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SOCIAL WORK IN MOLDOVA IN THE 21ST CENTURY: FULBRIGHT SPECIALISTS' REFLECTIONS

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Abstract. The Republic of Moldova ranks low in common living standards and human development indicators in comparison with other European and transitional economies. The social work profession within Moldova is also in transition. Two Fulbright specialists discuss their experiences as social work professors in Moldova. First, the need for social work education and professional social workers is detailed. Second, training of Moldovan university faculty and government officials is considered. Third, how students were educated through classes in Moldova and through distance-learning co-taught courses from the USA is detailed. Finally, the specialists reflect on the continuing need for professionalism in such transitional economies.

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Introduction

Over the past decade, many international initiatives have supported the development of social work education and practice in post-communist countries of Eastern Europe (Davis, & Blake, 2008). Such countries are now in the troughs of transitional economies and the problems inherent in an evolving economic structure (Imbrogno, 2001). In Moldova specifically, poverty is a more widespread phenomenon in urban areas, but particularity in rural regions. Subsequently, a substantial portion of Moldovans are not adequately protected by social programs or social assistance systems, resulting in an increase in vulnerable groups.

Thus, the need for social work pedagogies and university educated, professional social workers is palpable (Davis, & Blake, 2008). Moldova State University in Chişinău initiated a bachelor's degree of social work in 1997 and a master's degree in 2007. Previous research in Moldova suggests a need to move away from the "charity ideology" toward social justice. Social work education in Moldova exists in numerous universities (Neil & Sellick, 2001) but most often in tandem with psychology or sociology. Academic degrees are offered at the bachelor and master's level as either social work or social assistance, with the majority of Moldovan faculty from the disciplines of psychology and sociology. Social Work faculty from several countries and social workers representing private organizations continue to assist Moldova in developing social work education, and explicit professional knowledge and skills through specific courses (Neil & Sellick, 2001).

This article describes two social work faculty, both who are Fulbright Specialists, experiences of helping shape social work education at the Free University of Moldova (ULIM). The goals of the project were to plan a Master of Social Work program at ULIM, to consult and train faculty in social work education and possible curriculum, and to design and help implement the resulting curriculum design.

The Need for Social Services and Social Workers

The Republic of Moldova declared itself an independent state in 1991 as part of the dissolution of the Soviet Union. A new parliamentary constitution was adopted on July 29, 1994. The eastern strip of Moldova, however, is an internationally recognized territory of Transnistria since 1990 under the de facto control an alternative government. Moldova experienced a sharp rise in absolute poverty prior to, but particularly after, the break-up of the Soviet Union. A rise in inequality and social problems swiftly followed. Moldova continues at the bottom of income per capita among European countries, and despite recent economic growth, Moldova ranks low in terms of commonly used living standards and human development indicators in comparison with other transition economies (WHO Regional Office for Europe, 2010). The need for social services is self-evident as poverty, material deprivation and social exclusion are widespread.

About one fourth of Moldavans now work abroad. Survey data for 2007 suggest that 37% of children aged 0-14 years are not living in families with both parents, and in slightly more than half of the cases, this is due to the migration of one or both parents. There is evidence that households with children left behind face a higher risk of being poor and left to state resources. Despite some reform attempts in the past couple of years, institutionalization is still the main form of protecting children at risk in Moldova (WHO, 2010). Further, unemployment is a serious problem within Moldova, increasing from 37.5% in 2000 to around 50% in 2008. Women, particularly young women, are more outside the labor force than men are due mainly to family responsibilities, but also

lacking skills (Menchini & Redmond, 2009). Material deprivation indicators also highlight the social exclusion of poor households.

Half of Moldova's population, particularly in rural areas, does not have access to safe water sources and to an improved sewerage system. Almost 90% of rural households do not have basic water and sanitation facilities in their homes. Living in the rural areas has become synonymous with tough living conditions and lack of infrastructure. Hot water supply is available for only 10% of poor households and 35% of non-poor households. Eighty-three per cent of the poor have no bathroom or shower.

One third of Moldovan labor is engaged in agriculture, where the wages are low. Yet the country has by poor access by local producers to markets, lack of storage capacities, limited access to credit, and low investment. Subsistence agriculture is still an important source of income for most of the poor people living in rural areas, e.g. single parent households, women, and the elderly. In Moldova, four out of five persons aged 65 and older participate in subsistence agriculture (Verme, 2011).

The slow transition to a market economy accompanied by a significant economic crisis has had a major negative impact on the health system in general and on the hospital sector in particular. Having inherited the Soviet principles of organization, the hospital sector remains the consumer of approximately half of the resources allocated to the health care system. There are about 264 physicians per 100,000 people. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the country has seen a decrease in spending on health care and, for example, the tuberculosis incidence rate in the country has grown. According to a 2011 WHO report, Moldova consumed the highest amount of alcohol per capita in the world in 2005 with little substance abuse treatment available.

Discrimination by gender, age, disability and ethnicity is widespread (Davis, & Blake, 2008). Extensive crime and human trafficking of Moldovan women and children to other parts of Europe is a serious problem (Brunovskis, & Surtees, 2013). There are over 170,000 people with disabilities in Moldova where the current approach is centered on the medical aspects of disability, overlooking inclusion issues. Support for homeless, if at all, is only provided by NGOs. Roma in the region tend to be overrepresented as recipients of social assistance and child benefits in particular. The Moldova report states, that the extent of the Roma populations' participation in the social insurance system and their inclusion into social assistance programs is unknown due to the lack of data. Further, Roma often do not declare their identity from fear of discrimination. (Obreja, & Carașciuc, 2002)

Yet, while social reforms are underway, a number of social justice laws still exist only on paper, or poorly implemented. Moldova's courts receive inadequate funding as Moldova allocates the smallest share of the national budget to funding the judiciary of any country in Europe. The Anti-Corruption Action Plan adopted in February 2012 contains no funding provisions and offers no estimate for the cost of its implementation; nor does it specify the human resources necessary for the implementation of the plan (UNDP, 2014). Education, Public Health and Social Protection are the sectors that consume most public spending. Unfortunately, the spending of taxpayers' money across these sectors is far from ideal. Proficiency gains in education and increased healthcare could be made through reforms but the initial costs for the modernization of the education and hospital systems are high. With regard to social protection, the challenge is to direct social assistance to the neediest and away from the outdated system of 13 different social assistance programs.

The system of social services and its implementation are not apparent and fragmented. Within the context of social work globally, there is a general lack of recognition of the structural dimension of social problems and that of social workers in

Moldova. Foreign donors contributed significantly to the consolidation of the social protection system including its institutional framework and human resources. Moldova participates in the Bologna process and seeks to comply with international social work education standards. Currently, at least six universities offer social work degree programs, but more university confers social assistance degrees. Notably, Moldova State University Academic Programs, Department of Sociology and Social Work has offered social work degrees for the past fifteen years (Davis & Blake, 2008; Neil & Sellick, 2001), and are active in “Global Standards for the Education and Training of the Social Work Profession” adopted by International Federation of Social Work (IFSW) and International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW). Further, both Moldovan State and the State University of Medicine and Pharmacy hosted the “Masters Programmes in Public Health and Social Services” conference 22-27 September 2013 Conference within the Tempus Project.

The need for social work ethics in light of national politics, the necessity for social work knowledge toward understanding issues such as the effects of poverty and discrimination, and practice skills to appreciate the intricacy of the problems at hand seems prodigious at first glance. Unfortunately, students enrolling in higher education do so to receive a degree and see little connection between their chosen major and the degree. Thus, the social work labor force is not connected to social work education. There is no licensing and no oversight of the social work professionals. Nonetheless, the need for a proper social work education toward a professional Moldovan social work labor force is vital.

The Moldovan Consulting Experience

It is important to understand the cultural and political challenges for a visiting social work professor. Active participation in and research of the IFSW and IASSW positions and standards are a good place to begin an international social work career. Ethics is the foundation of our profession, both in academia and in practice. For Moldova specifically the IFSW policies begins with the “Statement of Ethical Principles” (IFSW, 2005). That is, “Ethical awareness is a fundamental part of the professional practice of social workers. Their ability and commitment to act ethically is an essential aspect of the quality of the service offered to those who use social work services”.

In addition, the authors began, and recommend to those interested in international social work education to begin by researching the country in which consulting was to occur. The political, economic, and cultural aspects of Moldova were thought provoking and challenging to understand. Moreover, we found that the research on paper refined and deepened by the experience within the country. It is important to know that change, especially in a country with the social challenges such as Moldova, does not occur overnight (Neil & Sellick, 2001). The IASSW Global Standards for Social Work Education and Training are central guidelines, embedded in the post-2015 agenda, which emphasizes universal inclusion. Further, the mechanisms and structures of any social work education occur under the control and development of the host faculty. We are the professional social workers and academics, but we are the outsiders and the IASSW Standard 3. Standards with Regard to Programme Curricula Including Field Education, addresses the “recognition and development of indigenous or locally specific social work education and practice” (3.4). It is not sufficient to understand the politics of the country, but we found it necessary to understand the policies and politics of our host university, ULIM. The pre-planning occurred through emails, phone conversations, texting, Skype, and Google Chat between ULIM’s Department of

Psychosociology and Social Assistance faculty and the American academics that would conduct the initial training and propose subsequent course work. Moldovan University administrators planned the training and invited the participants representing other academics, agencies, and government officials. Language was an issue for both authors, so the university graciously provided translators for all trainings, throughout the site visits and course offerings.

Every society at every stage of development has devised ways and means of providing services for those in need: the orphans; the handicapped; the sick; the aged and others. The tendency of humans to help one another has been a common feature of all societies as it is in Moldova. In traditional Moldova, for instance, the family dealt with social needs and social problems. With the inclusion in the Soviet Union, the state handled social problems. With the fall of the Soviet Union, came much discussion among academics and social workers themselves about the direction in which they are or should be moving and uphold all honored the dignity and worth of human beings (Wetzel, 2007). As psychology and sociology faculty regularly teach social work, there seems to be disparity about social work methods and techniques, not readily understandable or acceptable to the other disciplines and the public at large. It seemed evident through the preplanning and conversations once the first site visit began that an important training discussion should begin with the IFSW definition of social work, which became the first agenda item in the initial the training of academics and government officials.

A major concern was Social Work as a field of study and practice is not well understood in Moldova. This is largely because social work as a profession still in its early period. Through interviews with Moldovan academics and students, it seemed the public and some government officials see social work as helpers who bring food to the poor and as caretakers of children. Therefore, the second agenda item was clarifying the possibilities of the depth and breadth of the social work profession. This discussion addressed the ambiguity and debate surrounding the meaning, objectives, and methods of the profession. Through this experience, it became evident to both authors that social work practice in Moldova was limited. For example, conversations with academics, students and agency administrators indicated that substance abuse treatment and still most likely handled by families. And, sexual abuse was a taboo topic.

Once the initial ULIM site visit was concluded, a provisional curriculum was devised based on the discussions and existing education standards. Through e-mail, an outline of the aims and content of the course was sent to Moldova for consideration. The proposed social work curriculum was based on the combination of The European Qualifications Framework (EQF) for Lifelong Learning and The IASSW Core Curricula Competencies. The resulting curriculum plan first detailed the European Qualifications Levels. Second, social work knowledge was detailed in the context of EQF. Therefore, social work knowledge was described as theoretical and/or factual. Third, social work skills in context of EQF, was described as cognitive, involving the use of logical, intuitive, and creative thinking, and practical thus involving the use of methods, materials, tools and instruments. Finally, EQF was used to detail competence described in terms of professional responsibility and autonomy.

The proposed social work courses began with understanding community through historical, economic, and political perspectives. We found that transitional economy academics favor understating social work through community practice first over the western curriculum that often begins with individual casework. The proposed curriculum also included in the first year of study: *Practice of Ethics in the Global World* (formerly, *The Ethics of Practice in the Global World: Multiculturalism*,

Spirituality, and Ecology course), Human Behavior and the Social Environment, Research 1: Qualitative Methods, and Field Work. The proposed course work was to be taught in Moldova first with Moldovan faculty and American social work educators. The second round of courses was proposed to occur through distance learning in cooperation with ULIM faculty originating from America.

The Teaching Experience

In Moldova

It was decided that American students would also participate in the Moldovan courses at ULIM. Orientations helped prepare American students for the experience of going abroad and position them to reap the greatest benefits from their experience. This multicultural educational exchange clearly benefited both the Moldavian and American students. The Moldovan students learned social work practice from one author, as well as her American students. This combination deepened the educational experience by adding modeling component teaching Moldovan students singularly would not have had.

The American students learned more deeply as they actively participated in teaching social work knowledge and skills, self-care activities, and demonstrated professional ethics and conduct. Despite the complexity of a study abroad program of an author's experience, in part, due to simultaneously fulfilling Fulbright assignment such as (e.g. teaching developed course Global Social Work: Multiculturalism, Trauma and Posttraumatic Growth, formerly Global Social Work: Perspectives on Conflict, Trauma and Resilience) and mentoring students, it was a rewarding experience. Further, the study abroad experience at ULIM assisted three of the American students, who subsequently were accepted at prestigious graduate United States social work programs and who received scholarships.

As the faculty member in charge of an international program, you must be especially vigilant in the area of academic quality and integrity. Teaching social work in a foreign country first requires rethinking teaching styles, and the speed at which one speaks. Even with translators, cadence must be slow and methodical. The introduction of concepts, ideas and problem-solving skills requires a pedagogy that not only addresses rigor, but also the learning styles and abilities of all students in the course. Teaching social work courses overseas can take advantage of the host country environment and its resources. Yet, professors require adaptation to teaching and learning settings that are different from their customary styles.

Nonetheless, international social work education standards governed learning outcomes and course content. The syllabus simply and clearly explained the requirements for successful course completion, reading requirements, homework assignments and the grading policy just as if they were on campus in America. ULIM set the hours and scheduling of the course, including field experiences for the participants to explore the social work in Moldova and the culture. In addition to student internships at a child welfare agency/residence for abandoned children, a mental health facility, and prison setting (monitored and visited by American social work faculty), service-learning activities included cultural trips to the museums, open markets, parks, religious venues, villages, and social activities. We found that being flexible was required of the American faculty regarding the itinerary and calendar:

Several American faculty members from various universities designed syllabi approved by the Ministry of Education in Moldova. A dyad taught the modified modules—Moldavian and American faculty. *Practice of Ethics in the Global World* (formerly, *The Ethics of Practice in the Global World: Multiculturalism, Spirituality,*

and Ecology course) was an opportunity to address student learner post-soviet experiences and international collaborative learning, incorporating IASSW and European Union Standards. The course emphasizes understanding indigenization perspectives and global ethical dilemmas in a holistic way aimed at circumstances existent in Republic of Moldova. Important themes include ethical dilemmas, morality, good governance, mentoring, self-care, and human rights principles.

Moldovan faculty members completed student assessments and final examinations.

By Internet

The second round of teaching was for Moldovan students and accomplished in tandem with Moldovan faculty via Skype group video calls. A distance-learning course was created and co-taught by one Moldovan faculty and one American-faculty to solve challenges created by geographical distance and language barriers. The pilot master-level course, Ethics of Practice in the Global World (formerly Ethics of Practice in the Global World: Multiculturalism, Spirituality and Ecology) was orchestrated using face-to-face, Skype, and Blackboard website. The course content was compiled in a 15-session module consisting of lectures, interactive dialogue, and PowerPoint presentations. The proliferation of the course website permitted student learners to download all course content through course sites.

There were several anticipated advantages and challenges in collaborative distance-learning teaching. Advantages include: (a) Global access and interactivity. Perhaps most important from a culturally competent standpoint, The American instructor began each class greetings student learners in their native tongue, "Good day!" BunaZiuă (Boo-nuhZEE-wah) and used other terms such as, thank you (Mulțumesc, mool-tsoo-mesk), you are welcome (Cu plăcere, coo pluh-cheh-reh), yes (Da, dah), No (Nu, noo) throughout the course, and (b) use of email to disseminate complex messages and material to many others instantly and cheaply supports global "go green" initiative.

Unfortunately, work schedule demands, low wages, and transportation difficulties (e.g. from Transdnier to ULIM) impeded the process of regular attendance to attend class for some students. Despite the aforementioned barriers, the distance learning class was a success, in part, due to the steadfast efforts of students to attend class at great sacrifice. Teaching efforts between the Moldavian and American faculty was collaborative and strengthened through the support of an American social worker who currently resides in Moldova. One author described the trans-country collaborative distance-learning course as a paradoxical rewarding and challenging "first."

The use of the internet required some strong coordinated planning skills. Both faculty worked together to set up the group video calls to plan the course of the conversation so that the Moldovan classes benefited from the call. The major concern, and the reality of working with a transitional economy, was the provision of adequate infrastructure, including classroom space, computers, texts, and audio-visual equipment.

An author learned to be more organized when teaching via the internet. The difference in time between Moldova and American is seven hours, therefore simple scheduling took much coordination. The course material was emailed, and more time was spent on lesson preparation. Faculty and students became familiar with video courtesy. Students learned to wait for their turn to speak, to speak clearly and look into the webcam during the call. The sound quality and reliability on the internet from

Moldova was not always great and calls were lost during lectures, impeding innovative pedagogy. This meant that using the internet for teaching pose more problems than anticipated, and again patience and cadence were upmost concerns. Homework became an issue, as Moldovan students did not necessarily complete assignments after the lesson.

Conclusion

In April 2012, the Moldovan Parliament adopted the National Decentralization Strategy because of United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) support. UNDP helped the Government measure and analyze poverty policies and plans toward poverty reduction and resulting social conditions. Contributions to filling the country's data gap on socio-economic status and poverty have been particularly important. Social impacts may be diverse and could affect different population groups, individuals and households in different ways. It also provides an assessment of some general implications for overall poverty levels and aggregated impacts at the community level. Thus, UNDP experiences with decentralizing government functions such as in transitional economy countries, UNDP found that local problems usually require local solutions.

Similarly, when working with transitional economy countries, we learned that planning and facilitating must include as much consultation and inclusion in the process as possible. Thus, the three goals of the project were met and exceeded our expectations. As a result of the planning, and course work, American faculty members and ULIM administrators alongside the Minister of Work, Social Welfare, and Families presented aspects of the master plan at the International Center for Advancement of Social Work in Countries with Transition Economies at ULIM in June 2013. The first ULIM Master of Social Work class was accepted September 2013.

Yet, we struggled to ensure that the social work education took into account Moldova's unique political, cultural, and economic circumstances. Issues pondered by the authors required much discussion and reflection. Questions we considered included:

- What level of educational corruption in Moldova effected social work education in the country, if any?
 - How might the abilities of psychologist and sociologist academics be maximized in advancing social work education?
 - How might the unique societal and cultural aspects of transitional economies add to social work as a profession worldwide?
 - How self-care activities might be used in the classroom to raise awareness about tolerance as it relates to political differences, language (Romanian-speaking vs. Russian-speaking), sexual orientation, and ethnic differences.
 - How might social workers who occupy an "outsider-within" status impact teaching and learning in host countries?
 - How might the political unrest between Russia and Ukraine impact technology between Moldova and Western countries desiring to teach using distance learning?
 - How might the Post-2015 United Nations Development Agenda strengthen global social work education, specifically, human trafficking, in relation to "Gender Economic Social Ecological Justice for Sustainable Development: A Feminist Declaration for Post-2015?"
 - How might language differences and translations impact teaching and learning styles?
 - How should global assessment tools be used to evaluate students' performance in distance learning, trans-country pedagogies?
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We believe that international projects in social work education in the Republic of Moldova strengthen the capacity of that country's academic endeavors and improve social services. While Moldova, and other transitional economies, should be encouraged and assisted to secure adequate social services, no conjecture that countries with lesser resources provide poorer quality programs. Ultimately, we believe that the standardization of the social work curricula in accordance with international social work education standards creates capable Moldovan social workers

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