

## **Public discourse and social work language in today's Russia**

The goal of this research is to analyze on everyday experience as an important condition of knowledge formation in social work. The ‘theory’ of social work is interpreted from the point of view of social constructivism. In order to cope with uncertainty in everyday practice a social worker builds practice theories on the ground of common sense with available concepts, values and emotions. The authors consider the role the social work language as well as official rhetoric play in the creation of the “welfare clients” identity in Russia. In particular, the discursive ways to define such phenomena as poverty, gender, and social welfare system are discussed. The research is connected with critical analysis of post-Soviet stage of the national family policy. The rhetoric of official political documents is considered, to study symbolic aspects of family policy and its instrumental sides. The contribution of social security into the social differentiation is discussed, including such an effect as constructing so called “unfortunate families” as social work clients. The role of social services in creation of identity of “unfortunate” among the low income household is considered. The analysis is based on the data of interviews and critical overview of discourses in official documents and relevant publications. A public discourse which frames social work practice contains a mixture of stereotypes concerning social issues and their treatment inherited from Soviet times and induced by neoliberal ideology. Those discursive means are important components of a context in which clients understand their personal life situation in respect to the existing system of support and social workers create their own understanding of social problems. The areas of agency jargon intersect with public discourse on social welfare issues and include definitions of the clients, functions of agency and self-definitions of social workers. Everyday knowledge – ‘tacit knowledge’ that is not necessarily expressed verbally but must be experienced – plays an important role in practitioners’ work. It is ‘practical wisdom’, implicitly included in everyday practical action and tacitly implied directions in social work routine. The authors conclude that in a context of anti-crisis efforts of the officials to improve social services with less budget the jargon words such as “unfortunate families” reflect the policy of rationalizing of expenses. Widespread understanding of poverty shared by many social workers and neoliberal politicians is concerned with scapegoating, i.e. placing on individuals the responsibility for those problems that have societal origin. Such understanding ignores important social conditions and those challenges that people are faced with in real life situations. Everyday theories are formed in practice for adjusting the complex reality of human relationships to the strict tasks of classification of the clients on deserving and non-deserving. Categorization of people to deserving and non-deserving presents a bright example of power of nomination.

### **Rhetorics of Russian social policy**

During the drastic transformation of social, political, economic order in Russia during the 1990s the transformation of modern family and the connected processes have forced researchers to revalue the state of this institute and to put forward assumptions of the further tendencies of its development. The post-Soviet public sphere is characterized by the legacies of Soviet hegemonic pronatalism<sup>1</sup>. Issues of reproduction and nationalism have been interconnected in alarmist, crisis discourse on family, talking about the “catastrophe” and “dying-out” of the Russian nation (in terms of ethnos)<sup>2</sup>. This very conservative discourse is blaming women and liberal policies (including sexual enlightenment and contraceptives) for “degeneration of Russian nation”. While decision about a number of children in family is a question of choice of modern people — husbands and wives, partners, living together or autonomously, there is a “women’s fault” in the reduction of fertility as it is presented by some

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<sup>1</sup> Rivkin-Fish M. From “Demographic Crisis” to “Dying Nation”: The Politics of Language and Reproduction in Russia // Gender and National Identity in Twentieth-Century Russian Culture. Ed. by H. Gosciolo and A. Lanoux. Northern Illinois: University Press, 2006

<sup>2</sup> See: Ловцова Н.И., Ярская-Смирнова Е.Р. Демографическая проблема: кто виноват и что делать? // Мир России. 2005. № 4. С.78-104

traditionalists, including orthodox clericals and civic intellectuals. The opinions of some experts, including scholars, officials, politicians, public figures, journalists are sometimes very retrograde and ill-informed<sup>3</sup>. On the other hand, the well-informed analytical approach is pointing out diversification of family forms and strategies in terms of modernization while underlining the complexity of hardships for family life brought by economic decline, decrease of public support, minimization of child care facilities, poor quality of family relations, and “social illnesses” including mental health problems, etc. A group of “instrumental” discourses concerns legislation, establishment of social services network, methods of social work with families. However, pragmatic and instrumental messages found in social work and social policy textbooks, in academic and popular texts are loaded with conservative and even discriminatory discourses<sup>4</sup>.

Language of official documents on social policy elaborated on the national level can be considered as a jargon of public officials<sup>5</sup>. The popular means in the official discourse are nomination of the phenomena without definitions, for instance: “demographic crisis”, “family crisis”, “family unfortunateness”. Impersonal and denominative phrases are widely used as well as listing of “figures”, events and phenomena. Rare or no comments, analysis or interpretation are provided. A notion of “unfortunate family” is a key example of such jargon. This term is not defined and is rather roomy and vague to include many children families, junior (teenage) families, one parent families, families in crisis situation, families with a disabled or chronically ill child. The jargon also includes such concepts as “problematic families”: crisis, incomplete, many children, low income. As one can see, some families are seen as immoral, unfortunate and dangerous for society, even “transmitting poverty through generations”. Quasi official discourse consists as of political rhetoric on regional level, reports of service organizations. This type of discourse is characterized by the efforts of regional officials and service administrators to be compatible with official discourses. The rhetorical techniques and text structure are very similar and are not subject to change.

At the same time, the regional officials often initiate their own original macro-narratives. In concert with the general political course the rhetoric of regional officials is developing towards restoration of traditional family and patriarchal values. The following quotation is even flavoured with the fantastic theories:

«In the way out of demographi problem there are many factors. For instance, the position of woman in the society. Today she is evaluated according to success she achieved at work, in public life. While it would be needed [to evaluate her] according to what sort of children she gave birth to and brought up together with her husband, because a woman is at first place a mother and a spouse... The main task of a human being that is predetermined by the nature and God – not only to be a guest on Earth but to reproduce ones similar to oneself, to prepare them for future life... Another problem that leads to the birth of ill children is promiscuous sexual relations. If even a child wouldn't suffer of sexually transmitted infections, a woman who changed several partners, he almost surely will be born sick...”<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> See for instance: Розенхольм А., Савкина А. «Роди патриота - спаси Россию!» (нация и гендер в демографическом дискурсе российских печатных СМИ, комментировавших «демографическое послание» В.В.Путина) // Гендерные исследования. № 18 (2009). С. 267.

<sup>4</sup> See: Iarskaia-Smirnova E. and Romanov P. Gendering social work in Russia: towards anti-discriminatory practices // Equal Opportunities Volume 27 Issue 1, 2008. P. 64-76

<sup>5</sup> См.: Исола А.-М. Неблагополучные семьи: риторика российской демографической политики // // Новый быт в современной России: гендерные исследования повседневности: коллективная монография (Труды факультета политических наук и социологии; Вып. 17) / Под ред. Е.Здравомысловой, А.Роткирх, А.Темкиной. СПб., Изд-во ЕУСПб., 2009. С.404.

<sup>6</sup> В решении демографической проблемы много факторов. Например, положение женщины в обществе. Ведь сегодня ее оценивают по тому, каких успехов она достигла на работе, в общественной жизни. А нужно — по тому, каких детей она родила и вместе с мужем воспитала, ведь женщина в первую очередь мать и супруга. ... Основная задача человека, предначертанная ему природой и Богом, — не просто погостить на Земле, а воспроизвести себе подобных, подготовить их к дальнейшей жизни. ... Другая проблема, ведущая к рождению больных детей, — беспорядочные половые связи. Даже если ребенок не пострадает от инфекций, передаваемых половым путем, у женщины, сменившей несколько партнеров, он почти наверняка родится

More often, however, the middle level texts of reports are regulated by the pragmatics of social security and therefore include everyday classifications derived from the practice.

### Classification of beneficiaries

Let us consider one of the empirical examples from our data archive. A higher official responsible for social issues in one of the regions was presented a report that included a list of so called “served under care” [обслуживаемые подопечные]. She listed under this term ‘low income families, incomplete, many children, families with children with disabilities, refugees and forced migrants, unfortunate families’. When we asked her, “who are the *unfortunate families*?”, she thought a second and answered: -“Those with whom a big social work is conducted”. She has also talked about further development of the classification in the following terms: “layout of those under care according to the groups of dependency” [разбивка подопечных по группам зависимости]. In another region we have found a draft of the concept of social service that explained causal relations between “family unfortunateness” and quality of intergenerational and relational connections: “family unfortunateness due to the loss of familial relations and continuation of generation” [... семейное неблагополучие вследствие утраты родственных связей и преемственности поколений]. Obviously, the term “unfortunate family” or “unfortunateness of the family” is being defined locally in different ways.

Some of the experts attach to this term the meanings of immorality and explain it even in relation with suspicious sexual habits. In an article “Value orientations of unfortunate families” psychologist Elizarov talks about several distinctive qualities of such families: he mentions their “need to engage into tense interpersonal contacts, need to have bright, unusual impressions, that are less mediated by cultural values, indifference towards study and work as well as feelings of emptiness and senselessness of one’s own existence drowned out by: a) focus on sex and love relationships; b) rush after the career, increase of material well-being; c) social contacts in a group of alike, that often is followed by the sliding to alcoholism and other types of dependency”<sup>7</sup>. As one can see, the usual motives and feelings that can be characteristic for any person, receive here negative connotations through the use of such nouns as “focus on”, “rush after”, adjectives “tense”, and other rhetorical means.

At the level of everyday practice work so called “street level bureaucrats” (M. Lipsky) develop their own jargon in order to cope with uncertain situations and relate complex cases with already known types. One of such words originated from abbreviation: socially dangerous position [социально опасное положение] = S.O.P. = SOP-families [соповские семьи]. Other jargon nominations in the talk of social workers and social pedagogues include the following examples: “under care”, “dependent” and unfortunate [подопечные, зависимые], “regular and unfortunate families” [обычные семьи и неблагополучные], “migration families” [миграционные семьи], “units” (up to a 100 units of children in the school [в школе до ста единиц детей]). The latest example is related with a current trend towards rationalization, monetization and neo-managerialization of welfare provision. It is close to what Lynn Haney in her research of recent history of welfare restructuring in Hungary shows. In her research she demonstrates how “rapid democratization allowed global forces and local actors to institute new surveillance techniques and disciplinary welfare practices”<sup>8</sup>. She considers the phenomenon of “materialization of need” meaning that under the adaptation of the discourse of poverty all needs of clients were reduced to poor relief.

As we can see, the social service organizational jargon implies classification of service users into deserving and non-deserving according to many qualities, including loyalty and obedience:

“When we came to her to sign the act of assessment, and then we brought food stuff to her, - when you see her eyes you understand – yes, we are needed... And sometimes happens so that [they] come, behaved rude, but you should smile, otherwise the bosses will swear at you. [They] would take this kitchen stuff, go away and will even talk that [we] gave little and bad” (specialists in social work). So, the client who is

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БОЛЬНЫМ...» "Национальный проект - не кампания, а реальная работа". Интервью первого заместителя министра здравоохранения области Ларисы Твердохлеб // Официальный Сайт Правительства Саратовской области, 12.02.2008, [http://www.saratov.gov.ru/news/interviews/detail.php?ID=23631&phrase\\_id=1204083](http://www.saratov.gov.ru/news/interviews/detail.php?ID=23631&phrase_id=1204083)

<sup>7</sup> Елизаров А.Н. Ценностные ориентации неблагополучных семей // Социологические исследования. Ежемесячный научный и общественно-политический журнал Российской Академии наук. 1995. №7. С. 93 – 99. <http://www.psychologia.narod.ru/values.htm>

<sup>8</sup> Haney L. Global discourses of Need. Mythologizing and Pathologizing Welfare in Hungary // P. 70

eligible for poor relief may be “more or less takes care of herself”, and present “not like neat but tidy, smooth poverty”. Classifications of material status developed in social service organizations try to avoid the terms “poverty” and “poor”: In our Center we say “low income” [в Центре у нас говорят «малообеспеченный»] Specialists in social work, Saratov. In order to grasp the notion of poverty, however, social workers employ all their senses to describe color and even smell: “They looked grey”, “she was dressed in something grey... and her house was grey, dark hallway, and I’ve got all her image...”; There was smelling there, yes, it is perhaps the most bright impression, you know, that smell... Like in houses with a lot of old things, such a smell. Not meaning that it is bad, but such a specific smell... Such as very old premises, people live there since very long ago, unaired, such a smell...” Similar situations are described by Haney who writes about bodily experience of social workers striving to increase distance between them and their clients.

Classifications of clients is conducted by linguistic means in a jargon of social pedagogues and psychologists. The jargon in use at the agencies is patronizing and careless, sometimes even aggressive: “little ones” [«*детки*», «*ребятки*»], little orphans [«*сиротки*»] and home children [«*детки-сироты и детки-домашние*»], “the parents have to” [«*родители должны*»], subject to education [«*подлежащие обучению*»], mummies, pappies, mumsies [«*мамочки*», «*папочки*», «*мамочки-кукушки*», «*мамашки*», «*папашки*», «*бабульки*»], “mamsies came sober, didn’t have time to get drunk” [Ведь мамашки-то пришли трезвые, не успели напиться]; “mistakes of parents” [«*ошибки родителей*»], patologizing upbringing [«*патологизирующее воспитание*»]. Diagnos-based jargon: “a child with a shift” [«ребенок со СДВИГ», *sdvig*=shift and abbreviation for ADHD], minimal brain disfunction-kids [«*ммдэшники*»], autists, downists [«*аутисты*», «*даунята*»].

Along with “unfortunate families” there is a nomination “unfortunate children” [«*неблагополучные дети*»]. Those are interpreted as “children from unfortunate families”: including many children families, low income families, incomplete, children of junior mothers, as well as drug users and abandoned children. The discourse shows such children as objects of pedagogical and psychological scrutiny and influence. One news paper article had a title “Poor means unintelligent” (Novye izvestia 16.10.2006) [Бедные значит неумные]. The author wrote: “Children from poor families are more stupid than their rich peers. This was pointed by the western scholars who during several years have been studying the issue of impact of social environment on intellectual activity of a human being... With this point of view both Russian scholars and pedagogues agree who work with unfortunate kids”<sup>9</sup>.

### Phraseology of professionalism

Intensification of labor and following formalization of labor is reflected in the style of reporting as well as in the attitudes towards the service users. Services are measured and calculated in terms of items and the rhetoric of reporting is built on the logic of increase: “it helped increase a number of services by 19%; 16 304 items of services provided” [«*Это позволило увеличить ... на 19% количество услуг*», оказано «*16 304 ед. услуг*»] (Report on the position of children in Saratov region, 2000s). This rhetoric means can be called “specification outside the context” as it is never has analytic comments or comparative statistics to see the dynamics or to grasp the effects of actions.

The following examples show formalism in evaluation and low sensitivity towards incorrect and unethical formulations:

#### Inquiry

Given to pedagogue-psychologist Demidenko A.P. to certify that during her work no conflicts occurred that would have been implied professional solving.

*Director of kindergarten*

*“I have launched a small questionnaire for the parents about child abuse” [«*Я запустила анкетку для родителей по жестокому обращению с детьми*»] (social pedagogue)*

<sup>9</sup> Поздняков А. Бедный, значит неумный. Плохие социально-экономические условия разрушают детский мозг // Новые известия 16 Октября 2006 г. // [www.newizv.ru/news/2006-10-16/56101/](http://www.newizv.ru/news/2006-10-16/56101/);

Family is perceived as an object of pedagogical, medical impact and societal control. Often such attitudes are medicalized – healthy becomes synonymous to normal and usual, therefore children should undergo treatment [Дети «облечены» и «пролечены»], while bad mothers should be cured radically, according to one pop-star: according to the media, Singer Valeria proposed to sterilize unfortunate mothers in Saratov (Novosti Privolzhia 10.10.2009). Her producer had proposed a market-oriented solution – his idea is to take such bad mothers to Moscow to TV show! <sup>10</sup>

There is a widespread stereotype that “many children families” are “unfortunate families”. The treatment of clients based on the assumptions of immorality and danger obviously is discriminatory, it not only attaches stigma to them but also diminishes human dignity and undermines the whole notion of social work. In many cases “unfortunate” is connected in everyday theories with family structure. It may be a case of many children family:

“I came to be registered at social service and when I told her that I have three children, she has looked at me and said “nightmare”, see? I was so much hurt that I even did not listen, got up and walked away. [I] wanted to see their bosses even but there would have not been any sense...” (Inna, 39 years).

In other cases, the stigma works towards one parent families:

“Recently I have come to school and say – I am a mother of Misha R., and a teacher replies: “yes-yes, I remember you – you are our unfortunate family” (Julie, single mother, 34 years).

The stigma effects women on a deep emotional level and has social implications for her and a child:

“I got already used, everywhere we are told “incomplete” family. Once even named “inferior”. Or, say, mother-alone. So unpleasant, immediately feels yourself defective, inferior indeed” (Inna, 39 years).

The following example serves as a symbolic learning kit – a family should learn how to live with stigma, to call themselves “incomplete” or “unfortunate”:

**Assessment chart of child development (to be filled in by the parents)**

1. *Surname, Name and Patronymic of a child*
2. *Birth date*
3. **Family: low income, incomplete, fortunate, unfortunate]** <sup>11</sup>
4. ...

### **Contradictory symbolism of family policy**

One of the explanations that we can meet in public discourse is that they are transmitting poverty through generation that can be found in mass media and in interviews. Leitmotiv “multiply misery” was recorded in interviews 2004 and 2008 as a stigma that is experienced by the mothers of three and more children. A fear concerned with lumpenization of a nation was publicized in mass media right after the President Address of Vladimir Putin in 2006, debate on Putin’s address – against such fertility that would promote “lumpenization and islamization” <sup>12</sup>.

<sup>10</sup> «Певица Валерия предложила в Саратове стерилизовать неблагополучных матерей» // Новости Приволжья. 10.10.2009 // <http://susanin.udm.ru/news/2009/10/10/186792>

<sup>11</sup> *Семья*: малообеспеченная, неполная, благополучная, неблагополучная

<sup>12</sup> См. об этом: Розенхольм А., Савкина А. «Роди патриота - спаси Россию!» (нация и гендер в демографическом дискурсе российских печатных СМИ, комментировавших «демографическое послание» В.В.Путина) // Гендерные исследования. № 18 (2009). С. 272

Nowadays a new Concept of the state family policy up to 2025 is under elaboration. It stresses role of social workers in identifying and working with unfortunate families but also proposes the necessity to place “fortunate” family in focus.

There is an idea that the regions should pay maternity capital for the 3rd child (maternity capital is an allowance paid for the 2<sup>nd</sup> child). But according to high officials from the government, the decisions should differ as “opinion of inhabitants of the South and middle part of Russia differ concerning the number of children”<sup>13</sup>. The suspects are non-Russian many-children families, in particular, the news report about the high fertility in Chechnya: here it is the biggest in RF, the average – 5 children per family<sup>14</sup>. Example of a title of news paper article: “to disroot banditism in Chechnya is possible through condoms”<sup>15</sup>. No need to note that the average income level in Chechnya is low, as well as education and employment<sup>16</sup>.

One of biggest concerns in today’s Russian national policy is “demographic crisis”, mainly debated in aspects of low birth rates. Many children family appears as a political orienteer in social advertisement. Symbolic means of new pronatalism are flourishing – social advertising is produced and it makes emphasis at the number “three” in a modality of ought (we must become bigger [nation] [нас должно стать больше]) as well as connotation with material well-being and ethno-racial identity<sup>17</sup>.

A local poetess from Saratov has published children’s poetry where she calls kids “little putinists”.

Uncle Putin governs Russia,  
our lovely motherland...  
Every mama has a baby?  
It’s too little, should have two!..  
...They are many, they are pretty,  
LITTLE PUTINISTS they’re called

[Нашей Родиной Россией Дядя Путин управляет  
«Быть стране великой, сильной», - он однажды помечтал.  
Только, как без ребятшек? Маловато их у нас  
Прочитал он много книжек И издал стране приказ:  
«Каждой маме по ребёнку?! Это мало!.. Надо двух!  
И теперь в родной сторонке Появились детки вдруг.  
Много их... Они красивы. Как цветочки, там и тут.  
Малышей теперь в России ПУТИНЯТАМИ зовут!]

Putin has announced 2008 a Year of the family in Russia, and a big propaganda work began. A lot of actions, fests, special days and other symbolic activities have been arranged to contribute to a pronatalist mission of the new family policy. New pronatalism of such propaganda co-exists with family policy aimed at conciliation of waged work and care duties while the unavailability of housing is a significant barrier to increasing fertility: one in four families live in poor or very poor housing and the average waiting time for housing is 15-20 years. There are also problems of violation of workers' rights. Pregnant women do not always take maternity leave because of low maternity support, as well as the fear of losing

<sup>13</sup> ИТАР-ТАСС, 29.12.2008 // [www.ami-tass.ru](http://www.ami-tass.ru)

<sup>14</sup> Чечня — лидер по числу новорожденных среди северокавказских республик  
<http://www.rosbalt.ru/2008/02/07/454400.html>

<sup>15</sup> Искоренить бандитизм в Чечне можно презервативами <http://www.rosbalt.ru/2009/07/29/659211.html>

<sup>16</sup> Доклад о развитии человеческого потенциала в Российской Федерации, 2008. Россия перед лицом демографических вызовов. М.: UNDP, 2009. С.195

<sup>17</sup> See collection of posters of social advertising: сайт Благотворительного фонда защиты семьи, материнства и детства // [http://semya.org.ru/pro-family/info\\_program/collection/index.html](http://semya.org.ru/pro-family/info_program/collection/index.html)

their jobs. Informal wage payments are common in Russia, which excludes workers from the social insurance system.

Moreover, propaganda of traditional family model (nuclear family with three children) contradicts with extensive problematization of “many-children” families. The everyday knowledge of service providers implies that the “maternal capital” allowance should not be a rational motivator for making a decision:

“Believe me that a woman who possesses some intellect, never would give birth to a child just for getting somewhat 250-260 thousand roubles that are planned now...” (psychologist of a women’s health center)

There is a paradoxical contradiction: while public discourse is preoccupied with “demographic” crisis, and the widely publicized official political orienteer is a family with three children, the unspoken norm is a nuclear family with two parents and one child (rarely two children), while all other formations are problematized. Everyday knowledge and common sense often intermediates with public discourse and nurtures its contradictory nature. In 1990s social workers, officials and ordinary people learned a term “unfortunate family” (actually, it existed already in Soviet times<sup>18</sup>, but became very popular since 1990s). Ideal “healthy” family is juxtaposed with the “unfortunate” family, and that reflects stigma, which has no strict definition but often supposes that family structure is one of the criteria. Therefore, one parent families and many children families (the possible structure can be one parent with many children) are considered as immoral, unhappy and dangerous for the society.

At the agenda of social policy there are new priorities related to national demographic policy. In 1990s and early 2000s there was activation of the gender equality discourse due to the implementation of two National plans on improvement of the position of women (as well as in their regional editions). Today the rhetoric of the regional officials includes new-traditionalist emphases: one can see idealization and propaganda of traditional family and patriarchal gender relations, many children families and prohibition of abortion, while fertility decrease is explained due to economic and political emancipation of women and social functions of family are reduced to reproduction. And while a political orienteer is many children family, an unspoken norm is still “complete” nuclear family with one child (less often with two). The other formations are problematized. Symbolic space of new family policy is being filled with class pronatalist and nationalist ideologies; besides, some publications are responsible for discursive construction of families and children undesirable for the state.

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<sup>18</sup> Следует отметить, что концепт «неблагополучная семья» использовался еще в советское время: «Составление социальных паспортов семьи <...> позволяет выявить неблагополучные семьи...» (см. Пухова З. П. Женское движение и перестройка в СССР // Женщины в современном мире. М., Наука, 1989. С. 58-63// <http://www.a-z.ru/women/texts/puhovr.htm>)