



Understanding care for the poor in rural Russia

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A B S T R A C T

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The issues surrounding care and care-provision have been key themes in social scientific research, yet the intersections between care and poverty, particularly in rural contexts, have not been sufficiently explored. This paper addresses this gap by studying care for the poor in rural Russia. It argues that isolated, disengaged and decontextualised caring interventions often ignore situated possibilities and traditions of care and overlook what matters to poor people. To overcome this problem, the paper uses Heidegger's (1978, 1993) dwelling approach to prioritise a relational framework that focuses on care as concern, solicitude and possibilities for supportive action in the context of rural Russia. Using examples from fieldwork in two Russian villages, the paper stresses the constitutive role of non-representable practices of care which provide the ontological basis for recognising and understanding the world-views and coping practices of the poor. It concludes with conceptual observations about alternative approaches to care, relations to others and responsibility for the rural poor.

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1. Introduction

The issues surrounding care and care-provision have been important themes in social scientific research (Smith, 1998; Silk, 2000; Massey, 2004), yet the intersections between care and poverty, particularly in rural contexts, have not been sufficiently explored. This paper addresses this gap by looking at the ways in which care is woven into the fabric of rural life in Russia, where there exists a certain disconnection between anti-poverty measures and the poor people themselves (Rimashevskaya, 2004). It uses a philosophical approach to care and builds upon recent work on poverty in changing post-socialist contexts, which suggests the existence of diverging interpretations, experiences and practices of disadvantage involving “both the unmaking of a previous way of life and a step toward a new, unknown one” (Humphrey, 2002, p.xx). The transition to post-socialism involved uncertainties and ambivalences, which required plural interpretations of continuity and changes in the Russian countryside, as well as nuanced understandings of multiple cultural constructions and practices of poverty (Shubin, 2006, 2010). In this context, the meanings of “poverty” and “care” differ and change depending on their interpretations by policy makers and locally embedded actors, who negotiate disadvantage differently depending on the regional context (Verdery, 2001), their gender (Pine and Bridger, 1998), ethnicity (Thelen et al., 2011), disability (Phillips, 2011) and age

(Hlebec, 2010). As Read (2007) stresses, the transition to post-socialism created new forms of economic vulnerability and revealed different forms of poverty, which require attention to alternative forms of support and understanding of the messy construction of the “rural poor”.

Both Anglo-American and Russian rural poverty studies have shifted away from their initial focus on inequalities of opportunities in the countryside, “poor” places and the measurement of different aspects of impoverishment of rural people to a broader understanding of poverty as cultural, social exclusion, feelings of loss, belonging and acceptance of personal anti-poverty strategies (Yaroshenko, 2001; Bondarenko, 2005; Cloke et al., 1995; Milbourne, 2006; see also Schwarz, 2012 in this special issue). To reflect this shift, this paper offers an understanding of care beyond normative fixes within the landscape of formal institutions and statistical notions of welfare for the poor, which do not include disadvantaged people themselves. It attends to dynamic poverty and heterogeneous poverty processes, linking needy rural people, artefacts, histories, emotions and co-produced embodied and affective dimensions of care often neglected in welfare policies.¹

In addressing care for rural people living in everyday and ‘messy’ poverty, the article follows several studies on care (Morse et al., 1990; Tronto, 1987; Benner, 2001; Gordon, 1999; see also Kay, 2012 in this volume). First, it considers care as both an affective

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¹ This approach does not deny structural factors causing poverty and possibilities of care for the poor, but attempts to open up new opportunities for attending to often overlooked experiences of disadvantage.

and physical entity that is implicated in the production of particular social spaces and defines our engagement with materials, relations and emotions of vulnerable others (after Conradson, 2003). Second, this paper builds upon a relational framework that stresses continuity and relationality of care as a part of the very process of being-in-the-world and relating to places where care occurs. Care, in this case, can be defined as “orientation and embodied practice [which] holds the possibility ... of facilitating new ways of being together” (Conradson, 2011, p.454). Third, this paper considers care as having no pre-defined meaning² and always emerging in everyday routines, precognitive triggers and fleeting encounters before conscious and reflective thought (Popke, 2008). It focuses on negotiated and performed care for the poor by moving beyond the morality or representation of care seeking to enforce moral conduct, binary accounts of care-full and care-less places and proscribing stereotypes of moral expectations in relation to responsibilities towards disadvantaged people (cf. Parr and Philo, 2003). It draws on studies of care as an affective orientation towards the other (Popke, 2008), capacity to respond to corporeal engagements and create “com-passionate” socialities (Jones, 1993), as well as feminist theory linking affective care to moral decision-making, a way of relating to others through “normative concern for inclusion” (Staeheli and Brown, 2003:773) and responsiveness awakened by the other’s vulnerability (Ruddick, 1990; Beasley and Bacchi, 2005).

Building on this research, this paper studies the process of care for the poor in two villages in Russia by addressing three research questions. First, it explores the ways in which affective and engaged help can encourage attention to different poverty experiences tied to particular places. Second, it studies opportunities for expressive and performative care to induce compassionate responses to poverty. Third, it examines the possibilities offered by care to challenge existing social arrangements and poverty discourses. From the outset, it develops a conceptual approach, which attends to multiplicities of poverty and reveals unexpectedly hope-ful, care-ful and “soul-full” geographies of care for the poor in rural Russia. The paper then examines existing links between care and responsive policymaking in rural Russia, and uses an empirical discussion to tease out embodied and emotional realities of care in relation to policies of welfare. It concludes with conceptual observations about alternative approaches to care, relations to others based on the fundamental principle of being human, and responsibility for the rural poor.

2. Care and dwelling

In this paper, Heidegger’s (1978, 1993) metaphors of care and dwelling provide a theoretical orientation in disclosing embodied and localised approaches to understanding social support for the rural poor. On the one hand, Heidegger’s thinking explores care as a fundamental value and a mode of being (which he considers as being-with others), which shapes the everyday comportment and

understandings of individuals and their stance on ways of living in the world. Heidegger (1978) stresses that care is a primary ontological condition of being human (what he calls *Dasein*) and what they encounter as known in the world. Care, he stresses, “lies before every factual “attitude” and “situation” of *Dasein*” (Heidegger (1978), p.238). Such understanding of care as a primary condition of existence is particularly useful in challenging a separate and detached view of care and structures of social support for the rural poor that often stress competitive individualism and independence. This perspective therefore invites us to go beyond the binary approach in understanding care either in terms of autonomy or dependence, individuals or community, care-dependant and care-giving (Sevenhuijsen, 2003). On the other hand, Heidegger considers being a situated process of dwelling and care as engaged involvement, so it creates enabling condition of connection and concern for the other in embodied and non-reflective ways (Benner, 2001). Care is a “relational and shared accomplishment” (Conradson, 2003), which stresses our pre-reflective “connectedness to others” (Looyd, 2004:247). Within this study, this perspective helps to explore the complexity of both material and immaterial care practices in rural context and the intersubjective closeness experienced by givers and receivers of care. By studying care as involving more than deliberate intentionality, this approach offers an opportunity to convey the importance of emotional and embodied responses to the poor along the possibilities of practical rationality. It can also help to determine the caregivers’ complex motivation to care and the possibilities of acting in the world, which frame approaches to everyday engaged caring practices.

To reflect on co-constructed commitments, relationships and involvements in the process of care in rural Russia, this paper engages with three elements of Heidegger’s conceptual interpretations of care and dwelling. Firstly, Heidegger (1978) considers care as *concern* (*Sorge*), which structures *Dasein*’s relation to other things it encounters and produces an opening to the world and things in it (Inwood, 1999³). This thinking provides a theoretical orientation for disclosing care as a *dynamic* and *experiential* process which requires *openness* to alterity. He considers everyday dealings with these things not as a deliberate action, but as circumspection and awareness. He stresses that “the circumspection of concern” is not a subjective experience, but a mode of knowing and awareness linked to pre- and non-linguistic experiences of the world (Dreyfus, 1993). Rural dwellers in Russia experience the world not only through reflection and conscious appreciation (“knowing that”), but also by means of habits and doing things without thinking how to do them (“knowing how”). From this perspective, care for the poor needs to be understood beyond the formal knowledge in care structures in rural Russia “in such a way that they are not destroyed, distorted, decontextualised, trivialised or sentimentalised” (Benner, 1985, p.6).

Secondly, Heidegger (1978) considers care as *concern* or *solicitude* (*Fürsorge*) for people, not for things or equipment. Just as human being is already concerned with things available to it, so it is always already concerned for the others it finds in its world of being-with. Humans as selves oriented to others cannot be the object of care only in a functional way (making them into objects of care so that service is done correctly), but they require solicitude guided by considerateness and forbearance. Heidegger insists that *affectivity* is the key to *Dasein*’s engagement with others, which firmly puts the emphasis in this analysis of care on the *embodied* relations of providing and receiving care in rural Russia. Heidegger

² My paper includes examples where normative responses to poverty are also present, while some narratives of poverty reflect classic binaries relating poverty to family status (family/lone parent), employment (working/non-working), and age (elderly/young people). To some extent these stories emphasise the vulnerability of well-known segments of the rural population that have a tendency towards poverty, as well as provoke normative care responses. These traditional categorisations recognised by scholars of poverty inform my analysis of poverty and care, which nevertheless draws on different theoretical precepts. My work tries to explore opportunities for more than representational ethics of care to alter the socio-natural-material relations that characterise poverty in rural Russia. This ethics of care, as Popke (2008) states, highlights “commitment to being open to new possibilities, a kind of witnessing through which we are exposed to the potential for being-otherwise”.

³ As Inwood (1999) stresses, Heidegger uses the verb *Sorgen* to explain care in two senses: ‘sich sorgen um’ means to be worried about something and ‘sorgen für’ means to take care of something.

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