

The Development of the Three Pillars of Social Work Profession and its Resilience in Estonia

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Abstract. During the last thirty years, the Baltic states have come through dramatic and intense changes to develop their social work and social policy according to the examples of the Western welfare states. Regardless of the changes we have all come through during the contemporary history, the identity of the three Baltic countries is considerably different. This article draws attention to the Estonian pathway of social work development by looking at the development of the science of social work, the higher education in social work, and the practice of social work during the period of 1991–2022. By looking back at how social work became professionalised, and by analysing the critical incidents that have shaped this process, it is possible to strengthen both the nation’s collective social resilience and the professional resilience and development of social work as a discipline.

The aim of this article is to show the main shifts and milestones during these years on the road of professionalisation of the social work science in Estonia while looking at the resilience of the profession which was co-created in the social work practice, research, and higher education. The article is based on the author’s postgraduate thesis “*From a Helping to an Empowering Profession – the Process of Social Work Professionalisation in Estonia*” defended at the University of Helsinki in 2024 highlighting the aim of the research, main theoretical concepts, reflection of being both an insider and an outsider during the study, along with the main results with discussion.

Keywords: social work, professionalisation, Estonia, higher education, social work science, social policy.

Introduction

In this article, I share my thoughts on the development of social work as a profession in Estonia and the experiences I gained during my research journey – particularly regarding the resilience our profession has established amid the dramatic and eclectic development of the last 35 years. I draw on the theoretical foundation of my doctoral thesis, along with four separate studies conducted over a long time span and their conclusions. However, I examine the professionalisation process through the lenses of a researcher, a practitioner, and a lecturer in social work and social policy. In other words, since the

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thesis was also my personal journey through the last thirty years of social work and social policy development, I pay special attention to the reflexivity of social workers and researchers. Therefore, in this article, I view resilience mainly from an environmental or systemic perspective, where ‘bouncing back’ is seen as a collective endeavour. I focus on how social work research, practice, and higher education have adapted to the challenges encountered over these 30 years.

The profession of social work has developed rapidly in Estonia over the past thirty years, both as a practice-based profession, as an academic discipline, and as a field of research. It has gained a firm place in society and among other professions. Certainly, social work has become more professional both in terms of the applied methods and the knowledge and skills of those who do it. The understanding of the goals of social work has also become clearer, which is why we can talk about social work not as a profession that helps people, but as an empowering and transformative one. This process has also happened in other countries where social work has been developed without interruption compared to our countries which experienced 50 years of Soviet occupation. On the one hand, it seems a natural process where the profession is still looking for the place in society and is trying to formulate the aims of the professional activity in the course of practicing it. Whereas, on the other hand, it sounds a dangerous adventure to practice social work meanwhile still looking what it is exactly. Therefore, the societies like the one of Estonia are called either laboratories,¹ or else they can be seen as a labyrinths of a constant ‘test-and-trial’ chain. During this process, social work accumulates resilience to overcome natural trial-and-error procedures, while adopting practices from other countries and implementing policy standards that may not be well-suited to our context.

Even though we can identify distinct stages in the development of social work and social policy in Estonia over the past 35 years, three parallel processes in the 1990s marked the starting point: social workers began working in local governments; universities initiated social work education; and social work was legitimised at a state level. But how has social work in Estonia evolved into its current form, and what circumstances have shaped it?

Social Work Policy – the (Re-)emergence of Social Work

Estonia can be seen still as a transitional state looking from the point of view of a balance between social solidarity and neoliberal individualism (Ainsaar, Roots, & Trumm, 2019; Mitendorf, 2020). This unique socio-political context (has) shaped not only the policy frameworks but also the foundational structures of social work education and professional development in the country.

In the 1990s, Estonia chose to teach social work and social policy within a single curriculum. Social work studies at BA and MA levels started at Tallinn University in 1991 and at the University of Tartu in 1992. Postgraduate studies began in 1997 at Tallinn

¹ The term ‘Laboratory’ is used by Gil Eyal, Ivan Szelenyi, and Eleanor Townsley in: *On Irony; An Invitation to Neoclassical Sociology*. (2003). Thesis Eleven 73(1), p. 5–41.

University. Building a higher education system for social work was a crucial element in the development of professionalisation.

In parallel, those social workers who began their practice in the early 1990s had an opportunity to attend university studies and learn how to approach the dramatic field that had been ‘left for them to deal with’ after regaining independence. At the same time, university lecturers transferred knowledge from the neighbouring countries (i.e., Nordic and Anglo-American countries). At that time, we did not see this process as colonisation; we were happy to receive help because it was urgently needed. Knowledge transfer also occurred at a state level to establish the framework for the field of social work and social policy. Among other framing activities, the first *Estonian National Qualification Standard for Social Work* was created in 1996. It was an enthusiastic period (Sirotkina, 2024) where the practice, the academia, and the legal framework were all established, by sharing common and freshly gained knowledge and experience(s).

Slowly, the number of educated social workers in the field started to rise, the universities started to change the curricula, and the social work research established its place among other social sciences. The reforming process became most visible after 2005, when the Estonian welfare system was reformed several times with the objective to establish a more appropriate structure and more clear rules (Sirotkina, 2022), which was the result of joining the European Union. For example, the situation in the higher education was emphatically affected by the Bologna process introducing the academisation process and competence-based learning. In Estonia, the four-year baccalaureate of social work education was replaced with three-year education, making the postgraduate-level education the only consistent curriculum during the thirty-year process (Sirotkina, 2024). The higher education of social work in Estonia is a generalist one, and also interdisciplinary by nature, i.e., a threat for this kind of education is the diluted social work knowledge and blurred borders between disciplines in the field of education, and thus, at higher education institutions (Lorenz, 2021).

The neoliberal context, the austerity policy and *New Public Management* were the main keywords that were hindering the professionalisation of social work, and, by 2015, it was already clear that cutbacks are needed in higher education, in the field, and, not to mention, in the research activities. To conclude, it can be stated that important prerequisites, such as the three-tier higher education system in social work, practising and studying social workers, and learning from the practices and education systems of other countries – and applying this to the professionalisation of social work in Estonia – collectively created an environment that supported the profession’s resilience even during later setbacks, such as budget cuts, the *Bologna Process* in higher education, and the continuous ongoing reforms in the social work practice.

Four Studies

As mentioned above, my studies conducted in the framework of my postgraduate thesis inspired me to write this article. The purpose of my doctoral thesis “*From a Helping to*

an Empowering Profession – the Professionalization Process of Social Work in Estonia” was to find out how social work was being shaped in the years 1991–2022 on the plane of interaction of the presently mentioned fields. Its background was the rapid – and therefore ill-considered – development in social work since the 1990s, hasty reforms in the country, rethinking of the welfare state, and the global trends. In order to understand how social work has become professionalized and how it has been perceived, I look at the development trends at the frontline of social work, at universities teaching social work, and in social work research.

I conducted four studies that have been published as separate articles and book chapters. The studies are qualitative, and their results add to the overall picture, enabling the understanding of complex processes over a long period of time – particularly, the resilience of the profession that emerged amid Estonia’s turbulent transition.

1. The first article (Sirotkina and van Ewijk 2010) included a comparative qualitative study of the social work practice in Estonia and the Netherlands, and practitioners’ perceptions of social work as a profession that activates citizens.
2. The second article (Sirotkina and van Ewijk 2021) focuses on social work research, analyzing 15 doctoral theses defended in Estonia between 1996 and 2020.
3. The third article (Sirotkina and Kriisk 2021) examines the development of social work curricula in two universities, with a particular focus on social policy courses.
4. A book chapter (Sirotkina 2022) describes the development of social work in Estonia and summarizes it.

All four studies, in my feeling, contribute to the understanding of the complicated context – by admitting that not everything can be taken into account during the long process where the narratives about the development itself are changing – while highlighting the resilience of the profession in adapting to systemic challenges. In the next sub-chapters, I describe the main issues regarding the reflexive manner of the social worker-researcher and discuss the main results of the study. In the following four sub-chapters, I reflect on the wisdom of the social worker, explain what ‘signature pedagogy’ means and why doctoral studies in social work are needed, and examine changes in Estonian social work practice. In the last two sub-chapters, I explore researcher reflexivity – that is, why, for me, a reflexive approach is an inseparable part of social work research – and finish the article with conclusions. For me, these themes show how the social work profession managed to maintain its resilience during a very complex era.

Wise and Research-Minded Social Worker

My work is written in the field of generalist social work. Generalist-type social work – which has also been called social work dealing with a person from birth to death – is one of the most viable and necessary forms of social work in Estonia, regardless of the fact that Estonian social work has gone through specialisation and is still moving in this direction. A rehabilitation system has been developed, the field of child welfare has been

designed, a functioning system of probation and dealing with the unemployed is in place, and social workers are also employed in hospitals and schools. On the other hand, constant reorganisations prevent specialisation because the distribution of different sections of work must be quickly reassessed – and there are more and more of them. Estonian social work is rather individualistic, i.e., it focuses primarily on the needs of the individual. Even though there are good examples and attempts to design community-based social services (the second wave of deinstitutionalisation in mental health), its development toward more community- and group-based social work has been slow. The development of social work and social policy also depends on reforms: laws and the social protection system are improved to implement changes. The focus of activity in social work is on coping and supporting people through the case management method (Strömpl et al. 2012). The above proves that social workers with general knowledge are still most needed, because fragmentation within and between specialisations creates confusion for people rather than order.

The knowledge base of a generalist social worker is large and demanding. When first-year social work Bachelor's students read the social worker's professional standard and code of ethics, they recognise that the social worker is like a prodigy who knows a lot, can do everything, has the highest moral values, has an excellent command of the Russian language, and is capable of information and communication skills.

In the literature, the role of the social worker in a multidisciplinary team has been described by using the metaphor of driving a car, according to which, the social worker sits above the driver, with representatives of other disciplines behind and beside the social worker. Of course, one can ask why the social worker is sitting in the driver's or the manager's place. I think the answer is as follows: a social worker knows a little about the work of a teacher, a lawyer, a psychologist, and a sociologist, and public administration is not a foreign field to the social worker, either – not to mention economics and social policy. As a professional, the social worker is the one who takes two steps toward another specialist, because his/her knowledge is transdisciplinary, but not only because of that: the social worker has learned to communicate effectively and in a friendly manner with various people and can deal with difficult situations.

Social work seems to require diverse knowledge and skills from a general social work perspective, but, among other knowledge, it also requires research skills – and, even more, a research-oriented mindset. In connection with social work, it is exciting to think about research skills in every situation that a social worker may encounter; that is, research skills can also be applied, for example, to understanding the needs of the community, finding means to resolve some situations, listening to a person, and reflecting one's own feelings. Research skills are necessary for a novice social worker, but they are even more helpful in making sense of work that has already become routine, preventing burnout, and understanding as well as analysing the wider background. Not that it is the least important aspect, but, in order to do good social work, you also need professional higher education – although many employers do not recognise this point. Expertise in social policy, perception of the wider context in which social work operates, and the ability

to see ideological influences in decision-making – in order to understand and predict local government or state decisions – these aspects are as important as other competences traditionally perceived as requirements for a social worker.

Professional Education and Doctoral Research as Influencers of Social Work

The development of social work as an academic discipline has a strong impact on the professionalisation of social work. The assumption that social work is performed by people with a professional higher education changes the practice and shapes the image and content of the profession. I approach professional education in universities based on Lee Shulman's (2005) concept of signature pedagogy, according to which, each discipline has a specific component in the curriculum that defines the core nature of the major; in social work, it is considered a field placement or internship that allows students and practitioners studying social work to meet and learn from each other. If the main part of social work is the internship, this determines the content of social work. Later, I will discuss whether and why internship should or should not be a core element of the social work curriculum and the definition of the social work profession. I see social work practice as the essence of social work, intellectually demanding work but, depending on the Estonian context, the internship solely cannot determine the core of the profession. Some authors (Earls Larrison & Korr, 2013; Boitel & Fromm, 2014) also question if the internship makes the core of social work and encourage to see the social work curricula more holistically. 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 also be discussed.

Social work research has been seen, especially in recent decades, as a bridge connecting the social work practice and theory. In my dissertation, I discussed the process and results of doctoral studies in social work and showed how they have influenced the development of social work in Estonia. The research done for the doctoral thesis is generally long-term, comprehensive and represents the specific field represented by the doctoral student. Estonian social work doctoral studies are diverse. Specific research has been done on child protection and rehabilitation, but general social work has also been studied. 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.

Higher education and research mindedness actively contribute to the process of establishing professional identity and building the resilience of the profession, but the development process of the profession is more complex. In the subsequent paragraphs, I describe the broader context of professionalisation.

Special Features of the Development of Social Work in Estonia

In my doctoral thesis, I used Keith MacDonald's (1995) concept of the professional project, which means that every social worker participates in shaping the profession on a timeline. In the course of a professional project, the purpose of the project, its participants and the background are important. However, Walter Lorenz (2006) stated that social work as a professional project is unique in each country, that is, country-wise, social work is related to a specific background. The development of social work depends a lot on the country's cultural and historical development, economic opportunities, politics, etc.

It is not easy to briefly summarise such a complex and incomprehensible topic as the development of social work in Estonia during the last thirty years. In the years 1991–1997, a strong and clear foundation was laid for social work in universities establishing a three-level education system. Social workers began their daily work in local governments, and a legal framework was quickly established to legitimise the field of social work. However, the struggle to maintain the professionalism of social work and achieve recognition in society is a still-continuing struggle.

The development of professional social work was greatly boosted by some external circumstances, such as joining the European Union (EU). We are kidding ourselves about how eagerly we have adopted all the laws, regulations and norms coming from the EU. Even those rules that do not actually exist. Sometimes Estonians make even stricter rules, and I think their goal is to gain clarity in certain situations and ensure control. Often, it happens to also be some kind of control over people.

Therefore, it can be suggested that social work in Estonia has been built up very quickly and professionally, but some reforms and the rapid development of the profession have tied specialists to old habits and standardised social work. Often, standardisation and social work carried out under the auspices of evidence-based practice mean that, on average, the quality of work may be good, but the professional does not use his or her full competence. Old habits can lead to a comfortable decision, justified by the fact that 'we have always done it this way'. In addition, they tend to justify their actions or inactions by using specific techniques or based on some theory. This seems to increase the reliability of the activity and facilitate its evaluation, but, on the other hand, it also limits the full application of professional competence – ultimately challenging the resilience of the profession along the way towards professionalisation. Examples include motivational interviewing, which has become widespread recently, as well as frameworks introduced in the field of child welfare or rehabilitation. Although I know how difficult it can be to live in the flux of constant change, the core of social work is flexibility and adaptation to change and the use of foundational knowledge. When applying popular tools, it is usually easy to recognise to which field of social work theory one or another of them belongs, it is enough to analyse the purpose of their use. In other words, it is not new theory that the employer introduces, but, rather, 'old new'. To understand what my everyday practice in social work is like, reflexivity, critical analysis, and self-awareness

in everyday professional activities are needed. I will explain the reflexivity issues during my research in the following section.

What did I Experience and Perceive while Conducting the Research?

The development of the profession is a collective undertaking; therefore, I have used a constructionist approach in researching the process of professionalisation. In the continuation of this article, I will not discuss constructionism as a methodological mode, but rather look at my role as a researcher. I am writing about this because the researcher's reflexivity and ethical considerations are important not only for the researcher, but also when working as a social worker or as a lecturer. For me, reflecting on my own role during the research was the most important aspect.

Although reflexivity has been receiving a lot of attention (Fook, 2007; D'Cruz et al. 2007; Fook & Gardner, 2007; Fook & Gardner, 2012; Fook, 2020), in the social work literature and practice, the content of related activities often remains hollow. What does it mean to be reflexive in a process anyway? For me, it primarily means a conscious attitude toward one's own position, beliefs, knowledge, and experience – and sharing them with my co-researchers and colleagues in the field and academy. Along my journey, I found myself experiencing several role conflicts that could affect the study. For example, while I am a researcher, I also occupy several roles: I am a colleague and a former student.

Even more, I studied doctoral theses whose authors I admired. However, I had to understand if – and how – it affects my decisions when analysing and writing conclusions when I made an analysis of my colleagues' long-lasting scientific works. I needed reflexivity as a tool to understand how and why I decide upon something. For example, I made memos and consulted with colleagues not only when I felt stuck, but I also did it as a routine procedure. While I was discussing all stages of the research with my peers, we could also talk about our own stereotypes, prejudices, or discourses, for example, what we think about globalisation or localisation, neoliberal or postcolonial ideology. We discussed topics that were important to us as well as perhaps more widespread in Estonia. It helped me to understand my own position while I was researching, writing, reading, and choosing literature. I believe that the way we talk about social work and its context, social workers, social work researchers, social work teachers and learners creates a broader background for shaping and interpreting general social work in Estonia.

During the research, I often reflected on my professional self-definition. I have a distinct identity as a social worker, but I previously studied medicine. Therefore, I know how human nature is framed in both perspectives – those of the social sciences and medicine. Both the medical model and the social model have their strengths and weaknesses, and they should only be used by professionals who know not only what to do but also how to do it. My education in social work and social policy has also been inter- and transdisciplinary: I know something about public administration, sociology, psychology, economics, and other so-called 'related fields'. I often ask myself if it is beneficial

to know so much. For the most part, I find myself satisfied with my competence, but I am also envious of those professionals who master a specific narrow field. I feel that the social worker is very capable, well-educated, and competent in many ways – and this makes the profession itself, among others, a resilient and adaptable one.

Reflections and Conclusions

On the front line of social work, a dream has come true: professional social work is now recognised in Estonia. It has strong and multidimensional roots. Social workers are members of multidisciplinary teams, and the profession is legalised in various documents – thereby demonstrating the resilience of the profession in establishing itself amid complex challenges.

First of all, the road to professional recognition has been both dramatic and enthusiastic. This can be recognised in all three arenas – the practical field, higher education institutions, and social work science.

Admittedly, past mistakes are highly difficult to reverse, but they should be addressed in a pragmatic and deliberative way and can serve as tools to make the profession adaptable to turbulent circumstances – thus ultimately strengthening the resilience of the profession.

Firstly, theory and practice can be successfully integrated in social work, both in academia and in the field. While conducting my research, I realised that the social work practice, professional education, and research are closely related, and one cannot exist without the others. Social work researchers may lack a practitioner's wisdom, whereas practitioners may lack theoretical wisdom. We are sometimes complete strangers to each other. Therefore, it can also be dangerous if social work practice is the only carrier of the basic essence of social work in the curriculum. Social work researchers (sometimes researchers, and sometimes practitioners) can bridge the gap between the practice and the theory. But does it always work? Sometimes it does, and sometimes it does not. I believe practitioners should have some research skills, and researchers should have some practical skills and knowledge of what happens in higher education and how social workers operate every day.

Secondly, we assume that every social worker should possess research skills, practice wisdom, and theoretical knowledge. If these are missing, the focus should be on good cooperation and coordination of activities. In other words, it is unthinkable that decisions are made in higher education without involving social workers and social work researchers – and vice versa. This seems like a very natural suggestion, but it is still not easy to apply in everyday life. It has not been effectively done or practiced in Estonia yet.

Front-line work, research traditions, and scientific work must be adjusted, while taking into account the circumstances, and opportunities for cooperation must be sought and found. Our higher education in social work is highly competitive, and international academic standards apply to the profession – contributing to the resilience of the profession amid these demands.

Last but not least – how do you get social workers to fall in love with social policy which, for me, in Estonia is a part of Estonian signature pedagogy? I think that this is a question that should be dealt with more in Estonia when designing courses, organising forums, and, also, our knowledge of social policy should be trusted. Sometimes, social workers fail to see the connection between critical thinking, practice, and theory, or fail to link critical thinking to the social policy. Policy literacy skills are important in dealing with human rights or eco-social theory. Therefore, not only the internship or the field placement is the one that can be seen as (a) signature pedagogy for social work studies but, more evidently, the signature pedagogy is context-bound. Thus, social work students may hear in the auditorium that social policy is clearly visible when doing social work, and that social policy literacy is necessary, but when they go to practice, they do not see the connections between social work and the social policy. However, the gap described above can be bridged by trilateral cooperation.

For me, social work in Estonia is still an intriguing project, full of possibilities, expectations and surprises. This is a field that enables the exciting world of social work practice, research and higher education.

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