

Back to the future of social work: the empirical reconstruction of
craftsmanship in generalist social work practice in a transformational
context

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The Netherlands is faced with fast and extensive transformations and radical reforms throughout the social arrangements and institutions of the welfare state. The bulk of the reforms seem to depend on social work professionals, who are expected to work as 'generalists'. It is unclear what this 'new' profession implies, in the context of local social policy where the term is often used, but also in the domain of social work practice (i.e. professional associations, universities, social work providers) and among social workers themselves. In a multi-annual empirical research-project in a multi-method-design among social workers we look at the repositioning of social workers and social work as a profession: Is it possible and desirable to remodel social work into a generalist profession, when the core of the work seems to be very diffuse and hardly distinguishable from other occupations? How far can the boundaries of the generalist profession be stretched before it loses its characteristics as a profession? Or is he nothing but an employee forced to fit into the (austerity) objectives of the local social policymakers? Does the body of knowledge of social work need to be changed, and does the empowerment paradigm provide a steady foundation for this change? We will present the midterm results of the research project. Cases were wicked problems social workers encounter, and the wicked solutions they are able to provide will be presented. And we will discuss whether the empowerment paradigm and the conceptual basis of generalist social work, such as tacit knowledge (Polanyi), swamp work (Schön), dynamic development of professions (Freidson, Abbott), craftsmanship (Sennett), put together in a comprehensive conceptual framework, have the power to redefine the practical craftsmanship and fundamentals of generalist social work in highly uncertain, shifting and complex settings.

