

International

The Counseling Profession in Russia: Historical Roots, Current Trends, and Future Perspectives

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Psychology was established in Russia before the Communist era. The social work profession was created in 1991 for a society in turmoil after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In 2011, the counseling profession officially emerged as a branch of social work called *social psychological help*. Professional counseling associations are in the formative stage. Concern about mental health issues, particularly substance abuse, suggests that the counseling profession could continue to grow in Russia.

Keywords: counseling, Russia, Russian Federation, social psychological help

The Russian Federation, a vast nation that spans 11 time zones across the continents of Europe and Asia, has a profound 1,000-year intellectual and spiritual tradition. The Russian nation has weathered the cataclysms of its history and, today, finds itself facing an array of political, economic, and social challenges that call for the development of adequate mental health services. The counseling profession is one of the more recent innovations. To understand the position of counseling among the present trends and future perspectives of the mental health professions in Russia, one needs to understand Russia's current situation, as well as the historical forces that have shaped its culture.

Russia is home to 160 different ethnic groups and indigenous people, living in a land that borders on 14 different countries. An important unifying aspect of this diverse nation of cities, however, is its common official language. Although its 141.9 million people speak more than 140 languages and dialects, almost all of them also speak Russian. Despite its ethnic diversity and massive size, the Russian educational system has achieved a 99.4% literacy rate, higher than that of the United States. Approximately 7 million students attend the country's 1,090 higher education institutions, almost all of which are state supported (Central Intelligence Agency [CIA], n.d.; U.S. Department of State, Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs, n.d.). Russia places a high value on education, and directives from the Russian government form the basis of curriculum development.

In addition, Russia is a nation of urban centers. It is the largest country in the world, with a land mass almost twice that of the United States, even though Russia's population is only half as large (141.9 million vs. 308.7 million; CIA, n.d.; U.S. Department of State, Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs, n.d.). However, to compare Russia's population density (22 people per square mile) with that of the United States (76 people per square mile) is entirely misleading. Russia has 13 cities of more than a million people, compared with nine such cities in the United States ("List of Cities and Towns in Russia," n.d.; "List of United States Cities," n.d.). Moreover, approximately 20% of Russia's entire population lives in these massive urban centers, compared with a mere 8% of the United States' population living in its nine largest cities. By this key measure, Russia is more urban than the United States, and this urbanization has a significant impact on its social problems, the delivery of its social services, and the type of training programs that may prove effective in meeting its social needs.

To meet the needs of a rapidly changing society following the fall of the Communist regime in 1991, the field of social work emerged in Russia in 1991. The counseling profession is now officially established as a branch within the social work field, as a result of a government directive that went into effect in 2011 (Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation [Ministry of Education and Science], 2009). Another recent government policy calls for the creation of

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an addictions counseling specialty, offering the potential for counselors to work alongside psychologists and medical doctors in the treatment of addictions. A look at Russian history, including the history of its mental health professions, may provide an understanding of the unique aspects of Russian culture that affect the potential for the emerging counseling profession in the world's largest country.

■ Political and Religious History (962–Present)

Reporting on how Russians are likely to respond to the trauma of terror, a Russian public opinion analyst gave an insight that resonates throughout Russian history: "People place their trust in the president, the army and the church" (Krainova & von Twickel, 2009). From Russia's beginnings as Kievan Rus in the year 962, whether the Russian leader has been called prince, czar, or prime minister, that "president" is an authoritarian leader. That army is the Red Army that took Berlin and won World War II after heroically turning back the 1,000-mile invasion of German soldiers at Stalingrad on the Volga. The grandfather of that army 130 years earlier pummeled Napoleon at the gates of Moscow and hounded him back to the streets of Paris. One hundred years before that, the czar and his army withstood the incredible onslaught of Charles XII of Sweden over several years of campaigning across the entire Russian frontier from the Baltic to the Crimea. Three centuries before that, another Russian prince led an alliance from Moscow that finally broke the Mongol Tatar power to which the Russian principalities had paid tribute for 200 years since the invasion of Genghis Khan. In all these campaigns, an autocratic leader rallied the troops and called for the blessing of the Russian Orthodox Church upon the army to save Holy Mother Russia from a foreign invader. Strong leadership, overpowering force, and spiritual unity: When faced with national crisis, the Russian nation has always turned to these resources. Russians will often attest to the necessity of an authoritarian central government in order to subdue and bring order to a vast land and its people, even as they steel themselves against its abuses ("History of Russia," n.d.).

■ Communism and Its Legacy (1917–1991)

The first half of the 20th century brought Russia unremitting political violence and economic upheaval. Millions perished in World War I, and the bloodshed continued as Lenin's Bolsheviks seized control during the 1917 Revolution and forcefully subdued all opposition. When Lenin died 2 years after founding the Soviet Union in 1922, Stalin ascended to lead a vindictive totalitarian regime that annihilated somewhere between 3 million to 60 million people in the 1930s through political policies and a purge known as the Great Terror. He

deported nearly 3.3 million ethnic minorities to Siberia or the Central Asian Republics, 43% of whom perished from diseases or malnutrition; and he forced agricultural collectivization, resulting in the starvation of millions of people in what is sometimes called the Ukrainian Genocide. Stalin's terror campaign against religion was brutal: In 1917, there were 54,000 Russian Orthodox churches in Russia; by 1939, only hundreds remained. Countless thousands of religious clergy were executed ("History of Russia," n.d.).

By no means did those events mark the end of Russian suffering, because Russia was subsequently drawn into World War II. To put Russia's losses in perspective, the United States mourned the loss of more than 500,000 combatants and the destruction of Pearl Harbor. The Soviet state endured 2 years of occupation and the razing of much of the land ranging from its western borders almost 1,000 miles to the Volga River. Estimates of the unprecedented slaughter suffered by its citizens begin at 20 million, more than any other country in the war.

After the war, Stalin set up Communist governments in many Eastern European countries, hanging the Iron Curtain and ushering in the Cold War era. The last leader of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev, attempted to reform the Communist system through *perestroika* (restructuring) and *glasnost* (openness). When the attempted reforms failed, Gorbachev resigned as Soviet president in 1991. The Soviet Union collapsed days later ("History of Russia," n.d.).

■ History of the Mental Health Professions

Psychology had made inroads into Russia during the time of Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), whose works were all translated into Russian. A psychotherapy journal was published from 1910 to 1914, a psychoanalytical association was formed, and a psychoanalytical kindergarten existed in Moscow (Sosland, 1997). After the 1917 Revolution, however, psychology and psychiatry eventually became tools in the hands of the totalitarian government. Psychological concepts incompatible with Marx's and Lenin's ideology were banned. Anyone whose ideas posed a threat to the existing authority could be given a psychiatric diagnosis and confined to a psychiatric hospital. This psychiatric confinement would be documented in the person's work history and government paperwork, thereby seriously limiting job opportunities. Psychology became a repressive power, a dangerous tool. The totalitarian government contributed to a Russian mind-set that to be open and candid with anyone outside close family and friends is dangerous. Conversations about personal concerns took place with drinking friends or face to face, in the kitchen. A continuing distrust of psychology has its roots during this time.

As the Communist government gradually became more liberal before the time of *perestroika*, the field of psychology gained official government recognition (Sosland, 1997). As a result, most Russian universities house a psychology department, and psychologists work in schools to provide services

similar to those provided by school counselors in the United States, including vocational guidance (Popova, 2003).

In 1991, Boris Yeltsin became the first president of the newly formed Russian Federation, and the social and economic changes that took place during this time affected the growth of the mental health professions. The Communist infrastructure had disintegrated, but the new government did not yet have the financial means or organization to meet the social needs of its citizens. Therefore, in 1991, the same year that Soviet Communism died, the social work profession was born in Russia. In addition, because Russians had been closed off from the West for 70 years, there was now a hunger for new knowledge, including Western psychology. Countless educational institutions sprang up, including psychology programs from various orientations. Thus, glasnost, freedom of speech, and the fall of the Communist system encouraged the development of the mental health professions.

The economic and political legacy of Communism in Russia is still unfolding. Stripped of the Eastern bloc and the 14 now independent former Soviet Republics, the Russian Federation is looking to deeper historical roots to rediscover its identity. For a millennium, the Russian Orthodox Church has considered itself responsible for the *soul care* of its people. The church was an island to which a person could come for direction or comfort concerning life problems. Although not contributing directly to the growth of the mental health professions, the concepts of benevolence, helping others, and gaining self-understanding with the help of a person or authority outside the immediate circle of family and friends provide a model for the counseling relationship. As it becomes apparent that the current social needs in Russia are too great for the government to adequately meet, many think that the Russian Orthodox Church and other religious organizations must take initiative to meet these needs.

The counseling profession, just emerging in Russia, follows a different path from that of the United States, where vocational guidance developed, partly because of the population migration to large urban areas in the early 1900s during the Industrial Revolution (Aubrey, 1977; Neukrug, 2007). In Russia, however, schools and factories were closely linked, and the world of work was taught in the schools, starting in the primary grades. Vocational guidance began in the former Soviet Union in 1924; however, individuals were placed in professions not only on the basis of aptitude and preference, but also according to government needs (Brewer, 1942). Because psychology had come to Russia before the 1917 Revolution, vocational guidance in schools became the domain of school psychologists, who often coordinate with teachers (Popova, 2003).

Vocational counseling in Russia continues to be a separate specialty field, not identified with a mental health profession, as it is in the United States. In this article, we focus on the counseling profession as it is currently understood, with its

characteristics of being strength based, emphasizing skills training, and including supervised work in real-life settings as an essential piece of the training process. The year 2011 became the first time that a counseling curriculum emphasizing strengths, skills, and training was introduced into the Russian universities (Ministry of Education and Science, 2009).

Current Status of the Counseling Profession

In a nation that keeps its suffering to itself, and where neither antidepressant medication nor psychotherapy has yet taken root, vodka is widely regarded as *the* remedy for a range of physical and emotional problems. (Althausen, 1996, p. 683)

The counseling profession in Russia is just beginning to emerge as a branch of social work, itself a new Russian profession. Currently, separate university departments for the purpose of counselor training do not exist. Professional associations are just starting to be formed, and there is no credentialing or licensing process. The counseling profession is emerging from a directive by the Ministry of Education and Science (2009), which has added a specialization called *social psychological help*, housed under the social work umbrella. Social psychological help will be roughly the equivalent of counseling as it is currently understood in the United States, with its emphasis on counseling skills and its strength-based approach. This branch would be specifically designated *help* and not counseling, so as to not be confused with the field of psychology, which is often called *psychological counseling*. This specialization will be offered at the bachelor's degree level.

In addition, in its State Anti-Narcotic Policy, the Russian government has issued a directive that calls for substance abuse specialist training programs to be operative by the year 2020. This directive opens the door for the field of addictions counseling to burgeon in Russia (M. Kitmanov, personal communication, January 24, 2011), with the potential for counselors to work alongside the psychologists and medical professionals who have traditionally handled substance abuse problems in narcology hospitals.

Also under consideration by the Ministry of Education and Science is the addition of actual practice in the skills of the profession, what American counseling programs term *practicum and internship experiences*. These work experiences in real-life settings would supplement the purely theoretical curriculum traditionally offered in the past. Although it is yet unclear how skills in the profession will be tested, these regulations are an important step in distinguishing the Russian counseling profession from the profession of psychology.

In addition to the new specialty approved by the Ministry of Education and Science in state-sponsored universities, organizations in the private sector have initiated new pro-

grams in counseling training and continuing education. These organizations include private institutions of higher education, professional counseling associations, and seminaries. For example, the Russian-American Institute in Moscow currently offers three levels of counseling training programs: an evening baccalaureate program that culminates in a government-recognized degree, a 2-year training program, and a 5-month program. Graduates of the program may subsequently teach entry-level classes and may later provide mentoring and supervision as they become more experienced in the field. In addition, students who graduate from these programs may join the recently organized professional association of counselors associated with the institute. The association will endeavor to become a center of competence in the counseling field by providing opportunities for continuing education, such as conferences and seminars. These events will feature mental health experts from Russia, the United States, and elsewhere, teaching on specialty topics such as marriage and family counseling, play therapy, trauma, addictions counseling, group counseling, premarital counseling, and other topics of interest.

In addition, seminaries are beginning to incorporate pastoral counseling courses into their training curricula (Bowen & Bishop, 2003) in an effort to equip church leaders to meet the psychological needs of their members. Churches have proved to be an effective venue for presenting psychoeducational programs on a wide variety of topics, as well as a vital support system for those recovering from addictions (M. Kitmanov, personal communication, January 24, 2011). The training of church leaders is particularly important, because Russians tend to trust their church leaders (Krainova & von Twickel, 2009) more than they might trust a mental health professional in the public sector. Russia has had a history of providing soul care through its churches, and that tradition continues.

Counselors trained through all the aforementioned venues might work in orphanages, schools, hospitals, substance abuse treatment centers, and churches, as well as for various types of charitable funds formed by businesses and other organizations, in order to help specific populations. For instance, some funds provide counseling services to orphans, help orphans adapt to society when released from the orphanage, counsel troubled families, and meet various types of other needs. In addition, some mental health professionals are beginning to open private practices, although the demand for private practice services is small because of the limited economic resources of most of the Russian population.

The need for these trained counselors is evident, because Russia is beset by a myriad of social problems as a result of the economic and political upheaval connected with the fall of the Communist infrastructure in 1991. A few statistics will demonstrate that the situation is ripe for the introduction of a new mental health profession. Currently, there are approximately 700,000 orphans in Russia, a number greater than that after World War II. Approximately two thirds of these

children are termed *social orphans*, taken from their families because of abuse or alcoholism, or abandoned by their parents for various reasons (Achmatova, 2010). Counselors are needed to work with these children in the orphanages, as well as outside the orphanage, when, as adults, they must adjust to living and working in society.

In its State Anti-Narcotic Policy, the Russian government has recognized the pressing need for trained substance abuse counselors by issuing a directive that calls for the training of specialists by the year 2020. Between 1990 and 2003, vodka sales in Russia increased by 68%, so that Russian hard liquor consumption is now estimated to be the highest in the world. One study indicated that one third of all deaths; three quarters of all murders; and almost one half of all external causes of death, such as industrial accidents and car accidents, are alcohol related (Nemtsov as cited in Shlapentokh, 2005). Both expert and public opinion in Russia blame the high alcoholism rate for the short life expectancy of 59.50 years for Russian men, compared with 73.17 years for Russian women. In contrast, life expectancy in the United States averages 78.24 years: 75.78 for men and 80.81 years for women (CIA, n.d.). In addition to alcohol, the use of opiates such as heroin is also on the increase. It is estimated that there are currently 2 million people in Russia who use opiates. This estimate represents 2% of the Russian adult population, a figure much higher than the approximate 0.4% of adults worldwide who use opiates (Bobrova et al., 2008).

Approximately 1,500 to 2,000 substance abuse treatment centers are currently operating in Russia, but more are needed, and standards of quality must be defined. New government standards have opened the door for a specialty in addictions counseling, and this specialty may prove to be the fastest growing for the counseling profession in Russia.

Other statistics indicate the need for counselors in Russia. Of the 99 countries for which the World Health Organization (WHO) tracks suicide statistics, Russia ranks highest, with 70.6 male suicides and 11.9 female suicides per 100,000 people. These figures contrast with those of the United States, which has 17.6 suicides per 100,000 people for males and 4.1 suicides per 100,000 people for females (WHO, n.d.). The reported adult prevalence of HIV/AIDS in Russia stands at 1.1%, compared with 0.6% in the United States (CIA, n.d.). There is a need for more educational programs on HIV prevention and care, as well as counseling for individuals and families who are affected. The incidence of domestic violence in Russia is estimated to be 4 to 5 times greater than that in other developed countries, with approximately 14,000 Russian women killed by male partners each year (Horne, 1999). Although social services organizations have begun to provide aid for victims and families, more counseling services, shelters, and other support services are needed. In addition, Russia has been cited as a source, transit stop, and destination point for the trafficking of men,

women, and children for the purposes of sexual exploitation and forced labor (CIA, n.d.). With their social justice emphasis, counselors can advocate for individuals and become involved in the social systems that affect them.

Future of the Counseling Profession

There is potential for the counseling profession to grow in Russia. The social needs are compelling, and the need for counselors is evident. Addictions counseling may hold the most potential for growth in the next 5 to 10 years. During the Communist era, alcoholism was viewed as strictly a medical problem and was therefore treated by doctors through medical means. When Russia opened to the West, some programs began to integrate counseling into their traditionally medical treatment. The Russian government directive that calls for the training of substance abuse counselors allows both public and private institutions to oversee substance abuse treatment and may open the door for these specialists to work alongside psychologists and psychiatrists in treatment centers. Many substance abuse treatment centers struggle because they are self-supported and not able to send workers to Moscow or other large cities for training. Therefore, in addition to centers of professional competence in key cities, more regional training in counseling is needed to improve the quality of the services (M. Kitmanov, personal communication, January 24, 2011).

Several counseling techniques may prove to be particularly effective in Russian culture. In a country with a 99.4% literacy rate and where education is highly valued, psychoeducational programs tend to be appealing. Because Russians are generally hesitant to trust those outside their close circle of family and friends, psychoeducational programs have the additional advantage, in contrast to individual therapy, of offering helpful information without requiring significant self-disclosure. Programs on various topics may be developed in venues such as schools, universities, medical clinics, churches, and other places.

Russians are accustomed to strong leadership and central authority; therefore, techniques that are directive rather than nondirective in nature may prove to be more culturally congruent. In addition, suffering is viewed differently in Russia than in the United States. Long, cold winters with limited sunlight, along with difficult living conditions and deprivations, have produced an acceptance of suffering in many Russians. Techniques that overemphasize optimism and limitless possibilities are not likely to be as well accepted in Russia as in the United States. Another aspect of Russian culture that affects counseling techniques is its strong nuclear family system that gives the culture a more communal, rather than individualistic, quality. Effective counseling techniques in Russia must take this communal aspect into account.

The growth of the counseling profession in Russia may be linked to its economic recovery. Currently, mental health

professional salaries are comparatively low; therefore, although many students complete mental health degrees, relatively few continue to work in the field because they cannot survive financially. The mental health professions in general must become more financially attractive in order to thrive, and much of that success has to do with the health of the Russian economy.

Conclusion

The history of the mental health professions in Russia started with the introduction of psychology before the Communist era. The social work profession was established in 1991, the year that also marked the collapse of the Communist system. In 2011, counseling officially emerged as a social work branch called social psychological help. In addition, government policies have called for the creation of training programs for substance abuse counseling, a specialty that may prove to be one of the fastest growing areas in the next 5 to 10 years. The Ministry of Education and Science is currently changing its educational emphasis to include practical training in counseling skills and practice in working in real-life settings, in addition to the purely theoretical knowledge that has characterized mental health training in the past.

Russia has a long history of foreign invasions, causing it to carefully guard its political and cultural independence. Since the time of Peter the Great (1672–1725), Russia has intermittently opened and then closed its doors to the West, being fascinated with Western ideas and lifestyles and at the same time being cautious not to be absorbed into Western philosophies. Russia is a Slavic nation, neither entirely Western nor Eastern in mind-set and culture. Having produced some of the world's greatest writers and musicians, such as Pushkin, Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, and Tchaikovsky, to name a few, Russians guard their national pride and identity as a Slavic nation with different roots and values than those of the often pragmatic and materialistic West. This nationalistic rivalry between Western and Slavic people remains a prominent dynamic in current Russian social and political views. Therefore, any philosophy or therapy with Western roots must be adjusted to fit the unique character of the Russian people.

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