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Medical Anthropology in Russia

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Medical anthropology is a new field of scholarship with approximately ten years of history in Russia, and only preliminary steps have been made to establish it as a separate discipline in the country (Mikhel 2004). There are still no special study programs in medical anthropology in Russian higher education, and only two universities have special courses on medical anthropology. The first one is the Saratov State Technical University, which first introduced a special course in this field named “Medical Anthropology: the History of the Discipline’s Development” in 2001 (Mikhel 2010). The other one is the Russian State University for the Humanities, which also offers an introductory course named “Medical Anthropology”.

However, taking into account that the term “medical anthropology” has been imported into the Russian academic landscape rather recently, we should look more precisely at local intellectual traditions of understanding health and medicine. There are generally two main groups of scientists which investigate issues related to health, illness and medicine. The first one is represented by researchers who explicitly identify themselves as medical anthropologists and who are ethnologists in terms of their educational background. This group focuses on the social and cultural aspects of traditional medicine. Most of these scholars are based at the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology of the Russian Academy of Science, where they have conducted research in this field since the late Soviet period. In 2005, the “Center for studies of shamanism and other traditional beliefs and practices” of this Institute was transformed into the medical anthropology research group. The members of this group have continued with their previous studies in ethnomedicine and ethnopsychology. The head and leader of the group, Valentina Kharitonova, investigates contemporary Siberian shamanism (Kharitonova 2006), healing practices of shamans (Kharitonova and Topoev 2006), their adaptation to the spreading of modern medical knowledge in the region (Kharitonova 2009a, 2009b, 2011), and the interpretation of health and illness in the frame of neoshamanism and new religious movements (Kharitonova, et al. 2008). The research center also provides training in medical anthropology for several PhD students, and organizes summer schools on the subject. Currently the group is developing a new line of research – anthropological studies of bioethics. This is reflected in

the newly established “Journal of Medical Anthropology and Bioethics”¹, which was established by the Institute of Ethnography and Anthropology in 2010. So far two issues (in Russian) have been published.

As far as concerns the second stream of health related research, the scholars associated with it do not usually consider themselves medical anthropologists, however their research agenda and methodology is close to medical anthropology scholarship. While they come from different disciplinary backgrounds, especially sociology, but also philosophy, gender studies, history, etc., they all employ critical social theory as the epistemological basis of their work. This is reflected in the range of topics which these scholars pursue: most of them address acute social problems affecting contemporary Russian healthcare. These scholars are based at diverse institutions, but the Saratov State Technical University and National Research University Higher School of Economics (Moscow) particularly stand out. The thematic scope of studies conducted in these two centers include the social construction of disability (Romanov and Iarskaia-Smirnova 2010; Iarskaia-Smirnova 2011), the professionalization of traditional medicine in Russia (Iarskaia-Smirnova and Romanov 2011), and the influence of reforms in Russian healthcare on doctor-patient relations (Prisiazhniuk 2009; Romanov, et al. 2011).

The European University at St. Petersburg is another distinguished academic center where scholars investigate issues related to medical anthropology, especially reproductive issues. Since 2005, members and graduates of the Gender Studies Program have been involved in research on reproductive healthcare: Meilakh (2009) and Temkina (2011) focused on contraceptive practices, Zdravomyslova (2009) investigated the issue of abortions and abortion legislation, and together with Temkina explored trust in doctor-patient relationships (Zdravomyslova and Temkina 2009, 2012). Other studies dealt with the role of informal payments and social networks in access to antenatal healthcare (Brednikova 2009; Borozdina 2010). The researchers from the Program are integrated in the international research community in this field, and have especially established strong ties with scholars from abroad who conduct research on transformations of Post-Soviet reproductive healthcare and doctor-patient relationships. Among these scholars, Michele Rivkin-Fish (Rivkin-Fish 2005) and Finnish sociologist Anna Rotkirch (Temkina, Rotkirch and Haavio-Mannila 2012) belong to the most renowned international collaborators with the center.

Until recently there have not been many cross points between the representatives of the two groups described above, and scholars with a background in ethnography are usually not very familiar with the work of sociologists of health and illness, and vice versa. There is also a clear division among researchers according to research subjects; researchers who investigate topics related to traditional medicine

and those who study contemporary healthcare systems are usually not very familiar with each other's work. Yet some of the recent academic events, such as the conference “Subjective Meanings of Disease: on the Way to the Narrative Medicine” which was held at the Samara State University in 2012 and attracted scholars with different disciplinary backgrounds, raise hopes that the community of researchers working in the area of health and healthcare will become more integrated in the coming years in Russia.

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