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Stream 5. Social Work and Social Policy: Control or Empowerment?

Social workers in Poland – missionaries, professionals and working poor
On the specificities of social work's image in hybrid welfare state

It would be a truism to say that democratic changes and transition into capitalism was followed by the redefinition of the welfare regime in Poland. These processes are both reflected in and shaped by public debate, dominated to a large extent by the neoliberal discourse.

Legitimate perceptions of deservingness of certain social groups and categories, as well as images of social policy institutions influence both further transformation of welfare regime, as well as daily institutional practice. The image of the social work and social workers seems particularly vital for building (mis)trust in the formal support networks.

The proposed paper will focus on discussing the consequences of ongoing transformation of social policies' in Poland for social work and the status of social worker as a profession, socially constructed through various institutional and symbolic practices such as legislation and media debate. Furthermore, the question of interrelations between public images of social workers and their self-definitions as actors in the process of policy formulation and implementation, will also be explored.

The main body of the presentation will be based on several types of data. At first, selected legal acts and strategic documents will be analyzed to reconstruct the role model postulated by those at power. Secondly, the most distinctive examples of media debates which referred to social work will be used to reconstruct discursive strategies and practices which symbolically situate social workers in the process of social problems solving. Finally, the public images of a social workers will be juxtaposed with practitioner's self-reflections. The latter will be based on the qualitative research conducted among experienced social workers from Lodz – second biggest city in Poland whose inhabitants suffered a lot in social terms from the rapid deindustrialization during the past two decades, and apprentices – students of the social work from The University of Lodz.