

Final report small project EASSW

Social Work and the challenges of diversity in urban neighborhoods



European Association of Schools of Social Work

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Executive summary

The project started in 2018, initiated by the University of Applied sciences Utrecht(HU) in the Netherlands based on a pilot, done by the research center of social innovation (KSI) and several studies and publications on the impact of increasing diversity in Dutch society. This impact of increasing diversity was not only felt in social work practice, but also in social work education and one of the questions that emerged was how this impacts on the work of the social professional.

Within the CARPE network of the University of Applied Sciences, Utrecht partners were found, that showed their interest. This Consortium on Applied Research and Professional Education (CARPE) is the first strategic alliance of a number of European universities of applied sciences. Altogether 6 universities, who are member of the EASSW, were interested to join in a shared application for EASSW small project funding, specifically with a focus on social work education.

Institutions participating in the project:

- Odisee University College (Belgium)
- University Castile-La Mancha (Spain)
- Hogeschool Utrecht (Netherlands)
- Manchester Metropolitan University (UK)
- University of Debrecen (Hungary)
- Trento University (Italy)

A seventh partner (non EASSW member) who participated in the project is Turku Univerisity (Finland). This partner didn't use the EASSW funding.

The main purpose of the project was agreed not only to contribute to social work education but also to develop a trans-national network for cooperation in teaching and research, by aiming at a shared application for a Erasmus Plus project, to be able to continue after the project has been realized.

As a final product of the project a booklet has been made of the major outcomes, that can be used in social work education. It will be published and available on the EASSW website and also available in a limited number of hard copies, to spread among the partners of the project. This should be available in January 2020.

Rationale and purpose of the project

How do social professionals deal with different tensions/challenges in urban neighborhoods, in which they work. Social professionals focus on social inclusion, but increasingly face contradictions and polarization between groups and individuals, especially on sensitive issues, such as radicalization of young people, sexual diversity, religion, discrimination and racism. We planned to organize a cross-national European seminar for schools of social work aiming (in the longer term) at establishing a transnational network for cooperation in teaching and research. The focus will be on the development of competences of social workers, in cooperation with service users and/or citizens within urban communities. We are aiming at mapping tensions in relation to diversity and polarization: what tensions are perceived by social workers, how do they value these tensions and position themselves as

professionals?

The main purpose of this project is to contribute to the development of education and training of social professionals in BA social work education. Our purpose is to develop knowledge and tools in education focusing at prevention and integrative approaches in which different professionals work together with citizens within urban neighborhoods. The key question that we would like to address is: 'which (universal and indigenous) principles (incl: knowledge, skills) contribute to the social workers' ability to manage and relate to diversity and polarization in urban neighborhoods.

Process of implementation

Debrecen seminar November, 29-30 2018

A two-day seminar was organized and hosted in Debrecen (Hungary) on November, 29-30 2018 in which all partners and a group of Hungarian social work students participated. All partners prepared case-studies about how 'increasing diversity' was understood in all their different national contexts and how professionals deal with the challenges of increasing diversity. In the seminar each participating partner was offered to clarify their contribution by a pitch and why the case-study was chosen. The methodology of the World café, an interactive methodology, was chosen to analyze the different case-studies by discussing three major questions:

- What do we identify as strengths and risks related to increasing diversity in our neighborhoods?
- What do we identify as the greatest challenges for social professionals in relation to this increasing diversity in urban neighborhoods?
- Which theories or theoretical concepts can we identify as useful to understand the complexity of the impact of increasing diversity in urban neighborhoods?

The World Café is a method that allows for exchanging ideas with a large number of people, participating together in evolving rounds of dialogue with varying combinations of others while, at the same time remaining part of a single, larger, whole, to bring forth new insights into questions that deeply matter to their life, work, or community (Steier, Brown & Mesquita da Silva, XXX). The conversational process of the World Café is an attractive method for engaging in fruitful discussion on sensitive topics in superdiverse neighborhoods. It contains also several aspects of conflict transformation without demanding a strong mandate of the organizers, and participants in dealing with urban conflicts. The concept of the World Café is also an interesting way of creating a learning environment for social work students. Students acquire on the spot competencies on sensitive topics, conflicts, tensions, life worlds and several ways of dealing with these tensions.

Discussion of outcomes and/or feedback to the project

The seminar took place in a very good atmosphere and inspired the participants to carry out in-depth analyses and discussions on the question of how social workers in the different countries deal with the increased diversity in the urban environment. It soon became clear that the cases from the different countries vary widely and that this is partly determined by the migration history of the countries as well as the political climate, public debate and mandate of the social workers. Nevertheless, a clear picture of similarities and differences between the different countries emerged.

Some general remarks:

- Social workers act on different levels of interventions . They manage conflicts and polarization, but also celebrate the strengths in superdiverse urban areas
- Social workers must be able to appreciate the value of practical know-how which is constructed in an implicit, informal and fragmented way, by urban residents, parents, school directors, community workers, a group of engaged youngsters etc.
- One way of making this concrete in education and practice is Community Service Learning
- The partners of the EASSW funded project agreed that one of the outcomes is the setting-up of a consortium with the aim to continue the collaboration with the application for a Erasmus Plus project

Some outcomes of the World-Café during the Seminar

Impatient society

Tensions related to migration, increasing diversity and, as a result, demographic changes in the composition of the population in urban environments can lead to polarization and sometimes to violent radicalization. The reflex of politics and media is one of sharp condemnation, direct intervention aimed at restoring control and security. Although very understandable, social professionals know that real change begins with the understanding of deeper social problems within communities. The involvement of social professionals consists of initiating processes of recovery, resilience, participation and inclusion. These are slow and complex social processes that are not always clear and visible to outsiders, and which are also looked at with impatience.

Coherent positioning

The increased diversity of society also contributes to an increase in the complexity of social work. Social workers work in a local context with a greater diversity of groups. Different cultures and religions have different values. For social professionals, dealing with issues of cultural value difference is anything but self-evident. In addition, the social professional must take into account the interests of stakeholders, such as those of agencies, financiers and local authorities. In this complex reality of increased diversity, interests and power relations, the social professional should not lose sight of his own professional moral orientation.

Professional mirror

The social dynamics of communities in which there is increased diversity is reflected in the positioning of the social professional. Perspectives do not arise only from assimilation processes. Polarisation is not only a threat, but also an opportunity because it makes social inequality and injustice visible and challenges the development of new social relationships and improvement of social quality of communities.

Reimagining social work practice

Examples are given of how the social work profession needs to reposition in changing urban neighborhoods and how social work practice needs to be reimagined. Also a narrow professional mandate is mentioned, especially in child protection and the centralization of services and less focus on outreach approaches. This challenges instrumental practice and compliance-based approaches. Old fashioned ways of working do not match with new-emerging non-standard needs of local communities. There may be little or no connection between people and local communities. At the same time strong virtual connections exist versus proximate ones; digital social work may emerge in a much stronger way. The boundaries of the profession are not always clear; on what is acceptable or not, what is in my mandate or not? In some places medicalization is becoming dominant,; the predominance of health care professionals versus social workers. In some practices subversion emerges, such as no reporting to police, for fear of deportation. It also challenges environmental issues. One of the challenges for social work professionals is that when citizens have no or less connection with their neighborhood, they do not take care about their environment, are less concerned about pollution, garbage, maintenance of parks aso; it has an impact on environmental conditions. Another issues that is mentioned is that social work practitioners become more aware of the relevance of their own identity attributes when they encounter increasing diversity. They become aware of their own 'whiteness', their embedment in western values, their own 'otherness'.

Debates on conceptualization:

Social integration and social cohesion

Social integration is a contested term but was suggested as a concept that could incorporate the different strands of social worker involvement in urban communities. The use of the term in our discussions was immediately contested saying it had been; 'tried in Belgium and it didn't work'. It was claimed the Belgian government had established a process of geographical social integration into housing areas in Brussels but that it had not achieved its goals. Alternatively, it was suggested that social cohesion is often defined as a cohesive society or neighborhood that works toward the wellbeing of all its members, fights exclusion and marginalization whilst creating a sense of belonging and trust. Social integration as a lens to examine young people's place in urban communities is inadequate and although it has both positive and negative overtones, even the positive overtones require critical analysis. Whilst positively it suggests inclusion, the question remains inclusion into what? If this is inclusion into discrimination, poverty and exclusion from wider society this can hardly

be seen as positive promoting the status quo potentially masking social inequality and social justice. Other conceptions of social integration emphasised the 'social colonisation' potential of the concept and its drive towards homogenisation and uniformity denying diversity and the benefits it may bring.

In order to be able to use social integration as a lens the concept needs tempered with at least one other concept otherwise it is in danger of meaning everything to everyone and therefore meaning nothing.

Conclusions and implementation

The project has been experienced as very valuable by all project participants. The cooperation on the theme went very well and has yielded useful results for European social work education and research.

The project delivered the following results

- A successful two days seminar in Debrecen with presentations of researchers, lecturers of all the partners and students from Debrecen University
- A booklet suitable for educational purposes. All partners have contributed to the realisation of the booklet that will be ready for publication on the EASSW website at the beginning of 2020. The researchers of the Utrecht University of Applied Sciences are responsible for editing the booklet. The table of contents is included in the appendix to this report.
- A sustainable consortium of six school of social work in Europe. The network thus realized continuation of their study under a different banner. The project involves 6 European Universities in urban areas:
- An accepted application for the Erasmus Plus project 'Urban diversities: challenges for social work' in June 2019. <https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/projects/eplus-project-details/#project/2019-1-BE02-KA203-060321>

Brief explanation of the Erasmus-plus project Urban Diversities

Today's European cities are more diverse than ever. Immigration, socio-economic inequality, increasing diversity of identities, activities, mobilities and lifestyles, all contribute to a state of superdiversity. This demands the particular attention of social work in terms of solidarities, social mobility, cohesion and appropriate cross-cultural responses (Vertovec, 2007, 2011). Tensions and challenges, such as clashing lifestyles, forms of racial discrimination, radicalization or conflicts between ethnic and religious groups appear, as well as a growing sense of detachment and disillusion within marginalized communities. Tensions in urban settings are often framed in a biased way through (social) media and policy makers, whereas they express and intensify vulnerabilities of precarious groups and mirror huge challenges for social workers, whose competencies to deal with the complexities of urban tensions are generally limited.

The strategic partnership seeks to bring students, residents of super diverse urban neighbourhoods, practitioners and researchers together in order to co-create a fresh understanding of urban complexities and tensions, and to identify, create and refine skills for recognizing and effectively working with urban tensions and polarizations. The strategic partnership also aims at establishing cooperation between education, practice and applied research. This cooperation and co-creation will contribute to innovation in social work education and practice.

Concretely, the project aims at developing and implementing a ‘blended learning course’ that strengthens the capabilities of (future) social professionals to intervene in situations that involve urban tensions and complexities. The course will consist of a ‘community service learning’ trajectory at the local level, combined with transnational exchange on a digital platform.

Dissemination

Two presentations were held at international conferences on the outcomes of the project:

- European Conference for Social Work Research 2019, Leuven by Mieke Schrooten
- EASSW conference Madrid 2019 by Raymond Kloppenburg and Peter Hendriks
- Booklet for educational purposes published on the EASSW website in January 2020.
- News on the Debrecen seminar published in the Debrecen university's paper: http://hirek.unideb.hu/hu/hir/20181203_kozosen-az-europai-kutatasokert

Account of expenditures.

The estimated costs of this project were 12000 euros. The EASSW funding (6000 euros) concerns travel and subsistence costs, the hosting of the seminar and publication for educational purposes. The partners contributed equally (also 6000 euros) from which also preparation and management were to be financed.

Overview of realized costs

Activities	Expenses EASSW	Total EASSW	Expenses partners (in kind)
Preparatory meeting Brussels and management	Travel and accommodation costs	448, 20 euros	Preparation of seminar by Hogeschool Utrecht and Odyssee
Debrecen seminar 28.11.2018-01.12.2018	Travel and accommodation and subsistence costs	3821, 73 euros	Preparatory work: Case-description by all partners and pitch Participation in two day seminar

Wrap up meeting Antwerp plus publication 03.09.2019	Travel and subsistence costs	269, 10 euros	Wrap up outcomes of seminar by Hogeschool Utrecht and Odysee
Publication for educational purposes	Language check, editorial costs and printing costs	1500 euros	Contribution of all partners Editing Hogeschool Utrecht

