

Professionalization Process of Housekeeping Agencies in the Czech Republic

Introduction

In this essay, I will examine the process of professionalization in the practice of housekeeping agencies in the Czech Republic. The essay is based on ten semi-structured interviews with the owners of housekeeping agencies in three Czech cities – Praha, Brno and Olomouc. Those interviews were part of the larger project interested in how is care transformed when it enters the labour market and becomes paid service. One of the main feature of this process, emphasized by the owners of the agencies, was the professionalization which transforms home care into a paid service.

In this essay, I will present the specifics of the Czech context compare to the situation in some of the different countries. In other two parts, I will discuss different theoretical approaches to the concept of professionalization and specific features which can be found in the effort of housekeeping agencies. In this place, it feels important to emphasize that, as I said, the data were drawn from the interviews with the owners of the agencies and thus, this essay examines the conceptualization and narrative of the owners of housekeeping agencies rather than the actual practice which was not the subject of the examination. The main task is to show how is the professionalization done in the practice of housekeeping agencies in the Czech Republic.

Housework in theory and Czech specifics

According to the International Labour Organization, the statistics from various countries of the world show 53 million people working in a foreign household, but it is estimated around 100 million, while 83 % of those people are women [Ezzeddinne, Pavelková IN Ezzeddinne 2014]. „Household worker is any worker, who has paid job in the household of hers or his employee. It can be cleaning people, babysitters, caretakers of sick or seniors, housekeepers, au-pairs, personal cooks etc.” [Ibid.]. Those people can be split into two basic groups according to their presence in the household. So-called “live-in” (the person lives in the household where s/he work at the same time), and “live-out” (the person does not live in

the household s/he works and only goes there to do the job). Statistics also show that at least half of the house works are done unofficially [Ibid.].

As it was mentioned, most of the workers in households are women. In the western countries, this fact is based mainly on the socio-historical background: household works were almost always considered as a women domain, either without the pretension of payment (“out of love”), for minimum wage, or in the case of housekeepers and servants for accommodation [Jechová 2012]. As Souralová notes, this is also corresponding with the gender system of society, in which “caretaking is derived from womanhood which is defined through caring” [Souralová 2012: 34]. In other words: “all caretakers are women and all women are caretakers” [Ibid.].

Apart from (or maybe because of) that caretaking and housework were and are considered as woman domain, they are also considered as an unprofessional work. As such, this kind of work is (not) valued in terms of prestige as well as financially. Helma Lutz says that “skills needed in the household are considered to be *everyday* skills and therefore elude or resist evaluation according to meritocratic principles” [Lutz IN Souralová 2012]. Thus, in this kind of work, it is possible to talk about a low status within social values. This kind of work is also called *reproductive* in opposition to work *productive* which is not just reproducing, rather creating some specific outcome or product [Uhde 2012].

The historical evolution of the household work status is specific in post-communist countries. For during the communist regime, there was no business in this area (also because having servants was historically specific for upper classes, thus it was considered as unwelcomed bourgeois throw-back). Even though the communist regime promoted gender equality in every part of life, in practice the household work remained a women domain. So-called “second shift” started for women after they came home from work [Hochschild 1989]. After the Velvet Revolution, the discourse of housework was slowly changing and this work was getting back to the labour market.

Still, the position of housework is specific in the Czech Republic, especially compared to the situation in other countries, mainly those west of Czech. In those countries, this kind of work is very often (or mainly) done by migrant women. Often it is called “transnational care practice”, and considered as a part of global social inequalities [Uhde 2012: 12]. In the Czech Republic, the situation is usually different. The part of the labour market where migrant women do the paid housework is quite specific and it involves mostly women from

Ukraine or Philippine [Ezzeddinne 2014, Redlová 2013]. Especially the Philippine workers are those in the category of „live-in“ housekeepers or caretakers, which is unusual for most of the other women with similar kind of work. Not even too many au-pairs are situated in the Czech Republic [Búriková, Miller 2010]. There are several reasons for this. Among them is also the generally small number of migrants in the Czech Republic and associated concerns about cultural differences and persuasion about the importance of Czech house-worker, especially for work with children [Souralová 2017]. Another reason might be a purchase power, which is lower in the Czech Republic than in the countries west of it.

The model of delegated care about which Souralová [2015] is writing, is another thing that goes against usual international trends. Czech woman works as nannies for families from Vietnam. In this matter, Souralová writes about a disturbance of the classic ethnic logic, where caring of children and household is delegated to migrants [Souralová 2012].

The low status of housework is manifested for example in the fact that it is considered as an annoying necessity or, in the case of child-care or senior-care, as women nature, rather than real work. This is reflected also in the status of housework and care work on the labour market. As it was said before this kind of work is not well paid and not highly valued in society; it is considered as women domain and it is mostly done by women. More striking it is in the case of cleaning work, where experience, skill, and good physical conditions are good enough to do the job. In the case of caring, demands are higher (after all it is about people, not just property), however, next to the experience, the natural skills are presupposed. Those natural skills can in some cases replace the experience. Thus, any housework can be done by almost any woman.

However, owners of housework and caretaking agencies disagree with this perception. They stress out the professionalism of their service, which is based on an expertise no laic can have. Sometimes it is possible to see this even in the language they use – worker in housekeeping field is called “housekeeper” and not “cleaning lady”. As one of the informants said, the cleaning lady is not well looking lady with a rug wrapped on a broom. Similarly, owners of care-taking agencies stress out that not every mother (and certainly not every woman) is a caretaker. In other words – laic, or an average person, cannot clean up the house as well as professionals, and even though maternal love is irreplaceable, no mother can ever foster the child as well as an educated professional.

It might be that in the case of professional agencies, these declarations are a strategy to uphold their position on a labour market, the price of their services and in general higher up their value in the business. It is simply convenient for them to talk like this. And it might be their source of motivation, but on the other hand owners of agencies also stress out the difficult application process (through which only a few will pass) and the amount of various certification in housekeeping or caretaking, their employees hold. Their employees must have for example deep knowledge about types of surfaces and suitable detergents in housekeeping or knowledge about child psychology or pedagogical methods in child caretaking. Moreover, they have a big responsibility, whether for a person or for a property.

Professionalization

So how exactly is this professionalism build? Treasa Campbell emphasizes the origin of the term „professionalization“ which is *a profession*. As she notes, the definition of the term is unclear, however „on the majority understanding, a profession is especially skilled, regulated, and autonomous“ [Campbell 2015:35]. This brief definition is in accordance with the way in which the owners of agencies try to develop. It emphasizes a certain level of expertise as especially skilled practice and the autonomy which lays mainly in the specialization of domestic work in the Czech Republic. On the other hand, there is a major distinction in the fact of regulation in the Czech case. Unlike in many other countries [Le Bihan 2012], there is no such a regulation in the market of domestic work in the Czech Republic which means that the market of the domestic work is very free. The question, raised by many, is if we can talk about the professionalization without the regulation.

As Treasa Campbell says, „[the] elements of regulation is central to the concepts of a profession. The vast majority of professions have a central regulatory body whose role it is to guarantee performance standards among individual members“ [Campbell 2015: 35]. This regulatory body is missing in the Czech Republic and there is no special legislation regarding domestic work labour market. This might be one of the barriers on the way to establish a professional status of the domestic work industry in the Czech Republic and reverse the understanding of domestic work as an unskilled work.

Another theory of establishing a professional approach presents Adéla Suralová. She mentions three basic principles in those agencies on the labour market: a specialization, qualification, and professionalization [Suralová 2012: 37]. These three principles are the

base for the professional approach and all three of them can be found in the approach of the examined agencies, as we will show.

The owners of agencies (both in housekeeping and caretaking) agree on one basic fact: the agencies offer to find an appropriate candidate. Stated by the agency Pink:

What we offer is the stability of one lady in client's household. We choose this lady, who will be there and will be proven. This is most important. We do this selection. Everybody is concerned about who is going to be in their household; if she will not rob them, or kidnap the child, and so on. So, at first, the employee must be carefully selected. Obviously, she must go through an interview, training, she must have references about her previous work and the quality of work she had done, and we must know she did not cause any troubles. The person must be healthy and without a criminal record. Also, she must go through our training, so we know she is capable, apprehend what she does, have some relationship to her profession and in general is tidy. And thus, our clients do not have to do this themselves – to search on the internet, select the person (or find out how to even do the selection), etc. It takes a lot of time and we do this for them. (Pink)

The agencies thus make sure that the housekeeper or caretaker is qualified and well selected. Not only they do the time-consuming and difficult selection process and choose reliable and proven worker – they also guarantee that if a client is not satisfied with her, they will find another one and replace her. The key word is reliability. If one chooses to get a house worker through an agency, one does not have to worry about buying a “pig in a poke”.

The owners of the agencies often emphasized how demanding is this selection process. It is demanding in two ways. As it was said, it takes time to select good and reliable employee:

We do train our maids approximately one month and then they can go to the household or to the company to clean. Within one month, we can see in which type of the household the maid fits because every client needs something different. This proves her reliability and if we can count on her. Therefore, we have a big fluctuation of employers. It is about 50 %. We interview 100 applicants, we hire 50 and after three months of trial period, we have 25 left. (Brown)

Agencies have more experience, resources and capacities to do so, unlike a private person. Therefore, they guarantee they have only high-quality house workers.

What the owner of the Brown agency says, mentions the other reason, why is the process so difficult: the process itself is so demanding, that there are not enough good applicants to pass through. And this was often mentioned as a major problem of the owners of agencies. Another part of this problem is that although the selection process is demanding, the successful applicant needs to show qualification, experiences, talent, and motivation, the social status of domestic work is low, and so is its financial compensation. It seems that in the perspective of our informants, domestic work is a highly professional job with a low salary.

The second principle, on which the professionalism is based, is specialization. As Bridged Anderson notes, in abroad the housework is characterized by three C's jobs (cooking, cleaning, caring) [Anderson IN Souralová 2012: 37]. The trend in the Czech Republic again differs from the international one and is based on strict specialization. Most of the agencies are specialized in one house work field – cleaning, child or senior caretaking, and housekeeping. There are agencies that offer an entire range of house works, but it is almost never only one lady who would do all of the three C's jobs in one household. All the informants from agencies agreed that in the contract they insist on specific description of the job their employees will do in the household. It is also a consequence of the character of household work, which tends to overlap and interconnect. In agencies, those are strictly separated. As the owner of the Grey company said:

The client comes and tells us what he wants: minor cleaning, vacuum cleaning, wiping dust, bathroom cleaning and so on. And then he asks if we also offer a window cleaning. I say we do, so we clean the windows. I offer him a basic cleaning and alternatives. The lady does not have to only clean something. She can do other things. But what she cannot do, and I point that out to the client, is, for example, babysitting – in a situation when a cleaning is ordered, parents leave the house and children are left there, our employee cannot take care of them. No. She can do only what is in the contract. And we sign the contract on every kind of work separately. If she had to caretake of senior and clean the household, those are two separate things and thus, two separate contracts. (Grey)

The specialization, on which agencies base themselves, is related to the professionalization as the third principle of professional approach. As in a science, during time specializing departments and sub-departments, the house work went through the same process. Each special and closely defined field (child caring, cleaning, cooking, etc.) have its own experts

and specific methods. As Helma Lutz notes “one of the major features of professionalism is the existence of norms, based on which each profession should be done, and also the existence of ethical codex” [Lutz IN Suralová ROK: 39]. Those norms basing the job can be called an expertise knowledge.

This expertise knowledge is a basis of professional approach and as such, it is a basis of the difference from usual cleaning or another kind of housework. It is fast, effective and well done – and there is a process of learning behind. One of the informants said:

The lady for whom cleaning is a profession should be able to clean up much better than a lady who has another profession. You see, if you as an employee of Masaryk University go and clean windows, you will spend an entire day on it. But if you invite a lady for whom it is a profession, she will be done with it in three hours. I can't think of anything better. If a husband decides to clean up a bathtub, he spends two hours on it, while for me it takes ten minutes. And it is because I am a professional cleaner and I know how to do it fast, effectively and well. So, my husband doesn't do it anymore, he thought it is no work (laughing). And this is the added value.

An important part of expertise knowledge is for example knowledge about the surface. The variety of surface in households seems to be infinite and each of the surfaces requires particular care, as the owners of agencies say. It used to be specific for upper classes, but nowadays more and more people live in households they cannot care of.

So many time people buy beautiful things, but they do not know how to maintain the materials. Only for this, they come to us – because they do not know or because they damage it. And so, they rather pay for the professional. Not to mention that obviously the agency is insured. However, they seek out our professionalism. They cannot take just anyone from out there. Someone through public advertisement, who can do the job, for example, half price in hour wage. It is not worth it, because they do not have the training, certifications, and no one is taking the responsibility for them.

As it was presented important elements of professional approach consist of centralization, regulation, expertise and method. Those all are part of the professionalization process along with specialization and qualification. Except for centralization and regulation, all can be found in the practice of housekeeping agencies. However, there is still one very important feature of professional approach that remains unmentioned: the ethics.

Balancing on the edge of the distance-keeping

Ethics is crucial for every truly professional approach. It establishes important standards of the profession. In the case of housekeeping agencies, this means mainly to keep the eligible balance of personal and impersonalized approach. This is the very sensitive point because of entering a private space while working in a household and family. The reference to the importance of personal and personalized approach was often emphasized by our informants – as expressed in this case by the owner of Pink Agency:

First of all, when the family sends the order to us, we choose a maid and we send a photo and maid's profile to the family. Based on that, they say if they want her. Then we come with the maid and introduce her. We go through the whole household and take a look on what is needed to be cleaned, what type of surfaces are there, and we find out what the family wants overally. After that the maid is in contact with the family and she almost becomes part of the family. Of course, they need to get along with each other. If they do not get along, then there could be a problem. (Pink)

As we can see in this case, the maid is a service that needs to be set up and personalized. The process of personalization is very impersonalized in many respects. The warm personal relationship is not to be developed by itself as it comes. It has to be actively created.

On the other hand, Adéla Souralová mentions the importance of maintaining boundaries: “part of the professional approach is also a professional distance” [Souralová 2012: 39]. This boundary maintenance is not only related to the specialization which was discussed above (maintaining boundaries between each kind of work, as in household most of the works are overlapping) but also to entering a private space while working in a household and family. This was expressed by the owner of Blue Agency:

I would prefer them to have a certain distance. It is because if they are too good friends, they have ambitions to solve their conflicts out alone. And this gets me into a situation when it cannot go on anymore and the client is not able to say anything to the maid. The client wants to replace her and is afraid to tell her. The client is afraid to tell her his or her complaints and calls me at a point when s/he does not know what to do anymore. The client then talks about long-term problems and I am surprised that, all of a sudden, I have to solve long-term problems. (Blue)

As it can be seen, the balance between personal and impersonalized relations is a complicated process, fully in the hands of the agencies. And as it was said, this is very much

linked to the ethics because the role of the external invader into the very private space of the household needs to be negotiated very carefully.

Although professionalism is largely seen as a positive process, this can get us a clue why there are some critics of the process. As Trease Campbell notes, “one strand of resistance sees professionalization as a process of gentrification which distances practitioners from their clients” [Campbell 2015: 35]. In the case of housekeeping agencies, this is true not only because of the role of the middleman that the agencies hold but also because of their very active role in the client-maid relations constitution.

Conclusion

In this essay, I examined how is the professionalization done in housekeeping agencies in the Czech Republic. While housework is generally considered as a woman domain and nature, and as such has a low status also on the labour market, housekeeping agencies point out the professionalization as an important part of their service which distinguishes them from what unprofessional can (and have abilities to) do.

As opposed to other countries, in the Czech Republic, the housekeepers are not usually migrants. Still, there are important parts of the professionalization which correspond with what other (both local and international) analysis showed. As I presented, the professionalization is based mainly on the specialization of the service and expertise. Both are ensured by a careful selection process of employees, as well as thorough training and learning they go through before starting with their work. The specialization is then also secured by contracts the agencies sign with their clients, and the expertise can be also proven by a number of possible certifications the agencies and their employees hold.

The other inevitable part of the professional approach in the perspective of the informants consists of a careful balancing of personal and impersonal relations. The personalization lies mostly in client’s preferences on what should be done in his/hers household and also in “getting along” with the employee. However, in the perspective of the housekeeping agencies owners, the personal approach can have limits, and it can bring communication problems and other consequences. In general, it can be said that in the perspective of owners of housekeeping agencies, housekeeping is personalized high-quality service provided by carefully selected experts.

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