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Next-generation modelling of community work and structural social work in Finland

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ABSTRACT

The recently reformed Finnish Social Welfare Act obligates public social work to enact structural social work, and to address the community- and structural-level social problems behind individual cases. This article examines how community work and structural social work are conceived by early career social workers. The empirical data consists of 26 project plans by social work Master's students studying in a working life-based part-time programme. The data includes designs for community work or structural social work to be applied in practice to address a real social problem or issue identified by the students in their working environment. The designs are analysed by content analysis and related to the theoretical categorizations of community strategies by Rothman, the community work models by Popple, and the task fields of structural social work by Pohjola. However, the strong evidence of mixed models in the results allows to suggest that categorizations as theoretical-conceptual frames are rather useful for identifying rich diversities and combinations, instead of clear-cut categories of community work and structural social work. The designs reflect the challenges created by the managerialist service systems themselves. They seek more cooperative structures to meet the real-life needs of local communities. It can be concluded that structural social work can become a powerful approach when taken as a legal mandate in the hands of early career social workers, enacting community and political perspectives in Finnish social work at all levels. This requires that they will not be prohibited or tamed in its applications.

Introduction

A profound discrepancy regarding the position of community work and further macro-social work approaches is present in social work practices in many western societies. Political discourses and programmes (such as the LEADER, URBAN, and EQUAL programmes of the European Commission 2014) broadly recommend the strengthening of local communities as the most promising strategy to use against the polarization and individualization of societies. In reality, except for short-term project applications with various public and third-sector agencies, community work appears to be a marginal approach in the daily practice of mainstream social work, which is forced to focus mainly on the managerialistic governance of individual caseloads (Stepney and Popple 2008; Turunen 2020; Roivainen 2016). Therefore, reflection is needed on what concrete steps social work practice could take to more intensively utilize its position, close to local communities and rich traditions of community-oriented and macro-level approaches, in order to have a more powerful impact on the social problems that are identified behind the individual cases in local communities and society.

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Social work research provides a broad offering of conceptual, theoretical, and practical reflections on the different contents and understandings of community work (Opačić 2021; Popple 2015; Roivainen 2016; Rothman 2007; Turunen 2020) and further forms of macro-social work (Applewhite, Kao, and Pritzker 2018; Tice, Long, and Cox 2020). The aim of this article is to contribute to the international conceptual debates about community work by involving the concept of *structural social work* (Weinberg 2019; Pohjola 2011; Närhi and Matthies 2018) and provide knowledge about its potential in practice. The article is contextualized in the new opportunity of Finnish social work that includes community-oriented and macro-level interventions in mainstream social work. This application has been called for by the professional and scientific community for long time, and has now been legislated by the reformed Finnish Social Welfare Act of 2015. The Act emphasizes that public social work has a duty and a right to enact *structural social work* and address community- and structural-level social issues beyond individual cases. Social work practice, education, and research are now challenged to provide evidence of how to utilize this unique mandate.

In this study, I ask 1) what types of social problems do Finnish early career social workers identify, and what kinds of structural social and community work interventions do they suggest for these issues, and 2) how do these designs relate to international theoretical-conceptual categorizations and models.

The data used in this study consists of written academic assignments of early-career social workers in their Master's studies. Their designs for structural social work or community work are analysed by content analysis and related to the core conceptual debates, i.e. to the categorizations of community strategies by Rothman (2007) and the community work models by Popple (2015). Furthermore, I analyse how the task fields of structural social work proposed by Pohjola (2011) appear in the data, since Pohjola's conceptual work has held a core position in the Finnish debate, while applying this strategy in practice.

Theoretical-conceptual frameworks of community work and structural social work

In the international research literature on community work, one of the key issues discussed focuses on the theoretical-conceptual categorization and typology of the strategies and models of community work. However, in this article based on empirical analysis, it is neither possible nor necessary to present an overview of the entire international theoretical-conceptual debate, which has already been comprehensively done, including a focus on the Nordic context (Turunen 2004, 2009; Sjöberg and Turunen 2018; Roivainen 2016). Thus, those works that provide a framework for the empirical analysis are introduced and only briefly discussed.

The work most frequently used internationally, which is also highly relevant to the Finnish context, is the conceptualization by Rothman (; Rothman 2001, 2007) that includes the three basic strategies of distinct community work. Rothman (; Rothman 2001) categorized these as: 1) social planning, 2) community development, and 3) social action. All the strategies have the needs of the local community as a starting point but differ in the direction of their efforts: social planning mainly addresses policy-making based on knowledge from local communities, while community development involves working horizontally and networking among NGOs, and public and private agencies. Finally, social action is a – up strategy and usually includes advocacy and participatory actions with local people. In his later publication, Rothman (2007) changed the wording of the three strategies to planning/policy, community capacity development, and social advocacy, and enlarged their variations with a triple cross-tabulation, leading to nine new models that mix strategies. For instance, the combination of social advocacy and community capacity development leads to capacity development with social advocacy. This is not only a conceptual-technical exercise but brings up Rothman's argument that in most cases a mixture of strategies are needed, including rationalistic planning in formal organizations and participatory/grassroots forms of problem solving (Rothman 2007, 36).

For instance, in our cross-European action research of local policies and social work (Matthies, Järvelä, and Ward 2000; Matthies, Närhi & Ward 2001; Turunen et al. 2001; Stepney & Popple 2008), we identified three corresponding models as target directions of action: addressing policy-makers with a social-impact assessment of city planning in Finland, improving urban development with cross-sectoral networking in a suburb in Eastern Germany, and social action with local residents in England. However, at the end of the three-year project, each local community approach had changed its strategy by applying models learned from the European partners. Finally, we could determine that a mixture of the three basic models was most successful in achieving improvements in the respective communities. Thus, we realized that it is not contrasting but merging of all the three levels that has the strongest positive impact (see also Rothman and Mitzrahi 2014).

Interestingly, in a classic German textbook for community work published in 1976, the author Seippel (1976) applies Rothman's concepts but concludes that the applicability of these American-based concepts in the German context has to be regarded with awareness of the core differences between these societies. In the Nordic welfare states in the 2020s, we can still agree with Seippel, who stated that the most relevant differences, which need to be considered from the European perspective concern the scope of the socioeconomic and cultural-spatial polarization of the population, the degree of marginalization and building of slums, the responsibility of the public sector regarding people's welfare and education, and the role of charity organizations (Seippel 1976, 34–35). These differences also explain the scepticism towards state institutions and the radical tenor of the citizen movements in the American context of community work. It is assumed that, in spite of the clarity of Rothman's three basic strategies, their understanding and application essentially vary in different cultural contexts.

Another conceptual research line, which is involved in my analysis identifies variety of concepts and models. It demonstrates, how community merges into professional social work and applies concepts like community social work, community-oriented or community-based social work, and includes community-orientation in further relevant service segments, such as healthcare elderly care, and education. (Popple 2015; Stepney and Popple 2008; Turunen 2009, 2020; Roivainen 2016; Sjöberg and Turunen 2018).

However, although being aware of the differentiation between community work and *community social work*, for clarity I prefer to use the concept of community work only in a general and elastic manner in this paper, in line with Sjöberg and Turunen (2018; see also Žganec and Opačić 2021), which reflects the professional landscape in the country context of this paper. In a similar way, Popple (2015) uses community work as a generic term, which includes several differentiated community work models. The value of Popple's conceptualization is that it analyses the impact of core societal developments on community work. He speaks of the influence of globalization, neo-liberal welfare policies, technology, increased economic inequality, and urgent environmental issues and the need for transition towards a sustainable future (Popple 2015, 2). Consequently, he introduces nine different models of community work that differ based on strategy and the role of practitioners. They will not be described in detail here but are worth mentioning as conceptual tools that are also used in the empirical analysis: 1) *Community care* develops professional and volunteer care provision for people in need, 2) *community organizing* improves the coordination between various welfare agencies, 3) *community development* supports the skills of local groups to improve their the life in the community, 4) *community education* brings education closer to the community, 5) *community action* applies conflict-focused direct actions, 6) *community economic development* establishes local not-for-profit businesses, 7) *feminist community work* addresses women's well-being, 8) *ethnic minority and anti-racist community work* supports groups working for the needs of minorities, and 9) *environmentalism and the green movement critique* supports groups working for sustainability transition and environmental justice. Popple argues that although these models overlap in their techniques and the skills used, they essentially follow the different traditions

and ideologies of the movements behind them. This also strengthens Rothman's argument that the conceptualizations of community work are – besides the global perspective – very tightly bound to the cultural contexts in which they have developed (see also Gamble and Weil 2010).

In the Finnish literature, categorizations do not receive a similar broad interest; the theoretical debates on community work have focused rather on the agency of community work in relation to the welfare state, neoliberal management, civil society, and social work with clients (Roivainen et al. 2008; Roivainen 2016).

While preparing the Social Welfare Act including structural social work in Finland, international literature was used for its definition and content description. Embedding structural social work in the legal frame of Finnish social welfare policy was also a chance for long-term domestic efforts to encourage the idea that social workers receive important knowledge about social issues in their daily work with clients, and they can therefore give valuable insight for policy-making (Pohjola, Laitinen, and Seppänen 2014).

In the wording of the Social Welfare Act (Finlex 2014), structural social work is seen as a preventive measure for promoting social well-being and health. It requests that society (especially at a municipal level) makes use of the knowledge and expertise of social workers who can provide front-line information on social problems and suggestions for their improvement. The Act defines three tasks of structural social work: a) to produce knowledge about service users' needs and their structural background, b) to act and make suggestions to prevent social problems and develop a better living environment in local communities, and c) to contribute to the planning of further public actions in local communities and collaborate with private and third-sector organizations in developing local social services.

Pohjola (2011) defined the task fields of structural social work in a broadly used definition, which includes all methodical levels of social work – from individual to macro-political. First, it implies *knowledge work* (i.e. knowledge production about social issues for those in charge of decision-making). This includes intensive analytical examinations of people's living circumstances and their changes, as well as proactive reporting of this knowledge to policymakers, media, and public arenas. Secondly, structural social work is *strategic work*, i.e. it promotes the development of welfare services and social issues in the local community and society, and advances dialogue between service users, decision-makers, and further relevant stakeholders. Social workers should be part of any groups developing strategies for well-being in the community. The third task field is *inclusion work*, i.e. advocating for the participation and involvement of citizens in society, and developing measurements in the local community that enable co-creation with service users, such as community meeting points, citizen forums, and service users acting as experts by experience. Finally, structural social work means *justice work*; the promotion of social justice, a rights-based movement to inform people of their rights and safeguard their realization.

This understanding establishes a broad mandate for structural social work; however, it does not include something, which would be fundamentally new for the ideal self-understanding of social work in Finland based on social sciences. In other words, the Social Welfare Act legitimized the dream of progressive social work to consequently further enact all dimensions of community work, but especially the political dimension. It also underlines what Weinberg (2019) indicates as a vital component in structural social work: it provides a measure of certainty in the paradoxical area of ethics in the practice of social work (see also Tiitinen 2019).

Furthermore, structural social work theoretically and conceptually exists in connection with the dynamic development of the ecosocial and environmental approaches in social work (Närhi & Matthies 2016; Närhi and Matthies 2018). Närhi and Matthies (2018) argue that the ecosocial approach strengthens structural social work with new conceptual and practical impulses. The local-global interconnectivity of structural social work (Gamble and Weil 2010) is extended by the environmental perspective and the involvement of social work in the transition to sustainability (Närhi and Matthies 2018; Matthies and Närhi 2017; Matthies, Krings, and Stamm 2020). The ecosocial approach can help practitioners to understand that structural social work is not something

totally outside of case work and individual issues. Then, the broadest interpretation of the classic ‘person-in-environment’ concept in social case work re-establishes interlinkages to the environment in a way that proves the need for group and community work, structural- and macro-level strategies, and analysis of the bio-physical and built environment, including work in and prevention of disaster situations (Dominelli 2012). The ecosocial perspective also strengthens the cross-sectoral transformative collaboration needed in structural social work and highlights the core role of structural social work in promoting social justice, which includes environmental justice (Närhi and Matthies 2018).

The concept of macro-social work often used in this conceptual debate (Applewhite, Kao, and Pritzker 2018; Rothman and Mitzrahi 2014; Tice, Long, and Cox 2020) partly overlaps with both community work and structural social work, but tends to focus more on community organization and social administration. I do not use this concept in the analysis, however, it is worth mentioning as a useful meta-level categorization. Tice, Long, and Cox (2020) state that macro-social work practice has the ability to see and intervene in the big picture. It addresses larger systems of the socioecological environment and collaborates with service users to improve their opportunities at organizational, community, and societal levels. The authors also see a similarity with the historical concept of *indirect* social work, which has been used when involving the environment and the social welfare system, and replying to the need for policy analysis, income distribution, community building, and political organizing. It *‘changes conditions in environments and addresses community issues through the empowerment of consumers’* (Tice, Long, and Cox 2020, 21).

In a similar way, Applewhite, Kao, and Pritzker (2018) argue for a stronger macro-social work approach and request that social work students should be prepared for critical roles *‘in human service organizations, community-based organizations, and social welfare policy settings’* (2018: 1170). However, their investigation of social work education discovered that competences for macro approaches are not trained. Thus, as stated at the beginning of this paper, in reality the concrete professional picture of both community work and structural social work seems to be more ambiguous than their normative goal-setting and ideal-conceptual definitions.

Current context of community work and structural social work in the Finnish welfare state

As long as Finnish social work has been a part of the academic environment of social sciences, since the mid-1970s, there has been an ideal goal of social work as a profession that makes changes in society and works beyond individual issues. Community work has even been regarded as ‘the real social work’ (Karjalainen and Kivipelto 2014). Besides the critical social sciences environment, this goal-setting has surely been influenced by the Swedish social work professor Harald Swedner, who also had readers in Finland, and who formulated the slogan ‘Socialt arbete är samhällsligt förändringsarbete’ (‘social work is work for changing society’. Swedner 1981; Roivainen 2016, 113). A corresponding progressive picture of social work was incorporated in the way community work and structural social work have been conceptualized in Finland as tightly interconnected yet not totally overlapping approaches (Viirkorpi 1990; Heinonen 2014).

In reality, however, most social work services in Finland are provided as individual case work by public agencies in local communities, and distinct community work is not often enacted by social work practitioners. As Roivainen (2016, 120), instead there has been a shift from the models of traditional community work as part of social work methods in the contexts of a modern welfare state, towards post-modern community orientations and strategies. This shift also applies to the demands of neoliberal managerialism and the centralized organization of social work practice. It means that mainstream public social work practices are increasingly directed to the processing of case management and selected target groups. In a similar way, Turunen analysed a shift in Nordic community work (Turunen 2020, 121), and Roivainen identified that Finnish social work has become distanced from the traditional community work. Traditionally, community work focused

on entire local communities and their disadvantages by mobilizing collective change, and is now rather searching for the support of individuals with community resources (Roivainen 2016, 118–119). However, the need to strengthen local communities and civil society is still there, and it is broadly recognized also in the neoliberal political discourses and programmes. According to neoliberal thinking, not only the public social work agencies but third-sector organizations and short-term multi-agency projects are expected to provide preventive activities and especially identify the needs of the most vulnerable groups. Roivainen also highlights the differentiated emergence of urban and rural social work in enacting community work strategies.

Compared with the broad traditions of international community work since the birth of the settlement movement at the end of the 19th century, community work in the Nordic countries has developed differently due to the context of the welfare states. However, the main difference is that in the Nordic countries, municipal social work practitioners are expected to be key actors who maintain community work approaches together with citizens and practitioners from third-sector organizations. Consequently, community work is not something outside of local public institutions but rather is applied by various collaborative networks across sectors.

Surprisingly, as Turunen also states (Turunen 2020), certain strains of methods have survived over more than a hundred years of the history of community work, and appear still – such as community houses, self-help groups, and cooperative forms of social economy (Matthies et al. 2020) – however, not appearing solely as social work methods. For instance, neighbourhood centres as low-threshold meeting points comprise one of the main strategies in the metropolitan area of Helsinki to promote inclusion of the most vulnerable groups and poor living areas (Seppälä, Grönlund, and Kemppainen 2020). Village houses and meeting points in rural areas with multiple social and cultural functions are also likely to be important (Rantamäki and Kattilakoski 2019).

The professional and academic communities of Finnish social work have been requesting reforms in the direction of structural social work, arguing for its preventive benefits for society. According to international (Payne 2005; Mullaly 2007; Fook 2015) and national debates (Pohjola 2011; Närhi and Matthies 2018; Tiitinen 2019), structural social work is expected to be emancipatory, political, and collaborative with citizen movements in addressing structural inequalities and other reasons for social problems. In particular, the *ecosocial approach in social work* (that connects Finland to global debates on critical environmentalism) emphasizes community strategies and structural dimensions, and requires social work to contribute to a transition towards a more sustainable society (Närhi and Matthies 2018; Matthies and Närhi 2017).

Consequently, the new Welfare Act of 2015 (Finlex 1301/2014) provided a mandate to enact *structural social work* as a core task of public social work. This opportunity requires and enables Finnish social work to develop a wide range of types of macro-level social work. In parallel with the Act, a new two-year part-time specialization programme of further education for social workers has been offered since 2016 in a nationwide collaboration with the University of Jyväskylä, led by Professor Kati Närhi (SosNet 2020). The main contents of its curriculum include public communication and media work, empowerment and social justice work, the development of services and an environment for action, as well as evaluation and impact research.

As Heinonen states (Heinonen 2014), structural social work may not be able to solve poverty, inclusion, and power issues alone; however, it can make a significant contribution as an agency that brings these issues to public arenas and suggests models of how to solve them, including networking with various agencies.

Despite this optimism, a solid legal framework, and a theoretical base for structural social work, powerful resistance against such a change also seems to be emerging in the self-understanding and practice position of public social work. Bringing to public debate such topics as social problems in the local community, the unserved needs of people, or the deficiency of services is not welcomed by political elites in charge of local policies, independent of the importance of structural social work for

preventing further social harm and costs. Silencing of social workers is even taking place, as Tiitinen discovered (Tiitinen 2020). It seems that those in power have not yet realized the benefits of structural social work but rather see it as a threat.

Obviously, new tensions are emerging around structural social work in Finland. In fact, the practitioners on the front line face a dilemma to find their way between the right to maintain structural social work, according to the law, together with their own ethical preferences regarding the needs of people, and the real potential of entering into conflict with the persons in power, which would have an impact on their working conditions.

Research data and methods

This study approaches the exciting new opportunity for change in social work from the perspective of early-career practitioners. The cohorts of social work students included in this study were enrolled in a working life-based part-time study programme, meaning that they had already obtained working life experiences and were partly engaged in practice while completing their academic qualifications. Being in the fourth or fifth year of their Master's studies in social work after the new Social Welfare Act came to force, they were asked to design their own plans to enact structural and community social work as an intervention in a real-life social problem or issue that they had identified in their practice experiences.

The data for this article was collected in two different five ECTS-points courses that I offered in 2016 and 2019 on community work and structural social work. The courses applied blended learning methods typical of the part-time programme. The practical application segment of the course required the students to analyse a concrete issue, problem, or challenge in their working or living environment to which community or structural work could be applied, and to design a project plan to apply such a methodical approach. The course in 2016 also included a field visit to a neighbourhood centre, and, in both years, a guest lecture from an international visitor could be included.

The data consists of 26 students' written project plans of community or structural social work, each having a length of 3000–4000 words and formulated as an application for funding. Through a letter of informed consent and a written agreement, all of the 13 students from 2016 and 13 of the 20 students in 2019 gave permission to use their project plan in this research. Regarding research ethics and data protection, each student's work is anonymized and safeguarded according to the GDPR. Denying or allowing the use of the assignment in this research did not have any impact on the grade given in the course. The students' assignments enabled them to apply their interspaces of learning as unique part-time student opportunities, as they divided their time between work and study, theory and practice. Several students have later applied their plans in practice and have also connected it to their Master's theses. Most of the students in this programme are aged between 30 and 60, and several of them already have a Master's degree in another discipline, factors, which give a certain established adulthood as their background, compared with the majority of 20 to 25 year old university students.

Although comprising just two relatively small groups of social work students from one university and two cohorts, the data can be regarded as giving a qualitatively broad slice of the current stage of development of social work in Finland. Since this is the only part-time programme, students come from across the country and reflect social work perspectives from various regions between metropolitan Helsinki, small rural municipalities, and various organizations. Their status as early-career practitioners with simultaneous study and work participation legitimates the assumption that they also present views from their practice. Regarding the point of time of the new legal duty and option for structural social work, these students were one of the first cohorts who were expected to learn structural social work as part of mainstream social work.

The research questions were built upon the students' assignments, i.e. their project plans. The data was analysed by qualitative content analysis (Kuckartz 2013; Tuomi and Sarajärvi 2018) in a theory-led manner, applying the research questions and the theoretical-conceptual models of

Table 1. Target groups and social issues.

Target groups	N	Issues to address	Structure to address
Young families; parents of challenging young people; multi-service-user families	4	Isolation, need for preventive peer support; lack of sufficient early support for biological parents of children in care	New living area, no opportunity to meet others, lacking community structures; poor collaboration between various service agencies
Children and young people in a community	4	School dropouts, low social inclusion, hard to reach, bullying, not being heard in services	Lacking preventive services, poor access and information regarding services, poor co-operation between service agencies and community
Adult people in marginalized positions	3	Poverty, loneliness, addictions, unemployment, housing problems	Services are unable to provide targeted comprehensive support, lack of meaningful perspectives
Young people with backgrounds of migration	3	Difficulty in coping with service systems; lack of diversity education	Complex jungle of services and social security, poor access to information; racism, spatial segregation
People with housing problems	2	Constant challenges to find low-cost rental houses of modest quality	Socio-economic inequality based on form of housing; stigmatizing service structure for people suffering homelessness
Residents of a community in general	3	Lack of places to meet others and get support for everyday issues at a preventive stage, low participation	Stigmatization of communities, lack of meeting points and participatory approaches, lack of cooperation between authorities and policy-makers and residents
People in psychiatric rehabilitation, and people with mental disabilities	4	Challenges to enter labour market, required use of digital services and banking	Poor collaboration between different institutions in the care chain, digitalization of services ignores the needs of these groups
Elderly people	1	Loneliness, challenging use of services	Individualized insufficient home services, lacking community
Social and care workers	2	Lack of staff, facing burnout	Unsuccessful recruitment strategies, lack of prevention and support regarding burnout

community and structural social work as tools for interpretation. This means that distinct steps were taken in the analysis. First, a comprehensive table was established where the core contents of the assignments were analysed: a) each of the 26 students' plans were recorded in the table with the anonymized title of their project, b) the social problem or issue targeted in each paper was noted in the next column, c) the core content of the suggested solution was defined in the third column of the table. After having crystallized this basic information for each assignment, the theory-led theoretical-conceptual interpretation could start. I asked in each case a) which kind of task field of structural social work it was addressing (according to Pohjola 2011), b) which strategy (according to Rothman's (2007) nine cross-tabulated strategies), and c) which model of community work (according to Popple 2015) it was following. Due to the large size of this detailed table (five pages), it is not possible to include it in this article; however, example excerpts are included in the next section to demonstrate the research results. After this, I established thematic clusters of the designed interventions according to the issues targeted and the similarities of their methodical models. Finally, I analysed the designed interventions according to existing theoretical-conceptual categories. Tables 1 and 2 present the background problems and the theoretical-conceptual categories of interventions, responding to the two research questions.

Results

Social problems and issues to tackle with community work and structural social work

The analysis allows a clear response to the first research question about what types of social problems are to be tackled at the community level and structurally. While analysing the students' project rationales and plans, it became clear that the target issues of their planned projects were extremely factual and concrete. They were selected and argued incredibly carefully and with 'heart';

they addressed serious obstacles, which needed interventions or solutions. Many of the issues were discussed together with part-time students' practice teams or student peers, and recognized as an issue that is broader than individual opinions. Some of the recognized problems did not trace back to the working life context but the private life situations of adult students; for instance, a daughter caring for an elderly parent living at distance in a remote area, or a parent on parental leave at home with small children.

Interestingly, each of the 26 plans had its own unique issue, and their categorization under any set conceptual codes was therefore challenging. However, the plans can be clustered according to the main target groups, which are connected to a certain issue, as listed in

The table above does not allow for very detailed argumentation of the issues recognized by the students. However, it became clear when analysing their plans that in most cases they defined the issues to tackle from a unique and well-argued point of view of service users, citizens in need, people working on the front line of services, or regarding the structures of services as relatives of service users. They observed significant growing social problems and identified them as being of a structural character. In most cases, they addressed the service structures as such and suggested improvements for them – not always simply including additional services but also re-organizing them. In some cases, a new neglected group of people in need was advocated for; for instance, girls with a migrant background or, increasingly common, people who are unable to use digital services and payments thus losing their independent agency.

Interventions to be applied for the identified issues

Continuing the reflections on the first research question about relevant interventions, it can be summarized that although overlaps and mixtures are obvious, the concrete ideas of students' plans for intervening in the recognized issues can be presented in thematic clusters according to the core practice model suggested.

1. *Community meeting points and houses* in various forms to avoid isolation, enable peer support, networking, access to services and meaningful participation, mostly developed together with the target group. These were suggested in diverse forms, such as a family café, an open-access community living room in a suburb, support for rural self-organization, a centre for people suffering homelessness to provide support services, and a joint day care for the elderly in rural areas instead of insufficient home services.

2. *Community-wide networking of professional agencies and target groups* to get their voices heard. These appear very often in the local context of schools and related services for young people and their parents. New networking and joint efforts were suggested as preventive measures or in the case of school dropouts and child protection issues. Increasing cases of child protection in local communities called for better collaboration. A programme of positive recognition was suggested in schools and the local community to address increasing social deprivation. School social work identified the need to improve cross-sectoral prevention and the development of supportive cooperative networks in disadvantaged rural communities. Fundamental structural challenges beyond these suggestions comprised different services that were barely able to collaborate properly, or children, young people and their families not being included in dialogue regarding the problems and their solutions.

3. *Concrete changes and innovations in service systems* include distinct reforms or minor improvements that are urgently needed, as argued by the students. Students suggested establishing a municipality-wide digital platform or social media channel to inform the community about all the issues and services for young people in one place, including information about access to services. A systematic improvement of the collaboration between a psychiatric clinic and a rehabilitative club house was suggested through a one-week practice placement of the clinic practitioners in the club house. A new type of low-threshold access to employment for unemployed people should be enabled as short-term assistants for people with mental disabilities. The shelter services for people

in homelessness should be fundamentally re-organized to bridge the gap between very basic physical services and proper case management, access to digital services, and guidance across further relevant services. Resources from individual home services for the elderly in a rural community could be moved to a community day centre to reduce loneliness. A training programme is needed for migrant students for better inclusion in the Finnish systems, including alliance-building for newcomers.

4. *Engagement of people of concern as experts by experience* for the better development of their services is worth mentioning separately, since it emerged several times in the data as a distinct, clear idea of its own. Test groups of people with various challenges in using digital services should be involved in the development of services for the new national Digital and Population Data Services Agency. Groups of parents with experience of a child taken into custody could prepare preventive, parent-oriented child-protection tools for social and health care professionals. Young service users in child and youth protection could act as co-producers of their service processes for their own issues.

5. *Ecosocial approaches offering alternative services and new thinking* were suggested in two plans in the data. A nature-based and animal-assisted GreenCare wellness offer was planned for people facing multiple problems and for social and care workers in need of recovery from burnout or stress. Another plan would establish an ecosocial community farm as a living and housing opportunity for people in rehabilitation from addiction or experiencing unemployment and additional multiple long-term challenges.

6. *Political and/or economic change* includes suggestions for structural social work interventions with significant impact. This was suggested to enable people with low income to purchase their own home instead of remaining dependent on rental flats, with realistic economic calculations. Also suggested was a critical analysis of the current policies of work rehabilitation, together with people in unemployment, to develop better alternatives. A national social work programme is needed for diversity and human rights work against racism and racial urban spatial segregation in Finnish society. Finally, a reality-TV programme was designed to involve better-off people in experience-based learning about the life of people in extreme poverty in Finland.

Theoretical-conceptual interpretation of the designed strategies and models

In regard to the reflections on the second research question, the identified target problems and developed interventions presented in detail in [Tables 1 and 2](#) allow the interpretation of a clear connection to the theoretical-conceptual categories framing this study. However, while categorizing each of the plans, it became clear that some of them could relate to several categories of the four main task fields of structural social work (Pohjola 2011), the nine mixed strategies of community interventions in the cross-tabular form by Rothman (2007), and the nine community work models by Popple (2015). Basically, it was possible to correlate the analysed data with each of the three typologies. However, the main result that emerged was that none of the students' planned actions fit into one category only, as each of them contained a mixture or had overlaps between various categories. However, in [Table 2](#) the six clusters of the designed interventions built in the previous section are related to the most relevant categories of community work models, strategies of community work, and task fields of structural social work.

Community development and community organization are the kinds of community work strategies and models, which are the most often frequently suggested and well-argued interventions by early career social workers. However, these interventions often also include elements of social action and social planning as well as political work. It can be said that the harming societal structures behind the need for such interventions are rooted in impoverished community structures and discoordination between various service agencies. Moreover, these societal structures are connected especially to the individualized, specialized and centralized management of public services, where the capability to support the local, micro-level of communities, gets lost.

Table 2. Theoretical-conceptual categorization of the designs.

Model categories by the next-generation practitioners	Strategy and model of community interventions	Task fields of structural social work
1. Meeting points in communities (N 5)	Community action/Community building	Inclusion work/ Strategic work/Knowledge work
2. Community-wide networking of agencies and target groups (N 6)	Community development/Community organizing	Knowledge work/Strategic work/Justice work
3. Concrete changes and innovations in service systems (N 6)	Community care/Capacity building/Policy & Planning/Advocacy	Strategic work/Inclusion work/ Justice work
4. Engagement of people as experts by experience to improve services (N 3)	Community organizing/Capacity development with Social Advocacy	Knowledge work/Strategic work/Inclusion work
5. Ecosocial alternatives (N 2)	Environmentalism/Community building/ Policy & Planning	Strategic work/Inclusion work/ Justice work
6. Changes in policies (N 4)	Policy & Planning/Anti-racism/Advocacy	Knowledge work/ Justice work/Inclusion work

Additionally, the strategic categories of environmental social work, anti-racist social work, as well as feminist social work, which are also mentioned by Popple (2015) as models of community work, are present in the data. The four task fields of structural social work by Pohjola are strongly present in the data, however, neither they appear as clean categories. None of the students' project plans included only one of them, instead they spanned several task fields of structural social work. Structural social work focused mostly on improvements in the service system themselves, on policymaking but also inclusion of marginalized groups of service users.

Conclusions

Each of the three used theoretical frames by Pohjola (2011), Rothman (2007), and Popple (2015) regarded the cases from their own differing perspectives. However, the strong evidence of mixed categories in the results allows to ask, whether it is meaningful to highlight theoretical categorizations of community work and structural social work as much as done until now in this research area. The research could apply such conceptualizations rather to identify the rich diversity and the opportunities of combined approaches (as done by Rothman 2007), as this study shows.

Structural social work is a powerful approach especially when given and taken as a legal mandate in the hands of social workers, as is understood today in the Finnish context (Pohjola 2011; Pohjola, Laitinen, and Seppänen 2014; Tiitinen 2019). It can be combined conceptually and practically with the strategies (Rothman 2007) and models (Popple 2015) of community work; however, it goes beyond them. Structural social work not only addresses the community level but also individual cases (e.g. engaging individual service users as experts). It also addresses particular target groups across society (e.g. people who have difficulties in using digital services) and even macro-level social reforms (e.g. supporting homeless people in purchasing their own home instead of a rental flat). One can optimistically conclude that since community work has been weakened and reduced by the neoliberal welfare policies in Finland, structural social work as a legitimate tool of social work may open new access to macro-level perspectives in social work in a way that can directly interlink with knowledge production from social work with individuals.

The results prove that it is worth asking early career social workers for creative interventions regarding difficult social problems. The next generation's ideas are pragmatic and innovative. In my study, they also brought the newest theoretical perspectives and research-based knowledge directly to the practice of community work and structural social work.

Furthermore, it is evident that many of the contextual global changes that are influencing community work, as discussed by Popple (2015), were also clearly present in the topical themes of the designs by the Finnish early career social workers. This requires that the issues of local and national social work are regarded from a global perspective and distance is taken from the methodological nationalism of social work (Määttä 2018; Ruokonen-Engler and Siouti 2013).

Finally, in order to relate the results to the international strategic and conceptual debate, the relatively strong focus on improving existing service systems in the students' suggestions should not be misunderstood when drawing comparisons, for instance, with the Anglo-American welfare state contexts of community work (where the majority of theories are also based on Seippel 1976). Many of the community work models developed there by citizens' radical movements or by progressive community workers, such as community care and community education (Popple 2015), are already part of the normal publicly funded professional services in the Nordic welfare states, and delivered in the local community by public, private, or NGO-based agencies. Still, although community action and advocacy models (Rothman 2007) are not very strongly perceived in this Finnish data, involving service users as the core group of experts to improve welfare services, for instance, is a big step in the Finnish context. Therefore, I conclude with the argument that based on these promising results, structural social work can enact community and political perspectives and a hopeful spirit of change-making in Finnish social work at all levels. This requires that the enthusiasm of early career social workers will not be prohibited or tamed to formalistic actions in its applications. Still, deeper research in comparative settings is needed, as well as an examination of how the concepts of community work and structural social work are applied in practice in various welfare state contexts.

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