship and activation.

This is not exclusively a task for the local government. The whole society should promote responsibility and take care of each other, but it is not happening.

The Netherlands.

What are you willing to do to solve your problem? (Dutch social professional)

The Dutch social professionals in our research overwhelmingly support citizenship and activation as their main perspective on the people they work for. Like their Estonian colleagues, they are rather negative about the consumer perspective, which makes professionals into pure service providers. Different social professionals argued that social welfare has always been working from the idea that you should activate people to take care of their own lives and to be responsible for their community. However, some of them agreed that in the welfare state 'care and welfare' had become too system and provision oriented and were not sensitive enough for answering the needs and demands of the users. A certain adjustment of professional practice is supported by the respondents.

What we are increasingly doing, is not looking into what we can manage for the users but asking them 'what are you willing to do to solve your problem and how are we able to support you?'

There seems to be a consensus among practitioners, managers and policymakers on the core overall social work assignment as being

to support citizens if needed to be self- and social responsible.

It is the idea of participation, activation and integration that dominates the Dutch discourse. From this perspective users are considered as not mere clients—objects for care—nor customers but as citizens with a personal and social responsibility and as partners in the social and care domain. They are seen as people who in principle are able to cope with their lives and sometimes, and in some cases, need support from social professionals.

Personalised citizenship

People are responsible but there are limits to it. (Dutch social professional)

Although respondents endorse citizenship, some critical remarks are made. A number of comments are on over-burdening informal carers, or in the words of an Estonian social worker:

The family burden is often too heavy. The family is considered to be responsible for everything. We need to think about the health and wellbeing of the generation that takes care of their children and their parents.

And a Dutch colleague states:

I think that taking self responsibility is great, but not everyone is able to cope with it properly. Sometimes people need some guidance.

There are many voices from professionals from both countries expressing the view that many vulnerable people are marginalised, poor and very lonely and that the family cannot cope with seriously impaired elderly people. The risk of domestic violence against elderly people is mentioned as a serious concern and reason to intervene. Another aspect is the fact that children have their own families and jobs, and are often living in far-away places. A Dutch manager adds to this the view that in modern welfare states fragmentation and overregulation are creating new handicaps for vulnerable people to find access to society, in particular to social security and social assistance. Estonian professionals refer to a basic lack of information among many citizens, in particular in the rural remote areas. Asking too much from the informal carers, asking too much from the vulnerable citizens and creating new obstacles by bureaucratic approaches, are hindering a full citizenship for many vulnerable citizens, in the eyes of social workers. The policymakers are less outspoken. They recognise the risks of over-burdening people but are cautious in pleading for

more professional support. One Dutch policymaker analyses the tensions in the national overall social strategies:

On the one hand, it is said citizens should be responsible for their own lives, their own social lives. On the other hand the government is extending working time [per day and per life span] trying to get more people into the labour market.

Cooperation and mutual expectations

Background

Estonia is a country with a less developed social care system, a rather young (renewed) social work tradition and a hardly developed voluntary sector in social care. Before creating a well-based social work and social care system, the state has already decentralised its responsibilities in social care to the local governments. The municipalities are mainly used for social administration; providing social assistance and other material support and organising some basic services in the field of information and nursing homes. Social workers are either engaged in social administration or in social case work, targeted on the most complex situations and most vulnerable individuals and families. According to new legislation, the municipalities have got responsibilities that far exceed the given resources. Municipalities are responsible for their inhabitants' well-being but many municipal administrators argue that social services should be a state responsibility, because municipalities can't do much, through lack of budget and expertise.

The Netherlands is a country with a long and strong tradition in social work and social care. Nowadays, many politicians and the media consider the system to be over developed, making citizens dependent on social benefits. A shortage of social care professionals is foreseen all over Western Europe. Active citizenship is felt as a necessary strategy to cope with future developments in care. Social workers in social care are mostly case- or care managers, being in charge of supporting individuals and families who are most in trouble or need. The Netherlands has a well established, long tradition in civil society and voluntary work. What challenges politicians and experts is the concern over a decline of civil society and volunteering work in the next decades.

'Local government has a leader role' (Dutch social worker)

Listening to professionals from both countries, it seems that most of them expect local government to take leadership, to give direction and to be committed to the social objectives. According to an Estonian social worker:

policymakers should be highly experienced, to see the problems and to recognise them.

In the words of a Dutch manager:

I think that the local government should be more precise in identifying the main objectives and the overall strategy. What are the most important social problems and what are we going to invest in them?

We need a competent local government, and apparently that is not what social workers are experiencing. From the Estonian side, there are several comments on tensions within the government system in their country. Within local government, a tension is felt between the social administrators and the front line workers or social case workers. The administrators and politicians are mainly focused on administrative problems and not on the processes and personal problems of their citizens, it is said by Estonian social workers. A second tension is to be found between different local governments. The social systems differ considerably from municipality to municipality and in particular between the cities and rural areas. The third tension is about state and local authorities. Some local professionals are asking for leadership from the state, to invest in social care, to prevent excessive differences between municipalities and regions and to promote quality.

We cannot work according to the standards because we cannot meet them in the current situation.

This view summarises this need for quality and the lack of conditions to meet the standards. Some policymakers we interviewed are quite reluctant to ‘copy’ the long term care system from Western European countries:

The state thinks that we should proceed like other countries but it feels like rushing. We cannot implement everything at the same time. We are getting new tasks or programmes from the state before we have implemented former ones.

From the Dutch side another debate on the role of local government is dominant. The authorities are massively criticised in the media for their bureaucracy and overregulation. In particular new management strategies to plan everything beforehand in products, results and effects is felt to hinder the social support and social interventions needed at that time in this place by many professionals and also among the respondents:

The number of dossiers that I have to deal with is already fixed at the end of the year before. If unpredictable things are going to happen, you can not react adequately.

Or listening to a manager:

I am not very charmed by this system. If I have submitted our tender and now I am fully bound to it.

Most pronounced is this social worker:

Okay, if you want me to dance for you, I dance for you.

It is remarkable that those criticisms from social workers are highly supported by their managers and most policymakers. Just to quote one of them:

Local authorities have gone too far in prescribing the results and products and time to spend on it. It is too much driven by containment. Social services become mere executors of the local government. We need a more trust based partnership.

This process is strengthened by new tendering and marketing policies, making Dutch welfare managers rather desperate:

In this agency there are several people having their full job in registration. I suppose due to mistrusting our sector. The district agency from the local authorities drafted a tender for community development as a number of projects, prescribing in detail how much time to spend on what. Last year we had 39 projects, with 39 project registrations with very precise details about what to deliver. The consequence of this is that each staff member exactly knows what to do, in what time and what to deliver. In other words, there was not any room left for doing other things.

Another Dutch manager is even more outspoken:

They are totally lost. How many programmes we already have seen passed and have seen disappeared before implementation ... They lack convincing strategies.

On this issue there really are remarkable similarities among both groups of respondents.

Voluntary work ... it will not be there in the forthcoming 10 years. (Estonian social policymaker)

The full quote comes from an Estonian social worker:

Voluntary work has not been implemented and elderly people themselves are not interested in it. Maybe, it will not be there in the forthcoming 10 years.

She analyses the lack of a volunteering tradition in Estonia and a rather passive attitude among the older generation. A civil servant is confronted with another side of this lack of voluntary work:

Starting a social service is complicated. We offer some services for NGOs but we are dependent on them if they want to develop those services.

The problem here is that sometimes local government has understood the message to promote civil society and to privatise social services to NGOs very well, but what can be done if there are no NGOs answering the tenders, and people are not organising themselves into voluntary organisations? On the other hand, some Estonians are more hopeful. One of them refers to elderly associations as a starting point to strengthen voluntary work and informal networks.

Cooperation with elderly associations for example to visit nursing home clients without family and friends. And to bring elderly people together in day care centres and from there building up and empowering social networks.

Another social worker has a rather similar approach:

It is difficult to increase responsibility in rural areas because of the distance, but social workers can support self help activities. But reaching the vulnerable elderly is very difficult. You need personalised contacts; it is difficult to get them outside their homes. We need to do more on health promotion.

In the Dutch interviews volunteering work and civil society are not discussed so much. It is taken for granted that social services are carried out by NGOs and sometimes by the private market, and the main concern is to support informal carers and volunteers to keep them in place. Social workers perceive it as their explicit task to endorse informal care, social networks and voluntary work. However, there is confusion about roles and positions. When to leave caring and social support to civil society and when is the time to intervene, to facilitate or to take over?

'The coffee culture is over; the new social worker' (Dutch social professional)

In the eyes of social workers, it all comes down to being trusted by the policymakers and managers. Apparently, there is a lack of trust in both countries. Social workers want to be trusted in the fact that they are professionals and need their own space for acting professionally. They see themselves as mandated by society to take care of the most vulnerable people, children, families and neighbourhoods. In the Netherlands, social workers feel mistrusted and controlled by bureaucratic systems. In Estonia they feel overlooked and not supported. On the other hand we have not found a critical attitude among social professionals towards their own profession and their connection to politics and society. Some Dutch social workers refer to the old days:

And I can understand it [this critical attitude towards social workers]. Social services sometimes had too much a 'coffee culture', just talking over a cup of coffee, but that has changed, but now the government has lost its trust in social workers.

And Estonian social workers acknowledge that they do not meet the standards, due to a lack of resources. From their perspective, policymakers and managers are not very pronounced in their expectations of social workers. They promote citizenship in general or refer to the Family Act, indeed overlooking the social workers sometimes. Dutch policymakers ask for social workers to connect more to the political discourse and social programmes and to listen more to citizens.

It all starts with communication and also the capability to analyse complex situations ... In former times, the most important thing was 'to help people' and the relationship with the client, trust.

In their opinion, a social professional should assess the problems adequately and look for who is there to address the problem: the person himself, the network, volunteers, school, police, administration and maybe, sometimes, the social worker herself. Another critical comment is about outreach social work. Policymakers stress the need for social workers who are in the streets, in the neighbourhoods, in the homes and who take the lead and full responsibility in critical situations. Listening to the professionals interviewed, we find this approach is supported by them as well.

'We send the person from agency to agency: what about cooperation?'
(Estonian social worker)

Cooperation is considered highly important in both countries. Starting from the situation a citizen is in, you can only find social solutions in cooperation, in getting things together. Cooperation is sought in mutual agreements, sometimes in delegating responsibilities from one agency to another. Cooperation is organised in platforms, networks, panels, meetings. However in practice, cooperation is not easy to make effective. The statement from one of the Estonian social workers:

We do not cooperate but we send the person from agency to agency

is illustrative of the daily reality in care—sometimes due to lack of time, but mostly because of fragmentation—in Estonia and the Netherlands. Sometimes the feeling is expressed that cooperation is a goal in itself and numerous networks, platforms and meetings are set up, without reaching a more effective intervention. In the Dutch research certain evidence for this was found in the fact that in many cooperative networks a feeling of urgency is missing and quite often a convincing concept or drive fails. It is important that all partners are driving in the same direction and have a common understanding of what is needed. In that process, social (care) workers are often overruled by doctors, policymakers, managers, therapists and so on (Waal, 2008). Another complicating factor is the uncertainty about mutual expectations, the different interests and different roles. Interests and role concepts, and how different actors perceive each other, are seldom on the table. There is a world between intentions for cooperation and making cooperation effective. However, the feeling of the people interviewed is that things are changing and in this respect more promising.

Reflections

On the research outcomes

The basic assumptions of an activating welfare state and a participative citizen are not contested by the social professionals interviewed. Social workers—in their own words—are committed to activation, promoting participation and supporting citizens, albeit that the Dutch social workers interviewed are more outspoken in connecting to national policies, whereas the Estonians are hardly connecting to

national strategies. In our research, social workers from both sides of Europe agree on what we labelled as personalised citizenship, a concept close to relational citizenship (Lister, 1997). Personalised citizenship implies that citizenship is not a fixed standard to discriminate between full citizens and socially, physically or mentally handicapped citizens. Responsibility, rights and duties are universal but different in different contexts, different for different people. The idea of self-responsibility and social responsibility does not imply that for certain citizens and in certain contexts professional support is excluded; on the contrary, social support creates a more equal level playing field and supports the most vulnerable people, neighbourhoods, counties, groups to participate to their own capabilities. The difference between both sides is that in Estonia, on the one hand, the Family Act is hindering a full recognition of professional social support, and in the Netherlands, on the other hand, the debate is about creating dependency of vulnerable people on the social system and social professionals. Social workers, from their perspective, experience in their daily work what is needed by vulnerable people in society, and they ask for commitment, leadership—and, in the Estonian case above all, an adequate budget—from policy-makers and managers. In interpreting the interviews from both countries we found that Estonian social workers in the interviews seem to focus on the recognition and definition of social work and the code of ethics. The helping character of the profession is dominating: *we are here to offer a better life for our people*. Dutch social workers—at least those interviewed—seem to focus more on self-determination, participation and empowerment and felt themselves hindered by a bureaucratic system based on new management theories. An important feeling among the social professionals—most strongly expressed by Estonian social workers—was that their voice is hardly heard in the political and societal debates. Social work logic connects the problematic to the political and policy making arena. Social professionals feel themselves, maybe, recognised as ‘doing good’ and helping people but not as professionals with specific skills and knowledge (see Cameron & Moss, 2007). Finally, the social professionals interviewed are often rather negative about cooperation between different kinds of professionals and services. They experience that in complex situations combined actions from different actors are needed but difficult to organise.

On the research project

The research project started from the thesis that current social policy and social work is dominated by the European transformation process. The project started in the Netherlands and from the West-European perspective on this transformation process. In the transfer of the research project to Estonia, the Estonian researchers brought in the specific character of the East-European transformation process. The second step was to translate the Dutch concepts, questions and coding into the Estonian context and to adapt to the situation that social workers in Estonia are in. The third step was to analyse the data and to give a meaning to the findings. This mutual process of

interpretation between Estonian and Dutch researchers was felt as highly intriguing and interesting. It was positive to notice that social work research as a specific field was recognisable thanks to the international social discourse that binds workers and researchers from different parts of Europe together in an understandable framework. In a way, researching in countries with quite different historical and cultural background, we found many similarities among social workers about their ideas about support, participation and commitment to the people they work for and work with. International research projects contribute to a more strongly recognised social work theory and social work practice by getting a better understanding, in particular, of the way social work adapts to different contexts but from a highly recognisable international discourse within social work.

Note

- [1] Social work is used as a broad concept including social professionals in social care, mostly in the role of case- or care managers.

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