
Health and Medicine: Post-socialist Perspectives

The sociology of medicine, health, and the body is a progressively growing sub-discipline of sociology. Originating in Emile Durkheim's text on suicide (1897), followed by the writings of Talcott Parsons, Ivan Illich, Michel Foucault, Brian S. Turner, Howard Becker, and Ann Oakley, to name at least one of the most influential feminist scholars, this body of work became a substantive sub-field during the 20th century. Sociology has joined forces with social anthropology in exploring the embodiment of culture and medicine and analysing medical practices and knowledge systems. This thematic issue brings together several topical analyses in medical sociology with the ambition of strengthening and cultivating this sub-field of the social sciences, with a close exploration of health and medicine in the post-socialist region.

Post-socialist countries challenge social scientists methodologically and theoretically, in terms of explaining current conditions as well as specific transformations of health policies, medical institutions, and practices. For example, a key element of socialist health-care systems was state-provided care, which now co-exists alongside relatively new private practices, both alternative and biomedical. Medical pluralism has led not only to significant shifts in positions within health-care institutions, but also to new conceptions of the human body. The state's role with respect to health care and its influence on experiences and enactments of illness have undergone transformations in the post-socialist era. Thus, the organisation of health-care provision and the transformation of professions as well as everyday lived experiences, understandings, and embodiments bound to medicine and expert medical knowledge compose a highly relevant yet relatively understudied field in the region. Consequently, analyses focusing on this region have the potential to disrupt and challenge the central assumptions, applications, and ideas of medical sociology. For example, scholars have redefined conceptual frameworks, as in the recent application of Foucault's governmentality to a non-democratic context by Radka Dudová [2012]. Also, medical sociological work in post-socialist regions complicate and add to existing thematic sociological debates by presenting new historically situated contexts of health and medicine. The articles in this thematic issue take up the glove and contextualise, explain, and critically examine these processes and practices.

The specific post-socialist condition and multiple contexts offer fertile ground for both empirical and theoretical exploration. For some authors of this special issue, an inspiration for their contextualisation was taken from post-socialist theory [Buravoy and Verdery 1999; Hann 2002; Kürti and Skalník 2009; Verdery 1996; Wolff 1994]. However, these papers do not explain the post-1989 developments of health care in the region as a homogeneous and unified 'post-

socialism'. Rather the inquiries focus on manifold post-socialism(s) in the region as they are played out within and through health care. Everyday experiences and local strategies of transformation(s) suggest that post-socialism is more than just an accident of history—it is a multi-layered and shared experience at both the macro and micro levels of past and present reality [Skultans 2007]. Challenges, for example, to health professionals in Ukraine or the Czech Republic resemble one another. However, scholars must interpret and contextualise important cultural and historical differences simultaneously. Similarly, policies on reproductive rights and practices in Poland and the Czech Republic are hardly uniform. Such plurality is clearly visible in everyday discourses and practices; homogeneous concepts and ideas about post-socialism in both popular and scientific discourses should thus be under constant redefinition [Buchowski 2001]. The sociological analysis of health and illness offers productive ground for the exploration of both empirical and conceptual ways of grasping these realities.

Scholarly interest in relationships amongst broad social, political, and economic changes and health should not be surprising. These elements are in constant interplay and shape each other. Intertwined, health and politics mutually influence the status quo of medical institutions and practices. Health and politics also powerfully shape patient experiences, bodily definitions, identity, and responses to health issues. Shifting political fields are often reflected in shifting health-care policies. For researchers in the region, these transformations are intellectually challenging but equally serve as a means to a more complex understanding of other social and historical processes. Furthermore, intersectionalities of relevance in analyses of post-socialist conditions reach beyond the borders of the region. The complexity of analysing medicine and society requires an interdisciplinary approach as well as multiple analytical perspectives: from history to political studies, from anthropology to public health and medicine itself.

This collection of papers aims to explore recent transformations and stumbling blocks in the area of health and illness based on fieldwork conducted in post-socialist Central and Eastern Europe. The inspiration for this special issue came from the 3rd Annual Health in Transition Conference, which took place in Warsaw, 7–8 June 2013 (following previous meetings in Prague and Bucharest). We realised then that recent developments in health care in various national contexts of the region resembled one another, yet there remained important differences. Several significant aspects of these tensions were further elaborated upon and are now collected as articles in this published volume. This thematic issue intends to contribute and demonstrate the development of debates that began at this regional conference.

While each of the articles focuses on a different aspect of health and/or medicine, they also complement each other in many ways. The analyses consider three cultural contexts: Ukraine, Poland, and the Czech Republic. One article discusses the complex aspects of the transformation process in Ukraine. Two articles consider how health professionals manage emotions and juggle formal and in-

formal protocols. Other themes include ideologies present in debates relevant to (medicalised) human reproduction and available birth control technologies. The authors in this volume analyse trends in sexuality as well as the effects of health migration.

The strength of contemporary medical sociology and anthropology lies in its broad range of interests, including professional cultures. Maryna Bazylevych's article focuses on the ways in which Ukrainian physicians envision the future, present, and past of health care and how they make sense of changes occurring in their professional lives. Bazylevych argues that a slow but profound transformation in the Ukrainian health-care system is visible at the level of physicians' everyday practices, which reflect a growing level of responsibility for individuals rather than the state. The article unlocks how physicians navigate remnants of the old system, and what hopes they carry into the future.

Olga Šmídová Matoušová and Blanka Tollarová focus their attention on Czech nurses' narratives about the management of emotions. These narratives are part of the construction of nurses' professional identity and provide a set of tools for organising and making sense of their actions in emergency situations and interaction with doctors. The authors argue that emotions are an immanent part of a hospital's organisational culture. However, an unequal distribution of rights and obligations of doctors and nurses becomes apparent in the expression, or lack of expression, of emotions. The authors argue that this inequality is embedded in power/knowledge relations and the formal-hierarchical structure.

Heidi Bludau explores the burning issue of a growing trend in health-care worker emigration from the Czech Republic. She points out that a significant number of nurses return from abroad and re-enter the Czech health system. She analyses narratives to explore the role of standardised medical policies, procedures, and protocols in the development and maintenance of a nurse's professional identity in a post-socialist context. Bludau's research provides unique insight into the complexity of transformations that cannot be neatly separated into macro and micro levels. She highlights discrepancies between different styles of being a medical worker, which are defined by institutional 'reforms', while at the same time transformation initiatives of the health-care system must also be seen as bottom-up. Bludau contrasts strict foreign protocols with the informality of Czech health care, which provides a useful lens through which to view professional identity in post-socialism.

Issues relating to migration are dealt with in yet another text. Izabella Main pays attention to the phenomenon of medical travel (medical tourism), looking specifically at a group of Polish women who migrated to London, Barcelona, or Berlin. She shows that a significant number of migrants regularly travel back home to Poland to seek medical treatment there. The main factors prompting such travels are the lower cost of private treatment and easy access to specialised health care, as well as language and cultural competency. Main concludes that return medical travels undermine the national borders of health-care systems and

offer a sense of agency while simultaneously challenging regulations, authority, and expert knowledge.

Two other articles also provide a substantial contribution to the analysis of contemporary Polish health-related issues and practices. Agnieszka Kościańska and Magdalena Radkowska-Walkowicz focus their attention on sexual health and reproduction. Kościańska sheds light on the Polish history of sexology: in the 1970s and 1980s Poland provided not only unlimited access to abortion and contraceptives, but also a liberal sex education. During this period, sexual science was a holistic discipline where sexuality was perceived—contrary to a medicalised ‘Western’ discourse—as multidimensional and culturally embedded. Kościańska claims that Polish sexology has never been fully transformed. Rather, it has remained resilient to the influence of neo-liberal market ideology and pharmaceutical industries.

While Kościańska shows the resilience of sexology in Poland, despite the radical political-economic changes in medical care, Radkowska-Walkowicz introduces a new ‘actor’ in the field of reproductive medicine: naprotechnology (a method of natural family planning coined as technology). She sketches the social and political tensions over naprotechnology that have been gradually mounting since 1989. In this strained debate various stakeholders—the Catholic Church, the state, patients, medical professionals, and social movements—struggle to gain a more incisive voice regarding naprotechnology. Although most Polish gynaecologists and many IVF users are critical of the method, naprotechnology has had considerable exposure in major Polish media. Naprotechnology could be perceived as an emancipating power of legitimate birth control, Radkowska-Walkowicz argues that it might also serve as a form of colonisation of the female body, while simultaneously strengthening traditional gender relations. Both papers provide a nuanced consideration of two separate yet similar fields of medicine in Poland, revealing new trends, old trends, and the multiple actors invested in various facets of health care.

Finally, Ema Hrešanová also deals with the theme of reproductive health in another study of narratives. Hrešanová shows how Czech women with higher education experience, perceive, and understand birth care in the context of post-socialism. She carefully analyses women’s birthing experiences and then focuses on women’s birth-care demands and strategies. Ultimately, she presents women’s understandings of birth care as diverse. The article presents women’s disillusionment with birth care, which Hrešanová sees as an example of clashing ideas about birth care provider-receiver relations. Clashing ideas about maternity care are associated with clashes between the socialist past and the current neo-liberal discourses of health.

The contributors to this special issue bring diverse and complex perspectives to our understanding of health and illness in the context of post-socialism. Their analyses cover multiple areas of the structural and interactive dimensions of current social realms and the transformation processes in different national

contexts. At the same time, these papers explore the legitimisation and agency employed by the actors involved in negotiating the desired shape of health-care professions and notions of health. The authors' diverse conceptual and methodological approaches to medical sociology are nonetheless united in their focus on recent changes in the post-socialist region. The articles offer valuable analytical contributions to current debates in medical sociology and anthropology regarding issues related to health, the body, and illness. Not only does this thematic issue on post-socialist health and medicine provide timely analyses, it also contributes to important sociological debates that extend beyond this region.

Amy Speier
University of Texas,
Arlington
speier@uta.edu

Iva Šmídová
Masaryk University,
Brno
krizala@fss.muni.cz

Hubert Wierciński
Warsaw University,
Warsaw
hubertwier@gmail.com

References

- Buchowski, M. 2001. *Rethinking Transformation. An Anthropological Perspective on Post-socialism*. Poznań: Humaniora.
- Buravoy, M. and K. Verdery. 1999. *Uncertain Transition: Ethnographies of Change in the Postsocialist World*. Lanham, Boulder, New York, and Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Dudová, R. 2012. 'Regulation of Abortion as State-socialist Governmentality: The Case of Czechoslovakia.' *Politics & Gender* 8 (1): 123–144, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X12000098>.
- Hann, C. 2002. *Postsocialism: Ideas, Ideologies and Practices in Eurasia*. London: Routledge.
- Kürti, L. and P. Skalník. 2009. *Postsocialist Europe. Anthropological Perspectives from Home*. Oxford: Berghahn Books.
- Skultans, V. 2007. 'The Appropriation of Suffering: Psychiatric Practice in the Post-Soviet Clinic.' *Theory, Culture and Society* 24 (3): 27–48, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0263276407077625>.
- Verdery, K. 1996. *What Was Socialism, and What Comes Next*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Wolff, L. 1994. *Inventing Eastern Europe. The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.