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Title: The academic identity and boundaries of the discipline of social work. Reflections of social work professors on the recruitment and research of doctoral students in Finland

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## **Abstract**

Finland has a strong and long tradition of research-oriented doctoral education in social work. Recent general changes in doctoral education, such as increased regulation, internationalisation and time pressures, have had an impact on social work as an academic discipline. This article examines the recruitment of social work doctoral students and the perceived value of doctoral dissertations as academic research. The data consist of written responses by Finnish full professors of social work to open-ended questions presented in an electronic questionnaire. The analysis is based on the idea of 'boundary work' within and between disciplines, and between science and society, and on the professors' argumentation and reasoning. The results reveal several ambivalences in how the professors see doctoral education and dissertations in social work. Today, social work is seen much as any other (neighbouring) discipline, although with some unique features. According to the professors, while the quality of social work dissertations remains good, their value as scientific research has decreased. The societal and practical relevance of social work research presents the discipline with a major challenge. The most striking ambivalence concerned the relation between research and practice and thus merits further discussion within the social work discipline.

**Keywords:** recruitment, doctoral education, social work discipline, boundary work, Finland

# **The academic identity and boundaries of the discipline of social work. Reflections of social work professors on the recruitment and research of doctoral students in Finland**

## **Introduction**

Over the years, the academic nature and the role and purpose of research in social work has been much debated. Tensions have arisen between social work and other disciplines as well as between academic social work and social work practice, and hence it has been argued that social work research should be strengthened (Shaw, 2003; Powell and Orme, 2011; Taylor and Sharland, 2015). Doctoral education plays an important role in this (Orme, 2003; Scourfield *et al.*, 2018). In Finland, doctoral dissertations have traditionally made an important contribution to social work research in producing new research-based knowledge and reflecting traditions and trends of the research field. Doctoral students form the next generation of researchers and university teachers, and play an important role outside the university in the development, planning and management of social work. Thus, studying the recruitment of social work doctoral students offers an important perspective on the future of social work research (see also Maynard *et al.*, 2017). This article focuses on doctoral education in social work in Finland in the context of ongoing reforms in doctoral education. The aim is to analyse the recruitment of doctoral students and the nature and value of their research as seen by the professors who select them and supervise their work.

In the European context, Finland is often cited as an example of the academisation of social work, with a strong and long tradition of research-oriented doctoral education in the discipline (Orme, 2003; Lyons, 2003). Doctoral programmes in social work were initiated in the Finnish universities in the early 1980s. Unlike professional doctoral education, which is more typical in some other countries, the focus of these programmes has been on research. Doctoral education is also related more generally to the Finnish higher education system. In all disciplines, in Finland, a master's degree, which includes basic research skills and the writing of a master's thesis, is a prerequisite of entry to doctoral training. Moreover, admission to social work doctoral programmes is selective. Academic staff teaching students at bachelor's and master's levels in social work are also expected to have research-oriented

doctoral degrees. Unlike in many other European countries, a master's degree in social work is also required to practise as a qualified social worker.

The contexts and frameworks of doctoral education vary not only between disciplines but also locally, nationally and internationally, and over time. Stanley Taylor (2012), who has studied international trends in doctoral education, has defined recent changes in doctoral education as a turn from the Humboldtian to post-Humboldtian model. According to Taylor, the Humboldtian model, developed in Germany in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century,

*“... was intended for a tiny handful of the brightest and the best; it was based on a “master-apprentice” model of delivery; supervision was seen as a private relationship between consenting adults; there were no time limits on completion as creating knowledge took as long as it took; and the rationale was to develop new researchers in order to reproduce the academic population.”* (Taylor, 2012, p.119.)

In contrast, in the post-Humboldtian model, the numbers of doctoral students have increased and are also more heterogeneous, as they include more international students, part-time students, and students from different backgrounds. This in turn has also meant more regulation and management of doctoral education, including more time pressure on students to complete their studies and undertake full-time study, and thus a shift towards a more formal model. Taylor has termed these changes massification, internationalisation, diversification, commodification, McDonaldisation, regulation, proliferation, capitalisation, casualisation, dislocation, augmentation, and cross-fertilisation. (Ibid., p.20.)

The more formal model of the English-speaking academic world and the example of the natural sciences has had a major impact on Finnish doctoral education over the past few decades. Some of these changes resemble those identified by Taylor (2012), but others may already be a next step. The formal frame (4 years) is related to changes in science policy and to recent university reforms, and includes a strong emphasis on full-time studies, a rapid transition from the master's level to doctoral education, strict time limits on completion, and the overall effectiveness and regulation of doctoral education. (Husso, 2005; Suomen Akatemia, 2011; Tieteen tila, 2016.) This policy is imposing new demands on to student recruitment, doctoral education and supervision, and doctoral dissertations. It is important to

ask what this means for doctoral education in social work, and possibly for the future of the whole discipline.

This study on doctoral education in social work focused on the reflections of full professors as the key actors in the recruitment and supervision of doctoral students and as the examiners of doctoral dissertations. Studying the recruitment of doctoral students and academic value attributed to doctoral education and doctoral dissertations is important for social work research and its future development. In this article, we examine how the new framework could or might already have changed the recruitment of social work doctoral students and whether it has implications for the nature and focus of social work research.

### **Theoretical and methodological framework**

Internationally, there exists a substantial amount of research and academic discussion on social work doctoral education. Studies on the state of doctoral education, its meaning and purpose, and the nature of doctoral dissertations have been published in many countries (Dellgran and Höjer, 2002 and 2012 in Sweden; Orme, 2003; Scourfield and Maxwell, 2010 and Scourfield *et al.*, 2018 in the UK; Shera, 2003 and Rothwell *et al.*, 2015 in Canada; Shek *et al.*, 2007 in Taiwan; and Tirrito *et al.*, 2002 in New Zealand). In the US, which has more than 70 doctoral programmes in social work (Acquavita and Tice, 2015), research has been conducted on the trends, aims, structures and curricula of social work doctoral programmes as well as on their quality and results (e.g. Anastas and Kuerbis, 2009; Bentley, 2013; Drisko *et al.*, 2015; Goodman, 2015; Kurzman, 2015; Petr *et al.*, 2015). Doctoral education has also been compared between different European countries (Lyons, 2003) and international doctoral programmes in social work have been analysed (Leskošek and Matthies, 2017). However, comparisons between national programmes are not straightforward owing to differences, for example, in higher education systems. All in all, studies on the recruitment of doctoral students in social work or on social work professors' views on doctoral education and its results are rare.

In Finland, the information available on academic doctoral education in general is mainly statistical, including factors such as the numbers, employability, and future careers of doctoral students, although some studies have investigated doctoral students' views and

motives for embarking on doctoral studies (Hiltunen and Pasanen, 2006) and their experiences of doctoral education (Vuolanto and Pasanen, 2007). One study also analysed the nature of the doctoral dissertations in social work over the period 1982–2006 (Mäntysaari and Haaki, 2007).

Our research interest links with the international discussion on social work doctoral education, especially that pertaining to the sociology of science. In this study, we adopted the concept of boundary work, originally developed by Thomas Gieryn (1983;1999), as our analytic framework. According to Gieryn (1983), demarcation, i.e., drawing a line between science and non-science, is not the analytic question it has traditionally been treated as in the philosophy and sociology of science, but a practical one. Demarcation, which Gieryn defines as boundary work, is done for ideological reasons by scientists in different academic or non-academic domains, that is, to make distinctions in efforts to defend their own and their discipline's position and academic value. In an article published in the early 1980s, Gieryn presents the results of his empirical research in analysing both the style and contents of such boundary work (Gieryn, 1983).

The concept of boundary work has since then become popular, for example in studying boundary-making between basic and applied science (Sapir, 2017), between disciplines (Rodgers, 2012) or between the academic and business worlds (Tuunainen, 2005; Lam, 2010). It has also been widely used in other, non-academic contexts. In Finland, Pia Vuolanto (2013) has developed the concept for use in studying nursing science. She distinguishes boundary work within the discipline, between disciplines, and between discipline/science and society. In the first, she means defining the borders, norms and principles of a specific discipline. This could be understood as the 'identity work' of the discipline. Boundary work between disciplines is done by comparing one's own discipline with others. Boundary work between science and society refers to the debate on the societal value and purpose of a given discipline and its relations to the world outside the academy. In social work, boundary work of these kinds has been practised for decades, even if the term has not explicitly been used.

Here, we argue that when talking about the processes of recruiting doctoral students, the nature of their research, and the value of doctoral dissertations as social work research, professors in the field are doing boundary work within and between disciplines, as well as between science and society, and between academic social work and social work practice.

Drawing on this idea, we ask whether and how social work differs from other disciplines, what kind of social work research is wanted and needed, and what is or should be the social impact of social work research in society.

### **Data and analysis**

The data analysed for this article consist of written accounts or reflections by Finnish full professors of social work. Data were collected in autumn 2016 via an electronic questionnaire with open-ended questions. We decided on an e-questionnaire instead of face-to-face interviews for purely practical reasons, i.e., to save time and allow professors with their busy schedules to reply at the time most convenient for them. Face-to-face interviews would certainly have provided richer and deeper data. An invitation to participate in the research was sent to all 17 full professors of social work in Finland at the six universities offering doctoral programmes in social work. Of the 17 professors, 12 answered the questionnaire. These 12 were representative of all the six universities. Most of the respondents had 10–20 years of experience of supervising doctoral students. Two senior respondents had over 20 years' experience and two respondents 5–10 years' experience. At the time of data collection, the respondents had a total of 77 active doctoral students. All the questions on doctoral student recruitment practices were formulated to allow the respondents to freely reflect on and answer the questions from their personal perspective and to raise issues they saw as meaningful, important or worrying. The main themes of the questions concerned: (1) the recruitment of doctoral students in the professor's home university and the respondent's experiences of this process and (2) the respondent's estimate of the contribution of social work doctoral dissertations to the social work research tradition.

The analysis of the professors' accounts started with careful reading of the contents of their texts. We adopted boundary work (Gieryn, 1999; Vuolanto, 2013) as our analytic tool in coding the texts. Thus, we mapped the features of the boundary work within the social work discipline, between social work and other disciplines and between the social work discipline and society. We found also an additional aspect of boundary work in the data that refers to changes over time. In analysing the boundary work, we focused on identifying the



professors' dominant argumentation and reasoning (Vesala and Rantanen, 2007) but also ambivalences in their reflections.

## **Findings**

### *Similar to other disciplines*

When describing the current processes of recruiting students for doctoral programmes in social work in their home departments, the professors performed boundary work between disciplines. They compared social work doctoral education with that in other disciplines, but especially with former recruitment practices. The main argument was that practices of recruitment have changed in recent years and become standardised across disciplines.

For a long time in Finland, especially in the arts, humanities and social sciences, the dominant framework of doctoral education was an informal one, where the recruitment of doctoral students, and working with one's doctoral research, was relatively loose and free. This framework welcomed a heterogeneous group of doctoral students (Hiltunen and Pasanen, 2006). No time limits on completion were imposed, and thus doctoral studies could be a lengthy process, sometimes even extending over decades. The present professors referred to the national policy on education and science, and to the guidelines issued by their universities and faculties, in describing how current recruitment practices are more formal, regulated and transparent.

The turn towards more formal processes has affected the intake of doctoral students: "*Entrance qualifications are higher than earlier*". It is no longer as easy as it used to be to be admitted as a doctoral student in social work. Priority is given to (younger) applicants who apply directly after receiving their master's degree. They are perceived as adapting better to the more formal model and as having better academic qualifications for doctoral studies in terms of expecting rapid 'school-like' progress, fluent language skills, and international orientation. Similar trends have been reported in other countries (Goodman, 2015; Johnson-Motoyama *et al.*, 2013).

According to the professors, doctoral education in social work is also following the trend of other disciplines in its internationalisation. This means that writing one's doctoral thesis in English as an article-based dissertation consisting of 3–4 peer-reviewed published journal articles or book chapters and a rather extensive summary section has become a more highly valued form than the traditional monograph dissertation usually written in Finnish. The professors saw this as important for the development of the discipline. In addition, the numbers of foreign doctoral students of social work have increased, although no mention was made of any active recruitment efforts.

These changes were mostly seen in a positive light. The new formal selection process is seen as preferable as it makes the criteria for selection more transparent and guarantees the admission of the academically best candidates. Notwithstanding, informal recruitment procedures continue to exist. Some of these are more hidden and implicit while others are active practices either of recruitment or discouragement. These complement the formal processes and are probably rather similar in other disciplines. For example, students who are considered suitable candidates are encouraged to apply:

*“Students who have received good marks and who in their master’s thesis showed excellent research skills are encouraged to consider doctoral studies.”*

Active recruitment policies aim at educating a new generation of doctoral students and post-doc researchers in social work. Academically talented students, especially those who share the research interests of the recruiting professor and may even have worked in a project led by the professor are encouraged to apply for admission to doctoral studies. ‘Promising’ students are recruited as research assistants and integrated into research projects:

*“Such applicants also have the best options to be selected. For example, their research proposal might have been commented on and thus strengthened in advance.”*

Doctoral students are expected to be goal-oriented and complete their degree within the ideal time limit of 4 years and without excessive supervision. This means that those who are interested in taking doctoral studies as a ‘hobby’, planning to study part-time while continuing to work, and with long experience as a social work practitioner will not necessarily be accepted. Such candidates might unofficially be ‘turned away’, even before

they apply. Such informal practices are probably used in boundary work in all disciplines, not only between disciplines but also within a discipline in defining its principles, norms and borders (Vuolanto, 2013). These are practices to define what kinds of doctoral students, research topics and theoretical and methodological frameworks in the social work discipline are preferred.

In addition to arguing that social work is like any other discipline in its doctoral student recruitment, another line of argument was identified that drew on specific features of social work as a discipline. Arguments in this category referred to the professional orientation of social work to practice, a factor that comes into conflict with the formal trend in doctoral education:

*“The interests of those attracted to doctoral studies and of the university don’t coincide when a person wants to study while working, and to study a topic based on her or his own interests. The motivation of social worker doctoral students is often somewhat different from the current aims of doctoral education, more oriented to developing social work practice. In such a framework, social work doctoral students are seen as less theoretically oriented and they are less published.”*

In the above extract, one of the professors is describing how social work doctoral student candidates are seen by ‘the university’, i.e., by the academic community outside the discipline. While some professors saw this as problematic, they did not express any strong views on whether the current trend in doctoral education should be changed to better meet the needs and motivation of such students, or to further the nature of social work as a discipline. It has been suggested that the aim of academic social work should be to develop social work practice and create stronger collaboration between frontline social work and the academy, thereby encouraging practitioners to be more research-oriented, including doing research themselves. (See e.g. Howard, 2016; Orme, 2003; Satka, 2013) One of the professors responded to this question as follows: *“The current model (of recruitment) could mean losing important research topics arising out of practice.”* In other words, it could mean a weakening of societal sensitivity and of the impact of the social work discipline. However, in practice, according to the notions of the authors of this article, social work doctoral education and its

recruitment processes continue to remain rather heterogeneous, with different doctoral students with different motivations continuing to be admitted to doctoral programmes.

### ***Core characteristics of the social work discipline***

Many of the professors argued that doctoral dissertations are very important to the identity and development of the social work discipline (also Orme, 2003; Scourfield *et al.*, 2018). The more specific reasons they gave for this can be understood as boundary work within the discipline, i.e., work which defines and strengthens the identity of the discipline (Vuolanto, 2013) and in the case of social work defines it as a research-based practice. For the professors, dissertations:

*“are one of the main arenas of developing social work research”*

*“form an important part of social work knowledge production”*

Educating researchers and the continuing development of research and of professional practices through research were seen as justifying the importance of dissertation-based research in social work and as characterising the discipline. Interestingly, the professors did not reflect much on the importance of doctoral students as potential academic staff; however, this dimension may be too self-evident to merit mention here (compare Kurzman, 2015; Maynard *et al.*, 2017).

One reason for stressing the importance of dissertations was linked with the issue of developing the quality of social work research. In these lines of argument, the quality of dissertations was expected to improve, although

*“The development of social work theory is not as important as it was 20–30 years ago. The development of own theory base seems to be strongest in bigger research groups focusing on a specific theme or method.”*

Several professors remarked that national cooperation in social work doctoral training, which began in the 1990s, is an important factor underlying the better quality of social work dissertations. They were referring to the National Doctoral Programme of Social Work and Social Services (1995–2015). All the six universities (Helsinki, Jyväskylä, Eastern Finland, Lapland, Tampere, and Turku) that have social work education along with the National Institute for Health and Welfare (THL) contributed to the programme. The programme was funded by the Ministry of Education and the Academy of Finland. (SOSNET, 2015.)

With respect to the research methods used in dissertations, the professors saw these as more diverse than before and further that the level of education on research methods had markedly improved due to the national doctoral program. On the other hand, the research methods used in dissertations were also criticized for being too narrow:

*“although dissertations vary greatly from the thematic point of view, they are methodologically narrow (if we use the qualitative-quantitative division). Qualitative research with quite small data represents the mainstream.”*

Some professors saw that *“there is also need for quantitative research and use of big data sets”*. This is an issue that has been long debated in Finnish social work research – to the extent that some informants expressed boredom with the “deficiency discourse” on research methods:

*“In discussions on social work dissertations and research a kind of ‘deficiency discourse’ is usual. That there is not enough research that develops social work theory, or is quantitative, evidence-based etc. It is also said at the same time that there is already enough of ‘this or that’ kind of research.”*

The emphasis on qualitative research is not only a characteristic of Finnish social work research but also of that in several other countries and, nationally, other social sciences and humanities. Parallel estimates have been presented by, among others, Mäntysaari and Haaki (2007) for Finland, Dellgran and Höjer (2002; 2012) for Sweden, and Scourfield and Maxwell (2010) for the United Kingdom. In the United States, the need for methodological pluralism in social work research has also been debated. There, while both quantitative and qualitative skills are considered important, better skills in qualitative methods are especially

called for (Goodman, 2015, p. 36). One professor emphasised that a focus on specific research orientations and methods strengthens research and as such is a positive thing:

*“Some research orientations grow stronger at a given time, which is usually quite reasonable. On the other hand, growing stronger is not something that happens spontaneously; instead, it needs skillful and inspired research groups and supervisors (which again inspire new doctoral students), and active international connections. In the field of Finnish social work research there is room for a wide range of topics and orientations, provided the above-mentioned prerequisites exist.”*

The previous quote makes visible the overall aim of recent research policy, i.e., the formation of powerful research groups and centers of excellence where researchers in different career phases work together to develop their expertise in a specific domain or theoretical or methodological orientation. On the other hand, the international increase in the publication of article-based dissertations is believed to advance global awareness of Finnish social work research and increase the academic weight of dissertations.

Some professors, however, argued that the role of dissertations as scientific research has decreased:

*“All in all, the importance [of dissertations] has decreased since the time when a dissertation constituted a researcher’s main research effort and was also published by a commercial publisher.”*

*“Nowadays, a dissertation is more like a master’s thesis and monographs in particular don’t easily reach the research audience. Of course, there are many exceptions to this.”*

For the above-cited social work professors, the research career proper begins only after the doctoral degree.

Most professors argued for the need to develop dissertations. Their reflections included wishes concerning research topics, orientations, methods and the conditions under which research is done. For example, they would like to see bigger research groups where doctoral

students could be included and larger data sets used, more evidence-and intervention-based research, the development of social work theory, wholly new and bold initiatives, and also more dissertation supervisors.

These wishes and expectations regarding the development of doctoral training and dissertation quality in social work come from different directions and are linked to the substance as well the theoretical and methodological frameworks of social work research, its relationship to practice, and the scope and nature of dissertations. The most important question seemed to be how to boost the significance and contribution of dissertations so that they strengthen the scientific basis and knowledge production in social work. Thus, dissertations were also perceived as having an important role in social work research as well as just a pre-requisite for embarking on a research career. All these perspectives show that the professors understood social work as a discipline of its own that contributes to the building of theory, methodology and research-based knowledge that can serve practice. Despite the debate – or maybe because of it – confidence in social work research was evident.

### ***Relevance for social work practice***

The social work professors argued for the need to employ social work doctorate holders in practice development and expert tasks in the field of health and welfare services. This reasoning originates in the needs of working life and development work in the field and at the same time defines the social significance of the discipline. Discussion of the discipline's social significance constitutes boundary work at the interface of science and society. (Vuolanto, 2013), or academic social work and social work practice.

On the issue of the role of dissertations, professors often mentioned their relevance for practice. Many social work dissertations are “*extremely relevant for practice*” and “*often the research interests have already arisen from practice*”.

*“The relevance for practice and for society in social work dissertations is generally quite high, but it is a different matter how research knowledge succeeds in spreading to where it is needed, including outside social work.”*

Typically, the professors seemed to think that “*there is call for both professional and scientific dissertations*”. The need for professional and more practice-focused dissertations (known e.g. in the UK) has at times been discussed in relation to doctoral education in both social work and other disciplines. However, none of the present respondents addressed the issue of whether a separate degree of this kind of is needed. They were reluctant to regard professional and scientific orientations as distinct phenomena, as “*good theory also serves practice*”. The contribution of research-oriented dissertations as supporting practice was exemplified in the present data by reference to the deepened knowledge base in child protection.

As discussed earlier, in connection with the recruitment of doctoral students, in many international debates social work doctoral education is often strongly justified by appealing not only to the need to develop and strengthen research-based practice (Orme, 2003) but also to the needs of education and research (Goodman, 2015). There are also concerns that scientists in other disciplines and research funders may not recognize the uniqueness and the value of the relationship between social work research and practice or the value for the academic community of recruiting doctoral students from the field of practice. In the present data, although the relevance of direct practical experience for dissertations was mentioned, it was stressed by only a few of the professors. Some respondents wrote that the relationship and relevance of dissertations to practice is weak and should be strengthened:

*“There are too few relevant dissertations. Relevance to practice is not valued enough. It is a fact that the field experiences social work research to be too distant, too diffuse and world-embracing. This raises a credibility problem. Social work researchers’ knowledge of practice is often too thin.”*

Here, the decline in the value of dissertations is not linked to their academic importance or quality of research but to their weak contribution to social work practice. One of the professors attributed the decreased relevance to practice of dissertations to the change in the conditions governing research:

*“The pressure to publish in international forums may undermine the use of the newest research results of dissertations in social work practice.”*



The idea behind this view is that it is more challenging for Finnish social work practitioners to follow research published in English in international forums. On the one hand, the professors noted that doctoral education in social work and the change in the status of social work dissertations has followed – and maybe should follow – the general transformation in doctoral education. On the other hand, they drew attention to the disadvantages of this general change for the role of dissertations in developing the discipline. Based on our findings, the societal value of social work research, and especially doctoral dissertations, seems to be a contradictory and ambivalent issue, one in which academic and practical expectations do not always coincide.

### **Concluding remarks**

This article examined a rarely studied topic: professors' accounts of the recruitment of doctoral students and their reflections on the nature of doctoral dissertations in social work in the context of a general reform of doctoral education in Finland. When discussing the practices, procedures and aims of doctoral education and recent changes in it, the professors simultaneously defined and made distinctions – did boundary work – in positioning the discipline of social work vis-à-vis other disciplines, in defining the discipline itself, and in reflecting the relation of social work as an academic discipline to social work practice.

Based on our findings, this boundary work was characterised by ambivalences, as academic requirements and expectations regarding the development of social work practice do not always coincide in doctoral education. These ambivalences crystallised in discussion of the nature and value of the Finnish research-oriented social work dissertations and how to respond to applicants whose ambitions are more professional than academic.

Today, social work in Finland is seen much as any other (neighbouring) discipline, although with some unique features. The positioning of social work among other disciplines was especially evident in the professors' descriptions of the practices of recruiting doctoral students. According to the professors, with the increasing formalisation of doctoral education, exemplified in the trends towards regulation, management, internationalisation and degree

completion time-limits, the recruitment practices in the social work doctoral education nowadays resembled those in the other disciplines. This shift towards formalisation was welcomed, since it streamlined the recruitment process. However, the admission criteria were considered to be more demanding than in the past, possibly leading to disfavoured applicants with a background in practice and more professional interests, and thus neglecting specific features of social work as a discipline and weakening its practice-relevance. Even if such applicants lacked methodological and theoretical knowledge and the academic ambition required of today's doctoral students, their research topics might nevertheless be highly relevant for the development of social work practice. Clearly, the relationship between practice, theory and the current research orientation was problematic in the professors' reflections on doctoral training.

Social work dissertations were rarer in the past than they are today, and they have had an important impact on the academisation of the social work discipline in Finland. Some professors still considered them as an important part of social work knowledge production, and as such, a valuable academic contribution in developing theory, methodology and research-based knowledge for social work. Others saw instead that their role as scientific research had decreased even if their quality has remained good. This ambivalence is related to the general changes that have taken place in doctoral education. For example, the role of the doctoral dissertation nowadays is more focused and compact and doctoral candidates are increasingly seen as students rather than as young researchers.

The societal and practical relevance of social work research, including doctoral dissertations, presents the discipline with a major challenge. The most striking ambivalence, as also found in our study, concerned the relation between research and practice in social work. According to some professors, the link with practice continues to be a distinct feature of the discipline; for others the pressures exerted by the current science policy – such as the pressure to publish in international journals in English – has decreased the practice-relevance of research. However, such concerns over the practice-relevance differ widely from the situation in the UK, where a lot of discussion has been going on and efforts taken to build social work research capacity through the introduction of professional doctorates (PD) and research training for practitioners (Orme and Powell, 2008; Powell and Orme 2011). In Finland, however, all social work doctoral students pursue a research-oriented doctoral degree (PhD). There has been virtually no discussion on the need for a separate professional doctorate and

the issue was not raised by the professors in our study either. Instead, research-oriented doctoral education is considered to serve the purposes of both the academy and practice, even if not without some problems and tensions.

When comparing doctoral education in social work in Finland with that in other countries, it is important to be aware of the basic research –orientation of Finnish dissertations, where the relationship to practice is often indirect. Instead, basic research is governed by academic goals, ultimately, theory building. Unlike in many other countries, Finnish doctoral research in social work resembles social work-related PhD-studies in other disciplines, especially in sociology. While there has been a lot of discussion among Finnish social work academics on what kind of research is relevant for practice, no consensus has been reached. Reading between the lines, the present informants argued for evidence- and intervention-based research, participatory practice research and research on actual social work practices. These different research approaches entail, from their very outset, different relationships to social work practice. Furthermore, current Finnish science policy, which seems to expect academic research to have a greater societal impact (Tieteen tila, 2016), might also influence social work research and doctoral dissertations.

The ambivalences identified in our study indicate that there is a need for further discussion on the role of practice in doctoral dissertations and social work research in general. However, it is also important to discuss and clarify what precisely we mean when we talk about practice-relevance or the distinctive features of academic social work compared to the situation in other disciplines and other national contexts of social work research.

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