

Faculty of Social Sciences
University of Helsinki

**FROM A HELPING TO AN EMPOWERING
PROFESSION - THE PROCESS OF SOCIAL
WORK PROFESSIONALISATION IN ESTONIA**

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DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

Professionalisation is considered a complex phenomenon and process involving many factors. The acknowledgement of the profession is not a topic for social work solely; many so-called new professions such as teachers and public administrators are looking for their identities and societally recognized position, asking as the main question 'how it is recognised?'. Therefore, it is important to determine the role of the profession in certain context as well as the participants who take part in construction and creation of the profession as such.

Professionalisation is described through the characteristics of the profession, such as knowledge base and code of ethics, or the process of professionalisation accompanied by the interactionist construction of the profession. Although approaches to professionalisation date back to the late 19th century, they are still being used and developed by adding power relations and ideologies that influence the professionalisation process. Social work professionalisation has been a research topic in Western social work for many decades. Meanwhile, Eastern European social work is engaged in identifying the roots of professional social work, analysing the impact of Western social work schools, and reflecting on the country-specific traits and constructs of social work development.

Social work in Estonia underwent developments in professionalisation in 1918–1940 along with other Western countries and experienced 50 years of occupation when social work did not exist. Over the last 30 years, social work education, practice and research have undergone rapid development. However, although social work has been a topic of many Estonian postdoctoral researchers and other published texts from different inclinations, a holistic analysis of social work development in Estonia is lacking.

To overcome this gap of knowledge, this research aims to describe and analyse the social work professionalisation process in higher social work education, social work research and the practice of social work in Estonia in the period 1991–2020. The process of the research was divided into four separate phases published as peer-reviewed articles consolidated in a published description of social work professionalisation in a book chapter.

The first phase (Article I) entails comparative qualitative research on the activation and localisation of professional social work tasks. Interviews with social workers from the Netherlands and Estonia reveal the circumstances under which social work is carried out. Research participants criticise managers who are not involved in frontline work and reflect on their own core tasks that are challenged by neoliberal agendas and activist policies.

The second phase (Article II) focuses on social work research at the postgraduate level, analysing 15 PhD theses defended in Estonia from 1996 to 2020. Core social work tasks and research on social work are analysed using interpretive phenomenology. Looking at the results of the research, it may be concluded that postgraduates have completed two

types of dissertations: those specific to child protection, social services, or rehabilitation and those that address general social work issues, such as professional growth or context-specific influences on the general social work profession. The dissertations give good insight into the development of social work as a profession and a field of research, but a move towards more critical and transformative studies is necessary.

The third phase (Article III) focuses on social work curriculum development at two universities, particularly social policy courses. The theoretical framework of this research comes from signature pedagogy, which determines the core of the profession. Field placement is considered to be the core of the social work profession. In Estonia, social work and social policy are intertwined in social work curricula, but not equally represented. To characterise the context, Estonian higher education has undergone three major reforms over the last 30 years which could have influenced how social policy maintained its position in the social work curricula. Grounded theory-based research reveals that both internal and external factors shape social work curricula. Although reforms in higher education have not reduced the number of courses in social work curricula, there is a reduction threat for social work and policy courses in general to replace them with courses inclined toward horizontal skills. Among other changes in higher education, team size at the university and the expectations of the curriculum development manager have the strongest influence on social policy representation in social work curricula.

The fourth phase (Book chapter IV) highlights and concludes the development of social work in Estonia. The chapter focuses on the establishment of social work in Estonia between 1918 and 1940 before the 50 years of occupation. It also underscores the rapid changes, compressed into subchapters, describing the main challenges in social work between 1990 and 2020.

The three main conclusions: the commencement of social work development significantly influences the challenges during the professionalisation process. These developments have made Estonian social work transdisciplinary and part of the social sciences. Secondly, the rules and regulations that define social work practice have prevented social workers from advancing the practice. However, the organisational identity of social work has become stronger over the years. Thirdly, experiencing the evolution of social work in Estonia from two perspectives – inside and outside – helped the researcher to grasp the milestones, difficulties and strengths it has had and continues to have.

Keywords: professionalisation, social work, Estonia, higher education, social work research

TIIVISTELMÄ

Sosiaalityön kehittyminen professionaaliseksi, akateemiseksi ammatiksi alkoi teollistuneissa läntisissä maissa 1800-luvun lopulla. Vastaavaa ammatillistumista ja identiteetin muodostamista käynnistyi samoihin aikoihin myös esimerkiksi opettajantyössä ja julkishallinnon eri toimialoilla. Professioammattien tunnusmerkkeinä pidetään tutkimukseen perustuvan tiedon hallintaa ja siihen nojautuvien ammatillisten käytäntöjen muodostamista sekä ammattietiikan omaksumista. Profession harjoittajat itse muotoilevat toimintaansa, jolle tunnustetaan erityinen asema yhteiskunnallisessa työnjaossa. Se on sidoksissa valtasuhteisiin ja ideologioihin sekä niiden muutoksiin.

Läntisissä teollistuneissa maissa sosiaalityön akatemisoitumisen ja ammatillistumisen tutkimus on vuosikymmenten ajan ollut vireää. Itäisen Euroopan yhteiskuntien sosiaalityön nykytutkimuksessa tarkastellaan sosiaalityön juuria, läntisten maiden sosiaalityön koulutuksen vaikutuksia omien maiden ratkaisuihin sekä sosiaalityön maakohtaisia erityispiirteitä ja kehityskulkuja.

Viron sosiaalityön ammatillistuminen vuosina 1918–1940 oli rinnakkaista läntisissä maissa samanaikaisesti tapahtuneen kehityksen kanssa. 50 vuotta kestäneen miehityksen aikana sosiaalityötä ei ollut olemassa. 1990-luvun alusta lähtien eli viimeisten runsaan 30 vuoden kuluessa sosiaalityön koulutus, käytännöt ja tutkimus ovat läpikäyneet nopeita muutoksia. Vaikka sosiaalityö on ollut monen virolaisen väitöskirjatutkijan tarkastelun kohteena ja eri näkökulmiin nojautuvia tutkimuksia on julkaistu, kokonaisvaltainen analyysi sosiaalityön kehittymisestä Virossa on puuttunut.

Tämän tutkimuksen tarkoituksena on vastata mainittuun puutteeseen kuvaamalla ja analysoimalla Viron sosiaalityön professionaalistumista. Tarkastelu kohdentuu sosiaalityön korkeakoulutukseen, tutkimukseen ja ammattikäytäntöihin vuosina 1991–2020. Tutkimus on tehty neljässä eri vaiheessa, ja sen tulokset on julkaistu kolmena vertaisarvioituna tutkimusartikkelina kansainvälisissä tieteellisissä lehdissä sekä päätelmät yhteen kokoavana lukuna tieteellisessä antologia-teoksessa.

Ensimmäisessä osatutkimuksessa (artikkeli I) toteutettiin laadullisella menetelmällä analysoitu vertaileva haastattelututkimus sosiaalityön paikallisen tason konkreettisista tehtävistä Alankomaissa ja Virossa. Haastatteluihin osallistuneet sosiaalityötekijät valottivat olosuhteita, joissa sosiaalityötä toteutetaan. Haastatellut kritisoivat johtajia, jotka eivät tunne ruohonjuuritason työtä. Sen lisäksi he arvioivat omia ydintehtäviään, joihin heidän näkemyksensä mukaan kohdistuu vaatimuksia sekä toimintaa ohjaavasta neoliberaalista agendasta että aktivointipolitiikasta.

Toinen osatutkimus (artikkeli II) kohdentuu väitöskirja-tasolla tehtyyn sosiaalityön tutkimukseen Virossa. Analyysin kohteena on vuosina 1996–2020 julkaistut 15 sosiaalityön väitöskirjaa. Niistä jäljitetään tulkinnallisen fenomenologian menetelmällä sosiaalityön ydintehtäviä sekä sosiaalityön tutkimuksen teemoja. Tulokset osoittavat, että väitöskirjat jakautuvat kahteen kokonaisuuteen. Niistä toiseen sijoittuvat lastensuojelutyötä, sosiaalipalveluita ja kuntoutumista käsittelevät tutkimukset, toiseen

puolestaan yleisempien aiheiden tarkasteluja, kuten tutkimusta ammatillisesta kasvusta tai kontekstisidonnaisista ammattikäytäntöön vaikuttavista tekijöistä. Väitöskirjat tarjoavat hyvän käsityksen sosiaalityön professiokehityksestä ja tutkimusalasta. Jatkossa on tärkeää suunnata tutkimusta myös kriittisempiin ja muutosta tuottaviin tutkimuksiin.

Kolmannessa osatutkimuksessa (artikkeli III) analysoidaan sosiaalityön opetusohjelmien kehittymistä, erityisesti sosiaalipolitiikan asemaa niissä. Tarkastelun teoreettisena taustana on näkemys sosiaalityön ammattikäytäntöön ohjaavasta pedagogiikasta. Sosiaalityön erityisyyden sosiaalitieteellisenä oppialana määrittelee sen käytäntösidonaisuus. Virossa sosiaalityö ja sosiaalipolitiikka kietoutuvat toisiinsa, mutta ne ovat eri tavoin edustettuina opetuksessa. Viron korkeakoulutuksessa on toteutettu kolme suurta uudistusta viimeisten 30 vuoden kuluessa, mikä on voinut vaikuttaa siihen, miten sosiaalipolitiikka on säilyttänyt asemansa sosiaalityön opetusohjelmassa. Grounded theory'n lähestymistapaan perustuva analyysi tuo esiin, että sekä sisäiset että ulkoiset tekijät muokkaavat sosiaalityön opetusta. Vaikka korkeakoulutuksen uudistukset eivät ole vähentäneet sosiaalityön kurssien määrää opetusohjelmassa, on kuitenkin olemassa huoli, että sosiaalipolitiikan ja sosiaalityön asema heikentyy, jos opetukseen lisätään muita aineita. Korkeakoulutuksen muutosten ohella oppiaineen tiimin koko ja opetusohjelman kehittämisjohdon asettamat odotukset vaikuttavat voimakkaimmin sosiaalipolitiikan asemaan sosiaalityön opetusohjelmassa.

Neljännessä osatutkimuksessa (teosen luku IV) esitetään keskeiset päätelmät sosiaalityön kehittymisestä Virossa. Luvussa painotetaan Viron sosiaalityön kehittymistä vuosina 1918–1940, ennen 50 vuotta kestänyttä miehitysaikaa. Luvussa myös korostetaan nopeita muutoksia, joita on korostettu kuvattaessa sosiaalityölle asettuneita keskeisiä haasteita vuosien 1990 ja 2020 välillä.

Tutkimuksesta on nostettavissa kolme keskeistä päätelmää. Ensiksi, sosiaalityön alkuvaihe vaikuttaa merkittävästi myöhempään professiokehitykseen ja sen vaiheisiin. Kehityskulut ovat suunnanneet Viron sosiaalityötä tieteidenvälisyyteen sekä osaksi sosiaalitieteitä. Toiseksi, sosiaalityön käytäntöön kohdistetut normit ja säädökset ovat estäneet sosiaalityöntekijöitä kehittämästä käytäntöään. Kuitenkin sosiaalityön identiteetti eri organisaatioissa on vahvistunut vuosien kuluessa. Kolmanneksi, tutkijan oma kokemus Viron sosiaalityöstä kahdesta näkökulmasta – sisäisestä ja ulkoisesta – on auttanut jäljittämään sosiaalityön virstanpylväitä, vaikeuksia ja vahvuuksia, joita sillä on ollut ja tulee olemaan.

Avainsanat: professionaalistuminen, sosiaalityö, Viro, sosiaalityön korkeakoulutus, sosiaalityön tutkimus

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LIST OF ORIGINAL PUBLICATIONS

The dissertation is based on these four studies, which are referred to in the analytical overview by roman numerals.

- I Sirotkina, R., & van Ewijk, H. (2010). Social professionals' perceptions of activating citizenship. *European Journal of Social Work*, 13(1), 73–90. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691450903403867>
- II Sirotkina, R., & van Ewijk, H. (2021). 'There is no future with no acknowledgement of the past' - phenomenological approach in analysing postgraduate studies in social work in Estonia. *Social Work Education*, 47(7), 1019–1037. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2021.2012564>
- III Sirotkina, R., & Kriisk, K. (2021). Insider-outsider view of social work curricula in Estonia - should one competence of future social workers be policy literacy? *Social Work and Society*, 19(2), 1–19. <https://ejournals.bib.uni-wuppertal.de/index.php/sws/article/view/738>
- IV Sirotkina, R. (2022). Le développement du travail social professionnel en Estonie. In E. Jovelin, & L. Lienard (Eds.), *Le travail social en Europe: Entre passé, présent et avenir* (pp. 165–180). Presses de l'EHESP.

1 INTRODUCTION

Social work is recognised as a national project (Lorenz, 2006) striving for autonomy and acknowledgement within society. The process of social work professionalisation traces its roots back to the early 20th century and should be understood as a contextualised practice (Kessl et al., 2020). While social work in Western countries has a history of more than a hundred years in post-communist countries the development of social work experienced interruptions and reinventions that led to a surge of publications discussing the professional project of social work, as process of professionalisation, over the latest decennia (Laging & Ždanek, 2021; Lorenz et al., 2021). The challenge outlined in these publications is the exploration and recognition of the different pathways to professionalisation various countries took and the acknowledgement of differences in the forms of social work professionalisation. During the last two decades, internationalisation and globalisation of social work have challenged social work education, practice and research (Harrikari & Rauhala, 2019; Christensen, 2020; Lorenz, 2021a). Taking into account of the complex history of social work and professionalisation as a process in next paragraphs I introduce the context of the research intertwined with the connections of social work and social policy, the dilemmas of the development of welfare state in Estonia, professionalisation process and theories of it. Finally research aim and questions with key findings are presented. The introduction is finished by introducing the chapters covered in the dissertation.

The professionalisation of social work in Estonia commenced during the societal transformation beginning in 1991. The transformation period in post-socialist countries, including Estonia, resembled both a labyrinth and a laboratory¹ for social scientists and reformers as it introduced new professions, such as social work and other professions in the field of social sciences in a broader milieu. The context in which social work started in Estonia was both complicated and complex and was in the hands of academics lacking social work education and of social workers without adequate training in working with people. The Estonian specifics in the context of the worlds 100 year history of social work is that the professional development of social work in Estonia came to a halt after World War II broke out and resumed again upon Estonia reclaiming independence. From regaining independence in

¹ The term „Laboratory“ is used by Gil Eyal, Ivan Szelenyi and Eleanor Townsley On irony; An invitation to neoclassical sociology. (2003). Thesis Eleven 73(1), pp. 5-41.

1991 until the year, 2000 Estonian society underwent dramatic and drastic changes to rebuild its political and economical system (Lauristin & Vihalemm, 2009; Toots, 2020) and social work emerged as a part of this newly established system. The development of this new profession took place in three parallel processes – social workers began to play their roles in local governments; universities initiated the education of social work students and social work was legitimised at the state level. For the last 20 years, the development of social work in Estonia has been affected by changes in the social welfare system due to the accession to the European Union and the placement of European Structural Funds. Although the development of social services has been fast and in terms of people`s well-being Estonia has made remarkable advancement, it has stalled since 2015 and domestically social inequality between regions is deepening (e.g., Sooväli-Sepping & Roose, 2019).

Westhues and Wharf (2012) quote: “Social policy shapes the daily lives of every Canadian citizen and should reflect the beliefs of a majority of Canadians on just approaches to the promotion of health, safety, and wellbeing” reminds us something we often forget – that social policy shapes a lot the field of social work or in other words how social work is being done. Upon regaining its independence, Estonia embarked on the path of rebuilding its welfare state, including the profession of social work as a provider of public goods. According to political scientists (Sootla et al, 2006, p. 167) of Estonia “during the Soviet time, Nordic countries represented the dream or aspiration of quality of social life for the Estonian people”. However, in contrast to the “Nordic or Scandinavian dream”, Estonia immediately started to build a welfare state from a so-called thin state, where no contribution was made to social coping, but rather the responsibility of each person for his or her means of support was emphasised (Lauristin, 2013) raising questions regarding the future of social cohesion (e.g., Lauristin & Kivirähk, 2013). Transitioning from welfare state to workfare state (neoliberal model) was challenging to social work(ers), transforming it into a service delivery industry. The welfare state ideology sets the perspective meaning that the professional is approaching in the field, so for example as a consequence of this attitude community work in `Scandinavian model` of welfare state has “never got strong foothold like in the Netherlands, France and the UK” (Meeuwisse & Swärd, 2008, p. 485). Each country and each state ideology created its own perspectives on social policy and social work i.e. resulting in roles of social workers such as case workers, social administrators or community workers balancing their activity between the `care and control` (e.g., Thompson, 2020). As an example, Estonia chose the direction in which the role of social workers is relatively minimal and focused on the individual, only ensuring their basic survival and preserving people's social situations being affected by inequalities in society and low social spending (Toots & Bachmann, 2010).

The crisis and paradigmatic shift of the welfare state as described by many authors (Moran, 1988; Castles, 2002; Kuhnle, 2004) was also felt elsewhere in the

world in parallel with the construction of the welfare state in Estonia (Lauri & Toots, 2015). The need for a new ideology for the welfare state altered the role of social work in western countries at the same time shaping the professionalisation process in Estonia. In other words, the trajectory of social work professionalisation was influenced by complex events both in Estonia and elsewhere. Ferguson (2008) notes that the development of social work at the end of 1980s was driven by marketisation and managerialism which alienated social workers from the social change agenda. He highlights Clarke's 1993 paper titled 'After Social Work?' where Clarke criticizes the consumerist approach which rules the social work organisation introducing in the 'case management era'. Examining the literature of social work from the early 21st century, it appears that social work was searching for the new programs, with for example, the resurgence of 'old instruments' such as empowerment practises, human rights and social justice.

The professionalisation of social work in Estonia started in a very vulnerable situation, characterised by a lack of local knowledge about the profession while social work in other countries was undergoing a major revision. During the period 1991–2022, the knowledge base for social work in both the field and in education in Estonia has been developed within academic and applied sciences universities in a complex, constantly changing context framed by not only neoliberal or medical discourse but also ideologies of globalisation which, as de Wilde (2018) summarises, can shape the years to come. Because the dissertation is about social work, it is not necessary to go into the discussion of political sciences and political ideologies but it is necessary to bear in mind that the ideological shifts can shape social work and the context of social work can affect the implementation of social work more than the definition of social work itself (Payne, 2021). The place of discourses in social work development has been a relevant topic throughout the decades and continues to be an important field for study but not exhaustively represented in this thesis, as it consists of only a piece of the much more complex puzzle.

Despite the attention given to the development of the social work profession by almost all Estonian researchers, studies about social work and the development of the profession have been neither systematically nor holistically undertaken. Researchers studying the social work profession in several countries (Brante, 2011, 2013; Brekke, 2012; Dellgran & Höjer, 2012; Sommerfeld, 2014) point out that in a chaotic and complex context, it is even more topical to grasp how power relations and actors shape the professionalisation process. Therefore, it is necessary to monitor the development of the profession in order to understand what has affected its development and what we can learn from the past to follow the present and future evolution. The focus of this study is on the development of social work as a professional project rather than an exhaustive study of the full history of social work in Estonia. The contemporary history of the (re-)creation of social work in Estonia plays a central role in contextualising the theoretical framework of the thesis itself.

The dissertation belongs to the field of social work theory, taking into account the theory of social work itself and also using theoretical starting points from other fields, which allow to frame the research. My analysis is inspired by Macdonald's (1995) concept of the professional project as an interactive and contextual process of professionalisation which is enriched by the theories about professional identity (Evetts, 2012, 2013) and signature pedagogy (Shulman, 2005). The focus in my dissertation is on the creation and establishment of a substantial professional identity as it has been historically topic for numerous research on professions (e.g., Greenwood, 1957; Larson, 1977; Freidson, 1983; Abbott, 1988). Theory of professions is accompanied by the 'signature pedagogy' approach. In signature pedagogy (Shulman, 2005), the focus is on how teaching and certain disciplines in the curricula define the profession. Accordingly, professional education is one key element in the development of the professional identity (Healy, 2009). According to Shulman (2005), in social work education it has been field practice that has shaped its character but social work's signature pedagogies involve central forms of teaching and learning that extend beyond the practicum (i.e. field placement, internship) (Earls Larrison & Korr, 2013). The analysis of social work curricula in Estonia plays an important role in constructing the social work profession.

The thesis analyses the process of social work professionalisation in Estonia from three viewpoints of social work: research, higher education and social work practice.

The main question of this research is:

- *How has the professionalisation process been perceived and developed within the timespan 1991–2022 in independent Estonia?*

The research process spans almost 15 years and consists of four separate studies summarised in Table 1. The analysis focuses on the debates about the profession and professionalisation of social work. Although the literature regarding the professionalisation of social work and knowledge base of social work is significant, I use the literature which I found is important regarding the research aim and questions. Although I went through an immense amount of literature, the dissertation has limits and I made my choices. The best example of such discretion on the part of the researcher is that the dissertation and the discussion about the profession does not start with Flexner's 1915 speech but with Walter Lorenz's ideas, which I see as reflecting the contemporary understanding of social work.

The nature of the research in this dissertation is a self-understanding of Estonian social work implying on the opportunities as well as limits of the process itself. The field of social work can be characterised by some common patterns:

- multitude, complexity and diversity of theoretical concepts for explaining complex situations;
- rapid change of paradigms: in Estonia, like in other Western countries, the case work was replaced by case management and later on with other paradigms like user participation and relationship based social work. The title of the thesis,

'From the helping to an empowering profession – the professionalisation of Estonian social work' also refers to the relatively rapid process of change;

- interconnectivity between social work theory and practice;
- relative stability of the issues discussed by the social work researchers and practitioners (for example, the first article included in this dissertation dating back to 2010 refers to the same problems we face nowadays – welfarism, neoliberalism and citizenship).

This thesis is divided into six parts – starting with an explanation of the theoretical concepts, followed by methodological perspectives, contextualisation of the research topic and finalised by reflecting on research results and summing it up with conclusions. In the theoretical overview, I describe and explore the professionalisation of social work through the traditional frame and add the latest contributions of the studies about the professions in the context of a sociopolitical agenda. The chapter about the methodology provides an overview of the research aim and research questions. The qualitative methodology is described by examining research design in four separate studies and expanding the concept of researcher reflexivity. The chapter about the context of research topic provides a short insight into the topic while the book chapter which is included into the dissertation gives more exhaustive overview about the history of social work. The results chapter is divided into three subchapters offering an overview about the construction of the social work professionalisation process by looking at social work research, education and practice. In the discussion chapter, I reflect on the results based on the relevant literature presented in Chapter 2. Dissertation ends up with introducing the limitations of the research and possibilities for the future studies.

Table 1. Overview of research articles and their objectives, data, methods and findings.

Article	Objective	Contribution to professionalisation	Research data and methods	Key findings
(I) Social professionals' perceptions of activating citizenship (Sirotkina & van Ewijk, 2010)	To describe and understand how social professionals, civil servants and managers in social services perceive their core tasks, their clients and their role and responsibility.	Insight to social work field and practice	Qualitative analysis of interviews with social workers, social work managers and policy makers in social work	In Estonia, social work is viewed as helping work while in the Netherlands the ideology of active citizenship is gaining prominence in the field of social work
(II) There is no future without acknowledgment of the past' - phenomenological approach in analysing postgraduate studies in social work in Estonia (Sirotkina, van Ewijk, 2021)	To explore and describe the perceptions in postgraduate dissertations on social work as a profession, science and as research	Insight into professional social work and social work research	Phenomenology, subjective life worlds of postgraduates (thesis analysis)	Universities have played a significant role in developing social work research skills and enhancing the professionalisation of the discipline
(III) Should one competence of future social workers be policy literacy: insider-outsider view of social work curricula in Estonia (Sirotkina & Kriisk 2021)	To establish an explorative overview about the position of social policy in social work curricula over the past thirty years	Insight to social work curricula and the curriculum development process	Qualitative analysis of key informants' workshop data and interviews and previous research	Social policy literacy skills are scarce and not valued by program leaders
(IV) The development of the social work profession in Estonia (Sirotkina, 2022)	To describe the holistic and complex context of the professionalisation process of social work	Insight into the broader context of the professionalisation of social work	Description of the contemporary history and developments in social work	The periodisation of the development of social work in Estonia shows which circumstances have affected the evolution of the profession

2 SOCIAL WORK DUAL PERSPECTIVE: PROFESSIONALISATION IN PRACTICE AND IN THE ACADEMY

This chapter presents an overview of the professionalisation of social work and of its connections between theory, practice and research that form the framework for my thesis. The focus is on how social work knowledge is perceived in society to support the development of professionalisation of social work.

2.1 Professionalisation process in practice

The concepts of professionalism, professionalisation and professions are used to describe the development of a certain profession, usually encompassing the various characteristics of the profession and describing the role of other actors in shaping the profession. Professionalism has long been a field of research but authors (Freidson, 1983; Abbott, 1988; Macdonald, 1995; Weiss-Gal, 2008) have approached its study differently, either by looking at the characteristics or traits of the profession, i.e., its functionalist view, or at its power or control over the work and actions performed by professionals or interactionist and at its identity-bounded approach to professionalism (Macdonald, 1995; Evetts, 2011).

For a considerable time, professionalism was seen “as a distinctive and special way of controlling and organising work and workers” (Evetts, 2013, p. 778). During the 20th century authors (Larson, 1977; Freidson, 1983; Macdonald, 1995) focused on the description of the professions by looking at certain traits or power relations. Professionalisation was viewed as a process (Freidson, 1983) which could not be studied without considering the traits or characteristics of the profession. Over the years, a number of writers have provided a list of characteristics for the profession (Greenwood, 1966; Freidson, 1983; Perry & Ellett, 2012). The synthesis of the characteristics defining the profession are the following: 1) a knowledge base, a set of professional skills; 2) public sanction and recognition; 3) a code of ethics, set of values – accountability within profession itself; 4) an essential social function performed, reasonable autonomy in one's practice/work; 5) continuous

professional development, generally through annual continuing education. Social work appears to have met these criteria for defining a profession, maybe relatively weak in terms of public sanction and recognition (Schön, 1983; Perry & Ellett, 2012).

Macdonald (1995) argues that both structuralists and functionalists cannot explain the process itself, which has an interactive construction that he analyses through five categories: 1) the starting point or 'launching the project'; 2) the overall objective; 3) sub-goals; 4) other actors; 5) context – social, political, cultural. A similar approach is applied in the field of social work by Weiss-Gal and Welbourne (2008). They analyse the professional project by distinguishing between 1) public recognition of professional status; 2) professional monopoly over specific types of work; 3) professional autonomy of action; 4) possession of a distinctive knowledge base; 5) professional education regulated by members of the profession; 6) an effective professional organisation; 7) codified ethical standards; and 8) prestige and remuneration reflecting professional standing.

Interactionist elements in professionalisation have become more evident in later studies about professionalism, where it is viewed as socially constructed and contextually bounded (Holroyd, 2000) and having a changing discourse about it (Evetts, 2006). In other words, “a professional competence tends to be less formally explicit and decontextualised, and instead more personal, implicit, individual and connected with the contexts of positions, tasks and actual performance” (Svensson, 2006, p. 580).

The professional identity or the way social workers think about themselves as professionals is based on professional values, experiences, motives and the body of knowledge and is seen as a dynamic professional self-concept (Webb, 2016) created through interaction with others in a social process (Payne, 2006). Social work identity is influenced by the social workers' personal and professional identities. Although in many countries, the social worker's professional identity is rather strong, new political waves have enormously changed the way how social work is performed and how it is perceived by the public (Weiss-Gal & Welbourne, 2008). For example, Kamp (2016) implies the transformation of professional identity due to standardised work and transitions in professional identities when clients become customers and social workers assume a guide role. Julia Evetts (2011) calls it 'new professionalism' and a threat for so-called traditional professionalism where professionals themselves constructed their professional identity. According to Evetts (2011), in New Public Management (further referred to as NPM) circumstances, the profession is directed 'from above', meaning by managers and employers. The threat is that “managerial demands for quality control and audit, target setting and performance review become reinterpreted as the promotion of professionalism” (Evetts, 2011, p. 412). The 'managerial audit system' leads to the measurement of quantitative outputs collecting data using statistical information systems not set by the service users or providers but by the

government (Saario & Stephney, 2009). The new professionalism discourse is used by organisations due to increased managerialism, bureaucracy, standardisation, assessment and performance review and utilised by managers (Evetts, 2011). All occupational characteristics are controlled by the organisations and employers. Furthermore, the ideological, political, social and economic contemporary contexts have an influence on the positioning of social work and the roles it plays (Jones, 2010). The latest changes in the professional development of social work could decrease the central role of social work as a promoter of social justice, an agent for social change and human rights, replacing it with technical tasks and responsibility of managerial work.

According to Kamp (2016, p.1), “the Nordic variant of NPM is in fact paradoxical. On the one hand, professionalism and the development of new welfare professions have been a key element. On the other hand, NPM implies attempts to challenge the professions' monopoly to assess the quality of work by installing rational and standardised management models”. She implies to Evetts (2009) work, stating “the increased focus on efficiency, monitoring, and accountability may give rise to a new form of 'NPM-professionalism,' where professional work is turned into service products, clients into customers, and the professionals are encouraged to be 'enterprising change agents'”. Against this backdrop, tensions and contradictions in the working life of welfare professionals, or even more profound changes in the profession's identity and ethos should be expected (Kamp, 2016). She suggests that the professional identity of social workers will change because of the complex context, constant reforms and changes in general (Kamp, 2016). Not to mention that the theoretical base for social work is constantly researched, developed and adopted according to the social work needs (Blom et al, 2023).

To proceed, the professionalisation of social work has been a difficult process in many countries, where the process has been mainly viewed as an alienation from the moral obligation of social workers to advocate for the needs of the vulnerable (Pugh, 2005). On the other hand, “the demanding theoretical paradigm shift, i.e. looking at eco-social and 'post' theories of social work which are deliberative and could guide people in chaotic and complex situations but are perceived as using a 'mysterious' language” (Healy, 2022, p. 243) or, in other words, are not accessible. Consequently, the conflict within social work itself becomes evident, as it tries to accomplish both practical and academic aims, addressing people's personal issues as well as tackling structural changes. Enriched knowledge, transdisciplinarity and experiential learning are just a few trends common to social work.

In the professionalisation of social work, academia, practice and research stand for knowledge production and the definition of a signature pedagogy for social work in Estonia. Meanwhile, social workers work to implement this knowledge into practice and adapt to a rapidly changing context which is characterised by contradicting simultaneous liberal and social attitudes and trade-offs between needs and resources (Ainsaar et al., 2019). Parallel processes in the field, in higher

education and in a broader context, are mutually bound and can yet again be seen as the connection between the professional calling and the claims from academia, research and practice participating in the evolution of the profession. During the process of grasping the professionalisation process, the researcher's position in social work research is seen as fraught with tensions due to the complicated context and moral purpose of the profession itself (Powell & Ramos, 2010). Therefore, part of the methodological approach to social work research includes the researcher's self-reflection.

Concerning the discourse about professionalisation, it could be stated that the process of social work professionalisation has been turbulent. Historically, social work has been described as a semi-profession (Toren, 1972) and as “a minor profession” (Schön, 1983, p. 23) with the international recognition of the social work profession achieved in 2004 when the Global Standards for Social Work Education and Training were agreed upon (Perry & Ellett, 2012). Nowadays, a professional is someone with specific knowledge and expertise and who is paid for using this knowledge and expertise properly. There is no doubt that “social work must be located within a system which – within a modern society – is designated to deal with knowledge: the system of science” (Erath, 2007, p. 23). In the Estonian context, both the structural elements of defining the profession and the identity-oriented visions about the profession are relevant. In other words, professionalisation is a process focusing on the development of the profession itself, without looking at the competition with other professions or at a technical or functional approach to the profession.

2.2 Social work in the academisation process

Social work plays a dualistic role not only as a local or global profession but also in navigating between academic research-based science and the reflective-practical discipline. This chapter presents the challenges faced by academia and by practitioners in the field.

Hartman (1990) describes the four major constituencies that have shaped education for social work as the larger community or society, academia, the profession and students. The expectations towards professional social work vary across these stakeholders who contribute to the shaping of social work education. In 2012, in their editorial on social work professionalisation and research, Staffan Höjer and Brian Taylor concluded that Central and Eastern European social work research has very different preconditions where “in Sweden and Finland there is a discipline of social work with PhDs and professors, in the UK and Germany the road to academisation is not uni-disciplinary and in Portugal and Italy there in numbers and position social work research still has some way to go before it is recognised in its own right as an academic field” (Höjer & Taylor, 2012, p. 429). Although the

situation now is gradually changing, social work professors are members of the staff and academic education should match the theoretical and practical knowledge obtained from research, it is still a challenge to study social work at the PhD level in many European universities.

Academisation is seen as social work training in higher education institutions where the body of knowledge is rooted in scientific principles and perceived as a way to gain control over the knowledge and expertise that social workers have (e.g., Dewe et al., 2020). The academisation of social work has gained renewed attention especially over recent years when many studies have been published to describe the state of social work education (Kessl et al., 2020; Sajid et al., 2020; Laging & Ždanec, 2021), especially emphasising the ongoing juggling between contextually bound teaching and globally accepted scientific approach (Lorenz, 2021). It is relevant to point out that the expertise of social workers obtained through academia and practice is always a reflective one, striving to find out what has been appropriate for a given situation and how the approach social workers have chosen can be changed. This leads us to reflexive professionalism, which has a “participatory and democratic focus on service recipients, involving knowledge in case-specific and context-specific working methods aiming at empowerment” (Dewe et al., 2020, p. 390). The knowledge base of social workers is broad and sensitive to the context but should also respond to the high level of academic requirements.

The dual role of social work both in terms of being an academic discipline and a field for practice (e.g., social work definition, IFSW 2014) has shaped the evolution of the profession. The influence of the academic atmosphere is criticised for widening the gap between theory and practice in social work and for putting more effort on research rather than on practice (Teater, 2017). The dualistic role of social work practice research, where either the knowledge informs practice or the practice informs theory, makes the research lie between the theory and practice. While academia has been criticised for being too research oriented and for leaving out the needs of the practice, the practice in turn has been accused of being 'theoryless' as Pugh (2005) writes:

This is evident in the commonplace assertion made by many practitioners and their managers of a theory/practice divide between what is learned in college and what is learned ‘on the job’, with, of course, the implicit premise that the latter is superior to the former. While there is not space here to explore this peculiar situation further, it will suffice to note here that I do not think that there is any such thing as ‘theoryless’ practice. Rather, various practices have different levels of explicitness of theorisation. (p. 86)

Pugh (2005) contends that social work has been grappling with the challenges defined by both academia as well as by the wider society and practice. In other words, the procedural training required by organisations and the professional

practice taught in academia are in a constant battle with each other. Moreover, social work within academia can be influenced by anti-intellectualism (as posited by Pugh, 2005) due to the superiority of claims originating from the practice. Pugh's (2005) critical observations regarding professional social work derives from Parsloe's (2001, p. 11) discussion on the relevance of social work education to the profession, in which she criticises the social service department for "being anti-intellectual and for failing to encourage reflection, research and further training" and higher education for "failing to offer convincing models of the relationship between theory and practice". The opposing side of the argument is the positive influence of seeing new knowledge become accessible and relevant by doing research in a collaborative manner and bringing researchers and practitioners together (e.g., Heinsch & Gray, 2016). Within the higher education context, teaching, research and practice are imperative to uphold the high quality of the education. Practice-based research or research-based education is crucial in bridging the theory-practice gap (Karvinen-Niinikoski, 2005; Strömpl, et al, 2017; Lähteinen & Matthies, 2021). Yet again, a challenge facing social work is that it is vulnerable to other fields of social sciences being practice-oriented and -informed, but on the other hand, its transdisciplinary nature is a strength. Transdisciplinarity provides social work with a strong position by enabling the borrowing of knowledge from other disciplines while still questioning its position as a separate discipline in many countries. This kind of Mode 2 knowledge, which uses reflexivity and contextual thinking in addition to transdisciplinarity (Gibbons et al., 1994; Nowotny et al., 2003), provides the social worker with the expertise needed in practice research and complex contexts.

Research-oriented social work education aims to unite scientists and practitioners to help overcome problems in the field. Despite contradictory visions about social work education and the fact that educators and employers see social work core competences differently, field placement plays a crucial role in establishing further common ground regarding social workers' essential knowledge. Looking at the academic discussion previously put forward, social work education has many challenges to tackle and there is no simple answer to the question of what the core elements of social work knowledge and education are. Using the concept of 'signature pedagogy' (Shulman, 2005), the core of the social work curricula will be explained in the next paragraphs.

Lee S. Shulman (2005), who first discussed the concept of signature pedagogies concept, places the profession in a highly demanding role, where claims from both academia and the profession should be fulfilled. He has stated that the "characteristic forms of teaching and learning should be called signature pedagogies" (Shulman 2005, p. 52). To describe the most relevant topic in the curricula, Shulman (2005) approached the professions by examining the most relevant courses that determine the core competences in the profession. According to Shulman (2005), there are three dimensions to professional work – how to think,

how to act and how to act with integrity. The pivotal fact to emerge from Shulman's (2005) study is that the signature pedagogies play a central role in defining the body of knowledge for a certain discipline. He draws attention to the signature pedagogy dimensions which are surface structure, deep structure and implicit structure. Surface structure refers to the role of educators and all activities in the classroom. Deep structure involves the assumptions and beliefs of how important parts of education should be thought of while implicit structure pertains to the value base of the profession. In social work studies according to Schulman (2005), surface structure encompasses classroom learning by teachers in order to perform certain duties, deep structure delves into the theory and practice connections in the curricula and implicit structure pertains to the value base of social work.

After Shulman (2005) proposed his concept, numerous professions began adopting it to analyse their professional field. Over time, other studies in the field of social work regarding signature pedagogies have been published (Wayne et al., 2010; Earls Larrison & Korr, 2013; Boitel & Fromm, 2014). Some authors debate whether field education can qualify as a signature pedagogy for social work (Earls Larrison & Korr, 2013; Boitel & Fromm, 2014). Others are critical about how much curricula can combine field education with classroom knowledge (Wayne, et al, 2010; Earls Larrison & Korr, 2013), emphasising that the effectiveness of field education has received little attention (Boitel & Fromm, 2014). Further research has been critical about whether signature pedagogy for social work is field education. For example, research from last few years has suggested that the role of policy in social work practice (Wallengren et al., 2019) and structural and preventive social work (Närhi & Matthies, 2016) should receive more attention as should the role of social workers who supervise student training in the field due to the influence of managerialism on the workload of social workers as well as on the standardisation of the professional activity (Todd et al., 2019). Depending on the context, the challenges for social work necessitate good policy literacy skills to advocate for social justice and human rights, to avoid withdrawing from the emancipatory and humanistic practice (Kokkonen & Turtiainen, 2018) and signature pedagogies for social work should be discussed.

To conclude, certain prerequisites have been essential in achieving the academic recognition of social work. In a broader context, social work has developed alongside the welfare state (Dewe et al., 2020) establishing it as a legitimate profession. Within the profession, the reflective approach and readiness for inter(trans)disciplinary cooperation have created favourable conditions for its acceptance as an academic discipline. Critical reflection and complex skills are the most valued expertise for social workers when looking at the complex and uncertain context of social work. Rather than adopting a standpoint in which we see that 'somebody' or 'anything' is defining what social work is and how it is performed, we need to take a more pragmatic standpoint to describe and explore the way in which social work is perceived at a particular moment.

3 CONTEXT OF SOCIAL WORK DEVELOPMENT IN ESTONIA

This chapter briefly introduces the main milestones in the professionalisation process context in Estonia. The context has a strong impact on the professionalisation of social work in Estonia, i.e., rapid sociopolitical reforms, educational bureaucracy, internationalisation, and the development of the profession's identity. The social work context underwent swift changes, with new laws established, a three level education developed and novel social problems to address. The chapter covering the context is divided into three parts: the emergence of social work as a practice, the academisation process of social work and the development of the educational system of social work and social policy.

During the 1990s, the entire field of social science in Estonia was re-built, including social work. Helemäe and Saar (2011, p. 13) wrote that “since 1991, the country has experienced profound reforms touching upon all areas of politics, economy and society. The speed and depth of changes in post-socialist countries has posed a challenge to social scientists, and provoked much research”. According to Toots and Bachmann (2010, p. 31), “the first strand of research was mainly exploratory and mapped the changes in the social policies of post-communist states, while the second delved into more sophisticated questions, attempting to classify the emerging welfare regimes within the framework of the well-known Esping-Andersen's (1990) models”. Research done in the field of social work went through the same journey starting from mapping studies to more critical and transformative ones.

Social work studies commenced at the higher education level in 1991, when Estonia regained independence, after having lacked professional social work education and practice for 50 years. Academicians had to start from zero and had neither theoretical nor practical social work knowledge. A parallel process was simultaneously going on in the field, in 1991, social workers began working in municipalities during very dramatic times in which a totalitarian regime had just collapsed and a democratic one was established. Expectations toward the role of social workers were high and establishing the identity of academic social work in academia proved challenging.

Since 1991, social work as an academic discipline has existed at two universities – Tallinn University and the University of Tartu – and two colleges. Simultaneously

with the BA studies, master's level curricula were opened, and from 1997 it was possible to acquire postgraduate degree of social work at Tallinn University. The occupational standard for social work has been established since 1996 and the social work practice and practice research have been promoted as well as in curricula as well as in the Estonian National Qualification Standard for Social Work (Estonian Qualification Authority, n.d.). With the profession of social work being very new in Estonian society, efforts to establish it have been remarkable, but scarcely analysed. The biggest effort in analysing the social work core tasks from generalist point of view have done in postgraduate dissertations (Tulva, 1996, Kiik, 2006; Tamm, 2008, Mitendorf, 2020). All these dissertations have certain connotation – Tulva illustrates the beginning of the professionalisation process – starting point from the scratch; Kiik (2006) adds new elements and themes emerged from millennia; Tamm (2008) explores the professional growth of the social workers during millennia and Mitendorf (2020) analyses the situation of social workers from the complex context and challenges social work professionals have. These studies can be seen as milestones in attempting to grasp the challenges of social work professionalisation during last 30 years.

Social work in academia was constructed based on examples and using handbooks (often donated) from other countries. Professional relationships were with Finland and Sweden but also Canada and the United States where Estonians emigrated during the 1940s. Professional knowledge was 'brought in' without any adjustments and social work began to develop shaped by the local experiences in the field and by other professions in academia and on the field. Social work was carried out by social workers with no knowledge about social work on either a theoretical or practical level, and, being a new profession, social work struggled to obtain a position in society, among other professions, as well as among other disciplines in academia.

The millennium was a period for expansion of social work in terms of education, research and the development of social work practice. By 2004, the Association of Estonian Social Work was established and the National Qualifications Standard, revised for the fourth time, gave an input to the general idea of how the representatives from higher education and the field perceive the social work profession. Nevertheless, the Qualification Standard which created a cooperation between academia and the field with an aim at bridging the gap between theory and practice, the reality in curriculum development at the university and seeing the high quality social work in practice is different. During the millennium, social work established its standardised nature (Sønneland, 2021) with the main tasks, as seen by social workers in 2010, being social counselling, the development of social work and social services, and the organisation of services for target groups (The need for the training in the field of social welfare, 2011). Social workers were envisioned as the backbones for the welfare state (Kamp, 2016) tasked with combining policy literacy skills to protect human rights and tackling poverty, turned out to be the

ones who were working with target groups and clients (Mitendorf & van Ewijk, 2019) in the context of austerity, liberalism and NPM (Virokannas et al., 2014). This was accompanied by the process of merging at universities. Estonian was heading towards cut backs in higher education and was inspired by the Finnish and Danish example of merging universities to put an end to the duplication of professions and scientific disciplines and to start evaluating the need for certain disciplines in society (Okk, 2015).

There were three preconditions to the academisation process of social work in Estonia. Firstly, the Finnish example with its close contacts with Finnish universities which created an effective starting point for the academical curricula. Secondly, the historical development itself where “in former socialist and communist countries the academisation of the profession had fewer obstacles compared to those countries where charitable or religious organisations remained powerful players within the social sphere” (Zaviršek, 2009, p. 220). Thirdly, the Bologna process, which created the research led curricula. The academisation of Estonian social work research at the postgraduate level developed during last 30 years from the descriptive explorative approaches toward the critical-transformative ones, attempting to bridge the theory-practice gap through practice research and research-minded approach in social work education.

4 METHODOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES, DATA RESOURCES AND ANALYSIS STRATEGIES

In this chapter, the methodology of the thesis is outlined, providing an overview of the paradigmatic social constructionist standpoint of the analysis in relation to the research aims. It also reflects on the role of the researcher and addresses how contextual and moral questions during the research process were tackled and reflected upon. Finally, an overview of the four separate studies is presented.

4.1 Social constructionism

Shaw and Holland (2014, p. 22) write that '[s]ocial work context gives qualitative research a special character'. This distinctive character of qualitative inquiry stems from the process itself "in the events, using induction to derive possible explanations based on observed phenomena" (Gorman et al., 2005, p. 3). Social work education, social work practice and social work research are viewed in a holistic perspective (Soydan, 2001), rendering the phenomena complex and multifaceted.

The paradigmatic standpoint of this research derives from critical theory as well as from constructionism (Lincoln et al., 2018) implying that the context of the research is complex and requires critical analysis of the social, political and cultural factors along with the interpretation of the participants' meanings and understandings who actively participate in social work profession's development give their own meaning to the development of social work in Estonia. My role is to bear in mind the multidimensional context as well as the constructionist paradigm behind the social work professionalisation process.

In my study, I focus on the professionalisation of social work by looking at three perspectives – social work research, higher education of social work and social work practice. To illustrate the complex process of professionalisation, I draw on the metaphor of a concert proposed by Massey (2010) in exploring the professionalism of educators. In this view, the concert of professionalism involves performers and

an audience, the stage and stage setting. The performers are social workers while the audience consists of everybody interested in social work. The stage represents the context which creates the atmosphere for the music (or the profession) to be created. There is an assumption that everybody knows what to do, but in reality, many questions arise, such as 'do I should know what is happening', and 'do we need to have solo performances or all play together'. The uncertainty in this situation is mutual and the experience is shared. All these questions could be answered from a different perspective. For example, in describing social work context, we can refer to the neoliberal ideology and draw conclusions accordingly, or we can see that the context is highly complex and diverse, leading us to conclude that there is no single answer to describe it. Social constructionism is based on the assumption that the process of understanding is the result of an active, cooperative enterprise of persons in a relationship (Gergen 2015). Constructionism dates back to the Berger and Luckmann book from 1966, *The Social Construction of Reality*. Reality is constructed through experiences, relationships and interactions making our knowledge and understanding about the reality subjective (Berger & Luckmann, 1991). Burr (2015) refers to it as 'the constructionist case' where the context as well as our construction of social phenomena are in constant change. In other words, social conditions, time and the situation are constantly changing and therefore the role of the researcher as well as the context are crucial to understanding the research process and results. The findings are not discovered but constructed and researcher identity and values cannot be excluded from the research process (Guba & Lincoln, 2005).

Over the past 30 years, social work in Estonia has been co constructed by numerous actors who played a role in the process of professionalisation of social work. Burr and Dick (2017, p. 59) define social constructionism as a way "how we understand and perceive the world is a product of how the world is represented or produced through language, and depends upon the culture and times that we live in". Therefore, the meaning of the context and occurrences is given and interpreted by the participants and reality is jointly created in social interactions (see Flick et al., 2004). Different perceptions about professional social work give rise to the discourses in and about social work. For example, 'the progress of social work in Estonia' could be described as a result of emerging research in social work or the good development of social services. Furthermore, we could discuss what the meaning of progress is and how everyone defines social work. In other words, the discourse about social work can be seen as a 'right' way to define social work while devaluing other definitions (e.g., Healy, 2018). For example, the neoliberal ideology dominant in higher education reforms can shape the ways how programme leaders describe their role in developing curricula.

A discursive approach helps to identify the trajectory of contemporary social work in Estonia by critically analysing the development of the construction of social work as a practice, as a field of research and as a scientific discipline in academia.

The discourse concerns the language, text, conversation (see Potter, 1996) and even more, it is about “the situated use of language in social interactions” (Burr, 2015, p. 72). The social work professionalisation process, stretching over 30 years of history, needs methods that are suitable to answer research questions and approach research material.

4.2 Positioning myself in researching social work profession

Every piece of research can be seen as a narrative told by a storyteller who assumes various role(s) in it and constructs the story line. One can see one’s role as active mirroring or a constructive one. Furthermore, the narrative itself can be linked to a lengthy story with different chapters, an expedition to 'visit different people and meet undiscovered countries' or even 'a detective story with good and bad characters' or ultimately a fairytale with a happy ending. The thesis narrates the story of the Estonian social work professionalisation process incorporating not only the stories of all participants but also myself as a researcher, lecturer and social worker within it. Somehow it resembles an expedition to a never fully discovered country, encountering many characters, actors and fields along my way. The narrative itself marks the context in which the characters act and thus co-creating the life cycle of social work. Having been part of the higher education system for more than twenty years, I examine the evolution of social work in Estonia as both an insider and an outsider, analysing the local and global changes social work goes through. My own development as a professional and the development of social work in Estonia are inseparable. Participating in international conferences and projects gives me inspiration and the opportunity to look at social work from the outside, but working as a lecturer and doing social work myself, I see the development of social work from the inside.

Chiseri–Starter's (1996, p. 115) quotation about the researcher's position: “all researchers are positioned whether they write about it explicitly, separately, or not at all” is equivalent to the notion that every researcher is a 'storyteller' with their own narrative and using constructions that have been shaped by the researcher's experience, attitudes and stereotypes. As qualitative research is interested in the inner lifeworlds of the participants (Flick et al., 2004) and tries to understand the meanings of the phenomena, the self-as-researcher (e.g., Lunsford et al., 1996) position and the ability to reflect upon the process of research are crucial. Nevertheless, the meaning of the term 'understand' is a complex one as, according to (Matta, 2021), it is used to make something implicit explicit, and the researcher who understands should also be familiar with the context as well as with the research topic. Therefore, not only is the researcher's position important, but also the relationship with research subjects and context, and finally with the text itself

(e.g., Lunsford et al, 1996). For example, using the critical theory framework the advocacy for the research topic is focused on texts but using the constructionist paradigm, the emphasis is on how all subjects affecting the theme are prioritised in the text. As well as choosing the authors to refer to or interpreting the texts I quote. All this process contributes to the construction of the research done during my postgraduate studies.

Throughout the research, I have reflected upon my own biases and positions or identities alongside the research process. Reflexivity meant for me “awareness of the influence the researcher has on the people or topic being studied” (Probst, 2015, p. 37). Being in close contact with many social workers and doing social work myself, I understand how social work looks like from the inside; as a colleague to postgraduate students, I am aware of their position as postgraduate students conducting research mainly alone; as part of the university staff, I understand the challenges in curriculum development and small teaching teams. On the one hand, it is necessary to be familiar with the research topic but on the other hand, it requires more reflexive attention to my own beliefs, knowledge, expectations, stereotypes and attitudes. Therefore, both, my identities and biases, will be addressed in following sections to explain the context of the research process.

The positionality theory examines the meaning-making through identities which explore how gender, race, class or position and status are affected in terms of attitudes and beliefs in the role a person is carrying out (Kezar, 2002). She continues with the idea that positions or identities stem from ethnographic and anthropological research, with the term 'other' arising from when the researchers did not participate in the observations and the question about identity became evident through asking 'Who am I in this research and how do I perceive others?'. The 'multiple and overlapping' identities are changing and constructed (Kezar, 2002). During the research, I constantly asked myself how I approached the topic and participant, why I interpreted the data in a particular way and who and what shaped my own opinion about the topic. In other words, the process of the research was debriefed with co-researchers to tackle my/our own projections, attachments, assumptions, agendas, and biases (Probst, 2015).

The researcher's positionality has an impact on my research throughout the entire process. As previously mentioned, not only does the researcher have an influence on the research but the research context and subjects influence it too. My identities played a crucial role in perceiving others and in the way I was perceived. For example, my role as a researcher was intertwined with that of a colleague, a former student or of a social worker. In other words, it required me to employ ethical reflexivity to understand how I transform during the process and how my relationship with others will evolve (e.g., Amoureux, 2016). Therefore, the reflexive mindset can be a solution to overcome the insider-outsider dilemmas during the research. In other words, being aware of my own influence over the research is

crucial because being too familiar with the field of the study is not always in favour of the research topic (Barley & Bath, 2014) and needs reflection.

The insider-role in my context means sharing similar experiences as the participants in my research. This role potentially enhances my credibility and trustworthiness and allows participants to easily view me as one of them but this proximity could lead to potential stigmatisation. The stigma here being that an outsider relies on the researcher's role thus introducing subjectivity and a risk of misinterpretation of the data thereby jeopardising the entire research. This presents me with a role conflict where I must choose between either being loyal or being honest. During the process of data analysis, I risk easily 'slipping from the road' and misinterpreting the data by adopting a role that deviates from that of the researcher (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009), i.e. by adopting the stance of an expert in the same field as the interviewees in the research or by being misguided by the role of the social worker rather the researcher. On the other hand, being an insider provides me with a stronger vantage point to observe the process of professionalisation holistically, allowing me to better understand the complex constructive processes within a dynamic field. In both insider and outsider positions, having an inner dialogue and practising critical (self)-evaluation towards one's position is indispensable. Being constantly aware of my own experiences, knowledge and social positions that could hinder the research process has had key value throughout this process (Finefter-Rosenbluh, 2017; Burr & Dick, 2017).

Throughout the research, I focus on acknowledging my individual biases, which are often described as cognitive biases rooting from fast thinking (Kara, 2018). There are many individual biases but I will focus on four: belief bias, confirmation bias, conservatism and framing effect. According to Kara (2018) belief bias encourages prioritisation of beliefs over empirical findings while conservatism prioritises beliefs over the results even further. Confirmation bias provides the researcher with a tendency to confirm their pre-existing beliefs while the framing effect is nothing more than the way how researchers interpret data to arrive at a certain conclusion and how, by interpreting data differently, the conclusions will also be different.

In my research, I was able to implement all four biases. As an example, I use previously defended postgraduate dissertations to analyse the knowledge base of social work or, in other words, to see how researchers construct the social work knowledge by writing PhD thesis. Many of the postgraduates are my colleagues, making the task of separating the person from the thesis complicated. I am familiar not only with their written theses but also their general mindset and world views which could undermine the conclusions I make during my analysis. At times, I find myself critically questioning whether 'maybe I am analysing people, not theses?'. I can see how strongly my beliefs can affect research results and how thorough I must be with reflection throughout the whole process.

I worked on biases and the insider/outsider role when conducting research with colleagues by employing strategies such as memoing, discussions, separate code maps for analysis and by using interviewers to avoid the blending of my roles.

To conclude, it is important to understand one's positionalities and the possible ways of using power, guided by one's own stereotypes and experiences but Finefter-Rosenbluh (2017) goes further by stating that representing a certain community can make it easier to understand the experiences certain community members have. Embracing multiple roles allows me to reflect on my thoughts, experiences and actions and to be aware of my own standpoint on social work professionalisation. Therefore, 'being reflexive' is not employed in this research as a shield to protect myself against subjectivity but as a tool to understand my position throughout the phases of the research process. I am aware that the research is not only a narrative of the Estonian social work professionalisation but also the story of how I became a social worker, researcher and lecturer.

4.3 Four separate studies

The thesis encompasses four sub-studies to address the following overarching research questions:

- 1) How is Estonian social work professionalisation challenged in practice?
- 2) How has social work academisation influenced social work professionalisation?
- 3) What factors in the development of social work curriculum have played a role in the professionalisation of social work?
- 4) Which factors have influenced the process of professionalisation in the contemporary history of social work development?

To answer the first research question, the scene of the professional practice is constructed in Article I and Book chapter IV which is summarised in Chapter 5.1. The role of academisation is analysed in Article II, answering the second research question summarised in 5.2. Social work education and curriculum development is explored in Article III and is summarised in Chapter 5.3. Contextual factors influencing social work professionalisation are addressed in all publications and are summarised in Chapter 5.4.

4.4 Study design and procedure

In this chapter, the study design and sequence of separate studies is examined and described. This research employs a retrospective approach, analysing the events during the professionalisation process of social work in Estonia, using data from different sources, analysing meaningful documents and interviews from the point of view of development of social work in Estonia.

Three articles and a book chapter contributed to the unified aim of approaching the professionalisation but the methodological approach to the research was chosen according to the research material and research question. Therefore, for the research a qualitative approach was chosen to (1) analyse social workers perceptions about professional activity in social work, (2) understand the meaning postgraduates attribute to social work and social work research, (3) analyse the role of curriculum and its development in the social work professionalisation process and (4) describe the context of the social work professionalisation process in Estonia.

The first study was a qualitative comparative study using the same semi-structured questionnaire for 36 social workers in the Netherlands and 12 social workers in Estonia. The responses were analysed in both countries by two researchers. By having an insight into the field of social work and understanding how social workers describe professional social work, three further studies were prepared in parallel. I was interested in how universities through their curricula, and postgraduates, through their research, approached social work. In other words, I was curious about what their role in the construction of the social work profession during the last decades had been. I used a phenomenological approach in the study of 15 postgraduate's research focusing on the understanding of the core components of social work as well as their aspirations about social work research, trying to grasp the unique aspects every postgraduate brought into the social work research. The study of social work curricula in two universities employed a multidimensional analysis, examining curricula during three key turning points as well as 6 interviews with curriculum developers. In addition, as part of the professional social work community, I worked on the book chapter about social work professional development to contextualise my study. During the writing process of the book chapter, I went through the development of social work over the last twenty years.

4.5 Data collection and analysis

This chapter focuses on collecting research data and conducting data analysis. The research itself spans a considerable timeline, with the first study prepared on 2008 and completed in 2009. Results of the data were presented in 2009. Subsequent studies were made in parallel, analysing the role of social work research and higher

education in social work professionalisation in Estonia. Both studies were presented at international social work conferences. To contextualise the research, a desk study was conducted to describe the context and meaningful changes over the last 30 years that have influenced social work professional development.

Subsequent sub-chapters detail the separate study data collection and analysis.

4.5.1 I article: Citizenship based social work – perceptions of social work professionals

In a comparative qualitative study, 12 social work professionals were interviewed in Estonia – five social workers, four managers and three policy makers. A similar study was conducted in the Netherlands with 36 participants. Semi-structured interviews with open ended questions were carried out in both countries, asking questions about the cooperation between social workers, managers and policy makers in the policy making process, in the processes of localisation, privatisation and activation and finally about the core elements of the social work profession. Interviews were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis by two researchers in both countries. The results were communicated between research teams and the whole research process was reflected upon to address the differences and similarities between two countries. Procedures during data collection and analysis were time consuming due to the language barrier. During the thematic analysis, relevant quotes were translated into English and the analysis itself took an extra effort to match the sub-themes and main themes and to write the analytical part of the article.

4.5.2 II article: Social work research perceived by postgraduates

The second study focused on perceiving social work and social work research in postgraduate dissertations. The process itself was most demanding in terms of choosing a methodological and theoretical approach as my aim was not to compare obvious technical elements in dissertations such as aims, results, and methodology. Instead, my goal was to gain more insight into the meaning of social work and social work research expressed by postgraduates in their texts.

Analysing 15 different doctoral dissertations prompted reflections on stereotypes, biases and my research ethics in general during this process. The first decision was to exclude five theses that were dissertations from sociology, health or education sciences. A further analysis had several phases, from reading and summarising the key elements of the thesis to a thorough understanding of the phenomena – academisation of social work – keeping in mind postgraduate level social work research. During this research, I focused on the positions and experiences of the postgraduates, applying interpretive phenomenology where researcher's reflections can be added. After the theses were read several times, five

main themes were selected to present the results in following domains: social work core tasks, the position of social work in the society, the future of social work, epistemological and methodological approaches, and contribution to the body of social work of knowledge.

4.5.3 III article: Policy literacy skills – challenges for social work education

The third study was aimed at social work education and curriculum development during the last 30 years at two universities, using interviews and curricula as means of data. The research focused on social policy skills in the curricula. The constructivist grounded theory was applied as a methodological approach. Throughout the research process, the team of researchers followed the main features of the constructivist grounded theory approach, such as acknowledging the active role of researchers in the study process, the interaction among research data and theory and the contextualisation of the research itself, where research participants bring in their experiences based on their own background. To ensure the rigorousness of the research process, we followed the research actions according to Charmaz (2014).

4.5.4 IV book chapter: Contextually bound social work – contemporary history of social work

The book chapter is a descriptive text examining the development of social work in a broader context. The text is divided into two parts. In the first section, chronological milestones are described and the major events that influenced social work professionalisation are discussed. In the second part of the chapter, changes in social work practice over the last 15 years and future trends in Estonian welfare and the education of social work are explored.

5 OVERALL FINDINGS AND REFLECTIONS

This chapter is divided into four sub-chapters revisiting the four research questions on the professionalisation process of social work. In the first sub-chapter, I am seeking the answer to my first research question about the construction of social work in the field. The second sub-chapter is about the perception of social work research which is analysed through an empirical study of postgraduate theses. The third sub-chapter focuses on the education of social work and its academisation process. The fourth research question, pertaining to contextual factors, is intertwined with social work research, education and field elements and will be discussed in the fourth chapter. Four separate studies will be referred to by the Roman numerals.

5.1 The field as a promotor of the role of social work in the society

Social work as a profession emerged in the 1990s, when approximately 350 local governments engaged a social worker (Tulva, 1996) to tackle the dramatic social problems created by the system changes and rapid reforms. Social work practice was initially built up as client-oriented, and the position of social workers was not duly recognised (IV). Nevertheless, the broadest and most up-to-date picture of social work professionalisation in the field in the 1990s was described by Taimi Tulva's doctoral thesis of 1996, in the 2000s by Tiia Tamm and Riina Kiik, and in the post-2010 period by Airi Mitendorf. The role of social work, the core tasks social workers perform and the overall ideology of social work beyond its activities have evolved over the years. In this chapter, I focus on the changes in the role of the social workers in the field over the last 30 years.

Basic human needs and the chaotic situation in society significantly influenced how social workers approached the situation where people were (I, IV) gradually shifting from a helping to an empowering one (I, II). Not only the lack of professional tradition itself but also the missing recognition of the profession weakened the professional power of social workers in the field. The core tasks of

social workers were seen mainly as managerial, aimed at the most vulnerable individuals and with very limited budgets (I, II, IV) but changes in the field were very quick to come. More services were not only provided but also developed (IV) creating the illusion of a rapidly developing welfare system. The tension felt by social workers was related to how policy makers were alienated from the frontline activities. The core tasks of social workers were very broad ranging from counselling at individual level to broader cooperation with other professionals and different networks.

The welfarist and neoliberal agendas, coupled with NPM influences, have been distinguished across all research. Social work has strengthened its position as a managerialist, offering social services at a minimum level allowing it to sustain the coping of individuals and families (I, III).

The framework for social workers competences, outlined in the Estonian Qualification Authority (n.d.), draws on a very broad and rich variety of skills, knowledge and attitudes needed for the social work professional practice. Social policy knowledge such as diversity in society and skills such as strategic planning are crucial among other micro and mezo level skills. It is evident that frontline social workers are aware of the problems people face, but policy makers can be distant from the reality social workers experience daily (I, III). Therefore, policy literacy skills are essential for social workers either to inform policy makers about the situation in the field or implement their sociopolitical will. Because social workers gather information from the field, they can change the image of the passive role of implementing regulations into an active one – transforming the practice (I). The role of social work among other disciplines is a strong one with the capability to cooperate, understand other professions, integrate theory with practice and cope in chaotic and complex situations (II). The conclusion from my first article remains valid: the connection between social work and social policy is still weak (III). Policymakers are rather far from practice while practitioners are hardly defining themselves as policy-actors.

5.2 Contribution of social work research to the social work professionalisation

Estonia took two very significant steps to integrate social work research with education and the practice of social work. Firstly, Finnish social work education served as a role model for Estonian social work education (III, IV). In Finland, too, social work is part of university and applied sciences studies. Secondly, the fact that social work is a social science and part of academia itself requires high-level research, which is combined with teaching and practising (II). Therefore, one aim of master's studies in social work has been to educate research-minded social workers with research skills to autonomously carry out research in the field of social

work along with competences in micro, meso and macro level social work, despite the fact that well-trained social workers may not have possibilities to implement all skills and knowledge in the workplace.

Not only master's study competences serve as a promoter of a research ethos; doctoral studies promote the academic knowledge base for social work, too (II). It can be seen as a multilevel approach to social work when people with a master's degree in social work look at the field through the lenses of a curious person who knows how to raise questions and find answers to them. Furthermore, the reflexivity and contextualisation brings in the tools to postulate the aims not only within the research team but also with the persons the social worker is working with. Driven by the trend of neoliberal discourse to promote good technical and managerial skills to fit anywhere in the job market, instead of asking critical questions willingly to make changes in the surrounding environment, people have contributed to the change in curricula in terms of having broader skills-related courses rather than courses where students could discuss social justice issues or collective actions to gain better quality of life in a sustainable environment (III). This is directly connected to the mindset of students who are studying social work and are adjusting to the situation, possessing a superficial knowledge base on how to influence processes in society. but analytical skills are directly connected to how one sees and analyses the world (III) and therefore are connected to the moral call of social work profession, i.e. how are human rights perceived in local context and are they recognised in therapeutic partnership with the person or in community actions.

Competences required for the research are also needed for practice. Proficient skills in guiding conversations or negotiations are needed for both activities and are required by the Estonian Qualification Standard.

Research conducted during postgraduate studies has a significant impact on the entire social work research, illustrating the state of social work practice during a specific period. To date, a doctorate degree does not confer any special value when working in the field of social work but it is a prerequisite for an academic career at universities. Teams at universities are small and relatively stable, resulting in the Estonian postgraduate dissertations contributing to the field of social work as well as to the science of social work (II). Due to the social work scholarship and research being a young field in Estonia, doctoral work tends to be quite reticent when it comes to critiquing societal dilemmas and the development of social work in a neoliberal context. The complexity, which is flattened by the neoliberal ideology, hindered research skills – research should support evidence-based practice but is time consuming and does not work in a favour of an individualist-reformist ideology where change in the service system occurs more rapidly than the research itself.

5.3 Development of social work education

This sub-chapter summarises the key results in the field of social work education.

Social work education in Estonia has undergone substantial changes in terms of content and structure of the studies. The development of education in social work can be divided into three phases (III): academic freedom and the inception of social work education, the Bologna process and social work education and the period of free higher education and reform in social work education (II, III, IV). Two pathways in social work education – applied sciences and academic – were developed in parallel. Key figures responsible for creating the curricula in social work came from other disciplines such as psychology, sociology, educational sciences and other fields (III, IV). They relied upon the knowledge base of colleagues from neighbouring countries and incorporated insights from psychology, education, social policy etc. Throughout the development of social work education, two overarching debates have been crucial to social work. The first pertains to the balance between lectures and internship, while the second concerns the equilibrium between social work and social policy or interdisciplinary courses in the curricula. During the next paragraphs, I analyse these three phases of social work education.

The first phase of development of social work education can be characterised with words such as 'creative' and 'enthusiastic', during which new curricula were established. Teams of 5 to 10 individuals in both universities utilised all available contacts and resources in other countries to acquire knowledge about social work, establish a library and assemble a skilled staff to fulfil the aims of the curricula. Although social work started as an academic discipline in two universities, it remained concealed within or behind other social sciences such as sociology, public administration and social policy at the University of Tartu or educational sciences and social protection at Tallinn University. Therefore, several challenges for establishing a new field of social sciences had to be addressed: creating a curriculum without the know-how of the discipline but a strong support from neighbouring countries, building up a three-tier education and sustaining it, and developing a curriculum according to Estonia's needs and context. Estonia, as a small country, created a mixed curriculum for social work and social policy with skills, knowledge and values from both disciplines incorporated.

During the first phase, the profession itself was discovered not only within the field of higher education but also within the practice. The social work curriculum was transdisciplinary, as were the lecturers, and knowledge about social work was 'imported' from other countries in terms of training materials and knowledge (II, III, IV). For example, strong influences in terms of the donation of literature were felt from Anglo-American countries and Finland due to personal contacts with university representatives (III). Over seven years, all levels of education were

established, involving complex work and continuous discussions about the necessity of social work.

Doctoral studies in social work at Tallinn University are and will remain a unique case in Estonia and in the Baltic states. The 'enthusiastic' period in developing social work studies created a base for three level education and strengthened the position of social work in academia.

The second phase of the educational transformation was influenced by the Bologna process, with the four-year baccalaureate studies replaced by the three-year programme, presenting the curriculum managers with a dilemma of either teaching more general courses or target-group-based disciplines (III). The challenges during 2000–2010 in terms of social work education included preserving social work and social policy in the curricula amidst the crosswinds of the European social policy agenda and interdisciplinary requirements for curriculum development (III). Practical social work was guided by the 'case management era' and the development of social services, which continued during 2010–2020 when case management was already rooted in the field of social work and social work education (III).

This period is characterised by the professional growth of lecturers. Many of them obtained PhDs from Finnish universities, while in the meantime, some graduated from Tallinn University. Also, social workers were better educated.

Thirdly, social work education experienced a ten-year period of free education. Due to constant cutbacks in higher education, social work education was not perceived as one of the social sciences valuable for the economic growth in society. Early warning signs about the path of higher education were already evident in 2004 and 2005 when Estonia continuously followed right-wing government ideology and in social work 'case management' and 'networking' were the most used words. This period could be described as the 'period of fear and confusion' because the direction the Estonian government was heading towards was merging of universities and disciplines. This period could be described as embedding the neoliberal discourse into higher education (III). Words such as bureaucratisation of education and science, managerialist attitudes toward training and evidence (or science)-based viewpoints in organising life in society as well as in education were prevalent. This period still continues and is described at the higher university level as the 'reporting and auditing era' (Saario & Stephney, 2009; Evetts, 2011).

5.4 Context for professionalisation

The distinctive context for the professionalisation of social work in post-communist countries has been described by a variety of authors and compiled into a volumes of collected chapters (Lorenz, 2021a; 2021b) all sharing the common features of the so-called 'full "Western" package of social work education and social services

structures' (Lorenz, 2008). This, despite the context of post-communist countries revealing that education and the social security systems did not begin from scratch but were rather a continuation following the interruption caused by 50 years of Soviet occupation.

Estonia shared a similar history of social work development with many countries at the beginning of 20th century, when social work education was established in 1935 (IV) and the social welfare act came into force in 1925. However, the development of the profession was curtailed due to the 50 years of occupation.

Upon regaining independence in 1991, Estonia underwent rapid changes (Helemäe & Saar, 2011; Toots & Bachmann, 2010) to establish the basic fundamentals for the development of social work. Social workers began working in municipalities, a new social welfare act was passed and universities started to admit new students for social work studies. The phase of “Nordic dream” in the nineties was replaced by the phase of rapidly “catching up with EU standards” during the millenia. Rules and regulations for the field of social work came from “top down” and social workers did not have yet power to intervene the process of social work professionalisation.

In the book chapter about the development of social work in Estonia (IV) as well as in articles (I, II, III), the main milestones are described, noting the swift, establishment of a three-level education for social work, with more social workers in the field acquiring a professional education, social work becoming more specialised and, over the millenia, services being aligned to the European standards. Numerous reforms in the domains of mental health and rehabilitation, as well as in child care, were implemented. The development over the last 15 years indicates that specialised social work (i.e. child protection, rehabilitation services) is more regulated by the law than generalist social work which is evident also looking at the defended postgraduate dissertations (II).

Social work research has evolved from a descriptive nature to a more critical and transformative one. It appears natural to describe the context and phenomena before embarking on an analysis and critical evaluation. Doctoral dissertations defended after 2020 are constructively critical about the development of social services as well as about the role of social worker in complex context (II).

Regarding social work education, the quick changes in building up and restructuring the curricula have diminished the volume of social work studies within it.

6 DISCUSSION

The context and the agents make the professionalisation process inherently complex and the dynamic nature of social work adds an additional layer of complexity to its conceptualisation. Moreover, not much work has been done so far in conceptualising the professionalisation process of social work in Estonia. Research has focused more on the last 30 years of the development of social work, examining the education of social workers, on the practice of social work and on the research done in the field.

The analysis of the professionalisation of social work from three distinct perspectives – social work education, practice and research – brings forth the challenges discussed in this chapter in relation to the literature presented in Chapter 2.

The findings show that social work professionalisation has been supported by the firm historical foundations of social work, the ability to combine theoretical knowledge with the state's view of social work and the integration of social policy knowledge into social work practice. Even though knowledge about social policy is not represented enough at social work curricula, social workers in the field are aware of their role in being close to the complex context and duty to inform policy makers about what happens with communities.

The historical roots of social work shaped and provided during the nineties the profession with a fundamental direction in both academia and in the field. It can be stated that due to the scarcity of educated social workers the profession was perceived as managerial and diluted within other disciplines (Lorenz, 2021a). Public recognition proved difficult to establish due to the lack of professional knowledge of social workers. Despite adopting the Finnish model to teach social work at the universities, the legacy of non-professionals created a situation in which all 'social sciences were important' and this attitude overshadowed social work and social policy skills. In ensuing developments, the principles of social work – human rights and social justice – were neglected due to the neoliberal and standardised work which was accompanied by right-wing neoliberal policies. Consequently, micro-level social work gained popularity as a means to assist people at the individual level (Mitendorf & van Ewijk, 2019) rather than advocating against social problems (Kokkonen & Turtiainen, 2018). In other words, core methods such as work with individuals, groups and community were quickly replaced by case management, empowerment and networking concepts (e.g., Lorenz, 2021a).

The results reveal that the enthusiastic, spontaneous yet chaotic development of social work laid the groundwork for social work practice, research and education. Examples for this statement are derived from all studies showing that social workers don't feel the support of policy makers, research remains rather descriptive and, in the process of education of social workers, formation of the social policy skills are not supported. The starting point of the social work professional project (Macdonald, 1995) is crucial in terms of creating the discourse of the professionalisation of social work. The idealistic aspiration of achieving the status of a Nordic country and becoming a welfare state did not take into account that one of the basic elements of a welfare state is professional social work (Kamp, 2016). The increasing number of educated social workers in academia, as well as in the field, the embedded managerial approach to social work, has created expectations toward social work (Mitendorf & van Ewijk, 2019) as not being an advocate for social justice and not recognised by the state and people who were working. In spite of neoliberalism, the embedded managerial approach to social work, its lack of means and its long tradition, social work created in Estonia its own profile and fought for a holistic and broad perspective.

Furthermore, the identity of social work in Estonia is perceived more as an organisational rather than a professional one (Evetts, 2008) in which the training for the skills required is provided by the organisations in which social workers are employed, partly due to managerialism and partly because of the never-ending discussions of the gap between theory and practice. This situation is challenging for the overall professionalisation process of social work and to the establishment of a 'signature pedagogy' at universities. The concept of 'signature pedagogy' requires recognition and discussion among social workers, educators and researchers to establish a common ground in defining the core tasks of social work in professional competences and promote the development of theories. While universities promote the professional identity in connection with awareness of the research-minded approach toward the practice as well as a reflective mindset uniting the skills of social work and social policy, the requirements from the field are rather technical and bureaucracy-oriented. This prompts the discussion about the connectedness of theory and practice toward the manner in which other authors (Pugh, 2005; Teater, 2017) have described and criticised social work education at universities as being not so much practice-led but more research-led. Research, which could build a potential a bridge between practice and research (Karvinen-Niinikoski, 2005; Heinsch & Gray, 2016; Strömpl, et al, 2017; Lähteinen & Matthies, 2021) has not yet shown, within Estonian social work, its ability to bring together researchers, practitioners and the broader field of social work. Even though the attempts to do it are evident it is not a common practice.

According to Macdonald's (1995) interactive and contextual approach in analysing a professional project, it could be stated that, regarding the goals and sub-goals of social work in Estonia, it is difficult to assert whether social work stands for

the quality of the life of people and promotes social justice and human rights. It is not perhaps, the full and truthful picture of social work in Estonia but it has developed as a profession which is overruled by the policy in higher education i.e. as evidenced in the the study 'Estonian Labour Market Today and Tomorrow' (2016) to reduce the number of educated social workers. The question arises of how much room practitioners have in conceptualising and in constructing their profession in practice. Many social workers are employed by local municipalities where rules, regulations and theoretical concepts and methods are 'prescribed by the state'. Therefore, the body of knowledge that social workers carry within themselves and which has been accumulated during their years of university studies and through practice in the field are not fully implemented. As an example, case management is fully implemented in all areas of social work and a strength-based approach is acknowledged as the theoretical framework which is implemented in the child protection area. This, in my opinion, threatens to use the Mode 2 knowledge (i.e. reflective, contextual and transdisciplinary thinking) in their everyday practice being rather standardised in counselling and decision making process and not using whole professional competence.

On the other side of the story is the 'agora of disciplines' that were evident in academia as well as in the field during the 1990s and which continue to affect professionalisation of social work. In the field social workers were educated as teachers, nurses or in other disciplines, while in academia, teachers, sociologists and psychologists created the curricula for social work. On the one hand, this approach created a broader knowledge base in both academia as well as in the field and created the situation where social work was already in the nineties interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinary oriented. But on the other hand, it diluted the social work knowledge and blurred the boundaries between disciplines in both academia and in practice (Lorenz, 2021a).

The development of social work education in the 1990s was promising, with a thorough four year education at baccalaureate level. However, due to the Bologna process, this was later replaced by a three year education. Although the basic balance between social work and social policy skills was maintained, the curricula itself were streamlined. The only consistent form of education over the 30 years was postgraduate level education. Research indicated that the development of social work research at the postgraduate level has evolved from a descriptive one to a more transformative and critical one, integrating practice and theory through the research process as it was seen in social sciences in general (Toots & Bachman, 2010). The Bologna process introduced the academisation process and competence-based learning, as reflected in the Estonian Qualification Standard for social work. Even though postgraduate-level research is scarce, it brings forth the latest research methods and underlines the importance of ethics during the research process. Postgraduates continue to contribute to teaching or influencing their respective fields.

The integration of social work and social policy in Estonian social work is evident in most documents but not wholly embraced by the higher education institutions and the field responsible for shaping the professional image of social work. Recent studies show that social policy skills are considered part of social work's expertise (Närhi & Matthies, 2016; Kokkonen, & Turtiainen, 2018; Wallengren et al., 2019) In Estonia however, social work seems somewhat complacent, accepting social policy and social work as intertwined for granted.

The expectation is that social work professionals ought to leverage research skills to bridge the gap between knowledge, practice and theory. Employing Mode 2 knowledge, social workers can implement intricate knowledge gathered from practice, interpreted through transdisciplinary knowledge and a reflexive, research-oriented mindset. Establishing tighter connections between social work practice, research and education could bolster the professionalisation process, promoting a strong body of knowledge, ethical research practices and elaborated competences. This collaborative process is demanding, asking questions such as 'what should we do to make social work identity truly profession based?', and 'how could we make the body of knowledge in social work visible in research, practice and education?'. Addressing and answering these questions, could lead to a holistic perspective on social work education, practice and research.

My development story as a researcher, lecturer, and social worker spans 30 years. I witnessed the professionalisation of Estonian social work from an internal and external perspective. Therefore, I can highlight specific milestones that made me perceive Estonian social work in a different light. First, since I participated in several international projects, I have learned a great deal through analysing Estonian social work. My most remarkable experience was in the international project from 2003 to 2005, which aimed to establish social work master's curriculum. Participants were from countries with a long history of social work, including Great Britain, France, Spain, Finland, and Germany. In Estonia, master-degree studies had been back then part of social work education for 10 years, and the Bologna process reforms had reduced bachelor's studies from four to three years in order to redesign master-level curricula. During these years, I realised the differences in the pathways of social work professionalisation between the old and new European countries. First, I discovered the differences and similarities in higher education bureaucracy; in Estonia, it was easy to change curricula as the university department oversees the decision, not the ministry. Second, I learned that team research increased research quality compared with solo research. Discussions during different phases of the research add value to the methodology and enrich the analysis and discussion. Third, I observed that the different roles of social workers, researchers, and lecturers were unacknowledged, which encouraged me to pursue social work through the lens of different roles. Finally, I am proud of my development as a social worker in Estonia, with the invaluable support from other participants. I am committed to continuing to acquire knowledge through my abiding curiosity.

6.1 Limitations and future research

Even though the three perspectives created a holistic view about social work professionalisation, the extended timeline of this study has resulted in certain aspects being fragmented and generic. According to Hartman (1990) and Soydan (2001), the profession is constituted by the diverse viewpoints of higher education institutions, the field and researchers through the professionalisation process..

The complexity of combining research, practice and education on the one hand and generalist social work on the other renders the field of this research challenging to define and measure. The retrospective nature of the analysis makes it possible to see only the factors that can be seen in this diachronic perspective and those are by far not all the factors which affect the development of the profession.

Further research could help to dissect the separate facets of the professionalisation e.g. higher education and international cooperation, deeper understanding of social work research on user participation and review of the development of the social work practice in the context of social policy. The role of the social work education in applied sciences in Estonia should be explored.

The problem of unlimited knowledge is something that I learned in the course of this process. We have an enormous amount of scientific literature on social work along with works on psychology, sociology, public administration, the arts etc., so it is demanding to make a choice of which authors are quoted and referred to and which authors are inevitably neglected. I think it could be a fruitful research topic to analyse which authors are most quoted in generalist social work dissertations and which ones are neglected and why.

The most significant challenge was to write about the issues which are subject to political/ideology based criticism, e.g. neoliberal ideology and their effect on social work. Despite some critical studies existing on the social work practice in Estonia, the majority of it is critical of NPM and neoliberal ideology, as I am myself. Obviously, every ideology has its weaknesses as well as strengths: That means the framework NPM gives to social work and higher education also has some positive effects on how people structure their everyday activities, managing resources and accepting the person's ability to cope. During the process of analysis of the patterns of one ideology, I developed skills in more clearly seeing strengths and weaknesses of other ideologies, i.e., populism, globalisation and participationism.

I hope that the strength of this research lies in its collaborative approach and attempt to grasp the whole professionalisation process with co-researchers, its discussions concerning gathering data, its interpretation of results, and its awareness of researcher biases and insider/outsider conflicts.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A. Authorship contribution report for articles I-III

- I. Sirotkina, R., & van Ewijk, H. (2010). Social professionals' perceptions of activating citizenship. *European Journal of Social Work*, 13(1), 73–90. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691450903403867>

This article was a comparative research about social work practice in the Netherland and in Estonia. Reeli Sirotkina formulated the research questions in collaboration with an international research team, adapted interview questionnaire to Estonian context. Regarding the literature review and theoretical framework Reeli Sirotkina cooperated in conducting the literature review, participated in the formulation of the theoretical concepts adding relevant information regarding the results in Estonia. Reeli Sirotkina prepared the data for analysis, conducted the data analysis of Estonian part and co-wrote the manuscript constantly representing Estonian results and comparing them the the Netherland ones. Reeli Sirotkina made adjustments/corrections based on reviewers' feedback during the publishing process and presented the results at the international conference ENSACT 2009.

- II. Sirotkina, R., & van Ewijk, H. (2021). 'There is no future with no acknowledgement of the past' - phenomenological approach in analysing postgraduate studies in social work in Estonia. *Social Work Education*, 47(7), 1019–1037. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2021.2012564>

This research is based on the analysis of 15 postgraduate thesis. Reeli Sirotkina formulated the research questions and methodological approach. According to the research design Reeli Sirotkina analysed and categorised research data, conducted the literature review, participated in formulating the theoretical framework and analysed the data. Reeli Sirotkina was the main writer of the whole manuscript, made adjustments/corrections based on reviewers' feedback and presented the results at the international conference ECSWE 2021.

- III. Sirotkina, R., & Kriisk, K. (2021). Insider-outsider view of social work curricula in Estonia - should one competence of future social workers be policy literacy? *Social Work and Society*, 19(2), 1–19.
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The research shows the challenges to incorporate social policy courses into social work curricula. Reeli Sirotkina and Kersti Kriisk formulated the research questions, aim of the research, interview questionnaire. Reeli Sirotkina formulated the theoretical and methodological framework while Kersti Kriisk designed the contextual part of the study. Reeli Sirotkina formulated first research results which were discussed in collaboration with Kersti Kriisk and reformulated during the writing process. Discussion was written in collaboration. Reeli Sirotkina and Kersti Kriisk made adjustments/corrections based on reviewers' feedback according the previously mentioned part of the text: Reeli Sirotkina made changes in theoretical and methodological part and Kersti Kriisk in the part of context description. Changes in analysis and discussion were made in cooperation. Kersti Kriisk presented the results at the international conference FORSA 2023.

ORIGINAL PUBLICATIONS