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# HOW DO ORGANIZATIONS HELP TO SOLVE THEIR CLIENTS' PROBLEMS? | A case study from Lithuania

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**Zusammenfassung** | Der Aufsatz beschreibt den Zusammenhang zwischen dem Charakter persönlicher Beziehungen innerhalb einer Organisation und dessen Einfluss auf die Qualität der gebotenen Dienstleistung. Der Fokus liegt auf den Bedingungen, welchen die genannten Beziehungen in Organisationen der Sozialen Arbeit heutztagen in Litauen unterliegen. Die dem Beitrag zugrunde liegende Untersuchung wurde mittels Beobachtung, qualitativer Forschung mit Fokusgruppen, Aktenanalyse und Kommentaren der Beteiligten zwischen 2012 und 2014 durchgeführt.

**Abstract** | The aim of this article is to disclose the nature of interpersonal relations in an organization and its impact on the quality of provided services. It shall highlight the factors determining these relations in Lithuanian social work today. The research was carried out by observation, qualitative research on focus groups, analysis of the supervisor's work notes and commentaries and took place between 2012 and 2014. The participants in the research are employers of different organizations providing social services.

## **Schlüsselwörter** ▶ Litauen

- ▶ Soziale Arbeit ▶ historische Entwicklung
- ▶ Sozialismus ▶ Strukturwandel

**Introduction** | Social work in Lithuania is a comparatively young profession. During the Soviet occupation between 1940 and 1990, the authoritarian state controlled all spheres of life, including social services. The prevailing institutional model of state care was highly paternalistic, resembling the model of a "violent father" (Constable 1997). Professional work, as it is perceived on an international level, did not exist. When the independence of Lithuania was restored on 1 March 1990, a period of intensive

change began. The need for social work emerged, new organizations providing social services were established and the education of social work professionals began (Giedraitienė et al. 2006). In the process of intensive change, four orientations of change may be distinguished: *continual*, when organizations which existed during the Soviet period remained in the market adapting to the new political situation; *restitutional orientation* sought to restore the organizations and movements which were present before the occupation; *innovative orientation* focused on the establishment of new institutions seeking to meet all the needs, learning hereby from foreign organizations and experiences of professional social workers; *imitational orientation* changed the form, yet left the old content within the new form.

This orientation is observed when the name or a form of an organization is changed top-down, but no attention is paid to the process which is necessary for the change to actually happen. In fact, no essential changes were initiated in organizations under this orientation (Šaulauskas 2000, Liobikienė 2008). The process of intensive change was most perceptible at the macro level, whereas changes at the mezzo and micro levels happened rather slowly. It was difficult to shift from a strongly authoritarian style to an equal, cooperative, democratic style of communication.

Furthermore, processes of change did not take place everywhere. The most distinct changes can be observed in cities. Here, a number of new, innovative organizations providing social services were established. In smaller towns and villages the process was slower.

The research questions for this research asked for personal relations prevailing in organizations providing social services. How do organizations help their clients to solve problems, what strategy (enablement, control, paternalistic etc.) is used when providing services to clients?

**Research Methodology** | For the following enquiry, the qualitative method of applying focus groups to the research design was chosen. The groups comprised social workers from different organizations providing social services. Group leaders were supervisors of the participant social workers. The obtained data was analyzed and recurrent topics were identi-

fied. Group observation notes as well as supervisors' notes were taken into consideration. Due to the principle of confidentiality, the researchers are not allowed to disclose the names of the organizations which participated in the research or to publish research results in Lithuania. It would be inaccurate to generalize the results to include all institutions providing social services. Nevertheless, they are valuable, since they prompt further research in this area; moreover, the research data may help social work specialists comprehend the significance of client-worker relationships for the social work process.

**Research Data** | Based on data analysis, three main themes have been distinguished: relations between managers and workers, interpersonal relations between workers and relations between workers and clients. Manager-worker relations are closely related to the conception of manager functions, experience of managing work and inherited organization culture. The research data shows that the majority of senior managers perceive their functions rather narrowly. A manager in an organization is rather somebody who controls, assesses and punishes, but one who educates, supports and helps. Worker-manager relations are often inconsistent, superficial and indirect. The majority of workers share the same experience that in his or her professional work, the head of their organization "appears" only to find the guilty ones, to punish or when there is a "fire to extinguish". During the discussions, only a small percentage of managers raised questions about their management activities. Those who did were relatively young and had taken on managerial roles not long ago.

In the majority of cases, the topic of leadership was not covertly identified and could not be purposefully analyzed or solved. Only a few managers admitted that they should spend more time reflecting upon their managing experiences and aspects related to these. Those who acknowledged such a necessity did not view it as something important: "There is never enough time for that" or "you always get more important, urgent issues to deal with". Managers who did not work by themselves lost the opportunity to self-assess their managing experience, thus they lost the opportunity to reflect on, analyze and improve their skills and competences in working with people, maintaining working relations with their co-workers.

In some organizations, especially in the villages, a manager is not a social work professional. He is appointed based on the attitude of a party which wins elections in that area. In this way, a manager does not feel competent enough to propose solutions or to orient himself towards the execution of the organization's goals. In these cases, it could be observed that an organization seeks the party's goals. Moreover, in most of these organizations, the relationships between executive managers and employees are conflicting. The conflicts are usually concealed and an atmosphere of mistrust and suspicion prevails. Some managers who were only in office for a short time strove to find a different role as manager to adopt a more democratic way of leadership. They tried to create a more equal relationship with their employees based on partnership and cooperation, and hoped for more independence, initiatives and activity from the employees in proposing solutions. The majority of managers were confronted with a stagnant organizational culture, since the workers had no experience in finding solutions or providing feedback to the head of a company on possible improvements in various organizational processes. Therefore, they reacted quite passively to any changes proposed by the manager. The employees seemed to protect themselves by replying mistrustfully to any unknown situation and seemed to be asking themselves "what is happening right now?" instead of enthusiastically joining in with new processes.

A significant aspect for purposeful and professional activity is an employee's reaction to mistakes. Investigating the data gathered during the research, it became clear that mistakes in a professional practice are viewed not as an opportunity to change, improve and learn, but as a sign of weakness and incompetence. The majority of organizations neither have a tradition nor room for employees to reflect consistently and safely, to discuss and analyze their professional practice and difficult situations at work. When dealing with ambiguous, unclear situations, a search for "the guilty ones" starts. That search is undertaken rather than finding constructive solutions and evaluating all the resources. More often than not, the perspective of the stronger side is taken. For many years, this tradition has "trained" employees to conceal things and keep silent about the difficult cases. By following this pattern, employees even remain responsible for situations which they are not to blame

for. They miss opportunities to learn, receive necessary help, improve their professional work and develop adequate solutions which are necessary for the situation.

Organizations must seek certain goals. The central goal for an organization which provides social services should be to meet the needs of its clients. To attain this goal, employees share the tasks and responsibilities among themselves by contract. These responsibilities should be identified, discussed publicly and reviewed from time to time. The research data reveals that neither managers nor their employees feel certain about their own responsibilities as well as the responsibilities of others. The majority of managers stated that they expect "a more responsible attitude towards their job". Yet, they admitted that they have never discussed with their employees how they would view a more responsible job in their organization. Employees said that they have no experience in discussing their responsibilities and expectations with the manager. Thus, the research data shows that in a number of organizations, the topic of responsibilities is implied. No one talks about it clearly and openly. Everyone has his or her "implications" to go on.

When creating a mutual manager-worker relationship, feedback plays an important role. Having analyzed the research data, it was noticed that feedback is usually negative and one-sided. When a manager expresses his feedback, he does not expect the same from his employee. Thus, feedback of this kind very often encourages employees to take a defensive position and to think "he is picking on me again".

The majority of employees miss constructive feedback from their managers on the work they have done. The research data discloses that if a manager gives feedback, it is usually negative and only stresses the aspects which were performed badly. Managers very rarely praise their workers for their good work and they seldom search for their strong sides. In most cases "there is no time for that, more important questions must be dealt with". An employee who does not receive consistent feedback on his work seeks that response subconsciously by taking "third parties" into account. That means that all the rumours and unjustified propositions create a distorted image of a person's work in an organization. Whereby, areas

are neglected which instead need to be improved. Moreover, it is a perfect medium for creating gossip and slander.

### Interpersonal Relations of Employees |

When analyzing interpersonal relations of employees, the attention was placed on the group work process. Detailed notes on the dynamics of work in a group and observations of the group members' behaviour allow us to make certain assumptions. It is possible that communication of group members during discussions reflects their similar way of communicating at work when discussing difficult situations. Analyzing difficult questions, the workers give general feedback and their personal interpretations, which may be inaccurate and far from reality. In the majority of cases, the opinion expressed is based on the assessment of others and may hurt people participating in the discussion. This may be an obstacle in creating trust and openness in a group, which is necessary for a person to share his or her thoughts on important questions.

The research data allows us to state that interpersonal relations between employees is a tougher issue than worker-manager relations. When discussing interpersonal relations, participants stressed that they are affected by a heavy work load, experiences of stifled feelings (of fear, sadness, anger etc.) as well as a lack of trust and support. However, a disparity in the nature of organizations was observed. It was noticed that employees of NGOs often concentrate on their interpersonal relations and thereby forget about the needs of their clients. They pay more attention to their own convenience when fixing work schedules which seem more acceptable for them than for their clients. However, in some NGOs, the attention is focused on their clients' needs. These organizations systematically analyze feedback from their clients on the quality of their services and discuss difficult situations or conflicting relationships between clients and workers. It was noticed that employees of those organizations are not afraid to discuss problems and look for help.

The research data shows that social workers do not regard themselves as work instruments. Deprived of the opportunity to reflect on everything that is happening around them, how client situations affect their feelings and affect further work with a client, some

workers lose professional distance and burn out emotionally. Facing difficult client situations, experiencing a huge emotional load at work, experiencing feelings of fear, sadness, helplessness, anger, envy etc., having no opportunity neither to recognize nor to analyze experienced or applied transfers in relations with a client respectively his or her family and in relations with their co-workers, the majority of workers experience destructive conflicts with their colleagues. Having no opportunity and capacity to recognize, analyze and constructively solve all these problems, some workers start to withdraw from their colleagues and isolate themselves. Friendly relations are then compensated for by transferring sympathy to their clients instead. One of the participants mentioned: "When it gets really hard with my co-workers, I take my clients to a park. I calm down and then come back..."

Social workers face many complex situations in their professional work. This often calls for an intervention by the entire team and is usually undertaken interdisciplinarily. The research data reveals that such practice, when difficult questions are consistently solved by the whole team, is quite rare. Very often, a social worker appears to be alone and has no opportunity to receive adequate and professional help from his or her colleagues to constructively solve difficult issues at work.

### Worker-Client Relations |

Professional relations with clients are based on mutual trust, shared values and respect for boundaries. These relationships should enable clients to solve their problems. However, according to the research data, it is possible to state that worker-client relations are not clearly defined within a professional framework. A number of employees who do not receive support from their organizations or other cooperative institutions often involve their relatives or neighbours in the process of providing help to clients. They mix professional and personal roles and erase the boundaries between work and private life. At the same time, they "rob" an organization of the responsibility to look for solutions for how to "cover up holes", i.e. review their goals.

Experience has proven that in many cases, goals set for work are not rational, i.e. they cannot be attained with present resources. Although employees are motivated to help clients, they start identifying

themselves with them if they do not have the possibility to stand back and reflect on the relations they experience at work. When the professional distance is lost, workers are inclined to adopt clients' feelings and start to identify with them in real-life situations. Many social workers experience a huge pressure from their social environment (often from the manager) to achieve significant results with clients over a short period of time. As a result, they very often succumb to the temptation not to work "with the client" but rather "for the client". In this way, social workers disable their client and take their responsibility away to solve difficult situations in life.

**Discussion |** Analyzing the empirical research data from a systemic point of view and from change perspectives, it was noticed that in organizations, elements of the authoritarian system prevail. These elements are: "top-down" management methods, exaltation of the role of the manager, authoritarian decision-making, punishments and lack of positive feedback. It may be assumed that experiences of the Soviet authoritarian system are deeply rooted in the Lithuanian society and organizational structures as well as in the private lives and the relationships of individuals (Teater 2010, Liobikiené 2008, Sztompka 2003). "Fast results" achieved in an authoritarian organization are marked by a short duration, since they are not oriented towards the process and inner motivation of clients to change. Very often client-worker relations are of an oppressive and paternalistic type. These authoritarian organizations are assessed as continual, according to the factor change. They were the basis for the Soviet system; their change is hardly observed. The central goal of these organizations is to satisfy the requirements set by the authorities (governing parties, people in power). In such organizations, clients may be used for the interests of the governing party (social workers experience pressure to advertise party leaders etc.). In this case, traits of "parasitic innovation" may be detected (Sztompka 2003, Šaulauskas 2000).

When analyzing interpersonal relations between workers and workers as well as between workers and clients, consequences of authoritarian management were noticed. These relations can be characterized as non-transparent and reticent. Lack of trust and the role of managers as those who "punish" give way to rumours, unreasonable criticism, suspiciousness and

toadism. Workers, managers and clients may be assessed as people who are "difficult to communicate with". In this way, problems are not solved. All the participants in relationships take on certain stress combat positions, most often those of accusers and victims. In this way, an organization is trapped within the cycle of accusations and interpersonal problems. Clients and their problems, professional autonomy of social workers and client enablement become secondary tasks, instead of being regarded as the central priority (Satir et al. 1991, Duck et al. 2006).

An exception can be observed in some NGOs. Organizations which were founded after 1990 are often marked by innovative orientation towards change. They seek to satisfy the needs of their clients, while relations between workers and managers serve the same purpose. However, in some organizations, certain traits of "narcissism" were noticed, when the central goal becomes the creation of security zones for the workers, instead of focusing on the clients' needs (Ganesh 2003, Jaskyté; Kisieliené 2006, Liobikiené 2008).

In conclusion it can be deduced that the change in Lithuanian organizations is slow. It is characterized by a continuing orientation towards traditional patterns. The change in the system and its parts creates chaos, and the system itself fights against it. Therefore, some of the organizations would rather stay in the situation which is familiar to them. In this way, they avoid chaos and all the feelings linked with it: insecurity, helplessness and anger.

### Conclusions |

- ▲ An organization is a living, developing organism; its direction and nature of development are related to a national as well as a local context.
- ▲ Several levels of communication in an organization have been distinguished as problematic tension areas: manager-worker, worker-worker and worker-client relations.
- ▲ The majority of the investigated organizations offering social services are of continuous orientation, i.e. they proceed with communication models characteristic to the Soviet system.
- ▲ Analyzing these levels of communication, three types of organizations have been singled out in Lithuania: *authoritarian*, which could be metaphorically illustrated by slogans: it is important to please

all the superiors who have more power and clients should help us achieve this; *narcissistic*, i.e. when clients are not important, the most important thing is the convenience of workers and good relations; *optimal*, i.e. seeking the main goal of an organization: clients are the most important, good interpersonal relations should be achieved so that service for clients can be better.

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## ALLGEMEINES

**Gesellschaftlicher Aufstieg und Abstieg.** Um die subjektive Wahrnehmung der intergenerationalen sozialen Mobilität zu erforschen, führte die Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung im Herbst 2016 eine Studie durch, die auf einer repräsentativen Erhebung mit 2 211 Teilnehmenden und 82 qualitativen Leitfadeninterviews basiert. Dabei wurde es den Befragten überlassen, ob sie die Einschätzung ihrer gesellschaftlichen Position an ihre Erwerbstätigkeit oder an andere Kriterien, wie beispielsweise die familiäre Situation, knüpfen wollten. Im Blickfeld der nach dem politischen Wahlverhalten differenzierenden Untersuchung standen der Aufstieg im Vergleich zu den Eltern, dessen Relevanz, die für einen beruflichen Erfolg förderlichen Rahmenbedingungen, die Zukunftserwartungen und die Lebenszufriedenheit. Wie sich herausstellte, betrachten sich 43 % der Befragten als Aufsteigerinnen und Aufsteiger, 45 % sehen sich auf dem gleichen Status wie die Eltern und nur 5 % stuften sich als Absteigerinnen und Absteiger ein. Die wichtigste Rolle für ein gutes Leben spielten die Gesundheit, die Familie und die Partnerschaft, während beruflichen und finanziellen Aspekten ein eher nachrangiger Stellenwert beigemessen wurde. Download der Studie unter [www.kas.de/wf/de/33.49017](http://www.kas.de/wf/de/33.49017). Quelle: BFS-Trendinfo 7/2017

**Europäisches Jahr 2018.** Im Rahmen der seit dem Jahr 1983 ausgerufenen Europäischen Jahre fördert die Europäische Kommission Projekte, die zu den jeweils gewählten Themen durchgeführt werden. Nachdem in den Jahren 2016 und 2017 keine Europäischen Jahre stattfanden, wird sich das Europäische Jahr 2018 unter dem Motto „Sharing Heritage“ dem Europäischen Kulturerbe widmen, um die gemeinsamen Wurzeln und Werte sichtbar werden zu lassen und eine möglichst weitgehende Teilhabe am kulturellen Erbe zu ermöglichen. Im Mittelpunkt der von Deutschland als Mitinitiator konzipierten Aktivitäten stehen das bauliche und archäologische Erbe sowie die Entwicklung und Erprobung modellhafter Jugendfreiwilligenprojekte, die dann auf andere Stätten im In- und Ausland übertragen werden sollen. Zudem wird im Jahr 2018 die Ausstellung „Bewegte Zeiten. Archäologie in Deutschland“ im Martin-Gropius-Bau in Berlin zu sehen sein. Genaueres steht unter [www.dnk.de](http://www.dnk.de) auf der Website des Nationalen Komitees für Denkmalschutz. Quelle: BRANDaktuell-Newsletter Nr. 7/2017

**Deutsches Zentrum für Integrations- und Migrationsforschung (DeZIM).** Am 28. Juni dieses Jahres fand in Berlin die Auftaktveranstaltung für den Aufbau des DeZIM statt. Zu dessen Gründungsmitgliedern gehören das Berliner Institut für empirische Integrations- und Migrationsforschung an der Humboldt-Universität und weitere universitäre und außeruniversitäre Forschungseinrichtungen in ganz Deutschland. Im Mittelpunkt des wissenschaftlichen Interesses stehen die Fluchtursachen,