

Reforming Czech Social Services: Influence of the Implementation of National Quality Standards Active User Imperative on the Primary Process¹

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Reforming Czech Social Services: Influence of the Implementation of National Quality Standards Active User Imperative on the Primary Process. In the Czech Republic, a new act reforming social services has been adopted, that by means of the National Quality Standards (NQS) is radically changing the position of the social service users. In this paper, we discuss impact of the NQS active user imperative on the primary process. We have extracted relevant data from three consecutive case studies of the shelter facilities and focused on those aspects of the intervention that should have been affected by the reform the most profoundly. We found out that adoption and especially real application of the active user principle by the street-level bureaucrats encounter several serious problems. The misunderstanding of or the resistance to the merits of this principle by the street-level bureaucrats often led to its crippled or partial implementation. Consequently, the quality of the social services has not improved or has even decreased. It followed from our research that street-level bureaucrats were either reluctant or helpless when confronted with the requirement to transform or at least significantly modify their everyday practices and approaches towards the clients. As the most resistant element we have revealed conceptions of the client, i.e. shared understanding of clients by street-level bureaucrats. Our findings suggest that street-level bureaucrats should have been involved much more actively and straightforwardly in the discussions over and the planning of the NQS implementation process in their facilities; otherwise they would feel alienated from it and would tend to either circumvent the new requirements or comply with them only selectively and without inner acceptance.

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Introduction: Transformation of Social Services in the Czech Republic

Social services in the Czech Republic (CR) have undergone major changes in the past twenty years. The range of the types and forms of the provided social services and the methods of work with the client rapidly broadened in the 1990s. (Vojna 2001) Until then a paternalistic approach was universally applied to clients in social service facilities where the client was primarily subjected to material care. These changes in social services were long taking place in the environment of an obsolete legislation, missing development concept and unresolved questions of funding non-governmental provider

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organisations. In the late 1990s, not only the providers who had perceived the situation as unsuitable already before, but also governmental officers recognised the need for a systematic reform of social services.

New programmes and legislative tools were gradually created within the reform: community planning of social services, change in funding, and evaluation of the needs of users, workers' training, the National Quality Standards (NQS) and inspections of quality of the provided services. (Jabůrková – Medlínová 2002) Field verification of the newly created legislation in the areas of community planning and the NQS was to be aided by the so-called Czech-British Project which came into being in co-operation with the UK Department for International Development and was launched in 2001. (Vasková – Úlehla – Kovář 2001) The entire reforming effort culminated in 2006 as Act No. 108/2006 Coll. on social services was passed, which uniformly stipulates the conditions of provision of social services in the CR and came into effect as of January 1, 2007. The principal idea on which the new legislation in the area of social services is based rested in strengthening the role of the users of these services. (*Nový zákon* 2004, 2005) The goal declared by the authors of the law was to shift the recipients of social services to the level of active participants entitled to effectively influence the policy of social services on the one hand and, on the other hand, to collaborate on the provision of the social service which they use as one of the ways of their active contribution to the solving of their adverse social situation.

This paper focuses on the effects of one of the reform outcomes – the National Quality Standards – on the social service provision. On the basis of empirical data collected during three qualitative case studies of different shelter facilities, we discuss the question of how the active user imperative set forth in the NQS penetrates into and affects the primary process, i.e. „the interactions between professionals (social workers or case managers) and the service users“. (van Berkel – Valkenburg 2007: 6)

1. National Quality Standards

The goal of creating a tool of management of the quality of social services stood at the very beginning of the reform. The initiative towards this activity came from the very providers of social services who were creating within their professional associations already during the 1990s specific standards of quality of provision of the given type of social service which were binding upon the members of the relevant associations. Uniform national quality standards were developed at the governmental level in co-operation with both the users and providers of social services in the years 1999 to 2002. More than two hundred representatives of providers and users were active in nineteen workgroups. These workgroups drafted out the first national quality standards and the latter

were then further developed and detailed within the above-mentioned Czech-British project. Their final wording was published in 2002 and the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs of the Czech Republic considered them to be a generally acceptable understanding of a high-quality social service. (Johnová 2002) The NQS were formulated generally since they apply to all social services. Thus, uniform quality standards have been available to the providers of social services since 2002.

A specific conception of the client is inherently present in the NQS, involving provisions concerning support for the client's independence, respect for his/her rights and setting up a symmetrical and partnership relation between workers and clients. Sharing of this conception by the workers of social services is explicitly and implicitly expected by the NQS and a relatively high degree of competence and qualification of the workers are anticipated, which is a prerequisite for transferring the conception to practice. However, the providers pointed out that the new approach to clients is defined very generally in the NQS and it hence represents an ideal which is not easy to transfer to practice. (Musil – Hubíková – Kubalčíková 2003)

The provisions concerning the position of users were finally incorporated in the Act on Social Services as generally binding provisions in spite of the providers' reservations and comments. Of the total number of fifteen National Quality Standards, six deal with active participation of the user in the process of provision of the service and respect for him/her.³ They are perceived by the law as a set of measurable and verifiable criteria whose non-fulfilment is associated with a sanction. If an inspection ascertains serious shortcomings in the application of the NQS, the provider could face even an ultimate sanction of removing the authorisation to provide the given service.

The requirement of active participation of users in the course and planning of social services stipulated in the Act on Social Services and particularly in the NQS implicitly delimits social services as an area of "cultivation of citizens". The users and workers alike are to learn mutual respect for and understanding of general human rights. This requires from street-level bureaucrats a new working culture, new procedures, new approaches to clients, new methods of communication and dealing with clients and new intervention strategies. The main objective of implementation of the NQS consists in a change of the primary process: from universalism and paternalism to individualisation and partnership.

³ These include, in particular, Standards No. 2 "Protection of Social Service Users' Rights", No. 3 "Dealing with a Prospective Service User", No. 4 "Agreement on the Provision of Service", No. 5 "Planning and Actual Implementation of Services Provision", No. 7 "Complaints About Quality or Way of Social Services Delivery" and Standard No. 8 "Links to Other Resources" (Decree No. 505/2006 Coll.) (for a detailed description, see Appendix 1).

2. Reforming the relationship between social service workers and users from the theoretical viewpoint

Since the aim of this text is, generally speaking, to contribute to identifying and specifying the possible outcomes of the “from above” introduced reforms to social workers’ everyday duties and activities, we have chosen to draw on the classic work by Michael Lipsky (1980), the established author whose ideas are still valid and generally accepted, as our research findings confirm.

Lipsky (1980: 3) perceives social workers as some of the representatives of the so-called Street-level bureaucrats (hereafter called SLBs), of whom it is typical that (1) “they interact directly with citizens in the course of their job”, and (2) “have substantial discretion in the execution of their work”. Due to the nature of SLBs’ role and their working conditions in social service agencies, Lipsky sees it as appropriate that they ought not to be considered as mere cogs in the machine whose only responsibility lies in transferring the “from above” issued orders, instructions and regulations onwards to clients. On the contrary, the two features described prove their capacity to act as policy makers, i.e., through their activities, to further the policy aims of the agencies for which they work.

According to Lipsky, there is always a sort of discrepancy between practice in SLBs’ work and their employers’ official policy. This is partly due to the nature of their working conditions, which are typically characterized by (1) chronically inadequate resources relative to the workers’ tasks and (2) ambiguous, vague, or conflicting goal expectations for their agency, and as such, they compel SLBs to develop their own “survival” strategies for dealing with their workload. Lipsky believes that this state of conflicting managerial and SLBs’ goals can be more or less commonly found in all street-level bureaucracies. It may therefore be present even in such organizations where the goals and rules of services provision have long remained unchanged, their legitimacy is acknowledged and their working methods established. It is obvious that at the time of reforms, when the management itself has to struggle for the comprehension of new goals and priorities, the creation and implementation of new, desirable methods in the street-level area become an even more difficult task than before the beginning of the changes. Recall that the above mentioned NQS are meant to serve as a tool for defining the user’s position and constituting equal relationship between users and service workers at the level of specific provider organizations, and as such they require new attitudes and procedures of work within the primary process of social service delivery.

The periods when new reforms are being introduced often bring some increased risks associated with SLBs’ potential assumption that the new goals, or methods of achieving them administered by the management, or both of

these alike, are illegitimate. SLBs' role in the organization provides them with ample opportunity to follow their different preferences. Many studies devoted to this topic regularly come to the conclusion that in the direct provision of services by SLBs, there may be shifts in the intended goals, which may frequently be quite noticeable. Meyers, Glaser and Mac Donald (1998) observed the actual interactions between workers and clients after the implementation of a specific social programme which changed significantly the existing goals of intervention and approach to clients. They ascertained that only 18 per cent of the interactions between SLBs and clients were at least partly in accordance with the goals of the new programme, and indicated in this regard that there was always some kind of unpredictable, uncontrollable element in human conduct. According to the authors, this unpredictability was reinforced by the augmentation of the programme rules and requirements for documentation, to which the SLBs responded by their own interpretation of the new rules, with emphasis placed on these on a random selection basis, and, thus flawed, the rules were subsequently used in the course of SLBs' work with clients. McDonald, Postle and Dawson (2008) observed that British social workers, under the influence of the spreading neo-liberal ideology and managerialism which had recently started to affect their work, "struggled with gaps in their knowledge (...) and risked using defensive practice or relying heavily on procedures, rather than working proactively and creatively" (p. 1374). The authors thus indicate that the new procedures require, *inter alia*, an adequate depth of knowledge, frequently different from that which SLBs have been actively using thus far. They are convinced that in a situation when workers feel that they can no longer rely on their existing knowledge, they resort to passivity, proceduralism and routine.

When imposing new requirements on SLBs's work, it is important not only to ensure that the present workers are enabled to gain the adequate knowledge and skills (McDonald – Postle – Dawson 2008; Lurie 2002), but also to pay attention to the way in which the management of individual organizations approaches the process of implementing new goals and procedures within SLBs' everyday work (Evans 2010; Riccucci et al. 2004). Riccucci et al. (2004, p. 446) came to the conclusion based on their research that SLBs "who work in agencies where management practices – from training to performance monitoring – are aligned with new welfare reform goals were more likely to see these goals as important:, and vice versa. Similarly, Evans (2010) indicates that Lipsky's assumption that unlike SLBs, managers are always committed to reform and organisational goals, is rather too general and in many cases invalid. In SLBs from within the ranks of professional social workers, even a contrary situation might occur when it is the SLBs that are inclined to promote new goals while these are not considered a priority by the managers.

These findings imply that the implementation of new rules, operating guidelines and work procedures is a very arduous, sensitive and long term task. It is vital that workers – both SLBs and managers – understand the purpose of the new procedures in connection with the goals of the organization, and adopt them as their own. Also, it is essential to ensure the necessary conditions for the achieving of new goals and the implementing of new procedures, namely in the area of SLBs' qualifications and their working conditions. The above mentioned factors of welfare reforms implementation were also observed in our case studies. Our main aim, however, was to monitor interactions between street-level bureaucrats and clients as to which areas of routine procedures had been adjusted or entirely changed in accordance with the NQS implementation or, on the contrary, remained resistant to the requirements for change. In pursuit of this aim, we employed a conceptual framework of “the culture of an organisation” by Musil (2006).⁴

3. Research Strategy

3.1 Methodology

The entire research was carried out in the form of case studies specifically aimed at selected providers of personal social services. Having considered the advantages and disadvantages of various methodological procedures, we decided on qualitative methods of data collection and analysis. (Brown et al. 1998; Baldwin 2000; Yin 2009) There were several reasons for choosing case study as our research method.

Firstly, our research was, by its nature, closely related to implementation research, which, as e.g. Elmore points out (1979: 601), is typically carried out in the form of case studies. Also, the choice was determined by the research issue itself, along with the character of the whole study. As e.g. Yin (2009) suggests, if the research questions are of the “how” or “why” type and the whole research has an explanatory character, the case study method is relevant. Furthermore, according to Yin (2009: 4), “distinctive need for case study arises out of the desire to understand complex social phenomena”. In other words, the more complex the social phenomena studied are, and the more in-depth understanding they require, the stronger need for the case study method arises. While following the main objectives of our research (e.g. the way in which the implementing of new instruments of social services influences the culture of personal social services provision), we were faced with the necessity to untie the very core of how the provider organization functions and capture even the relatively subtle nuances of the culture of work with the client.

⁴ Using the term “the culture of an organization”, Musil (2006: 17) refers to “fellowship relations relying on the collective consciousness (i.e. shared values, goals, methods of work with clients, and ideas about clients and other relevant entities) of an organisation's personnel.”

3.2 Case study design

Based on Robert Stake's distinction of case study types (Stake 2005: 445), the issue of instrumental case studies was of primary interest to our research while the studied cases themselves clearly had an instrumental function. For the purpose of our research, we tried to choose typical representatives of the selected type of social service, each for the respective stages of the social services reform.

When establishing which cases to examine, we needed to ensure that two particular tasks were undertaken simultaneously, the first being to scrutinize a typical representative of the social service in respective points in time, and the second, to capture the issue at three different points in time. The problem was, however, that the two tasks could not be carried out in the course of study of the same case where this had undergone various subsequent stages of the NQS implementation.

However logical it might have seemed to monitor a single facility, this proved impossible due to the fact that our previous research had caused significant modification to the internal environment of the organizations studied. We had co-operated with each of those for a year and a half at minimum, provided them with feedback and requested the same from the participants. As a result, the research itself had caused a shift in the way in which the management and the street-level bureaucrats perceived their own service, thus excluding the facilities in question from the category of "typical organization" suitable for further research.

Besides, we decided not to perform further research in other facilities with the same clientele. Due to the fact that we had included the focus groups in the final stage of each case study and involved workers of the same type of service in the Czech Republic, we could have hardly found a social service which had remained unaffected by our previous research. In order to be able to study a service so untouched, we subsequently picked a single type of service, i.e. a shelter facility, with a different type of clientele in every single case.

In accordance with Yin's classification (2009: 48-50), we carried out three single integrated case studies, since each case study involved a number of subunits with analysis, which referred to the management, staff, clients and representatives of the social service facilities' founder. The data collected for each of these subunits were analyzed separately prior to broader analysis and more general conclusions concerning the facility in question as a whole.

This article is based on the findings and knowledge contained in the subunits on staff in each of the three successive single case studies. It comprises description and comparison of the data contained in the respective subunits on staff, along with our attempt to capture and understand the shifts and changes in the culture of social service provision at the front line level.

3.3 Selection of Facilities for Study

The main reason for studying shelter facilities was the growing importance of the active user principle in this type of service. Clients, who often stay in the facility round the clock and long term, are permanently exposed to the facility regime measures and rules for stay set by the organizations providing the given service without any client participation. (cf. Heikkilä – Julkunen 2003) Shelter facilities have to cope with the paradox that, by their very nature, they are stay-in facilities, but simultaneously and primarily, they prepare clients for life outside the facilities, ridding them of their potential dependence on institutional care. (cf. Lipsky 1980) The active involvement of users in shaping these services is therefore essential not only for the preservation of their human and civil rights, but mainly to achieve the goals of provision of the given social services. We carried out three case studies in different shelter facilities, which typologically represented facilities in the three stages of the NQS implementation.

The first shelter facility was studied before the NQS implementation, from 2001 to 2003. It was a halfway house facility (hereinafter HWH) – a shelter home for young adults between 18 and 23 years of age, with a housing capacity of merely over a dozen clients.⁵ Most of them were people with no housing who had left children's homes or some other institutional care and faced the problems of adjustment to living outside the institution. Although one of the first versions of the NQS was already available at the time of the research, the personnel of the facility were not yet familiar with them, and therefore the provision of the service was quite unaffected by the NQS.

The second facility, studied in the years 2005-2006, was representative of the early phase of the NQS implementation.⁶ It had begun to deal with the NQS even before their incorporation in the law. The management and street-level bureaucrats had already accepted them as a tool of social service policy and worked on their implementation approximately a year before the commencement of our field survey. The facility was a shelter home for mothers with one or more young children (hereinafter SfM) finding themselves in critical situations such as homelessness, unemployment, limited education, poverty, domestic violence, and, in some cases, insufficient skills in terms of child care. This facility was also a smaller one with a housing capacity of about a dozen mothers with children.

The third facility, studied in the years 2007 – 2008, represented a more advanced phase of the NQS implementation.⁷ By then, the NQS had already

⁵ For summary results of the research see Musil – Hubíková – Kubalčíková (2003).

⁶ For summary results of the research see Musil et al. (2007).

⁷ For summary results of the research see Musil et al. (2009).

been part of legally binding standards in the Czech Republic, and the facility in question had been implementing them for approximately two years. The goals and methods of the service provision were based on the organization's ideological principles and adjusted according to the requirements of the NQS. It was a middle-sized shelter facility (hereinafter SH) with the capacity of about 80 clients, both males and females over 18, whose main problem was homelessness, although many of them had to also deal with other serious difficulties such as unemployment, poor health, or lack of basic social skills and knowledge concerning the functioning of social institutions.

3.4 Data Collection and Analysis

The data collection unit comprised individual informants and respondents, who belonged to the respective subunits of analysis specified above. As the predominant source of data, different types of qualitative interview were used, depending on the research phase. Initially, we conducted several in-depth interviews with the key informants. The bulk of the data were gathered by means of focused open-ended interviews and semi-structured interviews based on the interview guide.

Additional sources of information were relevant documents, such as internal directives and regulations, codified principles and procedures of the social service provision, ethics codes, house rules, etc.

To enhance the validity of our findings, we included a focus group of selected experts and people of various professions in social work practice – managers, founders and workers from the same type of service, as well as experts from the academic environment. These focus groups followed the analysis of all of the subunits at the final stage of each of our case studies. The feedback obtained from this group of participants enabled us to determine which of our conclusions were applicable to this particular organization studied, and which could also be applied to other provider organizations within the same type of social service which is in the same phase of social services transformation in the Czech Republic.

We used Atlas.ti as a computer assisted tool for the organization and analysis of the data. Essential analytical tools and all the initial codes arose from the original research project and its theoretical propositions. Nevertheless, in some segments of more profound analysis, we also utilized inductive methods, due to the uniqueness of the research subject and, more or less, non-existence of adequate theoretical framework.

Following the completion of each of the single case studies, we made time series analysis to delineate changes over almost one decade, with the different stages of the social service reform in the Czech Republic.

4. Results: Interaction between Street-Level Bureaucrats and Clients

The analysis of the influence which the National Quality Standards dealing with everyday interactions between street-level bureaucrats and clients had on the primary process in the selected shelter services, revealed three areas of the primary process which had undergone profound changes. These are as follows: the intentionality of interactions on the part of street-level bureaucrats, communication strategies, and symmetrical relationship between street-level bureaucrats and clients. These issues will be described and discussed in more detail in the following three sections.

4.1 Shift in the Proportion of Random and Planned Interactions

As a result of introducing the NQS, we identified a decrease in the proportion of random, inadvertent and unsystematic interactions of street-level bureaucrats (SLBs) with clients in favour of planned, targeted and thought-out interactions.

The workers at the HWH were convinced at the time of the research that help based on the parental analogy was useful and needed. The SLBs were trying to develop a kind of quasi-family, personal and informal relationships with the clients. They therefore refused to plan any of the interactions with the clients. The workers claimed that “one also doesn’t plan at home” and “it can’t be planned anyway”. The intervention was supported rather by impressions and had quite a random and spontaneous nature. It showed an impulsive response to problems and events “as they happened” without aiming at a preset or long-term goal. In the context of the parental analogy it was essentially impossible to pursue an approach which would enable an intervention tailored to each client to be set. Differentiation between clients, favouring some and disadvantaging others occurred as a result of the quasi-family relationships. The workers and the management disregarded this tendency but it was quite obvious in the background of some events or disputes which were assessed and resolved by the workers variably from client to client depending on sympathy or antipathy towards the given client.

After the relatively short experience with implementation of the NQS the SfM had had at the time of the research, a certain shift occurred from random interactions of the SLBs to targeted interactions. It followed from the accounts of the SLBs that they were originally also used to working in a less systematic manner with the clients. After the introduction of the NQS, the SLBs tried to satisfy the requirements for providing a well-considered intervention where the client would be involved in the planning and continuous evaluation of the intervention as an equal partner. However, it became apparent that the SLBs did not know how they should perform individual planning in practice and were unaware of the direct link between the requirement for application of the

NQS and the changed form of the interactions with the clients. They tended to understand them as matters that made their work with the clients difficult. As a result, the client's own opinion did not play a great role in determining the goals of the intervention at the time of the research. The position of the SLBs was then even more difficult as they were tasked with supporting the meeting of these goals during their everyday communication with the clients, in a situation where they were to a certain degree personally responsible for a successful meeting of the goals by the clients.

The form of the interactions of the SLBs with the clients at the SH was already significantly influenced by the NQS at the time of the research. The work of the social workers with most clients was based on their individual plans of assistance, and the clients actively participated in the creation of these plans. However, two types of SLBs were present in the facility: social workers and lower social workers, and the form of interactions with the clients differed significantly between them. Meetings of the social workers with the clients were, with the exception of urgent situations, always planned in advance, they took place approximately once every month and their content was directed towards the plans which the client wished to accomplish through his/her stay at the SH. On the contrary, the lower social workers were in contact with the client intensely and on an everyday basis. Their work content, which originally rested on supervision over and material care of the clients, was broadened with the obligation to provide them also with social and psychological support in connection with the introduction of the NQS. However, the workers did not have access to information on the clients necessary for the provision of such support. They did not know the personal goals of the clients and their social or medical anamneses. The qualifications of these workers also did not comply with the requirement for provision of social and psychological care. As a result, the influence on the clients was unsystematic, random and to a considerable degree entrusted to incompetent workers. Although the interactions of the social workers with the clients were already standardised, i.e. they were very near to the NQS standard in formal terms and in their content, the everyday interaction of the lower social workers with the clients were by their nature closer to those we discussed in connection with the HWH.

4.2 Changes in Communication Strategies

The introduction of the NQS altered the way in which the SLBs dealt with the clients. On the other hand, the newly required respect for the rights and personality of the clients did not really change the asymmetric essence of the relationship. The SLBs only changed the style of communication with their clients. They stopped communicating with the clients through open orders, prohibitions, threatening with a sanction and emotional displays of resentment

and created hidden alternatives to the use of power and manipulation of the clients.

It can be deduced according to the accounts of the workers of the HWH that they found an informal and friendly style of communication with the clients and familiar communication to be ideal. In reality, the dialogue appeared to be a monologue-style approach to clients as the workers did not think about taking the clients' standpoints seriously. This approach to clients based on the parental analogy as applied in the monitored facility showed a significant asymmetry in the relationship between the workers and the clients. When the workers and the clients had different views of certain matters or situations, the main strategy of the workers was to reach agreement through "parental" talking to the clients. The objective was to convince the clients to accept the worker's point of view. If the approach proved ineffective in relation to a client, the workers chose an openly direct approach. In any case, the workers continued to have a major say in formulating the goals of the intervention. However, they always promoted, in a more or less direct way, their view of the client's situation and their understanding of the right solution.

We called the manner in which the SLBs applied their authority towards the clients as uncontrolled use of authority, i.e. a monologue-style, authoritative conduct with the elements of favouritism routinely applied to the clients. The SLBs were not forced to seek more symmetric strategies of intervention as they were not regulated by a concept which would, like for example the NQS, place emphasis on participation of the clients, their collaboration and dialogue. As one of the consequences of this approach, it was not clear to the workers and let alone the clients as to what the clients were responsible for and what they were able to influence.

It followed from the accounts of the HfM workers that the style and strategy of communication of the SLBs with the clients before the implementation of the NQS had many features similar to those we had caught and described at the first facility (the HWH). Written stipulation of the principles of dealing with clients was available to the SLBs relatively briefly at the time of the research in the form of various methodological instructions and, in particular, a code of conduct. The SLBs were able to echo back more or less accurately and fluently the general provisions of the NQS concerning respect for the client's personality, his/her uniqueness and rights, but struggled with the question of how to interpret the meaning of these provisions and ensure their application in practice. They were receiving zero support from the management of the facility in this respect – the management seemed to consider the transfer of the new methods of work to be a problem-free matter.

As one of the consequences, the SLBs were unable to recognise that in some cases the direct approach to the client is a justified and indeed the only

effective means of intervention. Their own interpretation of the NQS prevented them from understanding that in justified situations, the application of power in the area of social care need not exclusively mean suppression. The SLBs believed that the newly required approach to clients entirely prohibited direct intervention steps. Thus, instead of an openly directive approach, they chose more hidden and complex methods of manipulation intended to lead the clients where the SLBs thought it was desirable and, as much as possible, without the client being aware of this. In doing so, the SLBs disregarded the fact that such an approach contradicted the principles of respect for the client's personality more than an openly directive approach in justified cases – i.e. a controlled use of power⁸.

In connection with the implementation of the NQS, the management of the SH required that the SLBs consistently employ the so-called partnership approach in interactions with the clients, similarly as at the HfM. At the time of the research, the change in the approach of the SLBs to the clients had a practical display in the exercise of a less directive approach to the clients, abandonment of the curatorial role and effort towards standardisation of the working procedures so that they are foreseeable for the client, of the same quality regardless of the workers' sympathy or antipathy towards the clients and that the space for the clients' participation in decision-making broadens.

It followed from the account of the workers that transferring these principles to practice in the given facility was a long process of negotiation between the management and the SLBs on how to interpret the principles of the new approach and employ them in practice. One of the discussed themes consisted in the question of using directive approaches. The management strictly refused them at the early stage of implementation of the NQS. It was acknowledged after an intervention of the social workers that the latter were allowed to employ this approach in justified cases. This did not apply to lower social workers who, unlike the social workers, were not involved in the formulation of the new working procedures. At the time of the research, they were still dealing with the question as to how to perform, without sanction powers, the part of their working tasks that concerned providing for the operation of the facility. While previously they had been allowed to motivate the clients for certain activities (e.g. cleaning the dormitory) using a small reward or rather the opposite, "threaten" with a quick serious sanction in case of non-compliance with the home rules, now they had no direct sanctions, whether positive or negative, in relation to the clients.

⁸ See e.g. Kopfiva (2006) who explains in which cases a directive approach by the worker is appropriate – e.g. the client is in an acute crisis, there is a danger of delay. Furthermore, Laan (1998) points out that it is sometimes possible to achieve an increase in the client's emancipation rather by strategic conduct. (Habermas 1984) "Following the general criticism of social care, the discussion of emancipation versus disciplining can be conducted fruitfully only if we reach as far as considering and evaluating the individual cases". (Laan 1998: 85)

This situation led the workers to create an informal, hidden, auxiliary strategy consisting in a selective approach to the clients. The provision of informal exemptions, turning a blind eye to non-compliance with some of the rules, etc. depended on the clients' willingness and respect for the workers' instructions. However, an extensive use of this approach by the workers was prevented by a transparently and user-friendly institute of complaints, which had also been introduced in connection with the NQS.

4.3 Difficulties with Setting up a Symmetrical Relationship

As we showed above, the relationship between the SLBs and the clients was set asymmetrically in the first studied facility. In the second facility, this relationship had not been adjusted towards a greater symmetry, greater accomplishment of a partnership approach by the SLBs towards the clients; instead the workers began to seek strategies for masking their insistence on the original design of the relationship. In the third facility, a symmetrical relationship between the clients and the social workers who performed primarily as social consultants was successfully set up relatively soon, but negotiation of the symmetry was more difficult for the lower social workers who were in intensive everyday contact with the clients (see below). We had an opportunity to capture and describe some consequences for the clients and for the workers themselves in both approaches, i.e. the openly asymmetric relationship and the disguised asymmetric design of interaction. The experience from the third facility represents an example of the possible approach to promoting a partnership relation.

As we have already explained, within the quasi-family relationships observed at the HWH, well-considered intervention was replaced by an intuitive and unsystematic approach to the clients' situation. A situation arose on the clients' part where they had difficulty in understanding their rights and ways of enforcing them. In the concept based on "parental analogy", the clients were unable to decipher the nature of the SLBs – clients' relationship and sought with difficulty an appropriate style of communication with the workers. A phenomenon therefore arose which we termed "auto-selection by clients". The clients themselves, based on their personal relationship to the SLB and depending on the standard of their communication abilities, made decisions whether or not to start communication with the SLB and request help, for example in a difficult situation.

Thus, we described a paradox in our research where the importance of the SLBs and their help did not stem directly from the seriousness and complexity of the individual clients' situation. Instead, the intensity of the intervention depended on the clients' willingness to communicate with the worker and their individual willingness to maintain this communication in accordance with the

parental conception of intervention, i.e. to subject to the conception of themselves as immature children. As a consequence of this paradox, the most communicative, adaptable, loyal and essentially problem-free clients (in the environment of institutional care) received help from the SLBs more likely.

Another paradoxical situation occurred at the HfM after the introduction of the NQS. We have described above that the SLBs tended to persist in perceiving clients as unequal partners. However, the requirements of the NQS as interpreted by the workers themselves forced them in a complicated direction. The advantage was then in fact on the part of the seemingly weaker partner, i.e. the clients. In the context of the distorted understanding of the NQS requirements, the position of the SLBs towards the clients weakened according to their own interpretation. The absence of any explanation of the meaning of the NQS and the other newly declared rules and guidance for the SLBs resulted in a situation where they created their own interpretations of the rules. It followed from the accounts of the SLBs that they attempted to avoid any open conflicts with the clients and if they wanted to achieve something, they often had to almost worm into the clients' favour. On the contrary, the clients did not have to be so careful in picking the means of negotiation. They began to prefer methods of communication that proved the most successful in promoting their interests. Some of the questioned clients admitted that they were capable of "being unpleasant" when they wanted to achieve something. In some cases the clients did not hesitate to exert strong emotional pressure on the personnel including very animated displays of emotion. In an attempt to honour their understanding of the requirements of the NQS, the SLBs were unable to effectively face these clients' conduct. Thus, the position of the SLBs towards the clients became very uncertain or evasive. The workers experienced this uncertainty every day and it was a very tiresome and stressful situation for them. Perhaps a pathological model of communication was sometimes generated which was gradually firming on both sides.

As we suggested above, the institute of complaints played an important role in the establishment of the symmetrical relationship between the SLBs and the clients at the SH. However, according to the statement of the workers, it took a long time in the facility before the use of the institute was set up properly. In the first phase of implementation of the NQS, the manager of the facility in charge of dealing with the clients' complaints had automatically considered every complaint of a client to be a display of a worker's failure. This resulted in uncertainty of the workers on how to act in specific situations. After an external expert drew attention of the management of the SH to the fact that work in such conditions was psychologically very demanding for the SLBs as they were permanently exposed to the pressure of a potential complaint of the clients about anything and had no rules of a "proper" dealing with the clients, the

management of the SH reconsidered the rules for handling complaints. At the time of the research, every complaint was handled with the participation of both parties, i.e. the client and the worker, and their view of the situation was considered equal by the manager. The position of the workers towards the clients was again gradually levelling. The institute of complaints continued to help balance swings in the symmetry of the relationship between the SLBs and the clients in the facility as it prevented proliferation of the above-described hidden manipulation methods to the employment of which lower social workers inclined.

Discussion: Conception of Clients as the Core of Approach to Clients

It is obvious from the above that the transfer of generally formulated standards to the everyday practice of street-level bureaucrats (SLBs) is not an easy and straightforward process. Although the SLBs at the HfM and the SH generally expressed their consent with the principles of the NQS in the area of respect for clients' uniqueness and rights, promotion of these principles in practice was successful only with difficulty. In both facilities, the implementation of the NQS meant both a change in the position of the SLBs towards the clients and a significant change in the approaches of these workers to the clients. Their previous practice became disputable and the workers themselves felt threatened in their position. The requirement for new approaches, which are always more demanding than routinely performed activities, was perceived by many SLBs as an additional load in the already difficult working conditions. According to Heikkilä and Julkunen (2003), this kind of situation represents one of the barriers, most often unrealised by the personnel, to successful implementation of a change.

Meyers, Glaser and Mac Donald (1998) reached a similar conclusion on the basis of their research. Even if the first prerequisite of success of change is met, i.e. most of the SLBs agree with the reforms, it happens that they fail in their effort to act in accordance with the principles and goals of the reform. In their opinion, this is caused by the SLBs' working conditions, understanding of their work and the conception of their mission within the given social service. Our research shows that in addition to the aforementioned aspects, another one factor which stands in the way of a coherent implementation of the requirements of the reform needs to be analysed in detail. This factor consists in inertness of the very core of the approach to clients towards changes implemented from outside. We further summarily term our understanding of the core of approach to clients as "conception of the client".

Under the term "conception of the client", we understand what Musil (2006) describes as shared opinion of workers on what the clients of the service are like and where their problems rest. The conception constitutes itself gradually

at the level of SLBs, both on the basis of their specific experience with the clients and within their working conditions (e.g. procedures of work, delineation of authority and competence). The conception of client arises in the form of general conclusions, influences the approach to the individual clients, including every new client with whom the workers do not have a unique experience as yet.

It followed from interviews with the SLBs in the facilities studied by us that these workers had an unconscious tendency to recall uncomfortable experiences with clients. The overall conception of the client was established by drawing general conclusions from partial experience with clients, which the SLBs perceived as problematic or explicitly negative. However, the workers described these experiences as typical experiences and had no doubts on their own conception of the client. As a result, the conception of the client employed by the SLBs in these facilities acted on their preconception of the client rather than on a well-considered and consistent basis of the entire intervention work as anticipated by the NQS.

The basic conception of the client on which the SLBs relied in the provision of the service consisted in a picture of the client as a lax, irresponsible person disoriented with respect to normal social environment. At the HWH, the SLBs built on a conception of clients as immature, essentially irresponsible and rather unreliable children and the entire essence of the intervention was based on this conception of the client. They had deeply identified themselves with their conception of the client and felt no dilemmas or tension in connection with that conception.

At the SFM, the primary, established conception of the client was very similar to the conception we had noted in the previous case (the HWH). The workers there had also built on a conception of the client as immature, unreliable, with inclination to childish thinking and acting. In addition, they had perceived clients as untrustworthy. When the conception of the client shared by the SLBs was confronted with the requirements of the NQS the result has been a relatively strong discrepancy between the rooted conception of the client and the newly promoted conception and declarations of correct attitudes and approaches.

In the last of the studied facilities (the SH), they had had a long experience with the NQS and the latter were already a valid legal standard at the time of the research. The management of the facility insisted particularly on employment of the so-called partnership approach. In accordance with this new requirements, the SLBs at SH extended their rooted conception of the client with a certain respect for the client's own will, without being capable of inner identification with such respect. However, it clearly followed from the interviews with the SLBs that their original conception of the client as a person

unable to maintain personal hygiene, clean living environment and to accept commitments lived on. It served them as the main starting point for everyday work with the clients also after implementation of the NQS.

It clearly followed from our research that it is very difficult to replace a shared understanding of clients by SLBs with a different conception or at least modify it. The NQS with the concept of an active client aim directly against the essence of the conception of the client which prevailed in the services studied by us. The SLBs usually have a strongly established conception of the client and reproduce it day after day, while new requirements usually reach them indirectly, often fragmentarily and out of context. We pointed this out from the very beginning of our research as one of the great pitfalls of the summary and essentially directive introduction of the NQS. Workers at the street level will either circumvent the new requirements under the normative pressure of the NQS or, even more often, they will try to selectively comply with them but without inner acceptance.

We believe on the basis of our research that duality in conception of the client is the best result SLBs are able to achieve under the above-described circumstances of NQS implementation. The SLBs were to a certain degree able and willing to accept the concept of an active and equal client brought by the NQS but they were simultaneously unable to give up the established conception. They used the new conception of the client as guidance for setting up observable displays of their interactions with clients, but the original conception still served as the actual frame of reference with respect to their dealing with clients. They subjectively felt the greatest success in work when, using a seemingly dialogical relationship, they took clients where they themselves thought it was best for the clients.

Vojak (2009: 936) sees the conception of client as essential for the social service delivery on an equitable basis. He claims that “social service providers who care about social justice, but do not understand the relationship between language and the larger social vision they want to help create, may unwittingly undermine their own project by reinforcing the language of hegemony.” Inspired by Lipsky (1980), we believe that the conception of client applied by street-level bureaucrats may either undermine or, on the contrary, enhance the client's dignity both within the scope of the particular service agency and their environment, in that it directly affects not only the client's self-image, but also the attitude of other people, institutions and public towards clients.

Our findings suggest that if SLBs are not involved in discussions on the implementation of the NQS, the changes taking place do not interfere with their conception of the client. If, in addition, the requirement for a new approach to clients is set only very vaguely, it cannot undermine the original, established conception of and approach to clients at the level of everyday interactions of

SLBs with clients. Neither the workers' goodwill can initiate the mechanisms necessary for a change in the area of "thoughts, decisions and actions of individuals" on which, according to Valkenburg (2007), depends the success of implementation of new standards and measures. Even when the workers were able, at least seemingly, to harmonise some of their "decisions" and "actions" with the requirements of the NQS, goodwill in itself was not enough to change "thoughts" – conception of the client. Attitudes – where conception of the client belongs – cannot be changed merely by a conscious decision to accept an outer standard. According to Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2003), the behaviour of the SLBs is largely influenced by their own moral judgement of the clients with whom they interact, rather than by rules and regulations. These moral judgements are based on their personal knowledge of, and constant interactions with, the clients. This implies that the changing conception of the client requires not only personal involvement of the particular workers in the changes necessary from the point of view of the NQS implementation as suggested above, but also their continual training in ethics and issues relating to their clients (their lifestyle, life conditions, world view, culture), as well as in social work methods.

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Appendix 1

Standards for quality in social services (2002: 7-13) – chosen Standards and their description:

Standard No 2 PROTECTION OF SOCIAL SERVICES USERS' RIGHTS

In its activities the facility respects the basic human rights of the services users, their demands arising from other existing legal regulations and rules of citizens' coexistence. The facility has defined areas in which breach of users' rights could occur in connection with the delivery of services. The following areas are especially sensitive: protection of personal freedom, privacy, personal data, right to education and free choice of occupation, protection against any form of abuse, forced labour, discrimination, etc. For these areas the facility has written internal rules which in practice effectively prevent the breaking of rights of services users. The user's decision about solving his/her own socially disadvantaged situation by means of social services is respected.

Standard No 3 DEALING WITH A PROSPECTIVE SERVICE USER

Before the conclusion of an agreement, the prospective services user (*i.e. person interested in receiving a service*) is acquainted with all the conditions of services delivery. The facility employee finds out what the person expects from the service and then together they formulate how the provided service will meet the agreed goals. Responsible persons from the facility will agree with the person what personal goals the service will fulfil and what will be the specific form, process, conditions and extent of the services which the facility will provide. Personal goals are based on the potentials and abilities of the prospective service user. Social and health diagnosis and ensuing limitations are applied mainly during the stage of planning the way of achieving the set goal, of preparing a strategy to minimise the risks, etc.

Standard No 4 AGREEMENT ON THE PROVISION OF SERVICE

Social services are provided to the user on the grounds of a concluded Agreement on the provision of service. The agreement will stipulate all important aspects of the service provision including the personal goal which the service should fulfil. The Agreement is concluded according to the needs of the user and to the nature of the service, either orally or in writing. The concluded agreements are filed. The user can terminate the Agreement any time; the facility only under the conditions set forth in the Agreement.

Standard No 5 PLANNING AND ACTUAL IMPLEMENTATION OF SERVICES PROVISION

The provision of services respects the personal goals and needs of the user and is based above all on his/her abilities. The implementation (the course) of the service is adequately planned. The implementation of the service is based predominately on internal resources and the potential of the user, follows the achieving of agreed personal goals and is planned together with the user. The fulfilment of the user's personal goals is re-assessed during the course of the service. The user has a possibility to change his/her personal goals. The facility has its written internal rules which govern the planning of the process of service delivery. Depending on the nature of the services the way of recording the implementation of services provision is settled (including the deadlines and the way how the service delivery can be re-assessed). Individual (specific) employees of the facility are responsible for planning and the implementation of the service provided to individual users. The facility has the criteria for the evaluation whether the personal goals of services users are being met.

Standard No 7 COMPLAINTS ABOUT QUALITY OR WAY OF SOCIAL SERVICES DELIVERY

The users can complain about the quality or way of the delivery of social services, without being themselves in any way jeopardised by doing so. For this purpose, the facility has specified and asserts internal rules, which both users and employees are acquainted with.

Standard No 8 LINKS TO OTHER RESOURCES

The facility is active in encouraging the user to make use of common public services which are available in the neighbourhood. The facility also encourages the user to use his/her own natural networks such as his/her family, friends, and tries to prevent him/her from developing of addiction to a social service. If needed, it enables the user to use other social services.