

Criteria of professionalism of social workers in urban and rural areas: comparative analysis

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Abstract: The research is based on the problem associated with different approaches to understanding professionalism in urban and rural areas. These differences are largely explained by the different ratio of professional competencies and personal qualities of a specialist working in different socio-cultural and infrastructural environments. Qualification requirements are not only formally fixed in job descriptions and the professional and ethical code of social workers but are often actually dictated by the peculiarities of the area in which social work is carried out, as well as the specifics of client groups. The subject of the study is the criteria of professionalism of social workers in urban and rural areas and the factors influencing them (on the example of the Republic of Karelia). The article presents an analysis of the main approaches to understanding professionalism and its components, describes the professional and ethical requirements for the profession, personal qualities of a social worker, and also presents the results of an empirical study of the professional characteristics of social workers in urban and rural areas. The theoretical and methodological basis of the study was an attributive approach to understanding the phenomenon of “profession” taking into account the socio-cultural context of modern Russian society. An empirical study was conducted in the Republic of Karelia. Research methods: questionnaire, semi-structured interview, observation. The study uses, to a greater extent, a qualitative strategy. The result of the study is the statement of the existence of different approaches to understanding and different criteria of professionalism in relation to social workers engaged in professional activities in urban and rural areas (on the example of the Republic of Karelia), as well as recommendations for the dissemination of professionalism among social workers.

Keywords: professionalism; social work; social work in urban area; social work in rural area.

Introduction

Social workers and specialists in social work are representatives of a special profession that ensure the implementation of the main tasks of the social protection and social services system. The specifics of modern social work require specialists to have a high level of professional knowledge, skills and abilities, “soft skills”, compliance with ethical principles of working with recipients of social services, as well as compliance with universal rules and norms of relationships in society. The combination of these requirements in modern society is acquiring an increasing number of variations due to the ever-increasing variety of client groups, interactions and unpredictability of various factors affecting the occurrence of difficult life situations and the conditions in which they occur.

The contradiction is created by the situation of an acute shortage of personnel – the shortage of professional social workers in the conditions of increasing demand for social services. Thus, according to the Federal State Statistics Service, as of January 1, 2021, the number of disabled people in Russia increased by 200 thousand and amounted to 11.631 million people, or 8% of the country's population [Federal State Statistics Service 2021 a]. In the Republic of Karelia, as of January 1, 2021, the number of disabled people amounted to 61.5 thousand people – 10% of the total population of the Republic [Federal State Statistics Service 2021 a]. According to data for 2020, the number of people over the working age in Russia amounted to 36.629 million people, or 25% of the total population of the country [Federal State Statistics Service 2021 b]. In the Republic of Karelia, the number of people over the working age for the same period is 164 thousand or 27%

of the total population of the region [Federal State Statistics Service for the Republic of Karelia 2021]. It should also be noted that about 10 million elderly people live in rural areas, which creates special conditions for providing them with social services. These statistics demonstrate the need for professional social assistance, its relevance not only in urban, but also in rural areas.

Theoretical approaches to the concept of “professionalism in social work”

The concept of “social work” as a professional activity still does not have a single interpretation. At the birth of the profession social work was defined by Russian scientists (I.A. Zimnaya, V.A. Lukov, etc.) as a professional activity to help individuals, groups or communities to restore their ability to function normally and create the necessary conditions for this. E. Kholostova understands social work as professional activity carried out by professionally trained specialists and their voluntary assistants, aimed at providing individual assistance to a person, family or group of people who have fallen into a difficult life situation for them, through information, diagnosis, counseling, direct in-kind and financial assistance, care and maintenance of the sick and lonely, pedagogical and psychological support, orienting those in need of help to their own activity to overcome difficult situations [Kholostova 2016]. It is this formulation, in our opinion, that most fully describes the essence of social work as a profession and focuses on the professional readiness of specialists.

Interpreting the concept of social work as a professional activity, it is necessary to define the term “profession”. The term also still does not have a single definition. Thus, in English-language literature, a profession is defined as an occupation of middle-class representatives that requires complex training and high qualifications. In Russian, this term is used in the broad sense of the word and denotes a person's occupation in life, which allows him to receive income to meet his needs. Profession is not only one of the types of human activity, but also a component of his social status, a source of livelihood, a way of self-realization, while it requires a certain level of competence from him.

In the modern sociology of the profession, there are several directions of scientific thought about the relationship between the concepts of “profession” and “professionalism” [Krasnov 2019]. The positivist, or functionalist, approach implies the allocation of the function of the profession in society in the differentiation of labor, the basis of which is the social needs met by the activities of specific professions. This approach is closely related to the theory of social inequality (G. Spencer, E. Durkheim, T. Parsons, W. Moore.). T.Parsons understood a profession as a structural component of society, and he considered a professional to be an ideal citizen of his country, aimed at achieving a state of universal well-being [Abramov 2005]. According to T. Parsons, the criteria of professionalism in this approach are: appropriate education, an intellectual component that includes values, ideas, opinions and ideals of a person. Therefore, true professionals of their profession act for the benefit of the client and society as a whole.

The critical approach is based on K. Marx's sociological theory of conflict. Such a Marxist understanding of the profession defines it as a continuous process of controlling the market of goods and services of a certain area, which leads to achieving a higher status and increasing the social mobility of specialists. Thus, representatives of each profession are trying to retain or seize power, resources, the market for the provision of certain services, which results in competition between professionals of one or different fields. The same idea was put forward by Marx in the theory of conflict, which considers society as a struggle of social groups for their own interests, ideals.

The attributive approach, or the theory of traits, highlights the characteristics (attributes) of the ideal type of profession, focuses on issues of professional competencies (A. Flexner, E. Greenwood, L. Rizer, J. Millerson). The term “professionalization” in the context of this approach was considered as a process by which the type of work activity can relate to the profession. A. Flexner in his works identified a number of attributes that correspond to the ideal type of professional. He attributed to such characteristics the involvement of a person in intellectual

activity, responsibility for one's own work, involvement of science, training and application of acquired knowledge in practice, self-organization and professional self-awareness, as well as altruistic motivation. Follower of Flexner, J. Millerson put forward his own set of characteristics of true professionalism, complementing the previous list with competence confirmed by passing the relevant exams, rules of conduct forming and approved by the professional community, as well as participation in a professional association (Millerson 1964).

Theoretical and methodological basis of the study

In order to be able to identify any features of the profession of a social worker and the criteria of professionalism, we define the attributive approach as the theoretical and methodological basis of the study, but with some clarifications. The rigid association of profession and specific types of activity, qualification characteristics and status-role positions are more characteristic of the industrial model of the economy and could be analyzed in this way within the framework of the classical scientific picture of the world. Analyzing modern processes related to socio-cultural dynamics, characterized by an increasing degree of nonlinearity, uncertainty and unpredictability in combination with the transition stage to a new technological order based on NBICS technologies [Petrovskaya 2021], it is necessary to take into account a multidimensional system of factors influencing the transformation of the profession and ideas about it.

Qualification requirements for representatives of the profession “social worker” are fixed in the relevant professional standard [Order of the Ministry of Labor of Russia 2020]. So this document puts forward requirements for education, qualification level, fixes labor functions, as well as knowledge, skills and abilities necessary to perform these functions.

The educational requirements for a social worker are to have secondary professional education (training programs for skilled workers, employees), secondary general education and professional training, as well as secondary general education and short-term training or on-the-job instruction. This graduation gives people with different levels of education the opportunity to work in this specialty.

The professional standard does not put forward requirements for practical work experience in the social sphere but describes special conditions for admission to work. These include the passage of medical courses on first aid, the absence of a criminal record for applicants for the position of “social worker”, as well as the passage of preliminary and periodic medical examinations for security purposes, because social work involves direct contact with recipients of social services. The professional standard also contains a description of labor functions, i.e. services provided to recipients of social services in various forms of social services: provision of social, medical, psychological, pedagogical, legal, labor, urgent social services, as well as services in order to increase the communicative potential of recipients of social services with disabilities.

The ethical aspects of the activity of a social worker are fully covered by the ethical code of a social worker. The ethics of social work is a code of conduct for employees in this field, related to professional requirements for activities that ensure the nature of relationships between people. According to this document, social workers have obligations to their clients, employers, colleagues, profession and society as a whole. The activity of professional communities is aimed at monitoring the performance of professional duties by social workers [Order of the Ministry of Labor of Russia 2013].

Thus, the ethical code of a social worker develops some ethical standards of behavior. A social worker should understand and accept the characteristics of each individual client, respect them, use their knowledge, skills and abilities to assess and solve social problems. Not to commit acts that can negatively affect the prestige of the profession, clearly and clearly formulate their decisions, attitudes and actions, use their professional experience to develop new technologies, methods, social work programs, as well as to identify the social needs of the population.

Social work is a specific area of professional activity dealing with those categories of the population who have certain difficulties, social problems. In this regard, a special role is given to

the personal qualities of a specialist, among which are his value system, ideas about humanism, respect for the personality of each person is the determining one. That is why for a comfortable feeling of oneself in the profession of a social worker, a high level of self-awareness is necessary, an understanding of how correctly the profession was chosen, how much it corresponds to one's own abilities, interests and opportunities, and the life goals of a specialist.

In the professional orientation of a person, not only objective factors (the opinion of family, relatives, peers, school) are of decisive importance, but also subjective ones — his own interests, values, attitudes and ideas, a system of worldview. An important role is played by the possession of pedagogical tact by a social worker, politeness, sensitivity, attentiveness and benevolence, the ability to demonstrate indifference to the situation that has happened, anxiety due to difficulties, joy from the achieved successes. It is active participation, emotional empathy with the client that contribute to the creation of a favorable atmosphere for achieving joint goals. Morality as a spiritual quality of a person also accompanies a social worker in his professional activity. One of the most important personality traits of a social worker is charity – a compassionate, benevolent attitude towards another person, a selfless willingness to help him.

An important professional quality of a social worker is the ability to receive information about client's difficult life situation not only from his speech, but from the subtext of individual phrases, nonverbal symbols that can show the depth of his experiences of the current situation. Researchers rarely note such an important quality of a social worker's personality as a sense of humor, charisma of a person and his positive attitude to the world, which helps to overcome difficulties and serves as a means of preventing professional and emotional burnout for the social worker himself. It is the personal characteristics of a social worker, his ability to self-regulation and self-reflection that can make him more vulnerable or, conversely, more protected to emotional burnout.

A combination of professional knowledge, skills and personal qualities in various ratios are manifested and required to varying degrees in different conditions of providing social services, are evaluated and perceived differently by recipients of social services living in specific social and infrastructural environments.

Based on a study conducted in 2020, we identified the features of social work implemented in rural areas compared to urban areas [Slavashevich 2020]. Such features include, on the one hand, certain limitations (limited resources, problems with mobile communication, underdevelopment of social infrastructure, etc.), and on the other hand, positive social phenomena that form additional resources (mutual support and mutual assistance of villagers in relation to each other). It is the closeness of social ties between fellow villagers, which does not exist in the city, that allows us to talk about the presence of different models of caring – “cold” and “warm” care, when the care practices of social institutions are carried out independently or shared with the family [Parfenova, Petukhova 2019].

“Warm” care is defined by sincerity, love and compassion; a person cares about another, for example, about his relative, with love and a desire to help, and the ward consciously accepts this care. Attention to the feelings and opinions of a person, the desire to realize his interests and needs, usually these characteristics are present precisely in the care received from the family, from the closest people. As we noted above, the peculiarity of rural areas is the closeness of ties between residents, so we can also attribute the provision of social work in rural areas to the manifestation of warm care. “Cold” care is reflected in the fact that the person taking care tends to take everything into his own hands, including responsibility for the actions of the ward. Such manipulation leads to the habituation of the object of care to the fact that his participation is not necessary, all difficult situations will be solved even with his inaction, mainly according to a predetermined scenario. As a result, instead of independence, we get dependence and fear of taking responsibility for solving our own problems. Unfortunately, this model is more typical of social work in the city. Social workers, due to the heavy workload associated with a large number and more complex recipients of social services, the need to maintain documentation and work with an electronic database, can provide care without proper warmth. Such relationships are harmful to both sides – a social worker feels

uncomfortable at an unloved job, and a client may feel like a puppet whose opinion is not listened to and whose interests remain unsatisfied.

Research methods

The empirical study was conducted by us, the purpose of which was to study and analyze the professional characteristics of social workers in urban and rural areas. The base for conduction of empirical study was Complex Xenter of Social Services of the population of the Republic of Karelia, the departments of social services for citizens at home in Petrozavodsk (urban area) and Prionezhsky municipal district (rural area). All respondents are engaged in providing social services to recipients at home.

Research methods: questionnaire survey of social workers (n=45, sample type – targeted); semi-structured interviews with two heads of departments of social services of citizens at home in Petrozavodsk and Prionezhsky municipal district; included monitoring of the activities of social workers.

The social workers involved in the survey provide social services at home to the population of the city and rural areas, perform the same labor functions, provide almost identical services, therefore, they are in equal conditions in terms of selection for a position, provision of services, documentation, etc. The questionnaire for social workers consisted of 19 questions, revealing the main criteria for comparing the data obtained.

Research results

44 social workers out of 45 are women, and only 1 is a man. This is a typical situation for Karelia, demonstrating that the bulk of social workers are women performing serious physical activity: both in the city and in the countryside.

The age of social workers in rural areas is in the range of 37–54 years, and the age of social workers in the city ranges from 28 to 68 years, i.e. in the city the age range is greater. Urban residents enter the profession of a social worker at a younger age and continue to do it after retirement, while in rural areas the age limits fall into the period of maturity, without going beyond it. At the same time, the average age of respondents in both groups is approximately the same: 48 years for social workers in rural areas and 47 years in the city.

We observe an interesting correlation when analyzing the work experience in the profession of “social worker” – in rural areas respondents' answers fall within the boundaries of 8–28 years, in the city – from 3 weeks to 25.5 years. Thus, the average work experience in the profession in the village is 18 years, and in the city only 9 years. What could be the reason for such a difference? As the respondents themselves and the head of the department for the Prionezhsky district note, a social worker in rural areas, due to the closeness of ties between residents of the settlement and attachment to recipients of social services, if he or she comes to the profession, he or she stays in it for a long time. In Petrozavodsk, the situation is reversed, when there is a whole list of potential employees, but not everyone can stay at a new place of work for a long time because of the specificity of the profession and the difficulties associated with it.

What about the level of education of social workers? According to aggregate data, the presence of secondary professional education, often unrelated to social work, prevails among social workers. Only two out of eight respondents from rural areas noted the existence of a social worker's education, the rest have the following specialties: seamstress, nurse, agronomist, etc. Social workers in Petrozavodsk also have in most cases a non-core secondary professional education (commodity specialist, woodworking technologist, director of events, primary school teacher, accountant, etc.), but more often there are social workers with higher education, including in the specialty “specialist in social work” and “social pedagogue”. Thus, the share of specialized education among social workers in the city is lower than in the Prionezhsky district (1/6 compared to 1/4 having specialized education in rural areas), but the level of education itself is higher. Based on the experience of the previous study, we would like to note that a large number of social workers in rural areas working

by profession is most likely due to the proximity of the city. The further a locality is from a district center or city, the smaller the percentage of social workers will have a specialized education.

The respondents primarily associated the reasons for choosing this profession with the desire to help people, and also noted such advantages as a convenient work schedule and decent wages. Surprisingly, none of the social workers in rural areas mentioned the lack of a suitable place of work as the reason for entering the profession, although this answer was expected due to the difficult situation with work in rural areas.

Social workers in rural and urban areas, according to their own estimates, rarely experience difficulties in work. Both groups of respondents identified the physical and psychological burden that falls on the shoulders of a social worker. We would especially like to highlight the physical workload of social workers in rural areas, this is what makes social work in rural areas harder, which was noted by social workers themselves, including respondents from the city.

Among the advantages of social work in rural areas, the social worker of the city named the openness of recipients of social services. Our own observations confirmed this statement: one of the recipients of social services communicates with a social worker only through the door, leaving a small gap for the transfer of products and money. At the moment, the situation is complicated by the pandemic, but, as social workers note, such behavior of elderly people in the city is common, they are closed and wary of outsiders, even a social worker. Difficulties in communicating with recipients of social services were also noted in the answer to this question by respondents serving the urban population.

When asked what personal qualities a social worker needs, both groups of respondents answered almost the same way. Social workers highlight such qualities as kindness, patience, compassion and responsibility, politeness and fairness. Stress tolerance, non-responsiveness, empathy and a sense of humor, calmness and mercy are precisely those personality qualities that help social workers cope with any difficulties encountered in their life and professional path.

However, when describing the professional knowledge, skills and abilities required by a social worker, we observe differences in the responses of respondents. So, social workers in rural areas call it necessary to know the psychology of the elderly, the ability to listen and remain silent, the ability to create a favorable, comfortable atmosphere to meet the needs of the client and reveal his capabilities. City social workers also note the importance of knowledge of the psychology of the elderly, but the knowledge and skills necessary for professional activity also include nursing skills, medical knowledge, knowledge and skills of caring for bedridden patients and people with mental illnesses. This difference is due to the fact that a social worker in the city serves a recipient of social services living in a comfortable house, which removes a number of physically difficult social services from him. The population of the city is characterized by a different range of services, for example, hygiene services, and the recipients of social services themselves are in a more serious condition. One of the features of social work in the city, unlike in the countryside is working with bedridden patients and people with mental illnesses. Servicing these categories requires a social worker to have narrow-profile knowledge and skills.

This problem is also reflected in the professional training of social workers. Thus, when asked about the completion of advanced training courses, social workers in rural areas noted only first aid courses and certification confirming the compliance of social workers with the requirements put forward for the profession. City social workers note courses on caring for people with a self-service deficit, on social rehabilitation of citizens in a situation of maladaptation, on caring for bedridden patients, as well as courses aimed at studying the system of long-term care. Due to the presence of severe diseases in the recipients of services, a city social worker needs special training to provide quality services.

We also see the difference between social work in urban and rural areas in the range of services provided to the population. Rural social workers allocated services such as the purchase and delivery of food, medicines, water supply, furnace heating, snow removal of the house territory, payment for housing and communal services. This list forms the basis of the daily activities of a social worker. As for the city, the range of services is much wider and includes, in addition to the

services presented above, also wet and dry cleaning, assistance in cooking, provision of hygiene services, medical procedures, paperwork, support to healthcare institutions, etc. In an interview with the head of the department of social services at home in Petrozavodsk, she noted the peculiarity of urban recipients of social services, namely their mobility and freedom to use information and communication technologies.

The next difference is the different burden on social workers. So, in rural areas, the load on a social worker ranges from 4 to 10 people (the average number is 6 people), and in the city – from 7 to 16 people (the average number is 12 people). This is due to the fact that services provided in rural areas take longer, which in turn may be due to the underdevelopment of the social infrastructure of the settlement, the work schedules of institutions and organizations, climatic and other features and environmental problems that a social worker cannot influence.

Also, the number of recipients of social services being serviced in a rural settlement directly depends on public opinion. Older people may not take up social services for fear of being labeled “elderly”, “helpless”, such people want to prove to themselves and others that they are still able to serve themselves independently, despite poor health, illness or disability.

Social workers of the village serve all the recipients of social services attached to them daily, and in the city only half – 6–7 people a day, which is approximately the same in quantitative ratio. However, according to respondents' own estimates, it takes more time for social workers to provide services in rural areas, because half of the working day is spent on being served outside the house – queues in shops, long distances between recipients of social services and shops, physical work on the street; whereas social workers of the city spend only a third of their time on this.

During the study of social work in rural areas within the framework of the previous research [Slavashevich 2020], we identified the problem of the relationship between a social worker and relatives of recipients of social services. According to the social workers of the Muezersky district of the Republic of Karelia, if relatives came to the recipient of social services, and a social worker should come, then the relatives will leave all the hard work for him. During a personal conversation, social workers of the Prionezhsky district confirmed the presence of the same problem in their rural settlements, which indicates its prevalence in rural areas as a whole. During a conversation with a social worker of the city, this situation was presented in a different way. If relatives come to the recipient of social services served in the city, then it is more likely that social services will be suspended at this point, even if it is free of charge, since there is no need to invite a “stranger” person for this period when there are relatives nearby who can also go grocery shopping, pay bills, etc. Also, often the relatives of the recipient of social services themselves turn to a social worker with a request to teach the skills of caring for a relative or simply offer their feasible help. It is quite rare to observe the same situation as in the countryside in the city.

According to an interview with the head of the department of social services at home in Petrozavodsk, a psychologist works with social workers to prevent professional burnout, and various educational courses are held, which rural workers are deprived of. This is a clear omission, because, despite the support from the local community, social workers in rural areas are still a risk group for professional burnout. It is necessary to work through problematic situations, discuss protection mechanisms and try to avoid even the first symptoms of burnout.

It should be noted that, despite all the problems and difficulties that stand in the way of social work in any locality, all respondents noted that they like their work. This once again confirms that social workers are people of a special character, possessing special spiritual qualities and values.

Conclusions

Based on the conducted research, we come to the conclusion that there are two different approaches to understanding the professionalism of a social worker in the “city – village” plane, due to different conditions for the implementation of social services, different characteristics of recipients of social services and their difficult life situations. In this regard, we recommend not to make sharp conclusions about the professionalism or unprofessionalism of social workers in rural areas, to a greater extent to apply an “understanding” approach when analyzing social practices in this

professional field. The boundaries of professionalism and unprofessionalism in modern social work are increasingly mobile due to the lack of unambiguous criteria, the expansion of “supra-professional” competencies required of specialists, the presence of various models of social work, distinguished in different dimensions: city – village; secular social work – religious social service; state institution – public organization and other dimensions, setting the possibility of the existence of various grounds for comparison and understanding of the phenomenon of professionalism.

From the point of view of the attributive approach, urban social workers meet the criteria of professionalism to a greater extent, which is especially noticeable when selecting candidates for a position and evaluating professional training. The urban environment provides more opportunities for professional development, offers a variety of educational courses to improve the quality of services provided to recipients. The personal qualities characteristic of representatives of the profession of a social worker are equally inherent in urban and rural social workers, which, however, does not exclude the fact that in rural areas the conditions for their practical implementation are more favorable and disposing.

Based on the results of the study, the necessity of spreading professionalism among social workers in both urban and rural areas is determined, where professional development, professional retraining in specific areas of professional activity, stimulation of social workers to self-development and research activities, measures aimed at preventing the occurrence of professional burnout syndrome are equally necessary as well as the need for cooperation of Complex Center of Social Services of the Population of the Republic of Karelia with the administrations of rural settlements to increase awareness of rural residents about the possibilities of the social sphere.

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