

# Forensic Social Work: a Human Rights Perspective

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# Introduction

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## Problem statement

This doctoral dissertation analyses social work practices with people confronted with criminal justice interventions. More specifically, it investigates how practices of forensic social work (FSW) in Brussels and Flanders can apply a human rights perspective.

The literature uses different terms to describe social work with people who face criminal justice interventions. These include forensic social work, criminal justice social work or correctional social work. This dissertation uses the term *forensic social work*. This term is often narrowly understood as working with a target group dealing with mental illness combined with delinquent behavior (e.g., Hughes & O’Neal, 1983; Withmer, 1983; Brennan et al., 1986; Solomon & Draine, 1995; Sheenan, 2012). However, FSW is also broadly understood as social work – on a micro, meso or macro level – that assists people involved in criminal justice (Maschi, 2009; Maschi & Killian, 2011). This interpretation relates to how *forensic welfare work* (*forensisch welzijnswerk*) is defined in Brussels and Flanders, namely as a welfare-oriented approach in relation to criminal justice interventions (Bouverne-De Bie, 2002; Roose et al., 2012) and as a broad field of practices including both mandatory and non-mandatory social work (Bouverne-De Bie, 2002; Roose et al., 2012; Vanderlaenen & Polfliet, 2010; Vanderlaenen, 2015). This dissertation focuses on non-mandatory practices with people facing imprisonment.

Just like many other countries, in Belgium, social work has a long-standing tradition in supporting people during or after prison sentences (Meyvis, Roose & Vanderlaenen, 2012). Institutional changes were of great importance for the development of social work practices for this target group. From 1970 onwards, the state of Belgium underwent seven major reforms, each one devolving more responsibilities to three territory-based regions (Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels) and to the three language communities (Flemish, French



and German). With the state reform of 1980, “personal matters” (welfare, sports, culture, education, etc.) were devolved to the community level. This meant that forensic social work at the Flemish level developed independently from the federal level, which focuses on criminal justice and punishment.

Forensic social work practices at the Flemish level are connected to broadly oriented welfare goals related to human rights, human dignity and human development (Meyvis, Roose & Vanderlaenen, 2012; Van Garsse, 2012), this makes FSW interesting to analyze from a human rights perspective. A rights-based approach is considered indispensable for the support of people in prison and in moving people in prison from the status of a non-person toward citizenship (Easton, 2008). The shift toward a rights-based approach in criminal justice settings is recognized at the international level by the European Prison Rules (2006), at a national level by the Basic Law on Prisons and the Legal Status of Prisoners (2005), and at a regional level by a Decree concerning “the organization of services and assistance for people in prison” (2013). These laws and decrees emphasize that people in prison are “citizens” and holders of rights that must be guaranteed.

This rights-based approach is central to the broader debate on the identity of social work and its position in current society. In recent decades, social work has been defined as a human rights profession (e.g., Ife, 2009; Healy, 2008; Staub-Bernasconi, 2012; Androff, 2015; McPherson, 2015; Mapp et al., 2019). Human rights provide social work with an ethical and legal backdrop as well as a framework for action that give direction to the ambition of realizing social justice. This implies that human rights must be understood as a means to create well-being for individuals, families and communities and requires the pursuit of social justice (Wronka, 2008; Hubeau, 2018; Maschi, 2015).

Recently, several publications have concentrated on what a human rights approach implies for social work practice in general (Androff, 2015; McPherson, 2015, Vandekinderen et al., 2020; Reynaert et al., 2022). As a result, several frameworks for social work practices have been developed. For example, Vandekinderen et al. (2020) state that a human rights

approach to social work should focus on five principles: proximity, connecting practice, a process approach, generalist social work and politicization. However, most studies that focus on the relationship between forensic social work and human rights primarily identify the difficulties, challenges and tensions forensic social work faces when adopting a human rights approach. Three tensions in particular are often identified.

The first tension appears when the rights approach challenges the dominant perspective in society, which often considers people who break the law as not only guilty of the crime they committed but also responsible for their own situation (Roose & Bouverne-De Bie, 2008; Fenton, 2013; Birgden, 2015; Stanley, 2018; Vance & Rivers, 2020). In this view, their life situation and living conditions are usually seen as a consequence of wrong choices and bad behavior. In this vein, citizenship and the related rights are perceived as something that should be earned by good behavior and can thus be withdrawn or limited by misconduct (Easton, 2008). In contrast, a rights approach focuses on society's responsibility to promote well-being and realize rights for everyone, even when people misbehave or are involved in criminal activities.

The second tension concerns the difficult relationship between a rights approach and a probation approach for forensic social work. Although forensic social work is often narrowly defined, several scholars emphasize that forensic social work stands for a welfare approach to people facing criminal justice interventions (Van Garsse, 2007; Roose & De Bie, 2008). This is substantially different from a probation perspective that aims to support people in learning how to cope with the goals of communities (e.g., reduced risk). This probation perspective is often criticized when social work practices are perceived as a methodological and instrumental answer to problems of criminality and risk (Reamer, 2004; Ward, 2009; Van Garsse, 2007; Roose & Bouverne-De Bie, 2008). As many people in prison come from disadvantaged backgrounds, social work that takes a rights-based approach must transcend the individual level and question criminal justice interventions (Fenton, 2012; Garrett, 2016; Cummins, 2017). Thus, social work with people facing criminal justice interventions entails tensions in the relation between individual human

development and dignity on the one hand and societal well-being and safety on the other (Roose & De Bie, 2008; Boers et al., 2012; Dollinger & Kretschmann, 2019).

Finally, concerns have been raised because forensic social work, in practice, mainly developed from an organizational perspective focusing on collaboration. Consequently, the focus has remained on collaboration between service providers in various life domains, including housing, addiction and work (Van Tomme, Voets & Verhoest, 2011), or collaboration with actors in the justice department (Meek, Gojkovic & Mills, 2010). This has been to the detriment of the more conceptual question of how a rights-based approach could be developed and adopted in forensic social work (Roose & Bouverne-De Bie, 2008).

The above-mentioned tensions show that a human rights framework implies challenges for forensic social work. The research goal of this dissertation is to analyze how forensic social work can apply a human rights-based perspective. Therefore, this dissertation develops an in-depth case study of Flemish and Brussels forensic social work practices and determines which principles of the framework of Vandekinderen et al. (2020) are central to a human rights approach. The research question of this dissertation is formulated as follows: How can practices of forensic social work (FSW) in Brussels and Flanders apply a human rights perspective?

The scientific contribution of this dissertation lies in its analysis of how forensic social work can apply a human rights perspective, in contrast to studies that have only focused on the tensions and challenges that arise when the connection between human rights and forensic social work is brought to the fore. This doctoral thesis thus fills a gap in the research, adopting the framework of Vandekinderen et al. (2020), and showing how forensic social work can embrace principles such as proximity, a process logic, connecting work, generalist social work and politicization. The dissertation does so by focusing on empirical work conducted in four case studies of social work in and out of prison.

The main themes of this dissertation will be further elaborated below. The shift in legislation will first be explained, followed by a discussion of social work as a human rights profession and, finally, the research question and the four studies of this dissertation will be elaborated.

## **Legislation on people in prison**

International human rights declarations and treaties have a strong moral authority or are binding for the member states. In Belgium, such declarations also form the basis for the legislative framework at both the national and regional levels. Citizenship is thus protected in international human rights instruments and by laws and decrees that guarantee the rights of people in prison. A rights-based approach is founded on the principle that people in prison should be regarded as full citizens whose human rights must be treated with respect (European Prison Rules, 2006). In Belgium, this transition was initiated with the introduction of the 2005 Basic Law on Prisons and the Legal Status of Prisoners (also known as the Basic Law or the Law Dupont). The Basic Law provides a formal legal framework that regulates the legal position of people in prison, with all the rights of people in detention bundled together in this law. The Basic Law of January 12, 2005 considers, in accordance with European regulations, the normalization principle as one of the guiding principles of imprisonment. This idea of normalizing prison life is intended to ensure that the human rights of people in prison are respected; to promote their reintegration; and to reduce the harm caused by detention.

As stated above, state reform in the 1980s resulted in a complex field of organizational actors and policy levels that are responsible for the treatment and care of people in prison. The Federal Public Service of Justice, formerly the Ministry of Justice, is responsible for the implementation of sentences and provides a psycho-social service (PSD) in each prison. The PSD is composed of a multidisciplinary team of social workers, psychologists and a psychiatrist. In addition, the communities (the Flemish and the Walloon communities) and Brussels were made responsible for forensic welfare services, cultural and educational

activities, sports and vocational training. Each community is responsible for providing activities within their prisons. The Flemish and the Walloon communities also provide activities in Brussels.

At this regional level, in Flanders and Brussels, the Decree (i.e., Flemish law) of March 8, 2013 concerning “the organization of services and assistance for people in prison” was another important step toward a rights-based approach for people in prison. It states that all people in prison should have access to cultural and educational activities, sports, vocational training and welfare services (B.S. April 11, 2013). The Decree guarantees the right of all people in prison and their immediate social environment to holistic and high-quality assistance and services to enable them to develop in society (Art. 3, B.S. April 11, 2013). As a result, the Flemish government has taken initiatives to develop a high-quality range of assistance and services based on the needs of people in prison and their immediate social environment, through cross-sectoral cooperation between assistance and service providers and through intersectoral coordination of the services (Art. 3, B.S. April 11, 2013).

Thus, with this Decree, people in prison are entitled to the same support, services and assistance as people outside prison walls. In order to provide them with access to these activities, the services are offered in prison and are equivalent to those available outside prison, all financed by the Flemish government. Article 4 of the Decree stipulates the following objectives: “(1) to stimulate the self-development of the prisoner; (2) restore the social, relational and psychological balance of the prisoner; (3) limit the negative consequences for the prisoner and his immediate social environment caused by and during detention; (4) promote integration and participation in society after the detention period; (5) stimulate a process of recovery between offender, victim and society; (6) limit the chance of reoffending” (Art. 4, B.S. April 11, 2013).

These various legal frameworks are important as they can set the standard for the treatment of people in prison. However, a formal rights-based framework does not tell us

anything about the way in which it is put into practice. This issue is also apparent more broadly in the field of social work, which is defined as a human rights profession. As human rights are abstract norms, scholars are currently investigating if and how these human rights principles are being applied in social work practice. As these insights are relevant to the problem statement of this dissertation, the next section sheds light on social work as a human rights profession and focuses on human rights practice frameworks for social work.

## **Social work as a human rights profession: toward a conceptual framework**

A rights-based approach recognizes the universal principles of human rights: the equality of each individual as a human being, the inherent dignity of each person and the rights to self-determination, peace and security (UN, 1948). Social work scholars have elaborated on the historical (Healy, 2008; Staub-Bernasconi, 2012) and ethical (Reichert, 2011; Androff, 2010) connection between social work and human rights. From a rights-based perspective, social work practice recognizes people as right holders instead of beneficiaries (e.g., Gatenio Gabel, 2015; Ife, 2016; Mapp et al., 2019). Human rights are considered entitlements someone has because he or she is a human being (Nussbaum, 2011). However, just because someone has the entitlement does not mean these rights are realized (Boost et al., 2019). Therefore, social work is seen as indispensable in realizing human rights, particularly for people in vulnerable situations or positions (Bouverne-De Bie et al., 2007; De Maeyer et al., 2017; Boost et al., 2019). Since 2000, the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) has recognized human rights as core values of social work and has included them in the definition of social work (e.g., Ife, 2009; Healy, 2008; Staub-Bernasconi, 2012; Androff 2015; McPherson 2015; Mapp et al., 2019). Consequently, social workers are often defined as front-line human rights workers (Healy, 2008; Dibbets et al., 2021).

An important question concerns how and to what extent social work practice puts a human rights-based approach into practice. In that vein, scholars distinguish several approaches

(Ife, 2001; Ife, 2016; Dean, 2015; Dibbets & Eijkman, 2018; Vandekinderen et al., 2020). The first approach starts from the notion of human rights as formal or legal rights. This top-down approach emphasizes whether and how formal rights are realized for individuals (Weiss-Gal & Gal, 2009; Dibbets et al., 2021). To realize these rights, practitioners need to have knowledge of legal frameworks and procedures and the skills to apply that knowledge in concrete situations (Braye & Preston-Shoot, 2006). Such a legalistic understanding is important as it underpins the notion that people receive a certain benefit or service not because they deserve or need it but simply because they are entitled to it (Gatenio Gabel, 2015; Ife, 2016; Mapp et al., 2019). Consequently, in daily practice, social workers are engaged in realizing access to social services and benefits.

However, this legalistic understanding of human rights is criticized in two ways. First, this perspective neglects and decontextualizes how people perceive their needs and rights (Nussbaum, 2011; Dean, 2015). Second, this perspective only focuses on assisting vulnerable people to realize their rights and therefore neglects the importance of a structural or politicizing approach that is directed toward social change (Cornwall & Nyamu-Musembi, 2004; McPherson et al., 2017; Moyn, 2018).

More recently, a second understanding of a human rights approach has come to the fore. This perspective focuses on the socio-political context and has developed a more profound focus on individual needs and freedom of choice (Vandekinderen et al., 2020). The socio-political approach to social work and human rights attempts to intervene in the structural living conditions and the availability of resources with the aim of enabling everyone to live a life of dignity (Vandekinderen et al., 2020). Following this interpretation of a rights approach, Braye and Preston-Shoot (2006) stated that service users should be understood as the *drivers* of social work, as their daily experiences and perspective on what constitutes a dignified life is indispensable (Dean, 2013). According to Silvestri and Crowther-Dowey (2016), the added value of such an interpretation of human rights lies in its ability to unify the experiences of vulnerable groups, in order to provoke greater discussion about the

location and enactment of power. In this vein, McPherson (2015) argued that it is necessary to connect the individual level to the macro level.

Consequently, such a bottom-up and inductive approach starts from everyday realities to provide a contextualized perspective on how a rights-based approach and social justice might be realized (Hermans & Roets, 2020). Following this inductive and constructivist approach, several social work scholars have developed action frameworks, guidelines and practice approaches for the application of human rights in social work (Androff, 2015; McPherson, 2015, Vandekinderen et al., 2020; Reynaert et al., 2022).

This dissertation also uses such a bottom-up understanding of human rights in social work (Ife, 2001). This means that the daily realities in social work practice stand central, and is taken into account while reflecting on the question of how human rights practice should develop and how human rights are realized (Hermans & Roets, 2020; Dean, 2015). In particular, this dissertation adopts the human rights framework developed by Vandekinderen et al. (2020), who used an inductive approach. By listening to the voices of social work practitioners and other stakeholders they were able to identify five building blocks that characterize social work practices that realize rights (Vandekinderen et al., 2020).

While this framework built on other valuable frameworks, such as Androff (2015) and McPherson (2015), the latter were developed in very different socio-political and welfare contexts. For example, McPherson's framework mentions the link to the liberal welfare context in the US. In Belgium, after the Second World War, the welfare state expanded and the government took a leading role in the development of welfare practices. The pursuit of social equality and justice became a core task of the welfare state and consequently also for social work. The framework of Vandekinderen et al. (2020) was developed within the specific context of the Belgian/Flemish welfare state, and is thus highly relevant to the studies in this dissertation, which take place in the same context.



As mentioned, Vandekinderen et al. (2020) identified five interrelated characteristics or building blocks through which social work, as a profession, can be developed from a rights-based perspective. They distinguished: politicizing work, proximity, process logic, generalist practice and working in a connecting way (Vandekinderen et al., 2020).

The first building block of *politicizing* refers to practices based on collective social problems and to the development of practices that, for example, influence and/or criticize policy makers (Reynaert et al., 2022). A rights-based approach requires social workers to engage in practices where they advocate for people in vulnerable positions (Androff, 2018). McPherson (2015) also identified and made a distinction between activism and advocacy. “Activism” refers to those strategies where professionals, together with their clients and communities, aim to realize social change to tackle the issues that affect their clients’ lives. In this regard, Androff (2018) stated that social work must take action to address stigma and scapegoating and inform broader society about the issues people face. “Advocacy” refers to those actions and strategies adopted to influence policy and policy makers at the micro and macro levels. Advocacy on the micro level might address a client’s immediate needs, while advocacy on the macro level aims to change social structures (McPherson, 2015).

The second building block is *proximity* and touches on the relational essence of social work. Proximity is understood as being engaged in the lifeworld of service users (Vandekinderen et al., 2020). The early founders of social work had already emphasized the importance of being close to clients. Mary Ellen Richmond (1899), for example, showed the importance of a friendly relationship as the necessary context for trust. This is closely related to what Reynaert et al. (2022) defined as “lifeworld-orientation action,” in which social workers make connections with people’s everyday lifeworld experiences. Vandekinderen et al. (2020) demonstrate that worker-client proximity is necessary to guarantee accessible services and service delivery. This means that proximity refers to practices where social workers actively aim to reduce as many physical, organizational, social, cultural, emotional, psychological and financial thresholds as possible.

The third building block is defined as *process logic*, which refers to the importance of client participation in dealing with complexity and uncertain outcomes (Vandekinderen et al., 2020). Social work practice is often organized in such a way that social workers are seen as the experts, which creates power differentials between practitioners and clients. In a rights-based approach, social work practice should involve clients as equal partners. Consequently, clients are involved in deciding which services an agency will offer and what the focus should be (McPherson, 2015). Within this building block, people are not seen as passive objects but rather as having capabilities and potential. Decisions that affect the social welfare of people are taken with those affected by the consequences (Androff, 2018). In addition, other human rights frameworks stress the importance of participatory action (Reynaert et al., 2022) or see participation as a human rights-based method (McPherson, 2015).

The fourth building block is *generalist practice*, which is understood as having an integral view and paying attention to all the different life domains of service users (Vandekinderen et al., 2020; Raeymaeckers, 2016). In this regard, McPherson (2015) states that a broad focus across many aspects of clients' lives characterizes a human rights approach. In order to encourage progress in all life domains, the interconnectedness of social problems demands collaboration between different organizations involved in service delivery (McPherson, 2015; Raeymaeckers, 2016). Generalist social workers occupy a very central position in these networks as they transcend fragmentation in the professional field. They develop several roles to lower thresholds and to increase access to the necessary services and support for vulnerable target groups (Reynaert et al., 2022; Raeymaeckers, 2016).

The fifth and last building block in the framework is *working in a connecting way* at the individual and collective level, as well as connecting people to basic societal institutions (Vandekinderen et al., 2020). The individual component of this building block is understood as strengthening individuals or groups to regain control of their lives and to participate fully in society. The collective component refers to social workers trying to strengthen social life at the local level. The third component refers to connecting people with basic societal

institutions: social workers build bridges with other organizations to ensure that groups in vulnerable situations can obtain access. This latter component resonates with *system world-oriented action*, defined as an orientation and access to institutionalized societal resources necessary for the realization of human rights (Reynaert et al., 2022).

It can be concluded that the building blocks or principles as they are delineated by Vandekinderen et al. (2020) are clearly connected and cannot be seen as distinct and isolated practices. In the complex context of social work practices, these principles are highly interrelated and are translated in various ways depending on the specific context. This dissertation thus heeded the call by Rossiter and McPherson (2019) for more research on how rights-based practices may be constructed for particular target groups, such as for clients facing prison sentences.

In this particular context, studies that reflect on how forensic social work can develop a human rights approach often start from a probation approach (Lewis, 2006; McNeill, 2005; Durnescu, 2011) or focus on treatment in correctional clinical practice (Ward & Birgden, 2007), linking those practices to human rights as an ethical framework. Furthermore, probation and clinical approaches often adopt a narrow perspective on the goals of forensic social work. More specifically, they focus on questions such as the reduction of risk behavior or the avoidance of recidivism. A probation or clinical approach uses methodological instruments to attain the specific goal in order to enable people to adapt to societal expectations.

This dissertation is critical of this approach in two ways. First, these studies often neglect the voices and concerns of people in and outside prison. Second, these studies often adopt a narrow perspective on the goals of forensic social work, such as the reduction of risk behavior or the avoidance of recidivism, as mentioned above. In contrast, a socio-political understanding of human rights and social justice emphasizes a broad approach to how forensic social work can contribute to the realization of rights in various life domains and thus to a more just society. However, empirical evidence on how forensic social work is put

into practice from this human rights-based approach is lacking. Therefore, this dissertation examines how practices of forensic social work in Brussels and Flanders can apply a human rights perspective. To address this gap in current literature on forensic social work this dissertation encompasses four qualitative studies, each contributing to the research goal. The next section elaborates on each of the studies and their relationship to the overall research question.

## **Case studies and research questions**

The four case studies within this dissertation are related to current developments in the field. Data collection and the analysis in each study are typified by a qualitative approach.

The first study started from the observation that forensic social work in Flanders and Brussels was facing fragmentation and differentiation across several organizations, policy levels and services (Hellemans et al., 2008; Van Tomme, Voets & Verhoest, 2011; Claes & Van Parys, 2013). People in prison are not only confronted with criminal justice problems, but also with many other social problems such as addiction, debt and mental health issues. Consequently, a variety of services and organizations that provide services and support in different life domains are indispensable for the target group of people in prison and those coming out of prison. However, we observed that the institutional context was reinforcing the fragmentation of assistance and services provided to people in prison. To overcome this fragmentation, coordination, collaboration and a shared vision within the specific case of Brussels services for forensic social work was necessary (Pieraerts and Martin, 2002; Floré et al., 2006; Claes and Van Parys, 2013). As networks are often portrayed as important to achieving good results in social work (Wiklund, 2006; Van Tomme, Voets & Verhoest, 2011; Raeymaeckers, 2016), the aim of this first study was to analyze the role of the network in forensic social work. Networks aim to increase collaboration and reduce fragmentation (McPherson, 2015; Reynaert et al., 2022), but are also an important vehicle in the development of a politicizing role (Decorte, 2015; Raeymaeckers & Van Puyvelde,

2021). This study thus focused on the first building block of *politicizing*, in the framework for social work as a human rights practice.

Interviews and focus groups were held with social workers and their supervisors (n=22). Respondents were found in services for forensic social work in a complex institutional and organizational context. The study was published as an academic paper in *Brussels Studies* (Naessens, 2018).

The second study analyzed how forensic social work embraces a generalist approach while providing services and support. In the literature, social work practices with people in prison are, due to the complexity, often conceptualized and studied as a specialized field within social work (Green, Thorpe & Traupmann, 2005; Munson, 2011; Sheenan, 2012). However, as already stated in relation to the previous study, people facing criminal justice interventions are often struggling with a variety of problems in different life domains. Consequently, several specialized organizations and professionals are involved in providing services to address the needs of this target group. These services are responsible for one specific problem area, such as substance abuse, debt and mental health issues. As a result, clients with complex needs have to interact, at the same time, with different social workers with separate areas of expertise and methodological skills (Grell, Blom & Ahmadi, 2019). Research has found that specialization results in fragmentation and less responsive services and support for clients with complex needs (Krumer-Nevo, Slonim-Nevo & Hirshenzon-Segev, 2006; Blom, 2004), thus revealing the importance of generalist social work to address the complex needs of vulnerable target groups (Ellem et al., 2012; Blom, 2004).

Generalist practice is characterized as an approach with a holistic and broad focus across all different life domains of clients (Vandekinderen et al., 2020; Raeymaeckers, 2016; McPherson, 2015). Vandekinderen et al. (2020) already showed that a generalist approach is an important building block in realizing the human rights of vulnerable people. This study analyzed the role of generalist social work in collaboration with more specialized organizations.

For this study, generalist social workers in forensic social work organizations (n=14) were interviewed about their collaboration with more specialized services and social workers. This study resulted in an article published in the *Journal of Social Work* (Naessens, L., & Raeymaeckers, P. 2020).

The third study focused on a trend observed in many European countries, whereby volunteers and voluntary organizations work with people dealing with the criminal justice system (Tewksbury & Dabney, 2004; Hucklesby & Corcoran, 2016; Helminen, 2016). There is a long-standing tradition of volunteers and voluntary organizations supporting people and their families dealing with the criminal justice system (Hucklesby & Corcoran, 2016; Abrams et al., 2016). In Belgium, as in other Western countries, the work of volunteers in charitable and philanthropic organizations preceded the professionalization of social work (Meyvis et al., 2012). During the expansion of the welfare state and the professionalization of practices for this target group, the position of volunteers changed from pioneers to one of playing a more supplementary role with regard to criminal justice services. Currently, public and non-profit service organizations are increasingly looking for ways to combine the efforts and expertise of professionals and volunteers to provide support and services to vulnerable target groups (Wilson, 2012; Fensenfeld & Levinsen, 2019). This trend is also recognized in the field of criminal justice (Hucklesby & Corcoran, 2016; Helminen, 2016).

Without doubt, voluntary efforts have many advantages. In this regard, some studies have shown that volunteers are capable of building trusting relationships with people from very complex target groups (Connor & Tewksbury, 2015; Schuhmann, Kuis & Goossensen, 2018). Furthermore, it has been argued that by combining the strengths and resources of voluntary and professional efforts, services can be more responsive to the needs of vulnerable target groups and increase their well-being (Dahlberg, 2005). However, in times of budget cuts, the increasing reliance on volunteers is challenging for social work. Volunteers, nevertheless, can be used to fill the gaps in service provision or as a cost-effective way to meet welfare needs.

The aim of the third study was to analyze how professional social workers support volunteers in order to provide quality services to people confronted with criminal justice interventions. This study contributes to the main research question of this dissertation through its focus on the question of the role of professional social workers, who, in collaboration with volunteers, work together to provide services that are in line with a human rights approach in social work (Vandekinderen et al., 2020). The study focused on volunteers and social workers involved in a befriending project for people who had recently left prison. The group of volunteers were engaged as buddies to support people tackling issues while trying to rebuild their life after imprisonment. For example, volunteers can support people to reconnect with societal organizations and basic institutions (Van Dam & Raeymaeckers, 2019). In this specific study volunteers (n=13) and professional social workers (n=4) were interviewed.

This study resulted in the following forthcoming article: Naessens, L., Raeymaeckers, P. & Dury, S. (Forthcoming) Analyzing professional support in a befriending project with people who have left prison.

The fourth study started from the observation that formal rights often do not meet the needs of people (Dean, 2015). As stated above, a narrow and legalistic approach to human rights that guarantees the formal rights of people in prison is an important guideline for practice. The Basic Law states that work in prison is a formal right in Belgium (B.S. 12 January 2005, art. 84). However, it is not clear if and how this formal right is realized in practice and meets the needs and expectations of those wishing to exercise it. With regard to the building block of process logic in the social work human rights framework, Vandekinderen et al. (2020) state that people should not be seen as passive objects but rather as having capabilities and potential. Listening to the voices of those involved enables social workers to detect how and to what extent formal rights actually address the concrete daily issues that people confront. According to Silvestri and Crowther-Dowey (2016), the added value of a human rights approach to people facing criminal justice interventions can be found in its ability to unify the experiences of this vulnerable target group.

For this reason, the final step in the dissertation was a research project which took the perspective of people in prison. In the broader field of social work, there are also increasing attempts to take the client's perspective into account (e.g., Krumer-Nevo, 2008, McPherson, 2015; Androff, 2018; Reynaert et al., 2022). Adopting a perspective that is based on the lived experiences of the those most affected, enables the researcher to go beyond a formal and abstract conception of rights. For this study, the right to work was analyzed as work, of all activities in prison, consumes the most time and it thus constitutes an important part of prison life (Guilbaud, 2010; Peled-Laskov & Timor, 2018). Consequently, the aim of the fourth study was to analyze to what extent a formal right, such as the right to work, actually addressed the needs of people in prison. This contributes to our main research question by introducing an inductive and bottom-up understanding of human rights in social work.

For this study, we interviewed people in prison (n=14) about their work activities. The study was published in the *European Journal of Social Work* (Naessens, 2020).

The four publications based on these case studies all contribute to addressing the overall research question of this dissertation.

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# Chapter 1: Welfare work in the Brussels prisons: a puzzle with many pieces

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**Liesbeth Naessens**

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## **Abstract**

The welfare needs of people in prison are often complex and difficult to fulfill because they often relate to various areas of life. By providing assistance and services to people in prison and their relatives, different organizations try to formulate an answer to these needs. This kind of assistance and services extends over various domains such as education, culture, employment, sports, health, well-being... The services for forensic social work are playing an important role in this matter. This contribution focuses on the specific characteristics of the forensic social work in Brussel. We also discuss the results of a practice-oriented research from the Odisee University College about the way the Brussels forensic social work operates, its network and its collaboration with other services.

## **1.1. Introduction**

Often people in prison are not only confronted with criminal justice problems, but also with many other social problems such as addiction, debts, mental health problems... making their welfare needs complex and difficult to fulfill. By providing assistance and services to people in prison, different organizations try to formulate an answer to these needs. This assistance and service extends over various domains such as education, culture, employment, sports, health, well-being... The services for forensic social work are playing

an important role in this matter. This contribution focuses on the forensic social work in the Brussels region which, in comparison with the other regions in Belgium: Flanders and Wallonia, has a specific identity because of its context. The forensic social work in Brussels is characterized by its institutional and organizational complexity.

A practice-oriented research project, called “JWW BXL: a strong network”, analysed how the collaboration between the various organizations takes place at case level. The research questions were: To what extent do they work together?; What are the difficulties and strengths experienced in working together?; How can the network meet these difficulties? This project was realized using the funds of the Practical Scientific Research (PWO) of the Odisee University College made available by the Flemish Government.

We start this contribution by discussing forensic social work within the complexity of Brussels. Then, we focus on the sector as a network. And, finally, we highlight the results of the research project.

## **1.2. Forensic social work in Brussels**

A large part of the work of the forensic social work organizations in Brussels is located in prisons. In 2016 it was decided to merge the three Brussels prisons (Vorst - Berkendael and Sint-Gillis) into a single prison. The current prisons are over a hundred years old. As a result, support and services to people in prison have a rich history in Brussels. Due to the large amount of people in prison, a lot of different organizations - mostly originating from volunteering groups - arose in Brussels, providing assistance and services to this target group (Floré et al., 2006). Until 1980, the Department of Justice was responsible for social work with regard to people in prison. As a result of the state reforms in 1980 and 1988 the matters relating to the individual were transferred to the communities. This gave them the opportunity to develop an offer with regard to people in or after detention, and their families, independent of an intervention from the justice department. The Department of Justice remained responsible for the execution of the sentence itself. On the one hand this

resulted in social work provided by the Federal Ministry of Justice , the psychosocial services (PSD) in the prisons. The PSD is a multidisciplinary team within the prison that provides advice on the execution of the sentences. The PSD also supports people in prison in the preparation of their probation. On the other hand, it resulted in assistance and services provided by the communities. The organizations for forensic social work (*Les services d'aide sociale aux justiciables*) offer first-line welfare work to people in prison and their relatives. The organizations work independent of criminal justice, which implies that confidentiality, voluntariness and professional secrecy are important starting points.

For forensic social work in Brussels, the transfer of powers was the genesis of a complex institutional framework. Both the French and the Flemish Communities, as well as the Common Community Commission became responsible for the assistance and services delivered to this target group. Independently from one another, the various authorities developed their own forensic welfare policies. Currently, six generalist organizations for forensic social work are active within the Brussels prisons. These six generalist organizations are acting within a framework of different types of regulations, but their offer with regard to the target groups is similar. They provide general assistance to individuals (and their relatives) who came or are at risk to come in contact with criminal justice, they operate independently from the Ministry of Justice and share the same field of activity. They offer on the one hand individual assistance and on the other hand they organize activities for people in prison. For the French Community this is the *Service Laïque d'Aide aux Justiciables et aux Victimes* (Secular Support Service for Litigants and Victims) or SLAJ-V; for the Flemish Community, it is *Justitieel Welzijnswerk Brussel* (Brussels Justice Welfare Service), housed within the Centrum Algemeen Welzijnswerk (Center for General Welfare Work). The Common Community Commission (GGC) supports four generalist services: *APO*; the *Dienst voor Sociale Re-integratie* (DSR)/*Service de Réinsertion Sociale* (SRS) (Social Reintegration Service); the *Stichting voor Morele Bijstand aan Gevangenen* (SMBG)/*Fondation pour l'Assistance Morale aux Détenus* (FMAD) (Foundation for Moral Assistance to Prisoners) and finally, the *Werk voor Sociale Wederaanpassing/Office de Réadaptation Sociale* (ORS) (Service for Social Re-adaptation). In addition to these

generalist organizations, the various communities also support more specialist organizations offering their services in the prisons. These specialist services focus on one specific issues such as addiction, mental health, immigration law, parent-child relationship, education...

In order to be able to collaborate smoothly with the Department of Justice within each of the communities, those communities each concluded separate collaboration agreements with the Department of Justice. The Flemish and French communities did it in 1994 and renewed it in 2014, the Common Community Commission in 1999. With these collaboration agreements the role of the communities is recognized in the prisons. On the supra-local level, each community has created a coordination function: the community coordinator (GGC), the *Délégué direction du partenariat* (French Community) and the *beleidscoördinator* (Flemish Community). They support and coordinate the services operating within their own community. Despite working within different frameworks and having different tasks, these coordinators meet each other on a regular base in order to implement further collaboration and coordination over the borders of the various communities.

### **1.3. A network in Brussels: why?**

The institutional context in which each community uses a different framework and offers different services in the Brussels prisons implies a fragmentation of the assistance and services provided to people in prison in Brussels. Such a situation creates a lot of ambiguity, for the social workers, for the target group and for the actors within the justice department (prison management, PSD...). Because of this fragmentation, coordination, collaboration and a shared vision within the different organizations for forensic social work in Brussels are necessary (Pieraerts and Martin, 2002; Floré et al., 2006; Claes and Van Parys, 2013).

Networks are seen as a response to the fragmentation of welfare services (Allen, 2003; Walter and Petr, 2000). A first reason to form a network within the forensic social work in

Brussels is the institutionally complex situation and the tangle of involved organizations. In the Ministerial Decree of March 27, 2006, it was decided to establish a *Consultative Committee for Forensic social work*. In that way, Brussels policy met the need for collaboration and coordination. The tasks of the consultative committee are: the organization of a permanent consultation between all parties involved; supporting and promoting collaboration and coordination at the executive level; giving advice to competent authorities about the existing and future policies on forensic social work within the territory of Brussels-Capital region (A.M. June 4, 2013, art. 2). The duty to coordinate and collaborate between the parties involved is therefore legally anchored. The consultative committee meets every six weeks and is composed of one representative per competent minister, one representative per competent administration, one representative per department, a coordinator per community and a coordinator for the specialist external organizations. Prison management is invited every two meetings.

Secondly, working together in a network within this context makes sense because of the specificity of the target group. As mentioned above, people in prison often already have many problems before they end up in prison (Roberts and Brownell, 1999; Green, Thorpe and Traupman, 2005; Sheenan, 2012). The criminal justice problems and the detention are an addition to – and also a reinforcement of – the already existing problems. Prisons house people are not only confronted with legal problems, but also with relational and psychiatric problems, many people are struggling with debts, with addictions...This implies that work has to be done in many life domains to meet the needs of the people in prison. So, the different organizations are faced with an enormous challenge. It is therefore impossible for one organization alone to provide an answer to all the needs of the target group. Networks are defined as bodies that realize added value which cannot be achieved by an individual organization alone (Provan and Milward, 1995). In order to achieve qualitative support, collaboration with other organizations in a network is a must.

The six organizations for forensic social work mainly offer generalist support. In doing so, they focus on a broad approach to the situation of the person and his immediate social



environment. They work together with more specialist services in order to meet the different needs of the target group, for example when confronted with addiction. The collaboration between generalist and specialist organizations offers added value for vulnerable target groups such as people in prison (Maschi, 2009; Ellem et al., 2012; Raeymaeckers, 2016). The specialized organizations focus on one specific problem or target group while generalist social work focuses on different target groups or problems in different areas of life (Blom, 2004; Perlinski et al., 2013; Raeymaeckers, 2016).

In order to enable a smooth reintegration of people into society, the generalist forensic social work organizations collaborate with numerous organizations both within and outside the prison walls.

## **Methodology**

Networks can be analysed from different perspectives. We focus on the perspective of the social worker within the network. Social workers are the actors who give shape to the collaboration in the field. They experience how the institutional and organizational context influences their work. In this research we focus on generalist social work organizations. The generalist organizations have a central role in providing assistance and services with regard to the target group. After all, they provide on the one hand general support and on the other hand they connect with other and more specialized organizations. Because we cannot ignore the role of institutional frameworks and structures, we also interviewed the coordinators of the generalist organizations and the coordinators of the various communities.

Data collection was done in phases: first, two focus groups were organised with social workers from the generalist organizations of the forensic social work in Brussels (n = 10). On the one hand, these focus groups ensured that we could tailor the literature study to the specific context in Brussels. On the other hand, the focus groups provided input for the in-depth interviews. The phased way of working allows us to interview in a more targeted

way during the next phase of data collection (Mortelmans, 2011). For the in-depth interviews, we interviewed both social workers and coordinators of generalist organizations. Finally, the coordinators of the three communities were also interviewed, resulting in a total of 22 in-depth interviews.

We used a semi-structured questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted out of questions concerning the interviewee and the organization (seniority, task, supply and history of the organization). We then asked the respondents about their collaboration at various levels: first, between the generalist organizations themselves, then with more specialist organizations which offered their services within the prison walls and with organizations outside the prison. Then, we questioned the interviewees about the network and their expectations regarding the network. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. A computer program for qualitative research (Nvivo 11) was used during the coding phase. The labels were ordered according to their content. Then core labels and sub labels were formed and defined (Baarda et al., 2013). This label scheme was developed on the basis of the questionnaire and was further shaped by patterns in respondents' answers.

Prior to the interview, each respondent received sufficient information about the research and an informed consent was signed. The focus groups were held in January 2016, the interviews in the period from March to June 2016. In the final phase, the findings from the study were verified with the respondents (n = 6) via a members check meeting. In this article, quotes are used to illustrate or to reinforce the findings.

## **1.5. Results**

### **1.5.1. Collaboration**

Previous research, on forensic social work in Brussels, shows that in the past, the various organizations knew little about each other's (Floré and Snacken, 2007). Currently, our findings show, this is much less the case, certainly between the generalist organizations. There are a lot of informal contacts, the organizations know each other, and good practices

are being exchanged. In recent years, the network has made efforts to improve the mutual relationships. For example, it regularly organizes informal activities for professionals, which benefit exchanges and interrelationships. There has already been a big leap in this area, but because the sector suffers a huge staff turnover, lasting efforts are needed.

The generalist organizations mainly work together on an organizational level, for example to organize activities for the target group or to organize meetings in working groups on a specific theme. A social worker puts it as follows: “collaboration has become a habit within the generalist organizations, we easily find each other organize something together”. At a case level, the generalist organizations do not work together very much, because of the similar services they provide. In order to use the available resources and staff as optimally as possible, one tries to avoid that several generalist organizations answer the question from one client. Despite the collaboration agreements that were made, there are still the so called *doublons* (duplicates). In that case, the social workers concerned solve this in a constructive way: the other care provider is approached and together they examine who is most appropriate to follow up on the client. Nevertheless, lasting attention is needed from the network to avoid duplication of work.

However, the generalists work on case level with other more specialized organizations both inside and outside the prison walls. Knowing each other is generally cited as important in order to work together. In addition, it is indicated that collaboration is often a matter of informal contacts: “In fact you often start creating your own small network with people you have already worked with”. You can easily fall back on organizations or social workers with whom you have already collaborated constructively and which could be trusted in the past. Another important task is to support clients in making contact with another organization. Simply redirecting a client to a service often does not work with this target group. The organizations are often overburdened, questions do not end up with the right service or clients stop in the event of a setback. For these reasons, it is important to follow up on the referral, both with contacts inside and outside the prison. Continuing to support and motivate clients is important. Nevertheless, social workers indicate that this follow-up is

impossible due to the heavy workload, while ideally this should be done for every client. The generalist social workers are not able to adequately follow-up all their clients and to keep an overview due to the high caseload. This is, however, precisely the added value of a generalist social worker.

### **1.5.2. Barriers to other services**

The collaboration with the specialist organizations that offer services in prison is relatively smooth. If difficulties arise, this has to do with a limited supply, a large staff turnover or limited (telephone) accessibility.

Social workers indicate that there are still a lot of barriers as well in prison as outside the prison. First, there still seems to be a prejudice surrounding the target group. The term *detainee* or *prisoner* still closes a lot of doors: “Let me put it this way, our clients are not the most popular clients”. Social workers experience that the person is often narrowed down to the offenses committed. In that case, the intervention of the social worker is necessary to broaden this perspective to a person with certain welfare needs. Organizations are also not always prepared to work with this target group, since, after release, it often concerns mandatory support or treatment. In that case, organizations often assume that people in prison are mainly extrinsically motivated which is a letdown for a number of organizations.

Second, social workers and their clients are often confronted with organizational barriers. The intake procedures are not always tailored to people in prison and the prison system. For example, clients must register at a specific time; the support is region-bound so people from another region are considered as not appropriate for it; the necessary documents have to be gathered in advance which is not easy for people in prison; there are waiting lists; services are only accessible in a limited way... The social workers have an important task in questioning and trying to adapt the existing procedures and working methods of organizations to the possibilities of the ones in prison. If, for example, an organization from

another region is not prepared to come to the Brussels prison for an intake, they try to do the intake by telephone or ask a similar organization in Brussels to do the intake.

Prejudice and organizational barriers are not the only problem. According to the respondents, there is certainly a structural shortage of resources which causes barriers. Respondents indicated that many organizations are faced with limited resources so they are not able to come to the prison or to provide this target group with an adequate services. Whether or not to develop specific services to people in or after prison in Brussels remains too often dependent on the goodwill of organizations.

Moreover, the existing barriers reinforce each other. “Yes, due to the limited places, I think they probably like to play it safe. In that case, someone who comes out of prison is not always a safe choice to fill in that one place”. As a result of these dynamics, the social workers often take on the role of an advocate for their client. They try to bring about change within other organizations to lower the barriers for their clients. To achieve that goal, they attempt to convince other organizations to adapt their services to the client's specific needs; they point out their responsibility towards this target group. “Sometimes I really say: just listen for a moment before you say that you cannot help people in prison”. The social worker advocates and tries to work together with the other organization to formulate an answer to the client's request for support. Then, the network regularly takes actions. For example, organizations are invited to the prison in the hope that they will get to know the target group better and their needs, so that the existing barriers will be reduced for the entire population of people in prison in Brussels.

### **1.5.3. Working conditions in prison**

Throughout the interviews, the working conditions in the prison were frequently discussed as an obstruction to the collaboration. To adapt the own organization to the prison context is not evident. Respondents indicated that the work is often time-consuming and inefficient because, for example, people often have no access to a conversation room, telephone or PC. “It could be much more efficiently organized. I have to enter here (in prison), first see

the client and then do all the work in my office. So I cannot work immediately with the client, I have to do it afterwards and then I have to go back and say I did this, this and this”.

In addition, both the individual support and the group activities are regularly disrupted for reasons which have nothing to do with the external organizations for forensic social work. For example, the activities of the organizations are often cancelled or the social workers cannot enter the prison as a result of trade union actions organized by the prison guards. For example in the period between June 2015 and January 2017 no group activities (courses, sports, etc.) could be organized in the prison of Saint-Gilles. This despite the right to sports, lessons, activities, support and services and the collaboration agreements to provide support and services in the prisons.

Next respondents also indicated that they are not consulted in the event of changes in the prison that have an immediate impact on the work of the social workers. The respondents have a strong feeling that they have to constantly adjust the own organization to the prison instead of being able to develop it further. The current rationalization exercise within the prison “Working differently” is a good example. In the period between 2015 and 2019, the federal government decided to save 10 % on staff resources. For this purpose, the rationalization project “Working differently” was started in various prisons. Its impact is enormous on the organization of support and services. The moments that activities can be organized have become much scarcer (Paterson, 2017).

The above makes it very difficult to provide social work in the prisons in Brussels. Due to these specific working conditions, the way in which generalist social work practices can be realized and the collaboration with other organizations can be organized is very unpredictable. As a result, realizing the social rights of people in prison remains very precarious within the prisons in Brussels. It also puts additional pressure on the network because practitioners also have expectations regarding the network.

#### **1.5.4. The expectations regarding the network**

As the Consultative Committee for Forensic social work is a central body within this network, we highlight the expectations with regard to the Consultative Committee. As explained above, the mandate of the Consultative Committee for Forensic social work is threefold: firstly, to organize consultations, secondly, to coordinate at executive level and finally to give advice to the competent authorities (M.B. June 4, 2013).

The analysis shows that the social workers know the consultative committee and are in favour of its existence. According to them, it is the only place where all the organizations involved can gather and meet, and they indicate that collaboration is necessary. They also see this consultative committee as an institution which gives them a voice in the debate. In addition, they expect that the consultative committee facilitates further optimization of their specific work practices. For example, the generalists social workers state that they need information. The fact that they have a generalist approach, implies that they must have a broad knowledge. They must know the changes in legislation, in other services, in procedures, they must know about internal changes in the prisons... Relevant information is often discovered sporadically, and a more structured information flow would be an added value. For this purpose they look at the consultative committee as the umbrella organization of the various services.

The social workers expect the coordination and the organization of the different generalist's organizations to go smoothly, just like the good informal contacts between them. Some social workers dream aloud of one organization for forensic social work, or one single house where all the organizations are gathered. "One organization would make it much easier, no? You would not need all that consultation, the communication would be easier, there would be less time lost..." According to them, it would encourage collaboration between the generalist organizations. It was already a recommendation to merge and decompartmentalize the GGC organizations in order to achieve a more coherent entity (Floré & Snacken, 2007). To date, a structure has already been created, including thematic working groups where people meet and further shape ideas. A social worker puts

it this way: “Those working groups did not exist at the time, then everyone was working in its own field and, if there was an activity, you were asked if you had possible participants, you would please pass them on. But now we have the working groups. We now are trying to involve all organizations, the PSD and the management in those groups from the start. Because it is easier that way and we want something that is supported by everyone”. When organizations want to organize or undertake something, that structure has helped to create the reflex to involve other actors.

The collaboration is nevertheless fragile. Rethinking practical collaboration arrangements calls for much debate and plenty of time within the network. Faced with practical problems, social workers mainly want a swift solution and clarity. They are rather pragmatic and find it difficult to understand why finding a solution takes such a long time. Coordinators also indicate that the difficulty to reach an agreement is a problem. This is striking, since they are part of the consultative committee. The coordinators refer to the institutional framework in Brussels, which often makes it difficult to reach a consensus across the different frameworks.

It is also expected that the organizations gathered in the network have a stronger voice with regard to the policy in the prisons in Brussels. We already stated how difficult it is to implement the own organization into the prison context because of the working conditions. On top of that, the living conditions in the prisons are still very poor. “The prison of Vorst is so inhuman, it is totally unthinkable and I think that the consultative committee should have a more combative side when it comes to determining the punishment and the way it is executed today and its negative results”. In this quote, the respondent alludes to the actions and the policy recommendations that should emanate from the network. The sector feels powerless, a feeling that both social workers and coordinators share.

The third task of the consultative committee is to offer policy recommendations to the competent authorities. Problems are pointed out in the field, among others through the consultative committee, and passed on to the own authorities on the one hand and to the



justice department on the other hand. The recommendations often relate to concrete and practical issues at the local level and concrete answers are expected. This concerns, for example, the access to the prison, the waiting times before a client can be seen, etc. However, many practical problems are also a reflection of more structural problems. For example in the relationship between the justice department and the communities. However, structural problems also arise between the different communities. The coordination of the generalist organizations is not always evident. For example, an adaptation in the way of working when receiving people in prison, taking concrete actions, etc., it all requires a lot of debate and time from the many actors involved. Both the social workers and certainly the coordinators are aware of the underlying structural problems. They consider the formulation of advices to the competent authorities to be a very important matter, but they are disappointed in the extent to which the complaints of the field are answered.

## **1.6. Conclusion**

Forensic social work in the prisons in Brussels has a complex structure and is confronted with difficulties at various levels. The target group is confined in prison and is characterized by a multitude of problems and belongs to different language groups. The institutional logic whereby each community develops its own offer with regard to its own target group leads to complexity in the field. This makes coordination and collaboration indispensable in the Brussels forensic social work.

Despite the institutional and organizational complexity, a lot of progress was made the last few years in the collaboration between the different organizations. The creation of the network for organizations for forensic social work in Brussels and the consultative committee are examples of this. In addition, the “Strategic Plan for Assistance and Services for prisoners in the Brussels-Capital Region” offers a basis to continue in the right direction. The sector has contributed to the realization of that document, which was finalized in 2014. Nevertheless, there are still many areas for improvement for the network. The network

often works slowly and has little impact. Social workers expect concrete support for their daily practice for example information and concrete actions. The consultation structures are currently often used to exchange information and as a reporting centre in case of incidents. Problems are signalled through the Consultative Committee to the own authorities and to the actors of justice. It must be said that in the past two years the situation in the prisons in Brussels was very difficult, consequently many issues got stuck in the signalling phase. It seems to be a pitfall to use the existing consultation structure mainly as a pass-through of problematic situations in need of a solution. However, it is also a unique platform for achieving joint actions and for developing a further vision by all actors.

Nevertheless, the institutional and organizational context remains an inhibiting factor for the development of this sector. The authorities concerned should therefore take structural measures. For example, simplify the sector at the level of the GGC. Such evolution would simplify the current consultative structure with its many organizations and accompanying coordinators. In addition, structural collaboration agreements with other policy areas should be implemented in order to facilitate the reintegration of people in prison. In addition, the signing of a single collaboration agreement with the justice department over the borders of the various communities would be a big step in the right direction. This last point was already a recommendation in 2007 (Floré & Snacken, 2007), but has not yet been realized.

Furthermore, prison as a work environment remains a difficult context. The communities are competent to provide support and services for people in prison. This means that the actors of the justice department must guarantee the organizations of the communities to be able to develop their offer as much as possible within the prisons. All too often the communities in Brussels are not able to provide their services because of infrastructural or organizational defects or because of the impossibility of entering the prison to see clients. Realizing the social rights of people in prison must be seen as a shared responsibility of both the actors of the justice department and the actors of the communities. Only then can one fully benefit from qualitative services that can fulfil the needs of the people involved.

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# Chapter 2: A generalist approach to forensic social work: a qualitative analysis

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## Abstract

Summary: Forensic social work (FSW) is often portrayed as a specialized area within the field of social work. Nevertheless, the target group of forensic social work is confronted with a variety of problems in different life domains. The literature reveals the importance of generalist social work to address the complex needs of vulnerable target groups. However, little has been written or studied about what generalist social work should entail in the field of forensic social work. This article addresses the value of generalist social work for the practice of forensic social work. We conduct 14 interviews with social workers affiliated with forensic social work organizations in Brussels, the capital of Belgium.

Findings: The results show that generalist social work plays a pivotal role in forensic social work. A generalist approach is indispensable to meeting the complex problems of the vulnerable target group of offenders. Our study makes a distinction between five different roles adopted by generalist social workers affiliated with forensic social work organizations when providing services and support to the target group of offenders. In addressing the needs of this target group, they act as a broker, a mediator, a key figure, a safety net and as an advocate.

Applications: Despite some specific needs and skills required in the field of forensic social work, a generalist approach is critical to a more responsive social work approach towards the target group of offenders.

## **2.1. Introduction**

Literature frequently defines forensic social work in terms of a specialized field of social work practice within the broader field of social work (Green, Thorpe and Traupmann, 2005, Munson, 2011; Sheenan, 2012). Within this specialized field, much attention is paid to a practice that requires specialized knowledge and skills to enhance the integration of offenders into society and to predict the risks of reoffending (Green, Thorpe and Traupmann, 2005; Sheenan, 2012). Maschi and Killian (2011) agree that “the emphasis on the legal or justice aspects of practice is a distinguishing factor that sets FSW apart from social work practice as usual” (Maschi and Killian, 2011, p. 11). However, these authors state that forensic social workers (FSWs) should be regarded as both specialists and as generalists while focusing on the different problems and needs of their target group.

In the literature, generalist social work practice is often understood as social workers focusing on all of the problems and needs of their target group (Blom, 2004, p. 27). In contrast to specialists, who only focus on one specific problem area, such as housing or drug addiction, generalists adopt a holistic view and pay attention to all aspects of the lives or life domains of their clients. Different authors agree that generalist practice is indispensable when social work is confronted with the needs of very complex target groups characterized by ‘wicked problems’ (Rittel and Webber, 1973; Ferlie et al., 2011; Blom, 2004; Raeymaeckers, 2016). Generalist social work requires a broad spectrum of knowledge and skills and is capable of finding solutions that touch upon a number of societal spheres (Blom, 2004, p 27). However, recent studies focusing on specialist and generalist social work agree that complex target groups struggling with different problems in a variety of life domains will benefit when social work makes a connection between a generalist approach and profound specialist knowledge (Ellem et al., 2012; Raeymaeckers,

2016). We therefore agree with Blom (2004), who concludes that it is difficult to provide an answer to the question of whether generalist practice is better than specialist practice or vice versa. He argues that both types of social work are crucial for helping vulnerable target groups suffering from complex problems. For these clients, a balance between the need for a generalist perspective and the need for highly specialized competence is necessary (Blom, 2004). Different authors emphasize the important role of generalist social workers in a network of specialist service providers. Earlier work, for example, shows that generalists are able to facilitate the interaction among specialists and their clients by adopting a mediating and brokering role (Raeymaeckers, 2016).

However, little has been written or studied about what generalist social work should entail in the field of forensic social work, where social workers must collaborate with a range of specialized service providers. To fill this gap in the scientific literature, this article focuses on the extent to which forensic social workers (FSWs) adopt a generalist social work approach while trying to provide solutions to the complex problems with which offenders are confronted. We address the following research question: to what extent do forensic social workers adopt a generalist social work approach while providing services and support to offenders? In the literature, generalist social work is studied at different levels. Some studies focus on the level of the organization and examine the extent to which organizations can be considered as generalist or specialist (Perlinski et al. 2010). Other studies put forward the idea that generalist social work can also be adopted at the team-level between various social workers (Blom, 2004). Our research, however, is situated at the level of the individual social worker. We interview social workers affiliated with forensic social work organizations in Brussels, the capital of Belgium, who provide support and services to people in prison. We analyse the extent to which these social workers identify themselves as generalist social workers and unravel the different roles these social workers adopt. In the following paragraphs, we first focus on the extent to which FSW is defined as a specialist area in the scientific literature. Subsequently, we draw attention to the roles of generalist social workers while collaborating with specialist social workers. The article then proceeds with the methodology and the results of our research.



## 2.2. Forensic Social Work

In the literature, there are different interpretations of social work with offenders. Terms that are often used in this field of practice are 'forensic social work' and 'criminal justice social work' (CJSW). Both FSW and CJSW can be defined narrowly or broadly. In this article, we prefer to use the term forensic social work. We observe that, depending on the interpretation, different expectations are imposed on social workers within this field of practice.

Hughes & O'Neal (1983) define FSW as a particular type of specialist practice. According to these authors, these social workers are situated in the space between the concepts of law and mental health. FSW is defined here as working with a target group of offenders with psychiatric problems. This target group, characterized by mental illness combined with delinquency, has proven to be a challenge for social work and care. As a result, mentally ill offenders experience difficulties in obtaining access to appropriate care. Consequently, this target group 'frequently falls between the gaps of service systems' (Hughes & O'Neal, 1983; Withmer, 1983; Brennan, et al., 1986; Solomon & Draine, 1995; Sheenan, 2012). Therefore, several authors suggest that a special role must be reserved for the forensic social workers in this field of practice. In an effort to ensure that this target group obtains the care it needs, social workers must bridge the gap between mental healthcare and the justice system (Hughes & O'Neal, 1983; Withmer, 1983; Brennan, et al., 1986; Solomon & Draine, 1995; Sheenan, 2012).

Another approach to social work involving offenders can be found in the description of 'Criminal justice social work' (McNeill, Bracken & Clarke, 2010). These authors state that CJSW 'is practised by people who work for "correctional services", "offender management services" or "probation departments"' (p. 438). Under this approach, social work with people involved in the justice system is narrowed down to social work within a compulsory framework of criminal justice interventions. The articles on this field of practice frequently focus on the double role of practitioners within this field (Brennan et al., 1986). This double

role concerns the tension between control and emancipation. On the one hand, forensic social workers want to meet their clients' welfare needs or their need for treatment. On the other hand, these social workers exercise a control function that involves the protection of society and an obligation to limit the risk of new offences (Brennan et al., 1986; Roberts and Brownell, 1999; Ward, 2012). These social workers are therefore expected to develop a relationship of trust with their client, while at the same time having a control function that requires them to report back to courts of law or the justice department about their client's life (Whitmer, 1983; Brennan et al., 1986; Stutterheim & Weymers, 1999; Barker & Branson, 2000; Halliday et al., 2009; Munson, 2011). The combination of these two roles can be considered as an important challenge for social work (Brennan et al., 1986). FSW is considered a specialization within the wider field of social work precisely because it involves such a complex task within this professional sphere (Green, Thorpe & Traupmann, 2005).

A broader interpretation of FSW describes it 'as a professional specialty that focuses on the interface between society's legal and human service systems' (Barker & Branson, 2000, p.1). These authors state that a growing number of conflicts and problems in today's society are being settled in court. Consequently, the demand for social workers who know how the judiciary system works is on the rise. Barker & Branson (2000) suggest that forensic social work can play an important role in informing the judicial system about the needs of this target group. At the same time, FSW must inform other social workers about the relevant legal frameworks, making them aware of the influence thereof on their clients' lives. FSW is thus considered to be a type of specialist practice, given that these forensic social workers must possess a thorough understanding of both the social and legal aspects of client situations (Barker & Branson, 2000; Sheenan, 2012).

FSW is also defined as 'policies, practices, and social work roles with juvenile and adult offenders and victims of crimes' (Roberts & Brownell, 1999, p. 360; Brownell & Roberts, 2002, p. 3; Wormer et al., 2008, p. 316). These authors stress that the FSW target group faces a variety of problems. Their situations are not only characterized by legal problems,

but may also include a low level of education, addiction, financial struggles, relationship problems, etc. They are frequently in a vulnerable position in society and are faced with a combination of social problems in various areas of life, also known as ‘wicked problems’ (Rittel & Webber, 1973; Ferlie et al., 2011). This suggests that social workers in a wide range of sectors are confronted with people in or released from prison (Roberts & Brownell, 1999, p. 360; Brownell & Roberts, 2002, p. 3; Wormer et al., 2008; Maschi et al., 2009); for instance, social workers in homelessness services, substance abuse programmes, training and education programmes, and so on. Despite the interpretation of FSW as a type of specialist practice within the wider sphere of social work, several sectors in social work are confronted with the welfare needs of people in or after prison and their families. Consequently, forensic social work is not limited to one sector but extends to a much wider sphere. A broader FSW approach is of interest because such an interpretation would not restrict FSW to one sector, method or target group (offender, victim, problem), which increases the risk of fragmentation.

Starting from this perspective, we would like to highlight Maschi’s approach to FSW (2009). Maschi coined the term ‘collaborative forensic social work’, which is defined as ‘an integrative approach (i.e., generalist, specialised, and collaborative) to social work practice with diverse populations across diverse practice settings’ (Maschi et al., 2009; Maschi & Killian, 2011). Moreover, the authors state that FSW has a role to play at both the individual level – by fulfilling individual needs – and at the structural level. Thus, FSW includes any type of social work – on a micro, meso or macro level – that assists individuals involved in the criminal justice or legal systems. The term ‘collaborative forensic social work’ is a broad and open interpretation of FSW, focusing on the importance of collaboration and taking into account the different levels of intervention. Maschi’s (2009) approach explicitly states that the knowledge and skills of generalist and specialist social work must be combined to achieve responsive services for offenders.

As stated above, some authors tend to define FSW as a type of specialist practice. A narrow definition has the advantage of providing clarity in the debate on the definition of FSW

(Strutterheim & Weymers, 1999). However, there is a risk that a specialist perspective on FSW will result in a limited view of the crucial role these social workers can play when they are confronted with the very complex problems of their target group (Blom, 2004; Raeymaeckers, 2016). As mentioned earlier, people who commit criminal offences are often coping with a wide range of problems in different areas of life. To be responsive to a client's situation, specialist services are necessary but are unlikely to cover the variety of 'wicked problems' of this target group (Ellem et al., 2012). Generalist social workers have a broad range of knowledge and skills, allowing them to tackle problems at different levels (Miley et al., 2004; Blom, 2004). It is precisely because this target group has so many needs that some literature on FSW and CJSW emphasizes the importance of generalist skills and a holistic approach (Whitmer, 1983; Agllias, 2004; Green, Thorpe & Traupmann, 2005; McNeill et al. 2010; Sheenan 2012). Social workers within these fields of practice often provide their clients with emotional and administrative support, information about the legal system, connections to relevant resources and housing application assistance. Therefore, we argue that specialist and generalist social work must be combined to address the needs of this target group (Maschi et al., 2009; Maschi & Killian; 2011; Ellem et al., 2012).

### **2.3. Collaboration between specialist and generalist practice**

To address the role of generalist social work within the field of Forensic Social Work, Maschi (2009) refers to the international definition of social work while developing the concept of collaborative forensic social work. The value base of social work plays a central role in this approach, as social work is founded on the principles of social justice and human rights (IFSW, 2000; 2014). More specifically, she argues that generalist social work that focuses on the interplay between the individual and collective levels is indispensable for the target group of offenders (Maschi et al., 2009; Maschi & Killian; 2011). However, it remains unclear which roles generalist social workers fulfil within this particular field of practice. Thus, in this part of this article, we will refer to previously conducted research on the collaboration between generalist and specialist social work.

Raeymaeckers (2016) analysed the role of generalist social workers collaborating in a network of specialist social workers. In this research, the roles of brokers and mediators are examined (Raeymaeckers, 2016). A broker is defined as a generalist social worker who contextualizes the client's demand or need (Raeymaeckers, 2016). Brennan, et al. (1986) define brokerage as 'the process of recognizing individual needs, matching a community resource to meet those needs, and making a referral' (p. 342). During this process, the social worker provides information about the client's context to explain the client's needs. Often clients are not aware of what type of information the organization requires. The social worker, who knows the individual well, can convey the information from the individual to the specialized service (Ellem, 2012). A broker will therefore gather information about the client's context to inform the other organization and guarantee a referral (Raeymaeckers, 2016).

The role of mediator is assumed when the generalist social worker resolves conflicts between the client and the specialist organization (Raeymaeckers, 2016). When a problem arises between a specialist organization and the client, the generalist acts as a mediator, trying to prevent the conflict from escalating.

Abbott et al. (2005) describe the role of the key figure in their study of families with a disabled child that requires complex care. This target group has a combination of needs at various levels. Inevitably, a multitude of organizations are involved in the care of such families. The multiplicity of professional welfare workers involved in the child's life can result in insufficient continuity and coordination (Abbott et al. 2005). Families are unsure who to contact with specific questions. The key figure provides an answer to these problems (Abbott, et al. 2005), acts as the central point of contact for the family and coordinates the various social workers providing services and support to the client (Abbott et al., 2005 p. 159). This role is also referred to in the findings of studies that focus on the client's perspective, which report that if several social workers are involved in a client's life, clients need a central point of contact (Blom, 2004; Perlinski et al., 2001).

In addition to the roles of broker, mediator and key figure, another important role arises in the literature concerning the treatment and care of offenders. This target group often has difficulties accessing specialized care (Solomon & Draine, 1995; Roskes et al., 1999). As a consequence, social workers assume the role of advocate for this target group while trying to establish change (Severson, 1994; Agllias, 2004; Sheenan, 2012; Dominelli, 2009). If ‘a social worker educates the society and policy-makers about implications of policy and funding in the lives of their clients, the social worker acts as an advocate’ (Sun, 2004). Because of the nature of their needs and problems, this target group needs social workers who advocate for improved access to services (Roberts & Brownell, 1999; Reamer, 2004).

## **2.4. Method**

The aim of this study is to reveal the value of generalist social work within the field of forensic social work. More specifically, we analyse how and to what extent, individual forensic social workers adopt a generalist social work approach. We limit our scope to forensic social work organizations in the prisons of Brussels. In the first section, we examine the case of Brussels, after which our methodological choices are discussed.

### **2.4.1. The case of Brussels**

In this study, we focus on the case of forensic social work in Brussels, the capital of Belgium. We consider the case of Brussels’ forensic social work organizations to be very relevant to our research aim for several reasons. First, Brussels has the largest population of people in prison in Belgium. The capital of Belgium has three prisons, with approximately 1,200 people in it including male, female and mentally ill offenders. Second, given that two of the prisons are over one hundred years old, forensic social work in Brussels has a longstanding tradition. In Brussels, a variety of social work organizations have provided all kinds of support and services to prisoners and their families for decades (Floré, 2006). Currently, a multiplicity of organizations remain involved in forensic social work in Brussels. We notice that a large number of organizations provide services and support to people in prison in Brussels. In this respect, we consider FSW in Brussels to be a very relevant case for

examining the extent to which forensic social workers adopt a generalist social work approach.

For this study, seven Brussels forensic social work organizations were analysed. We followed the advice of Morris (2006) and used a purposive sampling method to carefully select the relevant cases we have to include in our field work to provide an answer to our research question. Thus, selected organizations in which social workers focused on several types of problems, provided different types of support in different areas of life and, thus, developed a holistic approach. We consider the social workers of these organizations to be relevant to our research aim because they are affiliated with those organizations that aim to develop a generalist approach while supporting clients in various areas of life, such as administration, family issues, emotional support and re-integration.

#### **2.4.2. Data collection**

The main source of data used in this research was a series of qualitative interviews. We interviewed social workers from seven forensic social work organization in Brussels. The following criteria were used in the selection of respondents. All respondents were qualified social workers, and had a minimum of 1 year of experience in this field. Thus, we made sure to interview respondents with relevant field experience. The smallest amount of experience was 18 months, and the largest was 17 years. We also selected respondents that provide individual social work to people in prison and work together with other social work organizations. We collected our data during semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 14 social workers.

We began our interviews by collecting general information about the respondent and their organization (seniority, mission, history of the service and services offered). Next, the questionnaire included questions about their collaboration with other organizations to address their clients' needs. The collaboration was queried at three levels: (1) with other generalist organizations, (2) with specialized organizations offering services inside the prison, and (3) with specialized organizations outside the prison. We also questioned the

social workers about the difficulties they experience with collaboration. All interviews were recorded. All the participants in the study were informed that their participation was voluntary and that their anonymity would be guaranteed in the presentation of the results.

### **2.4.3. Analysis of the interviews**

Next, each interview was transcribed shortly after the interview, and all the transcripts were first read to preview the data. The analysis involved re-reading the transcripts to identify major themes or issues, and the data were reduced by labelling the transcripts with codes (Miles and Huberman, 1994). We started an open-coding method, which enables us to analyse the transcripts based on themes taken from the research questions but also leaves the possibility for additional themes to emerge. To code and analyse our interviews, we used a sensitizing-concept approach (Blumer, 1969; Bowen, 2006). Blumer explains this approach as follows: “A sensitizing concept gives a general sense of reference and guidance in approaching empirical instances. Whereas definitive concepts provide prescriptions of what to see, sensitizing concepts merely suggest directions along which to look” (Blumer, 1969, p. 148). The roles of broker, mediator, key figure and advocate served as points of reference and as guides in the analysis of the data. We also organized a membership-checking meeting (n=6) with some of our respondents to affirm that our interpretation of the qualitative data reflected their views and experiences (Morris, 2006).

## **2.5. Results**

In the following section, we discuss the results of our research. We start by emphasizing the importance of generalist social work within FSW. We then concentrate on the various roles that generalist social workers undertake in collaborative forensic social work.

### **2.5.1. Generalist approach**

First, all respondents emphasize the important role of generalist social work in providing support to the target group of offenders. Most of our respondents refer to the complex



problems with which the target group of offenders is confronted. More specifically, they state that offenders struggle with a variety of different problems in several areas of life.

*'Often they don't just have one problem. It's health insurance, the public centre for social welfare (OCMW), their family, their housing and sometimes, on top of all that, psychiatric issues are also present' (R7).*

To tackle this complexity, a broad and holistic generalist approach is necessary. In our literature review, we have already shown the relevance of a generalist approach for vulnerable target groups (Blom, 2004; Ellem, 2012; Raeymaeckers, 2016). This finding is consistent with the results of this study. Our respondents emphasized the importance of generalist social work attempting to formulate a response to several needs, starting from a broad and holistic perspective. Depending on the client's needs and questions, they intervene in various life domains to achieve the greater wellbeing of the client.

*'Yes, I actually do have a pattern in my head during an intake. "What was your situation before you ended up here for the following aspects, i.e., employment, education, assistance. How did you end up here? If they want to talk about this. Housing: did they own or rent? Do they need housing? And it's based on these areas that I start working with the client' (R1).*

We thus conclude that our respondents identify themselves as generalist social workers. Nevertheless, our respondents also emphasize that, for a number of specific needs with which the target group of offenders is confronted, particular types of specialized knowledge and services are required. For this reason, forensic social workers often consider the collaboration with specialized organizations crucial to dealing with the specific problems of their target group.

*'We are a more generalist service, but we are familiar with specialist services and contact them when we require their assistance for a client' (R13).*

The generalist social workers collaborate with specialized services when they are confronted with clients whose questions or problems require a more specialized response.

In our interviews, collaboration is often defined as the referral of a client to a specialized organization. During these referrals, however, our respondents stress the need to support their clients and encourage them in their contacts with other services (Raeymaeckers, 2016). This finding was confirmed in many of our interviews:

*“People tend to lose courage because they have a number of problems that need to be dealt with, burdening them with a weight that discourages them from persevering. Just handing someone a phone number or address does not work for this target group (about a referral)” (R3).*

The referral of a client is thus considered a very difficult task. Clients often give up for a variety of reasons: they are confronted with difficult administrative procedures, waiting lists and different setbacks while trying to gain access to the necessary specialized services. Consequently, social workers must guide, mediate, support and motivate clients during their contacts with the appropriate specialist service organization. In the next section, we elaborate on the generalist’s role in collaborating with specialist social workers.

### **2.5.2. The role of the generalist**

In this section, we focus on the results regarding the role of generalist forensic social workers working with specialized social work organizations. We identify five different roles that forensic social workers adopt when collaborating with specialized services. One of the first roles to emerge is that of broker (Brennan et. al, 1986; Raeymaeckers, 2016). One social worker put it like this:

*‘I met the account manager of the health insurance fund to explain the situation and the context in the hope of achieving something. Many of our clients are not that good at administration. For example, they (the clients) will send back paperwork,*

*but don't always provide the bigger picture. I still find that if I provide some additional explanation and request a phone number and call back a second time, that things will start moving' (R5).*

Our respondents emphasize that collaboration with specialist organizations is made difficult when clients are unable to explain their situation. Some are not able to provide the information the social worker of the specialist organization requires before they can provide the necessary services. In addition, our respondents indicate that the problems of the target group of offenders are frequently reduced to the crimes they committed. As a result, their actual request for assistance to meet their complex situation is often overlooked and emphasis is placed on the client as an offender rather than as an individual requiring support and assistance. This finding is what Warner (2007) describes as a narrowing of perspectives. Our respondents state that, when this happens, they often act as a broker when explaining the broader life context and needs of the client to the social worker of the specialist organizations. By providing more contextual information, the social worker attempts to neutralize the prejudice the clients face. Respondents emphasize that they only share information about their client's context after the client gives them the green light. In addition, the respondents stress that they encourage their clients to approach other organizations themselves. In practice, however, many clients seem to experience difficulties in doing so.

*'I sometimes have people who say 'I'll do it, I'll do it myself' and then I'll answer 'Yes, but if you find it too difficult, just come see me again'. And then, many months later, they'll tell me, 'I couldn't call, it was too difficult to explain it myself.' And I'll say, 'Can you tell me what makes it so hard?' 'Let's make the call together' and well... I don't know. I sometimes find it hard to assess what people can do for themselves and what is beyond their reach' (R3).*

A second role is that of the mediator (Raeymaeckers, 2016). A generalist social worker adopts this role when a conflict arises between a social worker affiliated with a specialist

service organization and the client. The generalist acts as a mediator to create an understanding between the two parties and prevents the conflict from escalating even further. The following quotation about a conflict between a client and a social housing company sheds some light on this role:

*'A few months ago, I visited a social housing company with a client and his family because they had problems paying the rent. The accountant met with us and I explained the situation and discussed the options. We also explained and clarified the obligations to the client... They (the social housing company) were satisfied that a social service was able to provide context for the situation, to explain the bigger picture, which somewhat puts us in the role of mediator because people (clients) can sometimes be rude or speak in a way that the organization isn't used to... In that way we keep things polite because some people are frustrated and (smile)... it's at those moments that you can really make a difference' (R5).*

Unlike the previous role, the mediator is not limited to only explaining the request for assistance. When taking on the role of mediator, there is always a conflict involved. The generalist social worker attempts to translate and synthesize the point of view of each of the parties involved. The expectations and the options of the various parties are clarified in such a way that a solution to the conflict can be found. By doing so, these social workers try to prevent further escalation. In the example above, the objective was to avoid an escalation that would result in the client's eviction. By mediating between the client and the other organization, the social worker prevents the client from ending up in an even worse situation.

The generalist also frequently takes on a role we label as the key figure (Abbott et al., 2005). As a consequence of the several problems clients are confronted with, many social workers are involved in the client's life. Because the generalist social workers adopt a holistic approach, they maintain an overview of the various aspects of the client's life and the different services involved. Respondents indicate that this broad perspective is vital.

*'You cannot just categorize people and their problems into a number of subsidiary problems', such as unemployment, mental health, etc. All these social issues are linked' (R2).*

This shows the added value of a generalist social worker in assisting this vulnerable target group. The role of the key figure can be seen as an answer to the risk of fragmentation.

*'Often people come to see us with an urgent or specific request. However, we often realize that the problem is much bigger than that and to get an idea of their home situation, activities, housing and so on, and also to understand the bigger picture, we check with the network to see what has already been done or check what still should be done in this situation' (R12).*

The key figure not only acts as a central point of contact for other services and the family; he or she will also make sure that all the needs of the client are met.

The results of this study also demonstrate that, when a client experiences difficulties in finding access to a more specialized organization, the generalist social worker sometimes acts as a safety net. This occurs when clients are confronted with all kinds of organizational barriers, such as waiting lists or a lack of available services, that prevent offenders from having access to the necessary services and support.

*'When the service has a waiting list, I sometimes already start collecting all the information so I can already do something about his situation (on debt mediation)' (R6).*

In other words, the generalist forensic social workers address issues and problems that are often considered as the responsibility of other specialized organizations. An important example that is mentioned in many interviews concerns a client that is confronted with a waiting list when applying for support from a mental health organization. In this case, some

of our respondents state that they tend to see the client on a regular basis to ensure the client's wellbeing. The generalist social worker addresses the needs of the client while waiting for that client to obtain access to the specific services of a specialist organization. In this role, the generalist prevents clients from falling "between the cracks of the system".

Nonetheless, some of our respondents raise important concerns about their role as a safety net. Generalists are unable to compensate for a lack of all necessary services. Moreover, generalists indicate that they are continuously confronted with new questions, which makes it difficult or impossible to succeed in following up with clients they already know.

*"It is not always that easy, we have many applications, it all has to be done super-quickly. Very often, we're just putting out fires and working in the short term and the steps thereafter, well, that does not always happen. Of course, those things happen, but it's just... well, it isn't easy." (R5)*

This heavy case load is an important obstacle in daily practice. As a consequence of acting as a safety net and being confronted with many client demands, most of the time social workers are preoccupied with urgent issues, with little time remaining to build a long-term relationship.

Consequently, social workers frequently act as advocates. More specifically, we show that some of our respondents adopt this role at the organizational level by aiming to lower the barriers their clients are confronted with while trying to access the necessary services. They try to convince other organizations to adapt their service to the client's specific needs, pointing out their responsibility towards this target group.

*'We can identify the clients' needs and share them with these services. All we can hope is that they consider this to be part of their mission' (R1).*

As advocates, social workers will emphasize the important needs of their clients and often demand that the relevant organizations come up with answers to their clients' needs.

## **2.6. Limitations**

We are aware that this study has its limitations. As we only interviewed generalist social workers, a first limitation concerns the lack of attention to the perspective of specialist social workers. In our analysis, we clearly stated that many of the abovementioned roles are based on the holistic perspective of generalist social workers. We can, however, assume that specialist social workers, because of their particular specialist knowledge, can also adopt these roles. Therefore, we suggest that further research should focus on the extent to which and how specialist social workers are able to adopt these roles in their daily practices. Second, the client's perspective is not included in the analysis. Therefore, we state that, in order to provide more scientific knowledge on the importance of generalist social work, further work must be conducted including the client's perspective.

Despite these limitations, however, we argue that our results offer an important scientific contribution to the literature on generalist social work within the practice of forensic social work. Therefore, we recommend that additional research be developed to address our recommendations and the limitations of this study.

## **2.7. Conclusion**

The literature shows that forensic social work is defined and interpreted in various ways (Hughes & O'Neal, 1983; Withmer, 1983; Brennan, et al., 1986; Solomon & Draine, 1995; Barker & Branson, 2000; Sheenan, 2012; Green, Thorpe and Traupmann, 2005; 2012; Brownell & Roberts, 2002; Wormer et al., 2008; Maschi et al., 2009; Maschi and Killian, 2011). Whereas some authors prefer a narrow approach in which forensic social work is defined as a particular type of specialist social work, other scholars emphasize the importance of a broad and generalist approach. In this article, we follow Maschi (2009) by emphasizing that the human rights agenda of social work can only be adopted in everyday

practice by a broad, collaborative approach wherein social workers combine the strengths of both generalist and specialist social work (Ellem et al., 2012; Maschi et al., 2009; Maschi & Killian, 2011). However, few empirical studies have been conducted on the role of generalist social work in the field of forensic social work.

Our results show that generalist social workers adopt different roles at the intersection of the micro, meso and macro level (Miley et al., 2004). An important finding is that generalists connect the client's perspective at the microlevel with the meso-level of the (specialist) service organizations by acting as brokers, mediators or key figures. Generalist social workers mediate when conflicts occur between their clients and social workers from specialist service organizations. They also adopt a broker role when contextualizing the client's situation to improve access to the necessary specialist services. The key figure role allows the generalist to solve problems that occur during the coordination between the (collaborating) specialist service agencies and the client. The safety net role shows that social workers often solve problems when their clients are confronted with difficulties in gaining access to the necessary specialist services or in obtaining support from specialist service organizations.

Another finding of our study is that social workers want to invest in advocacy to change organizational policies that prevent clients from gaining access to necessary services. When adopting this role, generalist social workers connect the micro level of their clients with the meso level of the specialist service organizations and the macro policy level while trying to make sure that social work organizations take the complex needs of offenders into account. Our results confirm earlier studies that stated that advocacy is an important role of forensic social workers (Severson, 1994; Agllias, 2004; Green, Thorpe & Traupmann, 2005; Wormer et al., 2008; Sheenan, 2012; Reamer, 2004; Garrett, 2016). Our respondents advocate when their individual clients experience problems when trying to gain access to the necessary specialist services. Because human rights and social justice are considered as crucial values for social work, realizing the rights of incarcerated people should be high on the social work agenda (Maschi & Killian, 2009; Fenton, 2013; Cummins, 2017; Garrett, 2016). Although it



is tempting to focus on crime and the risk of re-offending, addressing welfare and social problems should always be a key focus of social workers who work with offenders. Therefore, we emphasize that advocacy is not only necessary at the case level but that social work must also adopt this role at the systemic level when trying to change policies at different levels for the entire target group of people in prison (Weiss-Gal & Gal, 2009).

For generalist forensic social workers to adopt the abovementioned roles, we emphasize that generalist social work must be supported at the organizational level. Generalist social workers require a large knowledge base relating to legislature, procedures, and specific knowledge about life in prison. In addition, the roles we identified are very time-consuming; due to heavy caseloads, most of these roles are performed under a great deal of pressure. Many of our respondents agree that it is impossible to take up every role for each client, or even all roles for one client. Therefore, we suggest that further work be undertaken to examine the extent to which generalist social work can be supported at the organizational level.

### **Research Ethics:**

This study was conducted as a research project at the university college Odisee Brussels and meets the standards of this institution's ethical guidelines.

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# Chapter 3: Analysing professional support in a befriending project with people who have left prison

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## Abstract

**Summary:** In Western welfare states, public and non-profit service organisations are increasingly looking for ways to combine the efforts and expertise of professionals and volunteers to provide support and services to vulnerable target groups. However, little is known about how professionals and volunteers collaborate to provide these social services and support. The aim of this study is to analyse how professionals support volunteers in a befriending project, where volunteers provide support to people after they are released from prison. Therefore, we interviewed social workers (n = 4) and volunteers (n = 13).

**Findings:** Our results show that professionals provide tailor-made support to volunteers through different interventions: they share their knowledge and expertise, provide emotional support, and advise and coach the volunteers. Furthermore, in complex cases, professionals intervene to access appropriate social support for and realise the rights of those involved.

**Applications:** Our findings provide a comprehensive perspective on how complementarity is constructed in the daily practice of collaboration between volunteers and professionals. Although professional interventions and support are necessary to address the needs of vulnerable people, volunteers can increase the quality of support in the role of fellow citizens, offering a wider range of support than professionals alone can provide. Consequently, close collaboration between volunteers and professionals can lead to a valuable response to the needs of people who have recently left prison. However, when a

client's situation becomes complex and volunteers lack the skills, experience and status to deal with it, professionals are advised to take over.

### **3.1. Introduction**

In many Western welfare states, public and non-profit service organisations are increasingly looking for ways to combine the efforts and expertise of professionals and volunteers to provide support and services to vulnerable target groups (Wilson, 2012). The efforts and expertise of volunteers – defined as people who provide services to others in their spare time without receiving payment, in a formal or informal organisation (Hustinx et al., 2010) – are often seen as complementing the efforts and expertise of professionals (Dahlberg, 2006).

In order to analyse complementarity, an in depth and bottom-up perspective is required (Dahlberg, 2006). In everyday practice, the complementary role of volunteers working in collaboration with professionals is often challenged and put under pressure. Studies show there is no clear cut division of tasks between volunteers and professionals and the boundaries in the division of tasks between professionals and volunteers are often the result of a negotiation process in which the professionals use their status to demarcate the professional domain (Van Bochove et al., 2018; Verhoeven & Van Bochove, 2018). Besides, studies emphasise the need for professionals who can provide tailor-made support to volunteers. Seen that volunteers often experience many challenges in providing support to and addressing the needs of vulnerable target groups (Singh et al., 2019). Other studies report cases where volunteers take the place of professionals (Trappenburg & Van Beek, 2019; Skinner et al., 2019), resulting in a lack of professional support, which may lead to high volunteer turnover rates (e.g. Nelson et al., 2004). These studies providing evidence on value and pitfalls of collaboration between volunteers and professionals. However, to our knowledge the literature fails to specifically focus on how professionals might provide complementary value to the efforts of volunteers.



The aim of this study is thus to analyse how professionals provide tailor-made support to volunteers who are confronted with challenges and difficulties when connecting with people in a vulnerable position. In particular, we focus on social assistance for people who have recently left prison. As the relationship between volunteers and professionals is an important mechanism through which social services are delivered, the importance of analysing them in daily practice should not be underestimated (Dahlberg, 2006; Tomczak & Buck, 2019).

### **3.2. Voluntary and professional work**

Collaboration between volunteers and professionals is often seen from a complementary perspective. (Skinner et al., 2019; Dahlberg, 2005; 2006), which implies that volunteers and professionals are responsible for different tasks and services. It has been found that volunteers are employed because of their specific expertise, proximity, capacity to build trusting relationships with the target group, or precisely because they fulfil different tasks or offer different kinds of services than professional workers (Dahlberg, 2005). It is argued that by combining the strengths and resources of voluntary and professional efforts, services are more responsive to the needs of vulnerable target groups and this will enhance their well-being (Faulkner & Davies, 2005; Van Bochove et al., 2018; Dahlberg, 2005).

However, many studies provide a more critical account of the collaboration between volunteers and professionals (Kreutzer & Jäger, 2011; Trappenburg & Van Beek, 2019). Some report conflicts and difficulties in such collaborations. These conflicts may arise due to concerns about being replaced (Trappenburg & Van Beek, 2019), with professionals feeling threatened when volunteers enter their professional domain. The division of the tasks and roles of professionals and volunteers are continuously negotiated in their everyday interaction and are highly dependent on the particular context, which may concern factors such as the difficulty of the tasks of volunteers, the complexity of the problems experienced by the target group, and/or working conditions (Skinner et al., 2020; Jegermalm & Sundström, 2015; Van Bochove et al., 2018). Van Bochove et al. (2018), for

example, showed that due to work pressure and stress, professionals welcomed volunteers into their professional domain to fulfil certain tasks and functions. This welcoming work is based on them being perceived by the professionals to have important knowledge, skills and certain types of expertise.

Furthermore, despite the unique and added value of volunteers, professional support and interventions are seen as necessary, especially when volunteers are responsible for complex tasks and challenges (Verhoeven & Van Bochove, 2018; Metz et al., 2017). In practices where volunteers provide support to vulnerable target groups alongside the efforts of professionals, the latter must redefine and adapt their role according to the specific needs of both client and volunteer to provide the appropriate responsive services and support (Van Bochove et al., 2018). Professionals are responsible for new tasks, such as recruiting, selecting, training and coaching volunteers (McGonigle, 2002; Verhoeven & Van Bochove, 2018). Providing ongoing training, support and follow up is essential to retain volunteers and to maintain the connection between the organisation, the client and the volunteer (Behnia, 2007). This literature illustrates the complex and dynamic relationship between volunteers and professionals and emphasises the coordinating role of the professional. However, it does not examine how professionals might support volunteers in their challenging encounters with vulnerable target groups.

### **3.3. Case study: voluntary work in buddy projects in the context of criminal justice**

In befriending programmes, people without adequate support systems are matched with volunteers who offer support and companionship for a predefined period (Behnia, 2007). Befriending means that buddy and client have a relationship that resembles a friendship, with face-to-face or telephone contact (McGowan et al., 2009). In addition, befriending takes place through an organised intervention, with the selection, training, matching, support and follow up of the buddy volunteer taking place within the organisation. Moreover, the buddy relationship involves the negotiation of power between the

professional, the buddy and the client. This negotiation of power and agency is related to the moments and frequency of contact between the buddy and the client, the duration of the intervention and the nature of the relationship. Such decisions are necessary to build a relationship of trust (McGowan et al., 2009). In both the literature and in practice, the concepts of befriending and mentoring are often used interchangeably. Befriending is more focused on the social relationship, offering emotional and social support and companionship, while mentoring is more goal-oriented and focused on achieving predetermined goals (Balaam, 2014; Hucklesby & Wincup, 2014; McGowan et al., 2009).

Volunteers and voluntary organisations have a longstanding tradition of supporting people and their families dealing with the criminal justice system (Hucklesby & Corcoran, 2016; Abrams et al., 2016). In Belgium, as in other Western countries, the work of volunteers in charitable and philanthropic organisations preceded the professionalisation of social work (Meyvis et al., 2012). During the expansion of the welfare state and the professionalisation of practices for this target group, the position of volunteers changed from pioneers to a more additional role with regard to criminal justice services. However, recent literature indicates an increase in volunteers and voluntary organisations working with people dealing with the criminal justice system (Tewksbury & Dabney, 2004; Hucklesby & Corcoran, 2016; Helminen, 2016). At present, voluntary work in and on the periphery of criminal justice is diverse in scale, organisation, method, goals and tasks (Hucklesby & Corcoran, 2016; Tomczak & Buck, 2019).

This paper sheds light on how professionals collaborate with volunteers in this context to provide help to people leaving prison. Hucklesby and Wincup (2014) state that volunteers can support the reintegration process if volunteers are adequately recruited, trained and supported. Nevertheless, despite the capacity and skills of volunteers, Schinkel and Whyte (2012) found that voluntary support should always be combined with professional support and especially when volunteers have little work experience. More specifically, Singh et al. (2019) found that professionals play an important role when mentors of adults in the criminal justice system are unable to provide the assistance or support needed. Mentors

rely on programme staff members for guidance and expertise, as they are not sufficiently knowledgeable or well placed to resolve some of the practical issues of clients (Singh et al., 2019). Furthermore, Hucklesby and Wincup (2014) demonstrated that paid workers can also intervene by providing unplanned and pragmatic solutions to specific problems.

These studies indicate the need for professional support in combination with voluntary efforts. Furthermore, volunteers were found to experience difficulties and challenges specific to working in the criminal justice system, often being confronted with traumatising stories and situations (Tomczak & Quinn, 2020). Therefore, it has often been argued that supervision provided by professionals is essential to protect volunteer wellbeing and ensure they have the appropriate training (Tomczak & Quinn, 2020).

Given the above-mentioned importance of professional support and collaboration, in this paper, we investigate: (1) How professionals and volunteers collaborate in a specific befriending programme; and (2) The situations in which professionals intervene in the volunteer's relationship with the client or other professionals.

### **3.4. Material and method**

#### **3.4.1. The case of *Brug Binnen Buiten***

This paper analyses a buddy befriending programme which uses volunteers to support people who have recently left prison. The project is located in Antwerp and Turnhout, two cities in Flanders, which is the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium. The current project, called *Brug Binnen Buiten* (Bridge Inside Outside), is an initiative of the Judicial Welfare Work (*Justitieel Welzijnswerk*). An organisation, which is financed by the Flemish government. As the name implies, it is a welfare-oriented organisation that provides generalist social support to people in prison, operating independently from the federal justice department. This generalist approach to social work entails social workers addressing all of the problems and needs of their target group (Blom, 2004). The organisation has traditionally sought broad welfare outcomes as the primary goal of their work.

Within the *Brug Binnen Buiten* project, social workers match volunteer-buddies with people who have recently left prison. This project of voluntary post-release support started in 2016 and is financed by a philanthropic organisation. The overall aim of the project is to find qualitative solutions to the needs of people who have recently left prison as well as facilitate and support the reintegration process. Volunteers receive training for two days, in which they are introduced to the prison, the needs of people leaving prison, and the barriers to reintegration, as well as learning some basic conversation skills. The volunteer acts as a buddy, a confidante, a kind of friend, a helpline or a motivator (Van Dam & Raeymaeckers, 2017). The tasks of the volunteers include offering a 'listening ear', supporting people, taking care of practical issues, accompanying clients to services and attempting to reinforce their autonomy. Each volunteer supports only one person at a time. The social worker matches the volunteer and the person and remains available in the 'back office', supporting the volunteers in their tasks. Formal support occurs in group supervision of all the volunteers every month and intense individual support of each volunteer. In this manner, the social workers are closely involved and support the volunteers in the guidance of the client.

This case is interesting because the project is characterised by intense collaboration between the professional social workers and the volunteers. Since little is known about such daily collaborative practices (Tomczak & Buck, 2019), this case thus allows us to provide an in-depth account of how professionals provide tailor-made support to volunteers. Below, we elaborate on our method, before presenting our results.

### **3.4.2. Method**

#### *Selection of respondents*

We aimed to include a variety of respondents based on education, gender, professional background and experience, and we selected volunteers who were already supporting someone and who had at least two months of experience as a volunteer in the project. At the time of data collection, 25 volunteers were involved in the project in Antwerp, and 15

potential respondents were selected based on the above-mentioned criteria. We did not select a volunteer in Turnhout as the project had just started there. Ultimately, 13 volunteers were prepared to participate. In a second phase, all four professional social workers involved in the project were interviewed.

*Respondents*

Table 1 presents more details about the volunteer respondents. Their average age was 41.3 (range 21 to 71) and their average experience in the project was 18.8 months. In total, the volunteers interviewed supported 31 people within this project.

Table 1. Details on research participants (volunteers)

<b>Resp.</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Profession</b>	<b>Number of people supported in the project</b>	<b>Seniority</b>
1	52	Male	Teacher	4	43 months
2	60	Female	Retired	1	28 months
3	26	Female	Criminologist	4	43 months
4	71	Female	Retired	5	43 months
5	55	Male	Educator	4	41 months
6	51	Male	Manager	2	28 months

7	72	Male	Retired	2	12 months
8	23	Female	Student	1	9 months
9	34	Male	Manager	1	9 months
10	26	Female	Production assistant	3	11 months
11	23	Female	Student	1	5 months
12	21	Female	Student	2	5 months
13	23	Female	Student	1	5 months

Table 2 presents more details about the professional social work respondents (respondents 14-17). Their average age was 42.5 (range 31 to 54). Three of them had between 5 and 11 years of experience in working with this target group.

Table 2. Details on research participants (social workers)

<b>Resp.</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Profession</b>	<b>Seniority in working with this target group</b>	<b>Seniority in this project</b>
14	31	Female	Social worker	10 years	1 year
15	54	Female	Social worker	5 years	4 years
16	52	Female	Social worker	11 years	1 year
17	33	Female	Social worker	7 months	7 months

### *Data collection*

Just before the data collection period, COVID-19 started to spread across the world. The COVID-19 pandemic made face-to-face interviews impossible and therefore an alternative was found in online video calls through Skype or Teams. During first contact by telephone, respondents were asked whether they were able to conduct an interview by video call. If they felt uncomfortable with this, a telephone interview was proposed as an alternative. None of the respondents felt the need to do the interview by phone. The researcher and the respondent then made an appointment for the interview. In this way, both researcher and interviewee could choose an appropriate moment to avoid one possible disadvantage of a video call – the potential for disturbances during the interview (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014). The researcher also asked permission to record the interview and informed consent was sent by email.

The interviews were conducted between April and November 2020. Those with the volunteers had an average duration of 68.6 minutes (45 min–1 hr 52 min). The interviews with the professional social workers had an average duration of 96 minutes (85 min–2 hr). A semi-structured interview schedule was used, this enabled the researcher to explore additional issues mentioned by the respondent. In general, three topics were discussed: (a) information about the respondents (on age and profession); (b) the task of the volunteer and the professional in the project (on division of tasks and changes during the trajectory with a client); (c) the collaboration between the professional and the volunteer (on types of support and complex situations).

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. The transcripts of the interviews were analysed using NVivo. They were first read to preview the data, then a thematic analysis was performed to identify the main themes, and the data were reduced by labelling the transcripts with codes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Rather than using preconceived categories or concepts, inductive category development was used, as it enabled new insights to emerge (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). By inductive iteration, three major themes



were identified in the data: (i) emotional support, (ii) support through information, coaching and advice, (iii) interventions of the professional in contacting the client or other professionals. We were able to review and refine our interpretations with the project steering group (consisting of key professionals and researchers).

### **3.5. Results**

In the following section, the findings are presented according to the main themes that emerged from the data.

#### *Finding a balance*

Within this specific befriending project, it was not necessary or desirable that the volunteers had a broad knowledge of social work practice or organisations at the start. In this way, the volunteer was a true companion who searched for solutions in close collaboration with the client. Furthermore, the volunteers worked quite independently and had freedom to support the client in the way they thought suitable. The professional social workers remained available in the 'back office' and played a supporting role for the volunteers. However, social workers sometimes found it challenging not to become overly involved in guiding the volunteer or intervening too often.

*I am also always concerned about the client, concerned that they are not getting what they need. Of course that's because of my background as a social worker. I know that X (colleague social worker) sometimes struggles with that too. That you sometimes think: 'Come on just do it like this or like that', but you have to let them (the volunteers) do it themselves as long as possible. Letting them run into their own walls and the things they bump into. I don't find that easy... (Professional).*

We found that the social workers experienced a tension between, on the one hand, taking a more active role as a professional in direct relationship with the client and prioritising the latter's needs and, on the other hand, supporting the volunteer in their personal growth

and to cope with the many challenges they experienced. More specifically, our results showed that professionals can deal with this tension by adopting several roles to provide tailor-made support to the volunteers. We distinguished between emotional support, providing information, coaching, contact with the client in complex and difficult situations and contact with other professionals.

### *Emotional support*

A recurring theme across all volunteers was the lack of experience in working with people who had recently left prison. Many of the volunteers interviewed stated that they were confronted with distressing and unjust situations for the first time in their life. They had no experience in working with this target group and had doubts about their approach, their actions and the relationship with the client or with other professionals. These experiences evoked many feelings, often mixed. The volunteers emphasised the importance of having a professional social worker who could provide emotional support. Specifically, they mentioned that the professionals provided a listening ear, were approachable and were interested in the client's situation.

*I didn't really ask anything, but I talked a lot with X (professional social worker). For me, that first man I supported, well it was very emotional to see what it means to fight against a system and how powerless you can be. (Volunteer)*

The volunteers are often faced with emotionally stressful situations due to the life situations of many clients, the clients' lack of apparent prospects, and a variety of other problems. Having someone to share their feelings with makes volunteers feel they are not alone in dealing with these situations.

### *Providing information*

The social workers share their professional knowledge and expertise and provide additional tailor-made information to help volunteers tackle the many questions and problems faced by the client. This enables the client and the volunteer to develop a trusting relationship, makes volunteers feel more confident and increases the chances of making progress in some life domains of the clients.

With respect to providing help and support, volunteers reflected on the fact that they were confronted with a variety of social problems and specific questions about receiving benefits, housing problems, addiction, unemployment and criminal justice interventions. The volunteers often felt that they lacked the appropriate knowledge to support the client in dealing with these issues.

*When I have specific questions, because you know, a whole new world has really opened for me and still, it really is a tangle to find my way. Due to the fact that I am not working in it day in day out, many things are completely new to me, so sometimes I need help from the social worker to find my way. (Volunteer)*

In this respect, the professional social workers can provide specific information to the volunteers to help them find the appropriate services, or understand the legislation or procedures that must be followed, for example when they want to apply for benefits. Furthermore, the social worker can provide information about complex issues, such as addiction or mental health issues.

Professional expertise and knowledge are not only important to support the volunteer but also to realise the rights of the client. Volunteers (and clients) often have limited knowledge of all the rights to which clients are entitled. For example, a volunteer may support the client in applying for one specific benefit but have no knowledge of other benefits available. In discussing these issues with the professional, the latter can broaden their awareness of the client's rights.

*'Well, he needs money, so he has to apply for a living wage, is that enough?' Often we then say: 'Yes, but make sure to ask for a reference address or a rental deposit as well'. In that way, we give some extra information about possibilities for the client. (Professional)*

This indicates that by sharing their knowledge, the professional social worker supports the volunteer to go a step further than addressing the initial question of the client. In this way, the professional ensures that the volunteer and the client are better informed about the client's entitlements and how to obtain them.

### *Coaching*

The volunteers stated that they could rely on the professional to 'think things through' in the moments when they did not really know how to handle a situation. The professionals not only provided useful information to the volunteers but acted as a coach. In this case, coaching entailed giving advice and stimulating reflection through mirroring. First, advice was given about which actions volunteers should or should not undertake. The difference from providing information is that 'advice' refers to specific actions or the attitude of the volunteer. The professionals provided concrete guidelines with regard to the actions and attitude of the volunteer concerning the behaviour of the client, the variety of social problems, and collaboration with another organisation for example.

*He called me so often on Facebook that I thought something was really wrong. When I called him back it turned out that he just wanted to have a chat. So, then I discussed it with the social worker: How I could limit that without pushing him away? So, she gave me some tips and after that I did tell him that it was too much, at first a bit in a funny way and then we had a nice conversation about what I prepared with the social worker. And it has been much better since then. (Volunteer)*

The professional social workers pointed out that they often advised their volunteers about the appropriate level of proximity in their relationship with the client. Sometimes, the

professionals considered that the volunteer was getting either too emotionally involved or remaining too distant. In other cases, the professionals found that the volunteers could sometimes be too passive or take things over in a paternalistic way.

*Sometimes they tell you something that you think, oh no, that's not really the way we work. For example, a volunteer told me that he (the volunteer) had been looking for apartments [for the client] at home. Yes, then we say, 'Why are you looking for apartments at home by yourself, why don't you do that together?' (Professional)*

This shows that professional advice to the volunteer can help them to develop a more balanced relationship; in this case, instead of doing the work himself (searching for an apartment) without any involvement of the client, the volunteer is encouraged to focus more on guidance in doing the work together.

Second, all of the professionals indicated that if the actions of the volunteer were not in line with the mission of the project the social worker introduces mirroring. In these situations, the professional helps the volunteer to critically reflect on his or her approach (Esposito et al., 2017).

*Sometimes someone has to understand why his interventions are not strengthening for the client. You can advise, but if you notice it systematically recurs, giving advice may not be enough. Then you have to ask why are you doing such a thing, why do you take it out of the hands of the client?' (Professional)*

Professionals will thus coach the volunteers to ensure that their approach is in accordance with the mission of the project, that it is strength-oriented, looking for a tailor-made approach for each client, respecting the pace of the client, persistent and goal-oriented. In daily practice, adhering to these values is challenging for many volunteers.

*The social worker advised me to... well, you know, I would do everything at once, but I've noticed that for this group it often has to be step by step. So, first this and when that is finished think about the next. Otherwise, it is too much at once and that's too overwhelming. So, I thought that was a good tip, because in my personal life I find it difficult if things aren't immediately sorted out. (Volunteer)*

#### *Contact with the client in complex and difficult situations*

In order to enable the volunteer and client to build up a relationship of trust, the professional will generally have no contact with the client after the matching phase. However, our interviews showed that the social worker may have contact with the client if the relationship between client and volunteer is defined as 'difficult'. This occurs when the client does not respond to the volunteer, or the volunteer and the client have different expectations. At these times, a meeting between the volunteer, the social worker and the client is arranged.

*It is usually a signal from the volunteer, who says 'I can't get any further here.' And then it does help to sit down with the three of us. Then, you can ask the client, 'What do you really need?' (Professional)*

Furthermore, sometimes the client might ask the volunteer for support in undertaking a task with which the volunteer is not sure how to proceed, for example in preparing and attending an important meeting with another organisation. In such cases, the volunteer might discuss their concerns with the professional, who can then attend a preparational conversation between the client and the volunteer to reassure them both.

#### *Contacting other professionals*

In some specific situations, the professional has contact with other organisations or professionals for a variety of reasons. First, the professional may intervene in situations

defined as 'complex cases' or 'difficult cases'. Those situations occur when the volunteer finds the complexity of the problems faced by their client too difficult. For example, handling a complex and time-consuming social administration task can ask too much from a volunteer. In addition to the practical burden, the situation people live in can place an emotional burden on the volunteer. When the volunteer signals this, the social worker takes over from the volunteer.

*The volunteer told me it was a bit too much. The situation of the client was very poignant. He was sitting there without food. I just went to buy bread for him because I felt so sorry for him. That was already very emotional for me, and it was such a multi-problem situation that I think, how could a volunteer do this? That just won't work, that's irresponsible. (Professional)*

Second, there are cases where clients face a variety of problems in several life domains and have contact with several social services. Due to this complexity, both professionals and volunteers agree that professional social workers should take over.

Third, we found that professionals have networks with other professionals, which makes access to certain social services more straightforward.

*At the night shelter, to get a bed for the night for him. Well, when I called, I'm someone who calls for someone else. But if she [the social worker] calls, she knows the person on the other end of the line and that goes more smoothly of course. (Volunteer)*

Thus, in some circumstances, the status of the professional and the fact that they often have a broader network with other professionals and organisations allows them greater ease of access to services and to realise the rights of the client.

In addition to their professional status and network, the results show that their combined knowledge of legislation and procedures, professional jargon, arguments, assertiveness and experience makes social workers more resolute in obtaining access to certain services and in realising rights.

*Often a social worker from the Public Centre for Welfare (OCMW) doesn't want to give a reference address. Then, I sometimes have to explain how the legislation is for people who have left prison, because they don't know. Or I say, 'Yes, but that's a right and I want you to propose that to the council and this is my reason'. You can't expect that from a volunteer, can you? That they know the whole legislation around it and are assertive enough to protest against the social worker and say, 'I want that anyway'. (Professional)*

Arguing against the decision of another social worker is challenging for a volunteer. In these cases, we found that the professional social workers can better advocate to realise the rights of the client. For these complex cases, professional interventions make a difference because of their specific knowledge of legislation and regulations, their use of their professional network or status, their knowledge of jargon, their experience and their knowledge of the criminal justice system, all of which inform their assertiveness.

Finally, the social workers pointed out that they intervene when it becomes apparent that several volunteers and clients are experiencing the same type of problems. In these cases, professionals engage in advocacy strategies and contact other agencies or policymakers to discuss the problems experienced by the volunteers and clients.

*Frequently volunteers said, 'We cannot connect with the Flemish Employment Agency (VDAB)'. I had the impression that we could do more for our clients if we had a contact person there. So, now we have someone there, which is a great advantage. Normally, the procedure is that for the first 6 months there is only contact by telephone. If people, after that period, still have no work, they can get a counsellor.*



*Now, our clients bypass those 6 months and get a supervisor from the VDAB immediately. That's very beneficial as it goes faster and is more efficient. A better service is provided for our clients. Furthermore, a permanent contact person, like X, also means that she knows our clients better. She knows the problems of people who have left prison, she knows the profiles. That makes it much easier. (Professional)*

### **3.6. Discussion**

The aim of this study was to analyse collaboration between volunteers and professionals in a befriending project. Despite the overwhelming number of studies emphasising the importance of professional support for volunteers who are themselves providing support and guidance to vulnerable target groups, we lack in-depth knowledge about how professionals can fulfil such a supportive role (Schinkel & Whyte, 2012; Tomczak & Buck, 2019).

We found that professionals adapt their support to the needs and levels of expertise of volunteers. While the volunteers could engage in a supportive befriending relationship, sometimes they lacked the skills and expertise to cope with the complex challenges faced by their clients. The professionals supported the volunteers by providing information, advice, coaching and sometimes even taking on more persistent problems. More specifically, our study showed that professionals support volunteers in different ways. First, professionals provide emotional support to volunteers. This finding corresponds with earlier studies, which indicated that the life situation of many clients is often emotionally stressful for volunteers. Thus, they need emotional support and supervision (Tomczak & Quinn, 2020). Second, professionals also provide volunteers with practical knowledge and information (Hucklesby & Wincup, 2014). By sharing this information they ensure that the volunteer is aware, for example, of the rights the client is entitled to and how to obtain them. Third, the professional may act as coach in giving advice or enabling the volunteer to reflect on his or her actions or attitude in supporting people. Fourth, the findings of this study show that professional social workers actively intervene in the relationship when the

volunteer and client face situations defined as a 'difficult' and 'complex' (Hucklesby & Wincup, 2014; Singh et al., 2019).

These findings confirm the assumption that tailor-made support by professionals is indispensable, as it ensures the sharing of professional knowledge, experience, connections and attitudes with the volunteers, which can lead to an improvement in the life situation and wellbeing of the clients and the realisation of their rights (Singh et al., 2019). However, professionals may also experience difficulties in allowing volunteers the freedom to work independently. They often struggle with feelings of responsibility and feel the need to take over or tell the volunteer how to handle the situation better in order to provide responsive services. This corresponds with earlier findings that social workers feel responsible for the care and welfare of clients who they hand over to volunteers (Verhoeven & Van Bochove, 2018).

In complex situations, professionals need to recognise the importance of their role. Not every task lies within the capacity, skills and expertise of the volunteer, even when they obtain advice, information or emotional support from the professionals (Singh et al., 2019). For example, when volunteers become aware that rights of the clients are violated they often do not feel in a position to take a stand and advocate for them. In these complex cases, professional intervention makes a difference because of the combination of the latter's specific knowledge of legislation and regulations, their professional network or status, their knowledge of jargon, and their experience and knowledge of the criminal justice system. Furthermore, we found that it was essential that volunteers signal these existing barriers to professional social workers. By doing so, social workers in turn obtain the necessary information to advocate for structural change and collaboration between services and thus increased accessibility of services (Naessens & Raeymaeckers, 2020).

To conclude, our results provide a comprehensive perspective on how complementarity is constructed in the daily practice of collaboration between volunteers and professionals. Although professional interventions and support are necessary to address the needs of

vulnerable people, volunteers can increase the quality of support in the role of fellow citizens, offering a wider range of support than professionals alone can provide (McGonigle, 2002). Consequently, close collaboration between volunteers and professionals can lead to a valuable response to the needs of people who have recently left prison. However, our findings indicate that when a client's situation becomes complex and volunteers lack the skills, experience and status to deal with them, professionals need to take over (Van Bochove et al., 2018).

Finally, this study has some limitations. First, like all qualitative research, there are limitations to the generalisability of this study, which is mainly focused on one particular befriending project in the field of criminal justice. However, we argue that the findings are of value in gaining a deeper understanding of the role of volunteers and how they can best be supported in other contexts and types of services. We therefore recommend that further studies investigate the roles of professionals in other settings where volunteers provide support and guidance to vulnerable target groups. Second, this study did not include the perspective of the clients. Although gaining insights into the collaboration between volunteers and professionals is important, a client's perspective is also indispensable to a better analysis of the quality of the services provided. We agree with Quinn and Tomczak (2021) that volunteers and professionals have a shared responsibility, not only in the individual support of people but also in the critical reflection on how society deals with social problems such as crime, poverty and addiction. Volunteers may be important in dealing with many issues and may soften the consequences of criminal justice interventions. However, a narrow focus on the individual support of criminalised people often creates the pitfall that their social problems are merely managed and individualised and the systemic causes and responsibility of society are overlooked. Therefore, quality care and support from both volunteers and professionals must be seen within a broader context, in which the central aim is the realisation of social justice.

#### **Research Ethics:**

This study was conducted as a research project at the university of Antwerp and meets the standards of this institution's ethical guidelines. Approval for this research project was obtained from the independent Ethics Committee for the Social Sciences and Humanities, installed by the Executive Board of the UAntwerp (SHW\_21\_111).

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The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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# Chapter 4: Addressing the needs of people in prison: the case of prison work

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## Abstract

In the research literature exploring prison work and labour, there are few studies that examine issues from a prisoner's needs perspective. This paper argues that by analysing prison work through the lens of a thin and thick understanding of human needs (Dean, 2010), it is possible to develop a more critically nuanced perspective on prison labour. The paper is based on research that involved interviews with 14 people in prison in Belgium. The analysis concludes that prison work mainly address thin needs of people in prison. Nonetheless, our results show an appeal for a thicker understanding of human needs. These findings are important as social rights are a translation of human needs (Dean, 2014). Social work as a profession can play a major role in supporting the identification and claiming of thick and thin needs of people in detention. These processes can result in a more balanced understanding of how needs can ultimately be translated into rights.

## 4.1. Introduction

Social work's value base of social justice and human rights contains a commitment towards the most vulnerable and marginalised groups in society. Therefore imprisonment, prison conditions and the people in it should be of great concern to social work practice and research. The Criminal Justice System (CJS) was once a key area of social work interest.

However, it appears to have slipped down the research and practice agenda in recent years. This is despite the expansion of the use of imprisonment.

The starting point of a social work perspective towards this field of practice starts from the perspective of the ones involved, of their views, expectations and concerns about their life. The orientation towards this perspective is necessary to broaden the patterns of thinking about offenders and criminality and refers to the objective to create a social just society. More specifically if we focus on prison labour, despite the significant literature that examines this topic, there is a limited literature that takes the perspective of people in prison into account (Guilbault, 2010; Laskov & Timor, 2018). To date, despite the key role prison work has in prison sentences, it is uncertain the impact of prison employment has in addressing the needs of offenders. Therefore, this paper examines to which extent prison work address the needs of people in prison. In analysing prison work, we use the distinction between thin and thick needs (Dean 2010, 2013). Thin needs include the most necessary things for a person to survive, thick needs refer to the needs that give people the opportunity to achieve a good life (Dean, 2010, 2013). Starting from the voices of those directly affected, we argue this conceptual lens of human needs provides a profound insight on how prison work address human needs.

The results show that prison work can address a number of needs of people in prison. However, these are mostly thin understandings of human needs like structuring time, having something to do and earn a little bit of money. To address more thicker needs it is not enough just to offer prison work. Our results show that a thicker understanding of needs is perceived as valuable for people in prison, although currently most prison work does not address those needs.

## **4.2. Social work and prison**

We start this paper by emphasizing that prisons are by definition linked to human rights, social justice and social work for two clear reasons. First, in situations of detention there's

always a risk of human rights violations. People lose their right to freedom as a result of their punishment nonetheless further limiting their other rights must be kept as limited as possible. This human rights approach protects human dignity in prison. Despite such a human rights approach, living conditions in prison are often inhuman and degrading. Therefore, social work has a strong commitment towards that field of practice (Garrett, 2016; Cummins, 2017). Belgium, for example, has been repeatedly found guilty of human rights violations by the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) for the treatment, or lack of treatment, of mentally ill people in Belgian prisons. In addition, Belgium was also convicted for the poor living conditions in prison during strikes by the prison guards. Both examples demonstrate that living conditions in detention are precarious and often do not meet human dignity. This makes prison an important topic for social work research. Second, a good number of those incarcerated are among the most vulnerable and marginalized people in society. They are commonly struggling with issues as poverty, mental health, housing, addictions, and relational issues. The social problems that characterize these people are similar as does of other groups of service users. In addition, detention creates an additional risk after release of exclusion in work, social relationships, discrimination, health, etc. (Wakefield & Uggem, 2010). As a consequence of the value orientation of social work, prison is a major theme for social work and social work research. In this paper we focus on a specific part of life in prison, more specific on prison work. The choice for this topic is argued as prison work is an important part of prison life. In the following part we shed light on the literature concerning prison work.

### **4.3. Prison work**

Prison work is often presented as being of positive benefit to the maintenance of order and harmony in prison. Prison employment makes it easier to manage prison life and to keep control in prison (Saylor & Gaes 1992; Saylor & Gaes, 1997; Alos et al., 2015; Bushway, 2006; Guilbaud, 2010; Laskov & Timor, 2018). It can act as a tool for the management of people in prison. For example, people who are involved in prison labor are less likely to be

subject to a disciplinary report for misconduct (Saylor & Gaes, 1992, Atkinson & Rostad, 2003).

Besides the benefits for the prison management, studies also emphasize that prison work can also result in benefits for the individual. First, it allows people to earn some money during detention (Atkinson & Rostad, 2003; Laskov & Timor, 2018). The payment they receive for their work enables people in prison to be less reliant on their families for financial support. People in prison can buy items from the canteen and people are able to pay some debts during the detention (Laskov & Timor, 2018). Prison work is also important because it provides a daily structure (Hunter & Boyce, 2009; Guilbaud, 2010). In absence of work, people have too much spare time and more negative thoughts (Guilbaud, 2010; Laskov & Timor, 2018). The prison routine can become boring and depressing. Working during detention is a way for people to break the monotony of prison life (Atkinson & Rostad, 2003; Laskov & Timor, 2018). Prison work is also a way to gain more freedom of movement in prison (Guilbaud, 2010, Laskov & Timor, 2018). People who work have more opportunities, than others, to move on a regular base through the prison. Although this freedom is limited, it is a way to be out of the cell, to escape the four walls.

Employment during detention is seen to have a positive impact on levels of self-esteem (Uggen, 2000; Western et al., 2001; Laskov & Timor, 2018). This is especially the case when the job requires more responsibility or resembles more closely a job in the outside world (Hunter & Boyce, 2009; Guilbaud, 2010).

Finally, the literature on prison work emphasises the potential of prison work to contribute to reintegration (Hendriksson & Kreich, 1999; Murray, 2012; Saylor & Gaes, 1997; Saylor & Gaes, 1992; Wilson, Gallagher & MacKenzie, 2000; Laskov & Timor, 2018). It is stated that prison work prepares people for work after their detention. Prison work is then seen as a part of the process towards a successful reintegration (Holzer, Raphael, & Stoll, 2003). It is perceived as a preliminary step to employment after detention. Through prison work people, have the opportunity to acquire a number of technical skills, knowledge and gain

some work experience (Henriksson & Krech, 1999; Laskov & Timor, 2018). Prison work is seen as creating a lifestyle in which there is a link between labour and generating an income. People acquire through prison work the disciplines that are required for future employment (Alos et al., 2015, Uggen, 2000; Western et al., 2001). In this view, even repetitive and simple work has the potential to improve integration into the labour market. The emphasis on developing work habits and skills will help to gain employment when released.

#### **4.4. Negative aspects of prison work**

There are a number of criticisms of prison work. The first is that there is often no real connection between work inside and outside the prison walls (Cherney and Fitzgerald, 2016). Prison work is often repetitive and based on simple tasks. It provides few opportunities to develop. As a consequence, the learning capacity in the jobs in prison is rather limited. The experience gained during the detention can therefore be little validated after detention, which negates its reintegrating value (Western et al. 2001, Hunter & Boyce, 2009). Many jobs in prison are seen as boring and not in line with work outside in the community (Shea, 2005; Hunter & Boyce, 2009; Guilbaud, 2010).

A second point of criticism is that the barriers that people, with experience in prison, face in entering the labour market cannot be simplified as a lack of individual skills or knowledge. In other words structural barriers have to be taken into account. The labour market, for example, is often inaccessible because of employer attitudes (Hunter & Boyce, 2009; Decker et al. 2015; Holzer et al. 2003). Employers are frequently reluctant to hire people after prison sentence and hold stereotypical views. They fear possible reputational damage, they assume that people who left prison have too few skills or that they are not prepared to work hard (Hunter & Boyce, 2009; Decker et al. 2015, Holzer et al. 2003). In addition, for many jobs a clean criminal record is required.

Bushway (2006) states that it is misleading to talk about reintegration into the labour market. This target group has even, before imprisonment, weak links to the labour market (Ramakers et al., 2015). Dutch research shows that 40% of the people in prison were unemployed before their detention (Ramakers et al., 2015; Dirkzwager et al., 2018). Likewise people who worked before their detention, were mainly employed in temporary jobs or low status jobs (Ramakers et al., 2015). Furthermore, after their release people are often unemployed or end up in poorly paid and insecure jobs (Alos et al., 2015; Western et al 2001). Thus, it appears that there is a cycle of unemployment or low status and poorly paid precarious work and imprisonment.

Another point of criticism focuses on the moralizing aspect of prison work. Work in prison is organized on a regular basis, is characterized with a clear structure of time and prevents idleness (Pierson, Price & Coleman, 2014). Moreover, prison work allows people to get used to a regular life (Laskov & Timor, 2018). However, Foucault (1975) stated that people are kneaded by prison labour only into passive and compliant figure - the docile bodies - that institutions require. Prison employment encourages this kind of behaviour inside prison as well as behaviour that is also expected outside the prison walls. More recent literature states that prison work still is a way to achieve both social and market discipline (Fletcher, 2011; LeBaron, 2012).

A final criticism concerns the limited social protection and remuneration people receive for their work in prison. Studies that perceive the view of people in prison, on prison labour show that as a consequence of the low wages people often experience prison labour as a form of exploitation (Shea, 2005; Laskov & Timor, 2018). In addition, working in prison mostly does not lead to social benefits in case of an accident at work or unemployment. In many country's social protection in detention is problematic (Shea, 2005).

The above shows that literature on prison labour often disagrees on the functions and value of prison labour. Despite of the possible positive aspects prison labour is contested. To address this impasse, this paper adds a social work perspective to the discussion concerning

prison work. Therefore the distinction between different understandings of human needs is put forward.

#### **4.5. Human needs**

Human needs is a layered concept, it is interpreted in a variety of ways. Dean (2010) makes the distinction inherent and interpreted needs. The first needs are inherent to all human beings, simply because of their humanity. The latter are needs that are bottom-up formulations of human needs. Interpreted needs demonstrate the importance of taking into account what people experience as needs in their daily lives. In that respect it is crucial to listen to people in prison concerning their conception of needs within that specific context.

Dean (2010) even so makes a distinction between thin and thick needs. Thin needs are the basic needs of survival (Dean, 2010; 2013). Thick needs make it possible for a person to flourish and have a good life (Dean, 2010; 2015). They refer to the idea that people not only have needs to survive or to achieve individual happiness. People even so have needs that provide the opportunity to flourish as a human being and to achieve a good life. People obtain a fulfilment of humanity through social relationships, through shared responsibility and through creative activities (Dean, 2010; 2013). Therefore, thick needs indicate social connectedness and take into account the context in which people live. Furthermore, thin and thick conceptions of human needs, implicate competing notions of wellbeing (Dean, 2013). The thickness of human needs are constructed in the tension between inherent and interpreted needs (Roets et al., 2018).

People in detention are often denied their humanity. Part of this process is to ignore their human needs. The literature concerning prison work describes mostly thin conceptions of human needs. Prison work is mainly seen as a manner to organize prison and improve reintegration. Furthermore, institutional and organisational needs within the prison setting are frequently in conflict with the needs and rights of the people involved (Chantraine &



Kaminski, 2008; Easton, 2013). Disadvantaged groups, like people in prison, are less able to make their claims loud and clear than dominant voices in society (Dean, 2013). Social work practice is, on the whole, located within marginalised and disadvantaged groups and communities. The aim of this paper is to question to what extent prison labour can address thin and thick needs of people in prison. To explore this we put forward the perspective of the people involved and therefore interviewed people working in a Belgian prison workshop. In the next part of this paper we elaborate our method.

## **4.6. Method**

The following analysis is based on a qualitative study that took place in a Belgian prison. We chose a qualitative research method because we aim to better understand the meaning of prison work to the ones involved. Particularly in-depth interviewing is a useful method for elaborating the social world from the perspective of research participants (Silverman, 2013). In the first section, we examine the case of a long sentence prison, after which we discuss our data collection and the data analysis.

### **4.6.1. People serving long sentences**

The research was undertaken in prison where people were serving that is intended long sentences. In the Belgium prison system, a long sentence refers to a sentence of at least five years. People have the opportunity to work during their sentence. The prison has several workshops for example a joinery, bookbinding and various workshops. The technical team, which is responsible for the maintenance of the buildings, can employ people for work such as painting, bricklaying and all kinds of repair (f.e. electricity and heating). In addition, people can work in the household services, such as the kitchen and the laundry. (<https://justitie.belgium.be>). However, there is a lack of jobs inside the prison, only approximately 30 or 40% of the people have a job. Therefore, target group of long sentenced people is interesting because they have already spend several years in prison and have experience in several jobs inside the prison walls.

#### **4.6.2. Data collection**

In order to select respondents used a purposive sampling technique. Purposive sampling refers to strategies in which the researcher exercises his or her judgment about who will provide the best perspective on the research topic, and then invites those specific perspectives into the study (Abrams, 2010). In order to select respondents with diverse jobs, we visited the different workshops in the prison. The people who were present in the workshops were asked if they were prepared to be interviewed for this research. The potential candidates were given an explanation about the research, the anonymity and the audio recording. The people who were willing to participate, were invited by the researcher for an interview after their working hours.

A topic list was conducted in preparation of the interviews. The use of a topic list gives the researcher the possibility to obtain in-depth knowledge about the perception expressed by the respondent and it gives the researcher the possibility to further explore what is relevant for the respondents (Silverman, 2013). The questionnaire started with a number of short informative questions about the respondent: age, education and work experience. Then the topic list contained questions about the motivation to work and the experience of employment in the prison.

The interview took place in a closed room within the prison. To protect the privacy of the respondents and to ensure the research independence with respect to the management and other services within the prison, there were no other staff members in the room (Apa et al. 2012). Before the interview started, all participants in the study were informed that their participation was voluntary and that their anonymity would be guaranteed in the presentation of the results. Fourteen men were interviewed, all interviews were recorded and lasted an average of 45 minutes.

### 4.6.3. Respondents

We interviewed working men (n=14), the age of the respondents range from 31 to 65 years. The number of years in prison varies from two years up to 27 years. Their level of education and their employment rate before detention is diverse.

Educational level	University degree	2
	Technical education ( <i>TSO</i> )	3
	Vocational education ( <i>BSO</i> )	2
	Special education for disabled people ( <i>BUSO</i> )	1
	No degree of secondary education	4
	Education abroad - no Belgian degree	2
Unemployment	Never	7
	Only after leaving school	2
	Periods of unemployment alternating with work	3
	unemployed for long periods and rarely in official work	2

Before their detention they had a variety of jobs: taxi driver, translator, lab work, electrician, working in a fabric, etc. During the detention they did different jobs within the prison. They've worked in prison workshops: folding cardboard, making plastic flowers, sorting clothes, paste labels, book printing, repairing bikes. or worked in the prison kitchen

and in the library. When they were interviewed all the participants worked for an external company in prison.

#### **4.6.4. Data analysis**

Each interview was tape recorded and transcribed shortly after the interview. The transcripts were first read to preview the data. The analysis involved re-reading the transcripts to identify major themes or issues, and the data were reduced by labelling the transcripts with codes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). We started an open-coding method, which enables us to analyse the transcripts based on themes taken from the research questions but also leaves the possibility for additional themes to emerge.

### **4.7. Results**

In the following section, we discuss the results of our research. We start by elaborating the two most important reasons why people work in prison: earning money and structuring time. We then concentrate on the perception people have of their job.

#### **Having an income**

The possibility of earning some money was an important motivating factor. People in detention spend the money to buy some extra food from the canteen, rent a television, to make phones calls to their family, pay debts and save some money to prepare life after prison.

*R9: If you have money, you can make your life a little bit nicer. If you don't have money, you are a beggar. The most necessary things such as a phone call, which is very expensive by the way, or a stamp for your letter. If you have no money you are at the mercy of other prisoners and surviving.*

*R10: It ensures you that you can pay your lawyers, you can pay the victim, that you can take care for yourself too. Because in prison you can cook, you can buy clothes*

*etc. But these things cost money. Are those things necessary? No. But they makes us human.*

These findings correspond with earlier work (Atkinson & Rostad, 2003; Laskov & Timor, 2018). Moreover, those citations point out that the remuneration enables people to make prison life more bearable. The money gives people the opportunity to soften the circumstances of living in prison. The payment enables people to create a life towards some human dignity, to address some basic needs specific to the life in prison. It is clear that it's a way to survive the living conditions in prison. In that respect working in prison can be understood as an answer to thin needs.

### **Daily structure**

In addition to the small financial benefits that is provided by prison labour, there is another important motivation to work. Work is a way to keep themselves busy and to structure time. The time goes faster while working, people have something to do. Our data shows that spending time is no evidence for numerous people who have to stay long in prison. Therefore, working in the prison is necessary for many. Because work ensures that the time goes faster and gives structure to life, it is a way to stay mentally healthy.

*R3: If you do nothing, the days last longer. You know, I have kids and a family outside and then you're just start worrying. If you are at work, you're busy and you don't spend your time thinking about problems and time flies quickly and yes... If you have nothing to do then it becomes heavy yes ...*

The function of prison labour to structure time was earlier noted in literature (Atkinson & Rostad, 2003; Laskov & Timor, 2018, Guilbaud, 2010). Moreover, work in prison is a manner to escape from emotional and mental suffering. It doesn't actually contribute to more wellbeing but is merely a coping mechanism to escape inhuman living conditions. These

findings also relate to an individual basic need of human beings, therefore these findings suggest prison work is an answer to thin needs.

### **Negative feelings about their job**

Our results also show that the respondents are clearly satisfied to at least have a job in prison. Nonetheless, they are ambivalent towards it. A first aspect that is discussed is the low payment. The low payment is an component that makes people perceive the work inside prison as negative.

*R9: (about the remuneration) that is a disgrace. I'm not going to criticize the guard, nor the external companies who give us work here but it is the fault of the justice department and that is ... You would be ashamed if you would pay your friend two euros to do a job for you. You would think of yourself 'what a bad person am I to ask such a thing'. So in that respect I find it a disgrace.*

If people in prison are satisfied with their payment it is mainly because they compare it with others who are paid less or because they do not expect to earn a lot as it concerns prison.

*R13: Look, I find that remuneration for us, 3€ an hour, high when you hear what the others earn. I myself have been working six years in the maintenance of the prison. I had 1.16 or 1.14€ an hour. Sorry, 3€ that is a double of your wage hé. So who am I to say, no 3€ is not good enough.*

Besides the payment, people dislike the fact that in Belgium prisons labour is not part of the social security system. So employment in the prison does not contribute to future benefit entitlement. This makes them worry about their future.

*R10: I am now already 22 years in prison, probably I'm going to do my full sentence. Then I will actually have spent 30 years of my life in a prison. I was a twenty-*

*something when I was arrested so I'm going to be 50 when I'm out. Even if I still work 10 years after release, what am I going to get? Nothing or the minimum pension. Why don't they just let me work for my pension.*

There is also a lack of work in prison, which is perceived as a problem. There's a high unemployment rate in the prison we analysed. How many people exactly are at work fluctuates day to day, but it is in line with the Belgian average that's about 40% of all people in prison. The respondents state that everyone should have the opportunity to work. If this is not possible it leads to inequality in prison. It hampers some people in coming to terms with the prison regime.

The lack of work has a negative influence on the way people experience their job in prison. People have a strong feeling that they are replaceable. In several interviews people literally said that they are easy to replace. So even if they have a good and interesting job or have good working relations in prison, people feel strongly that they can be replaced by someone else very quickly.

*R4: Beware. If I'm away tomorrow, they just take another. That's not a problem. They will find someone who can do it. No problem, I will not be missed.*

In addition, if respondents were asked about their experience about the work they do, the nature of the job was frequently mentioned as being rather simple or repetitive work. Jobs like that are experienced as jobs to keep people generally busy. As it doesn't contribute to any further development of people, those jobs are an answer to their needs of people.

Nevertheless, this bold statement above, the more simple jobs are also important for people with little skills.

*R4: Look, also pasting stickers can make sense for some people. Some can do no better and in that way they are also busy.*

This implies that there is a need for different types of jobs, so that everyone can get started and have a job in accordance with his own abilities. At the moment this is not the case in the prison. Although all the respondents were satisfied to have a job, the most of them are ambivalent about it. They see it as necessary to deal with life in prison but are unsatisfied about the way prison work is conducted. Prison work mostly enables people to get through prison life, to address some basic needs. This reflects the conception of thin needs as Dean (2010, 2014) described.

### **Positive views of work**

Our research did indicate some aspects of the job that makes people feel more positive towards prison work. What is considered as 'real work' is perceived as more valuable. A job inside prison that also exist in the outside world, a job with more responsibility, a job that requires a higher level of difficulty or if the job leads to a concrete result experience people as more positive.

*R10: we make those covers for swimming pools. You know that is an application, that is something useful and you know what you are making. It is also a big company, you see advertisements of that company. People are buying those products. That makes you feel like 'I'm a useful part in the chain'.*

*R14: We are getting orders and we make them. The things we make go with a professional courier directly to the customer. There is no one in between. So we get somewhere a little bit of confidence like 'look that should be made here'. So we do it, it is packed in and sent with a courier. So if it is not good, it doesn't last long. So last year we made 600 of them without that one has come back. And that actually gives us a sense of 'those walls are a little bit away for us'. [sic] That may sound weird, here, getting some confidence and making it work.*



Both quotations above even so indicate a connection with the outside world. Doing that specific job seems to be a way to be part of society. Furthermore our result show that the contact with somebody external to the prison, who provides positive feedback is highly valued.

*Researcher: Do you have sometimes contact with the exterior company? R13: Yes. Researcher: how is that? R13: pretty good because we now have delivered an order for France and they have checked it and they gave us complements about the level of quality, so that is pleasant. Researcher: the work is appreciated? R13: Yes you get sometimes feedback from those people. Researcher: How do you mean? R13: I like it when people say 'well done'. That is part of a job, getting to know it and then a knock on the shoulder. You don't get that so much here in prison (laughs). Researcher: No. R13: So that is good to hear. Then you go to your cell like 'I have done that well'.*

Sometimes there is also an exchange or dialogue between the workers and the external company in terms of content. This implies not only that feedback is given on the product, but may as well mean that there is dialogue on how the work can be done.

*R6: I'm also responsible for the libraries that bring their books in for repair. I can, thanks to that workshop, build up a kind of relationship with the person in charge of those libraries. I can discuss with him like 'it maybe would be better to do like this, or like that. Of course if he prefers it the other way, that can happen to. But in the bindery you have contact with those people and that is definitely enriching, each contact is enriching.*

These findings suggest that direct social relations with someone from the external company seems to give an extra dimension to the work in prison. Even so, work that gives an indirect connection with the outside world for example by making things that are used in the outside world also is perceived as positive. These results indicate a more thick

understanding of human needs. Thick conceptions of human needs emphasizes the connection of human beings (Dean, 2010). These needs can therefore be understood as thick needs that people in prison have.

However, the results concerning social contact with other people in prison are less clear. For some, the contacts with others are good. Some people feel like they can work together in prison in a good atmosphere. Others indicate that they prefer as less as possible contact with others while working. On the one hand because they have little confidence in others, on the other hand, because they are afraid to be landed with some else's problems.

A last finding shows that jobs in prison with an educational aspect in it, are experienced as more positive. Some people say they have learned something technical or some skills or they have gained some experience in a specific job by doing it in prison.

*R6: The thing that really is valuable in my job is that I can do something in here that resonates my interest and build further on my earlier experience.*

People sometimes discover talents by themselves or they have the chance to further develop their skills or interest.

## **4.8. Discussion**

Our results show that earning some money, structuring time and being busy are very important motivating factors for people in prison to work. These are factors for everyone in employment. The results echo previous research (Guilbauld, 2010; Laskov & Timor, 2018) concerning prison work. People experience work as necessary because it gets them through the day, it allows them to buy something extra from the prison canteen or to pay their telephone home etc. Those findings indicate the problematic living conditions in prison and can be understood as a way to make life in prison more bearable. As they reflect basic and minimal needs people have, they can be understood as thin conceptions of human needs.

In addition, our findings indicate that prison work has the opportunity to make feel people being part of society at large. Having contact (direct or indirect) with people external to prison, creating a product that is used by in the outside world seems to be important. Even so jobs in prison with a learning or a creative aspects are perceived as more positive. These findings suggest that prison work is more appreciated if it has the possibility to contribute towards a further development as a person or to social connections from outside prison. People in prison wish to be able to participate meaningfully in society, prison work has that potential. The results indicate the social connectedness of people, even when they are in prison. This thicker understanding of needs in prison work is perceived as valuable for people. Thicker needs refer to the need to flourish as full human beings, they determines us as human beings (Dean, 2010; 2013).

Our results indicate that offering prison work is not enough to address thicker needs of people in prison. Moreover this conceptual lens is relevant because human needs, social rights and social responsibilities can be related to each other in a number of different ways (Dean, 2014). In Belgium, like in most European countries, people in prison have social rights (e.g. the right to work, education, social assistance). Despite these formal rights the situation in prison is often beneath a situation that corresponds with social justice. As social rights are created by the naming and claiming of human needs (Dean, 2013; 2015), a crucial question arises: which needs are recognized and translated into rights? Dean (2013, 2015) argues the translation of needs into rights is socially negotiated. These processes of negotiation reflect the wider power dynamics and relations within society. This raises broader questions about the processes of formulation of human needs. For example, are these bottom up or top down processes? To what extent does the expression and recognition of needs reflect the reality of people's lives? The social reveals the extent in which society is oriented at the individual freedom or to the social connectedness of people.

This conceptual work is something of a challenge to both social work practice and research. Social work is committed to social justice. The specific needs that refer to the concrete life

situations of vulnerable people are less likely to have chance be translated into rights. If we focus on people in prison the question who is going to name and claim their needs is vital. Disadvantaged groups are surely less able to make their claims loud and clear than dominant voices in society (Dean, 2013). Therefore we state that social work has a major task to elaborate a thicker and interpretative understanding of human needs.

We are aware that this study has its limitations. We only interviewed male workers in prison, with a long sentence. It would be interesting to conduct the same research with people that are unemployed in prison, people serving shorter sentences or women in detention. It is possible that those groups have different perceptions of prison work.

Despite these limitations, we argue that our results offer an important scientific contribution on the literature on prison work. Prison work is often valued for its potential concerning prison order, making life in prison more bearable and its possible contribution towards re-integration. These perceptions see people in prison mainly as offenders and not as a whole person (Warner, 2007). In treating people in prison as full human beings, we emphasize an approach of prison labour that address the thin and thick needs of people in detention. Moreover a social work approach in research towards prison and this target group is essential. Therefore this field of practice should be high on the agenda of social work practice and research.

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### **Declaration of interest statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Research Ethics

This study was conducted as a research project at the university college Odisee Brussels and meets the standards of this institution's ethical guidelines.

## 4.9. References

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## 5. Conclusion

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This final chapter provides an answer to the main research question of this dissertation. It begins with a summary of the research questions and problem statement. It then provides a summary of the main results of the case studies seen through the lens of the action framework for human rights practice adopted by Vandekinderen et al. (2020). I will then discuss how this dissertation contributes to the further development of forensic social work as a human rights practice, before formulating recommendations for future research and practice.

### 5.1. A brief recapitulation of the problem statement

In this dissertation, “forensic social work” is defined as a welfare-oriented practice in relation to criminal justice interventions (Bouverne-De Bie, 2002; Roose et al., 2012). Forensic social work is understood as a broad field of practices, including mandatory and non-mandatory social work (Bouverne-De Bie, 2002; Roose et al., 2012; Vanderlaenen & Polfliet, 2010; Vanderlaenen, 2015). This dissertation focused on non-mandatory practices. This meant that all of the empirical studies for this dissertation were conducted in non-mandatory social work settings with people dealing with imprisonment.

With the Belgian state reform of 1980, governmental involvement in “personal matters” (welfare, sports, culture, education, etc.) was devolved to the community level. This meant that forensic social work at the Flemish level developed independently from the federal level, which focuses on criminal justice and punishment. Due to the separation of the justice department and the goals of criminal justice, forensic social work practices were allowed to pursue their own objectives (Meyvis, Roose & Vanderlaenen, 2012). Those practices are now connected to human rights, human dignity and human development (Meyvis, Roose & Vanderlaenen, 2012; Van Garsse, 2012).

However, scientific evidence about how these practices are able to realize human rights was lacking. In this regard, several scholars developed human rights frameworks for social work practice (Androff, 2015; McPherson, 2015; Vandekinderen et al., 2020; Reynaert et al., 2021). However, to date, scientific knowledge was still lacking on how these frameworks might be adapted to the particular context and human rights perspective of forensic social work. In the introductory section, I extensively elaborated on the challenges and difficulties that forensic social workers encounter while adopting the principles of a human rights approach. Here, I provide a brief recap.

First, a rights-based approach challenges the dominant perspective, whereby people who break the law are often seen as responsible for their own situation (Roose & Bouverne-De Bie, 2008; Fenton, 2013; Birgden, 2015; Stanley, 2018; Vance & Rivers, 2020) and are considered as not entitled to full citizenship and the related rights (Easton, 2008). In contrast, a rights-based approach focuses on society's responsibility to promote the well-being and realize the rights of everyone, even people who are involved in criminal activities.

Second, social work with people facing criminal justice interventions is often seen from a probation perspective. Such a perspective aims to support people to learn how to cope with the broader goals of communities (e.g., reduced risk), and it solely provides methodological and instrumental answers to problems of criminality and risk (Reamer, 2004; Ward, 2009; Van Garsse, 2007; Roose & Bouverne-De Bie, 2008). As many people in prison come from disadvantaged backgrounds, social work that takes a rights-based approach must transcend the individual level and question criminal justice interventions (Fenton, 2012; Garrett, 2016; Cummins, 2017). Thus, forensic social work entails tensions in the relationship between individual human development and dignity, on the one hand, and societal well-being and safety, on the other (Roose & De Bie, 2008; Boers et al., 2012; Dollinger & Kretschmann, 2019).

Third, forensic social work has mainly been developed based on an organizational perspective, focusing on collaboration and networks. As a result, most studies focus on

collaboration between service providers across various life domains such as housing, addiction and work (Van Tomme, Voets & Verhoest, 2011) or collaboration with actors in the justice department (Meek, Gojkovic & Mills, 2010), rather than studying how a rights-based approach might be developed in forensic social work (Roose & Bouverne-De Bie, 2008).

The contribution of this dissertation is that, in contrast to studies that emphasize those tensions, it demonstrates how forensic social work is or can be put into practice taking a human rights-based approach. The research question of this dissertation was formulated as follows: How can practices of forensic social work (FSW) in Brussels and Flanders apply a human rights perspective?

In order to answer this research question, this dissertation used a bottom-up or inductive understanding of human rights. This meant that we wanted to provide an understanding of how professionals and the target group of people in and out of prison give meaning to their own contexts and how they develop a rights-based framework. Such an inductive perspective on human rights in social work emphasizes the everyday reality of professionals and those with whom they work, and it provides a contextualized perspective on how a human rights-based approach can be realized (Hermans & Roets, 2020). Therefore, this dissertation encompasses case studies focusing on the daily practices and experiences of forensic social workers and their clients. In these studies, the notion of “clients” refers to people in prison or people who have been released from prison.

The first study analyzed the role of a network in forensic social work. The literature often emphasizes that networks and collaboration are able to overcome the fragmentation of support and services (McPherson, 2015; Reynaert et al., 2021). Several studies have also shown that networks and collaboration shape an interesting institutional and organizational context for social workers to realize rights of the people in their target group. Finally, networks can also function as coalitions through which practices of politicization can be developed (Decorte, 2015; Raeymaeckers & Van Puyvelde, 2022). As evidence was

lacking on how networks in forensic social work fulfill these roles, the first study analyzed the role and functions of a forensic social work network in realizing human rights.

The second study analyzed what a generalist approach entails within forensic social work. Generalist practice is considered an important building block in a human rights approach (Vandekinderen et al., 2020). However, forensic social work is often defined as a specialist field of practice. Therefore, by analyzing generalist social work in this field of practice, the study provided more insight into how forensic social work might be developed as a human rights practice.

The third study analyzed how professional social workers support volunteers in order to provide qualitative services to people facing criminal justice interventions. This study showed how and to what extent collaboration between volunteers and professionals can contribute to a human rights approach in forensic social work.

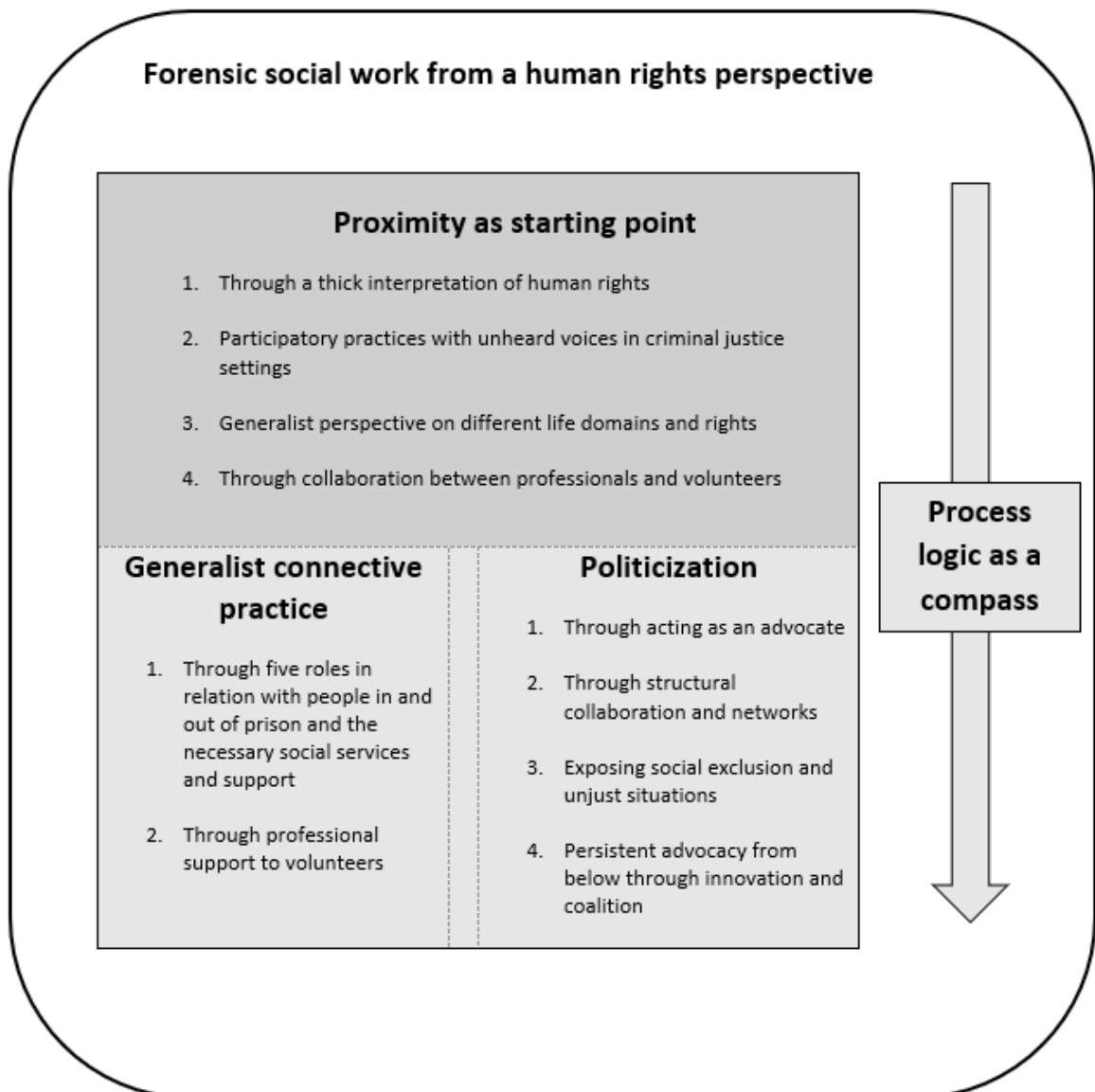
The final study analyzed the extent to which a formal right to work actually addresses the needs of people in prison. This study adopted a perspective based on the lived experiences of people in prison and takes into account how they wish to exercise their human rights and how they are able to realize them (Hermans & Roets, 2020; Dean, 2015).

In order to answer the main research question, the remainder of this final chapter is structured in the following way. I first elaborate on the most important findings of the empirical research. These key findings are seen through the lens of the human rights framework of Vandekinderen et al. (2020). The results will allow reflection on the potential of a human rights approach for people confronted with criminal justice interventions. These reflections include implications for practice and future research. The findings and reflections are bundled into a model of forensic social work as a human rights practice.

## 5.2. The DNA of forensic social work: a human rights approach

This dissertation revealed how forensic social work practice makes sense of a human rights approach in daily reality and activities. The following sections summarize the empirical findings through the perspective of a human rights action framework for social work practice. The framework developed by Vandekinderen et al. (2020) identified five interrelated building blocks: politicizing work, proximity, process logic, generalist practice and working in a connecting way, which they understood as the DNA of social work (Vandekinderen et al., 2020). It is through these building blocks that social work can be developed from a human rights-based perspective, as the framework states that all five interconnected building blocks are important in realizing human rights in social work. The results of each of the studies led to the refining and translation of this framework with respect to forensic social work practice.

I argue that *proximity* is the starting point for a human rights approach to forensic social work. Without actively incorporating proximity as an indispensable building block of its DNA, forensic social work cannot be successful as a human rights practice. Below, guidelines on how forensic social work can achieve proximity are put forward. Starting with proximity, we continue to look at how forensic social work as a human rights practice can adopt a *generalist* and *connective* approach. Guidelines on how forensic social work can realize such a generalist connective approach are also put forward. *Politicizing* work is then placed alongside generalist connective practice, elaborating on how practices of politicization can be developed in daily practices. Finally, *process logic* is understood as the guiding compass of forensic social work from a human rights perspective. The findings are presented in Model X, which illustrates how forensic social work should be developed if it is to succeed as a human rights practice. However, it should be noted that the model should not be understood as a linear process but as a layered and dynamic approach to forensic social work. Below, this model is explained in depth.



### 5.2.1. Proximity as starting point

Chapter 4 (Naessens, 2020) revealed that in order for forensic social work to develop a human rights approach, proximity must be the first principle underlying any intervention. Through proximity, social work is able to capture the lived experience and living conditions of the people involved (Vandekinderen et al., 2020). A lifeworld orientation is indispensable for forensic social work to grasp what people experience and what is meaningful for them. The results of the studies showed how proximity in forensic social work can be realized. First, we show based on the results of chapter 4 (Naessens, 2020) that proximity goes hand

in hand with a “thick” interpretation of human rights. Next, the studies in this dissertation showed how proximity can be realized through a generalist perspective on different life domains. Finally, they showed how proximity also can be achieved through collaboration between professional social workers and volunteers.

### ***Building proximity through a thick interpretation of human rights***

What does it mean to say proximity can be realized through a thick interpretation of human rights? A thick perspective starts from understanding how people experience their specific life situation and how they would like to see their rights realized. Thus, a thick interpretation of human rights takes into account the social context of people through listening to the voice of the target group and therefore enabling them to flourish (Dean, 2013; 2015). The importance of such an interpretation was shown in Chapter 4 (Naessens, 2020), which reported findings from interviews with people in prison about how the right to prison work is realized. The results of this study indicated that earning money, structuring time and providing a pastime were important reasons to work. The respondents considered work as indispensable, as it helped them to get through the day, allowed them to buy items from the prison canteen or enabled them to phone home.

These findings, however, must be interpreted in the light of the problematic living conditions in prison. Prison jobs could be understood as helping to make life in prison more bearable by responding to basic, minimal and thin human needs. However, our analysis further indicated that prison work has the potential to make people feel that they are also part of society at large. Having contact (whether direct or indirect) with people external to prison and creating a product that is used in the outside world were seen as very important. In addition, prison work involving aspects of learning or creativity were perceived as even more positive. These findings suggest that prison work is valued more if it offers the opportunity for social connections outside prison and contributes to further personal development.



These results demonstrate that people value a thicker and more apposite understanding of needs within the context of prison work. Thicker needs refer to the need to flourish as full human beings (Dean, 2010; 2013). However, the right to work in prison is currently realized in such a way that it mainly addresses thin needs of people by creating a means to survive but not to flourish. It was thus shown (Naessens, 2020) that a merely formal and narrow approach to work in prison does not sufficiently address the needs of people in prison. The results of the study confirmed that to gain better insight into how rights can be meaningful for people, proximity with the target group and an orientation toward their lifeworld is therefore necessary. A lifeworld perspective on human rights is indispensable to determine if the formal recognition of rights meets the specific needs of the people involved. Understanding how people would like to see their rights realized can only be achieved by starting with proximity.

The importance of proximity and a thick interpretation of human rights could be assumed for other rights to which people are entitled. For example, people in prison have the right to cultural activities, welfare programs, educational courses, vocational training, library and sports activities. Here, also, building practices of proximity toward the target group by seeing them as equal partners could result in practices in prison that address their needs and contribute to a better everyday life, social welfare and well-being.

### ***Proximity through a generalist perspective on different life domains and rights***

The analysis in Chapter Two (Naessens & Raeymaeckers, 2020) showed the importance of a generalist approach with clients facing imprisonment. Generalist practice is understood as a broad focus across many aspects of the clients' lives (McPherson, 2015; Vandekinderen et al., 2020). A generalist approach is considered indispensable to realizing proximity for two reasons. First, it enables the seeking of solutions from a broad perspective, thereby identifying and paying attention to the issues that are most important for the client. This implies, for example, helping them to identify material, emotional, social, financial or mental needs and providing support in managing those issues (Miley et al., 2001). Second, a generalist approach toward this target group is important because it overcomes the

dominant perception of people facing imprisonment (Naessens & Raeymaeckers, 2020), which implies a minimalist, one-dimensional view of them as offenders. Warner (2007) describes this as a narrow perspective on people who have committed crimes. Interventions that take this perspective only focus on rehabilitation and reducing recidivism rather than developing a holistic perspective that pays attention to welfare needs and individual talent (Warner, 2010). From the narrow perspective, criminal justice goals overshadow welfare needs and meaningful interventions for this target group. As social work aims at broad welfare-oriented goals and social justice, proximity through a generalist approach is indispensable for forensic social work as a human rights practice.

***Proximity through collaboration between professionals and volunteers: providing both practical and relational support***

The studies also found that proximity can be achieved through collaboration between professional social workers and volunteers. In Chapter Three (Naessens, Dury & Raeymaeckers, XXXX), we analyzed a befriending project with people who had recently been released from prison, whereby social workers matched volunteer buddies with the latter. Our analysis confirmed previous literature which found that buddy projects have two functions: they provide both practical and emotional support (Brown & Ross, 2010; Schinkel & Whyte, 2012).

The analysis in this study (Naessens, Dury & Raeymaeckers, XXXX) showed that volunteers can be successfully engaged as buddies in a supportive befriending relationship. The volunteer acts as a confidante, a kind of friend, a helpline or a motivator. The tasks of the volunteers included offering a “listening ear,” supporting people in tackling practical issues, accompanying clients to services and attempting to reinforce the latter’s autonomy. The volunteers provided support with issues, problems or needs that the client identified as important. In short, the volunteer supported the client to rebuild life after imprisonment starting from the clients’ experiences. In addition to this practical support, volunteers may offer a distinct contribution because of the relational aspects of the voluntary commitment

of a fellow citizen to this target group (Connor & Tewksbury, 2015; Tomczak & Albertson, 2016; Schuhmann, Kuis & Goossensen, 2018).

Despite the fact that we found buddies play an important role, the findings also revealed that volunteers frequently experience difficulties and challenges while supporting clients, and sometimes lack the skills and expertise to cope with the challenges the clients face in daily life. Therefore, it is important that professional social workers provide tailor-made support to the volunteers. The social workers were closely involved at case level and supported the volunteers while they were guiding their clients. More specifically, the analysis showed that professionals can support volunteers in different ways. First, the professionals provided emotional support to the volunteers, as they were often confronted with harsh and complex living conditions. Second, the social workers provided volunteers with practical knowledge and information. Third, the professional social workers acted as coaches in giving advice or enabling the volunteer to reflect on their actions or attitude in supporting the clients. The analysis also showed that volunteers were encouraged to provide tailor-made support, allowing the client to set the pace. Moreover, the professional support ensured that the volunteers' approach to the client corresponded with the welfare mission of the project. For example, some volunteers initially acted in a paternalistic way or aimed to achieve goals they, instead of the client, found important. In such situations, the social worker acted as a coach to ensure an approach tailored to the needs identified by the client and following a process logic.

The analysis showed that proximity could be realized through the clients' relationship with their buddy as well as through providing practical support in tackling problems in daily life. The collaboration and interplay between the volunteers and professional social workers enabled them to transcend a solely relational approach and help the clients gain access to all kinds of institutions and societal resources, such as health care and social services, which are important in realizing human rights. As Reynaert et al. (2021) state, as well as a lifeworld orientation, a system-oriented approach is also necessary to realize a human rights approach.

### **5.2.2. Generalist connective practice**

Above we emphasized the importance of a generalist perspective to create proximity with the lifeworld of people in prison. It is clear that generalist practice is an important building block for a human rights orientation in social work practice (Vandekinderen et al., 2020). We also touched on the fact that people dealing with the criminal justice system are often confronted by complex, interconnected needs and social problems. A generalist approach is also needed to tackle these problems at different levels (McPherson, 2015; Raeymaeckers, 2016; Miley et al., 2004; Blom, 2004), as forensic social workers also need to collaborate with different service organizations to ensure clients receive the necessary support and services (Reynaert et al., 2021; Raeymaeckers, 2016; Miley et al., 2001). This manner of *working in a connective way* is understood as supporting people to regain control of their life, supporting local social life in neighborhoods and connecting people to basic societal institutions (Vandekinderen et al., 2020).

As a consequence, it became apparent that generalist forensic social work and working in a connective way go hand in hand. Therefore, we combined these two building blocks into what is called generalist connective practice. The following sections discuss how generalist connective practice can be realized in forensic social work as a human rights practice. First, we discuss how generalist connective practice can be realized by adopting five roles at case level, in collaboration with specialized organizations. Second, we discuss how generalist connective practice also encompasses the adoption of several of these supporting roles in collaboration with volunteers or buddies.

#### ***Generalist connective practice adopts five roles at case level, in collaboration with other organizations***

The second study (Naessens & Raeymaeckers, 2020) conceptualized generalist social work in the field of forensic social work. Generalist social workers affiliated with forensic social work organizations adopt five different roles when providing services and support. We distinguished the roles of a broker, a mediator, a key figure, a safety net and an advocate in addressing the needs of people in prison. The analysis showed that generalists connect

the client's perspective at the micro level with the meso level – made up of the necessary specialist service organizations – by acting as brokers, mediators or key figures. Generalist social workers adopt a broker role by contextualizing the client's situation to improve access to the necessary specialist services (Raeymaeckers, 2016). They also mediate when conflicts occur between their clients and social workers from specialist service organizations. The key figure role allows the generalist to solve problems that arise in the coordination between the collaborating specialist service agencies and the client. In addition, the generalist social worker sometimes also acts as a safety net. This role is adopted when a client has no access to a specific service. The generalist provides support or aid to avoid the client being left without any support. Finally, generalists also advocate for organizational change to ensure access for clients.

The identification of these five roles in practice revealed how forensic social work as a human rights profession can act in a merely specialist field of practice. The analyses showed the importance of generalist practice in order to avoid clients falling between the cracks of service provision by connecting them with necessary specialist services and support.

### ***Generalist connective practice through professional support in collaboration with volunteers***

We also showed that generalist connective practice can be achieved through collaboration between professionals and volunteers. The analysis in the third study (Naessens, Raeymaeckers & Dury, XXXX) showed that volunteer buddies often try to reconnect clients with all kinds of organizations or institutions. The analysis showed that social workers support the buddies by sharing their professional knowledge, experience and network. Furthermore, in situations which are beyond the competencies of the volunteer, the professional can actively intervene in the trajectory between volunteer and client by acting as a broker, a mediator, a key figure or an advocate in the contact with other service providers. In such cases, professional interventions make a difference because of the combination of the latter's specific knowledge of legislation and regulations, their professional network or status, their knowledge of jargon, and their experience and

knowledge of the criminal justice system. The findings of the third study also showed that generalist forensic social workers act as brokers, mediators, key figures and advocates not only to connect people to very specialized services but also to connect them to all kinds of service providers in broader society (Naessens, Raeymaeckers & Dury, XXXX).

### **5.2.3. Politicization**

The studies also showed that generalist practice in forensic social work does not focus solely on the case level but also takes politicizing action in daily practice. Politicizing work refers to social work that questions dominant patterns of thought and makes visible how structural mechanisms lead to social injustice (Vandekinderen et al., 2020). Reynaert et al. (2021) defined politicizing work as collectivizing social problems and practices that influence and are critical of policy makers. Advocacy refers to those actions and strategies adopted to influence policy on micro and macro practices (McPherson, 2015). Advocacy on the micro level might address a client's immediate needs, while advocacy on the macro level aims to change social structures (McPherson, 2015). Here, politicization is not understood as case advocacy on behalf of individual clients, but as social work practices focusing on advocacy and policy practice to influence policy on the meso and macro levels. Our analysis showed that forensic social workers invest in advocacy and policy practice, aiming at structural reforms in favor of the entire target group. Below, we discuss how forensic social work realizes policy practice and politicization, first elaborating on politicization through acting as an advocate, then looking into politicization through structural collaboration and, finally, discussing politicization through networks.

#### ***Acting as an advocate***

The second study in this dissertation (Naessens & Raeymaeckers, 2020) showed that all kinds of organizational barriers explain why clients are not able to gain access to the necessary services and support. More specifically, forensic social workers often become aware that their clients face waiting lists, a lack of services or barriers in accessing organizations and support. The analysis showed that in such situations generalist social workers sometimes act as a safety net. This means that they provide a service or support

that, according to their perception, should be provided by another organization. A generalist takes on the role of a safety net to ensure that the client is not stuck without any help or support. These interventions must be interpreted as ways of using professional discretion to provide necessary support to clients, even when these efforts do not formally or officially belong to the mission of their organization (Reynaert et al., 2021; Raeymaeckers, 2016). In this way, generalists often prevent clients from falling “between the cracks of the system.”

These practices, however, must be seen as a symptom of structural shortcomings at the level of the welfare state. Therefore, taking on the role of a safety net can only be a temporary solution. We argue that whenever or wherever these generalist forensic social workers adopt this role, structural change is necessary. In order to achieve this, generalist social workers need to invest in advocacy activities. Through such advocacy, forensic social workers aim for change at the level of organizational policies that prevent clients from gaining access to the necessary services (Naessens & Raeymaeckers, 2020). When adopting this role, generalist social workers collectivize individual needs to ensure that other social work organizations take the complex needs of others who are in prison or have recently been released into account (Raeymaeckers, Mathys & Cools, 2022). Furthermore, the third study of this dissertation (Naessens, Dury & Raeymaeckers, XXXX) revealed how volunteers often do not feel in a position to take a stand and advocate for the client. Arguing against the decision of an organization or a social worker is challenging for a volunteer. Here, the advocacy role of the professional social workers, which aims to realize rights by overcoming the challenges faced and the barriers to access to services and support, becomes indispensable.

### ***Structural collaboration and networks***

Our analysis of the befriending buddy project (Naessens, Raeymaeckers & Dury, XXX) showed that social workers intervene when volunteers and clients experience structural problems in service delivery. The entire target group of people who are in prison or have recently been released face barriers in accessing regular service providers and basic

institutions. In such cases, professionals engage in advocacy strategies and contact the organization in question to discuss the problems experienced by the volunteers and clients.

This finding was also confirmed in Chapter two (Naessens & Raeymaeckers, 2020), which showed that forensic social workers invest in politicization by informing other organizations about the needs of this target group. By explaining the needs of the target group, they attempt to establish a relationship with other organizations to improve access and remove the barriers to the external organizations. Through structural collaboration, the social care for and the well-being of people in prison then becomes a shared responsibility of all actors involved. The third study of this dissertation (Naessens, Dury & Raeymaeckers, XXXX) showed that when volunteers signal existing barriers to professional social workers, the latter use this information to advocate for structural change and increased accessibility of services.

In addition to structural collaboration between two organizations, a network of several forensic social work organizations should be considered as important for practices of politicization by forensic social workers. The first study in this dissertation (Naessens, 2018) analyzed the network of organizations providing services to people in Brussels' prisons. The analysis showed that the network is appreciated for being a platform for discussing and resolving practicalities, combining the voice of welfare services and of policy recommendations and sharing it with the public authorities and the director of the prison. The network studied functioned as a platform for politicizing practices, as it enabled practitioners and coordinators to advocate to address the vulnerable living conditions of people in prison, the lack of and need for human dignity and the poor services provided. The analysis showed that, through the meetings of the network, problems can be pointed out and passed on to the authorities and to the justice department. Moreover, through the network, different forensic social work organizations can search for solutions to practical issues at the local level.



#### **5.2.4. Process logic as a compass**

We have already clarified that forensic social work as a human rights practice takes proximity as a starting point. Generalist connective practice and politicization follow from this and are placed beside each other as the second and third building blocks of forensic social work from a human rights perspective. In addition, process logic is the compass guiding every practice of forensic social work developed from a human rights-based perspective. A process logic differs from a product logic and refers to the importance of client participation in dealing with complexity and uncertain outcomes (Vandekinderen et al., 2020). As a consequence, a process logic is inherent in any approach starting from proximity, as the latter entails gaining insight into the issues that are important for the client by allowing them to take the lead in identifying the issues and their goals. Therefore, a process logic and proximity go hand in hand.

Focusing on generalist connective practice it becomes clear that a process logic is necessary, as people confronted with criminal justice interventions experience complex social needs which require flexibility and a tailor-made approach to address these needs. As stated above, a broad and holistic approach makes a tailor-made approach possible, and it is therefore one of the strengths of generalist connective practice (Naessens & Raeymaeckers, 2020). Process logic is thus the guiding principle in this practice.

With respect to politicizing in forensic social work, we follow Raeymaeckers et al. (2022) and argue that the legitimacy of politicization requires the inclusion of the voice and the participation of the target group in collectivizing individual needs. Only through proximity with the target group does it become clear which and how individual needs can be collectivized.

### **5.3. The road ahead for forensic social work**

The results of the studies showed how forensic social work can develop as a human rights practice. In this paragraph we formulate some recommendations to allow FSW to elaborate on his role as a human rights practice.

#### **5.3.1. Exposing social exclusion and unjust situations**

The analysis showed how forensic social workers seek solutions for their target group at both case and structural levels to realize the social rights of their clients. For example, generalist social workers act as a safety net or rely on volunteers to support clients to deal with all kinds of practical problems in the transition from prison back into the community. The analysis showed that those practices can be of great importance for an individual client. It is, however, problematic that a generalist social worker or a voluntary project are still needed to fill the gaps in service provision (Hucklesby & Corcoran, 2016). Structural deficits and unjust situations occur in relation to service provision and support for these vulnerable groups. This limits individuals and social workers in realizing these rights in terms of solutions and impact, whether before, during or after imprisonment. Forensic social work as a human rights practice aiming at social justice has the obligation to see the bigger picture and demand actions oriented toward change at the systemic macro level (McPherson, 2015). Forensic social work must bring into the debate the structural exclusion mechanisms affecting people from disadvantaged backgrounds. It is essential that forensic social work expose the impact of those mechanisms on the lives of people. Forensic social workers have the knowledge to bring these issues to the attention of policy makers and the general public. This politicization should be high on the agenda of FSW. However, this is a challenge for forensic social workers as it goes against the grain of populist perspectives. Nevertheless, if forensic social work fails to do so it will continue to be used as a safety net for unmet needs resulting from social exclusion.

### 5.3.2. Persistent advocacy from below through innovation and coalitions

The analysis showed that change on a structural level in forensic social work is often attained through networks and structural collaboration. However, the first study of this dissertation (Naessens, 2018) revealed the difficulties that a network confronts. Structural change takes time. However, networks have the potential to be a unique platform for achieving joint action, for developing a common vision and taking further action (Decorte, 2015). One example of this is “The Houses” (vzw De Huizen) project set up by a grassroots organization which gathered interested parties together to think about the prisons of the future. The initiator was a prison director who engaged a diversity of people for this project. All the participants had a connection with the prison system, for example, as a director, guard, academic, forensic social worker, organizer of activities in prison, client and architect. They frequently raised their voices about the shortcomings of the current prison system and the fact that it is not adapted to the needs of people in prison or to the needs of society. Moreover, they understood that prison creates or even enlarges the social problems of this target group. Therefore, they proposed an innovative alternative for prison, arguing that people should be able to serve their time in “houses.”

The idea of The Houses was based on three pillars: they would be small-scale, differentiated and community-integrated detention houses (Claus et al., 2013; Devos & Vanhouche, 2019). The organization invested several years in promoting the idea in the field through politicians and the media so as to reach the general public. As a result, the organization contributed to a change in penal law, which made it possible for people to serve their time in a *detention house* instead of a prison.

In 2019, two small-sized transition houses were opened in Belgium and the Minister of Justice is planning to establish several more small-scale detention houses in the coming years ([www.teamjustitie.be](http://www.teamjustitie.be)). This example of how bottom-up practices create the conditions for structural change shows that developing an idea and vision in combination with making coalitions in the field, politicization and policy practice can make a difference on a larger scale. While the aim of The Houses was solely focused on another kind of prison,

this grassroots organization could inspire forensic social workers to develop new ideas and discuss how society should deal with problems of crime and criminality.

### **5.3.3. Participatory practices with unheard voices in criminal justice settings**

Above, we argued for the importance of a process logic and participation in forensic social work from a human rights perspective. However, prisons and the criminal justice system are characterized by a power imbalance. Despite the independence of forensic social work, this raises the question of if and how forensic social work can contribute to a participatory approach in prison and criminal justice settings as a whole. The 2005 Basic Law on Prisons states that every prison should strive for a climate of consultation. To this end, a consultative body must be set up to facilitate participation in this way (B.S. 1/2/2005, art. 7). This legislative initiative is in line with the recommendations of the Council of Europe, which state that people in prison should have the opportunity to discuss matters related to detention and to communicate with the prison authorities (Council of Europe, 2006).

The fourth study in this dissertation (Naessens, 2020) clearly showed that formal rights are important but do not guarantee human flourishing. Furthermore, research in a Flemish prison has shown that it is challenging for people in prison to participate in a context where maintaining order and safety is the main goal (Brosens et al. 2016). Little is known about forensic social work as a participative practice and as a catalyst of participatory practices within criminal justice systems. In this respect, forensic social work must look into its own practices and reflect on this matter. Therefore, further research is needed to examine how participation can be developed and implemented in the daily life of people confronted with criminal justice interventions.

## **5.4. A model for forensic social work as a human rights practice**

This dissertation developed a model based on the findings of the four studies and the additional further steps for forensic social work identified above. The model (p.135)

illustrates how forensic social work should develop in order to succeed as a human rights practice. In the model, proximity is the starting point, with generalist connective practice alongside politicization as two important steps for forensic social work as a human rights practice. A process logic must be the compass that guides practice in each of those steps. While the steps in the model are of equal importance, the findings of this dissertation showed that forensic social work, as a human rights practice, will only succeed starting from proximity. Forensic social work can realize proximity through a thick interpretation of human rights, investing in participatory practices and collaboration with volunteers. Starting from proximity and a lifeworld orientation, a generalist connective approach and politicizing work follows. The model illustrates how forensic social work can adopt a generalist connective approach in this often specialized field. In collaboration with more specialized services and volunteers, forensic social workers can broaden the perspective on the target group and their social problems. As a consequence, a generalist connective approach is an important critical challenge to the dominant perspective that is based on risk-thinking in relation to this target group. There is also a risk that forensic social work mainly focuses on change on the micro and meso levels. However, social work has the explicit task of contributing to a more fair and just society. Therefore, politicizing work stands next to generalist connective practice as an integral part of forensic social work. The model illustrates the different ways that forensic social work can realize politicization. Only then can forensic social work maximize a human rights approach in daily practice. Finally, a process logic provides the indispensable compass that guides the actions of generalist connective practice and politicization.

## **5.5. Last but not least**

Finally, I would like to mention the use of language in relation to the target group discussed in the dissertation. Some of the articles used terms such as “detainees”, “prisoners” or “offenders.” I used, just like many practitioners and researchers, those terms with no intention to stigmatize people. However, doing research means questioning what seems to be self-evident. During the research for this dissertation, I realized that a human rights

approach implies considering people as full human beings and thus avoiding stigmatizing language. Words used by a researcher can also be labelling and stigmatizing (Cox, 2020; Willis, 2018; Garrett, 2017). As a consequence, I now talk about people and avoid language which is degrading or that reduces someone to one characteristic, which violates their dignity and identity, negates their individual needs and hampers their social reintegration (Snacken, 2021). Therefore, I would like to make a plea to change the way we talk about the men and women with whom we work and undertake research. By explaining why I have stopped using such stigmatizing labels, hopefully others will also stop using them.

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# Samenvatting

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Forensisch welzijnswerk vanuit een mensenrechtenperspectief. Een onderzoek naar hoe praktijken van forensisch welzijnswerk ontwikkeld worden vanuit een mensenrechtenperspectief.

Het huidige doctoraatsonderzoek is gebaseerd op een bijzondere interesse in hoe de samenleving omgaat met mensen die strafbare feiten plegen en meer specifiek in de rol van forensisch welzijnswerk in dit debat. In dit proefschrift wordt 'forensisch welzijnswerk' gedefinieerd als een welzijnsgerichte benadering in relatie tot strafrechtelijke interventies (Bouverne-De Bie, 2002; Roose et al., 2012). Forensisch welzijnswerk wordt opgevat als een breed werkveld, inclusief gedwongen en niet-gedwongen hulp- en dienstverlening (Bouverne-De Bie, 2002; Roose et al., 2012; Vanderlaenen & Polfliet, 2010; Vanderlaenen, 2015). Dit proefschrift richt zich op niet-gedwongen praktijken, wat betekent dat alle empirische studies werden uitgevoerd in niet-gedwongen praktijken van het forensisch welzijnswerk.

De probleemstelling van dit proefschrift start uit een aantal vaststellingen. Ten eerste is de staatshervorming van 1980 een belangrijk ankerpunt voor het forensisch welzijnswerk. Met de staatshervorming van 1980 werden de zogenaamde 'persoonsgebonden materie' (welzijn, sport, cultuur, onderwijs etc.) overgeheveld naar het gemeenschapsniveau. Dit betekent dat het forensisch welzijnswerk op Vlaams niveau zich onafhankelijk kon ontwikkelen van het federale niveau dat verbonden is met de uitvoering van strafrechtelijke beslissingen en de justitiële doelstellingen. Hieruit volgt dat de doelstellingen van het forensisch welzijnswerk gelieerd zijn aan mensenrechten, menselijke waardigheid en persoonlijke ontwikkeling (Meyvis, Roose & Vanderlaenen, 2012; Van Garsse, 2012).

Bovendien stellen we de afgelopen decennia een formele mensenrechtenbenadering ten aanzien van mensen in de gevangenis vast. Zowel op internationaal niveau, met bijvoorbeeld *The European Prison Rules* (2006), op nationaal niveau, met de *Basiswet betreffende het gevangeniswezen en de rechtspositie van de gedetineerden* (2005) en op regionaal niveau, met het *Decreet betreffende de organisatie van de dienstverlening en hulpverlening aan gedetineerden* (2013) wordt een formeel mensenrechtenkader gecreëerd. Dergelijke regelgeving benadrukt dat mensen in de gevangenis gezien worden als burgers met rechten, die gegarandeerd moeten worden.

Tenslotte stellen we vast dat een mensenrechten benadering centraal staat in het bredere debat over de identiteit van sociaal werk en over de plaats van sociaal werk in de huidige samenleving. In de afgelopen decennia werd sociaal werk immers gedefinieerd als een mensenrechtenberoep (bv. Ife, 2009; Healy, 2008; Staub-Bernasconi, 2012; Androff, 2015; McPherson, 2015; Mapp et al., 2019). Wetenschappelijke evidentie over hoe sociaal werk praktijken mensenrechten kunnen realiseren ontbreekt echter vaak. Om hieraan tegemoet te komen hebben verschillende wetenschappers mensenrechtenkaders ontwikkeld voor de praktijk van het sociaal werk (Androff, 2015; McPherson, 2015; Vandekinderen et al., 2020; Reynaert et al., 2021). Tot op heden is echter niet duidelijk en ontbreekt het aan wetenschappelijke evidentie over hoe deze kaders toegepast kunnen worden binnen de specifieke context van het forensisch welzijnswerk. Om tegemoet te komen aan dit hiaat, analyseert dit proefschrift hoe forensisch sociaal werk zich in de praktijk kan ontwikkelen vanuit een mensenrechten perspectief. Bijgevolg is de onderzoeksvraag van dit proefschrift als volgt geformuleerd: *Hoe ontwikkelen praktijken van het forensisch welzijnswerk (FSW) in Brussel en Vlaanderen zich vanuit een mensenrechtenperspectief?*

Om deze onderzoeksvraag te beantwoorden, werd in dit proefschrift een bottom-up of inductief begrip van mensenrechten gehanteerd. Dit betekent dat we inzicht willen geven aan hoe professionals en mensen in en na detentie betekenis geven aan hun eigen context en hoe van daaruit een op mensenrechten gebaseerd kader kan ontwikkeld worden. Een dergelijk inductief perspectief op mensenrechten, in het sociaal werk, benadrukt de

dagelijkse realiteit van professionals en degenen met wie ze werken. Het biedt een gecontextualiseerd perspectief op hoe een mensenrechtenbenadering kan worden gerealiseerd (Hermans & Roets, 2020). Om die reden is dit proefschrift gebaseerd op vier verschillende casestudy's die de dagdagelijkse praktijk en ervaringen van forensisch welzijnswerkers en hun cliënten weergeven.

In de eerste studie wordt de rol van een netwerk in het forensisch welzijnswerk geanalyseerd. In de literatuur wordt vaak benadrukt dat netwerken en samenwerking tegemoet komen aan de fragmentering van hulp- en dienstverlening (McPherson, 2015; Reynaert et al., 2021). Netwerken worden daarom gezien als belangrijke instrumenten in het realiseren van de rechten van kwetsbare doelgroepen. Tevens toont onderzoek aan dat netwerken kunnen fungeren als praktijken van politisering (Decorte, 2015; Raeymaeckers & Van Puyvelde, 2022). Omdat niet duidelijk is hoe netwerken binnen het forensisch welzijnswerk deze rollen vervullen, analyseert de eerste studie de rol en functies van een netwerk binnen het forensisch welzijnswerk in het realiseren van mensenrechten.

Het tweede onderzoek analyseert wat een generalistische benadering inhoudt binnen het forensisch welzijnswerk. Generalistisch werken wordt beschouwd als een belangrijke bouwsteen in een mensenrechtenbenadering (Vandekinderen et al., 2020). Forensisch welzijnswerk wordt echter vaak gedefinieerd als een specialistische benadering. Door generalistisch sociaal werk binnen deze praktijken te analyseren, draagt deze studie bij aan een toenemend inzicht in hoe forensisch welzijnswerk verder kan ontwikkeld worden als een mensenrechtenpraktijk.

De derde studie analyseert hoe professionele sociaal werkers vrijwilligers ondersteunen om kwalitatieve hulp- en dienstverlening aan te bieden aan mensen die geconfronteerd worden met strafrechtelijke interventies. Deze studie laat zien hoe en in welke mate samenwerking tussen vrijwilligers en professionele sociaal werkers kan bijdragen aan een mensenrechtenbenadering in het forensisch welzijnswerk.

De laatste studie analyseert de mate waarin een formeel recht op werk binnen de gevangenis daadwerkelijk tegemoet komt aan de behoeften van mensen in de gevangenis. Deze studie vertrekt vanuit het perspectief van mensen in de gevangenis. Aangezien de centrale onderzoeksvraag van dit proefschrift vertrekt vanuit een bottom-up begrip van mensenrechten in het sociaal werk (Ife, 2001), is dit perspectief onmisbaar voor het beantwoorden van de onderzoeksvraag van dit proefschrift. Dit betekent immers vertrekken vanuit de dagelijkse realiteit van sociaal werk en rekening houden met de ervaringen en expertise van degenen die hun mensenrechten willen gerealiseerd zien en hoe deze te realiseren (Hermans & Roets, 2020; Dean, 2015).

In het vijfde en laatste hoofdstuk keren we terug naar de probleemstelling van dit doctoraatsonderzoek. De belangrijkste bevindingen van het empirisch onderzoek worden bekeken door de lens van het mensenrechtenkader van Vandekinderen et al. (2020). De resultaten van elk van de onderzoeken hebben geleid tot een verfijning en vertaling van dit kader met betrekking tot het forensisch welzijnswerk. De bevindingen en reflecties zijn gebundeld in een model, namelijk *forensisch welzijnswerk vanuit een mensenrechtenperspectief*. Het model illustreert hoe forensisch welzijnswerk zich verder kan ontwikkelen als een mensenrechtenpraktijk. De analyse bracht echter ook een aantal punten aan bod waar het forensisch welzijnswerk bijkomend moet op inzetten als mensenrechtenpraktijk. Die ontwikkelpunten werden tevens aan het model toegevoegd. Met het model willen we een bijdrage leveren aan het debat over de manier waarop het forensisch welzijnswerk zich als een mensenrechtenberoep kan ontwikkelen.

# Summary

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Forensic social work from a human rights perspective. A study into how social work practices, with people facing criminal justice interventions, are developed from a human rights perspective.

The present doctoral research is based on a special interest in how society deals with people who commit criminal acts and more specifically in the role of forensic social work in this debate. In this dissertation, “forensic social work” is defined as a welfare-oriented practice in relation to criminal justice interventions (Bouverne-De Bie, 2002; Roose et al., 2012). Forensic social work is understood as a broad field of practices, including mandatory and non-mandatory social work (Bouverne-De Bie, 2002; Roose et al., 2012; Vanderlaenen & Polfliet, 2010; Vanderlaenen, 2015). This dissertation focused on non-mandatory practices. This meant that all of the empirical studies for this dissertation were conducted in non-mandatory social work settings with people dealing with imprisonment.

With the Belgian state reform of 1980, governmental involvement in “personal matters” (welfare, sports, culture, education, etc.) was devolved to the community level. This meant that forensic social work at the Flemish level developed independently from the federal level, which focuses on criminal justice and punishment. Due to the separation of the justice department and the goals of criminal justice, forensic social work practices were allowed to pursue their own objectives (Meyvis, Roose & Vanderlaenen, 2012). Those practices are now connected to human rights, human dignity and human development (Meyvis, Roose & Vanderlaenen, 2012; Van Garsse, 2012).

The shift toward a rights-based approach in criminal justice settings is recognized at the international level by the European Prison Rules (2006), at a national level by the Basic Law on Prisons and the Legal Status of Prisoners (2005), and at a regional level by a Decree concerning “the organization of services and assistance for people in prison” (2013). These

laws and decrees emphasize that people in prison are “citizens” and holders of rights that must be guaranteed.

This rights-based approach is central to the broader debate on the identity of social work and its position in current society. In recent decades, social work has been defined as a human rights profession (e.g., Ife, 2009; Healy, 2008; Staub-Bernasconi, 2012; Androff, 2015; McPherson, 2015; Mapp et al., 2019). However, scientific evidence about how these practices are able to realize human rights was lacking. In this regard, several scholars developed human rights frameworks for social work practice (Androff, 2015; McPherson, 2015; Vandekinderen et al., 2020; Reynaert et al., 2021).

To date, scientific knowledge was still lacking on how these frameworks might be adapted to the particular context and human rights perspective of forensic social work. In order to fill this gap, this dissertation demonstrates how forensic social work is or can be put into practice taking a human rights-based approach. Therefore, the research question of this dissertation is formulated as follows: How are practices of forensic social work (FSW) in Brussels and Flanders developed from a human rights perspective?

In order to answer this research question, this dissertation developed a bottom-up or inductive understanding of human rights. This meant that we wanted to provide an understanding of how professionals and the target group of people in and out of prison give meaning to their own contexts and how they develop a rights-based framework. Such an inductive perspective on human rights in social work emphasizes the everyday reality of professionals and those with whom they work, and it provides a contextualized perspective on how a human rights-based approach can be realized (Hermans & Roets, 2020). Therefore, this dissertation encompasses case studies focusing on the daily practices and experiences of forensic social workers and their clients.

The first study analyzed the role of a network in forensic social work. The literature often emphasizes that networks and collaboration are able to overcome the fragmentation of



support and services (McPherson, 2015; Reynaert et al., 2021). Several studies have also shown that networks and collaboration shape an interesting institutional and organizational context for social workers to realize rights of the people in their target group. Finally, networks can also function as coalitions through which practices of politicization can be developed (Decorte, 2015; Raeymaeckers & Van Puyvelde, 2022). As evidence was lacking on how networks in forensic social work fulfill these roles, the first study analyzed the role and functions of a forensic social work network in realizing human rights.

The second study analyzed what a generalist approach entails within forensic social work. Generalist practice is considered an important building block in a human rights approach (Vandekinderen et al., 2020). However, forensic social work is often defined as a specialist field of practice. Therefore, by analyzing generalist social work in this field of practice, the study provided more insight into how forensic social work might be developed as a human rights practice.

The third study analyzed how professional social workers support volunteers in order to provide qualitative services to people facing criminal justice interventions. This study showed how and to what extent collaboration between volunteers and professionals can contribute to a human rights approach in forensic social work.

The final study analyzed the extent to which a formal right to work actually addresses the needs of people in prison. This study adopted a perspective based on the lived experiences of people in prison. This perspective was indispensable to answering the main research question of this dissertation as it used a bottom-up understanding of human rights in social work (Ife, 2001). This meant starting from the daily realities of social work practice and taking into account the experiences and expertise of those wishing to exercise their human rights and how they were able to realize them (Hermans & Roets, 2020; Dean, 2015).

Finally, in the fifth and final chapter, we return to the initial problem statement of the present doctoral research. The key findings of the empirical research are seen through the

lens of the human rights framework of Vandekinderen et al. (2020). The results of each of the studies led to the refining and translation of this framework with respect to forensic social work practice. The findings and reflections are bundled into a model of forensic social work as a human rights practice. The model illustrates how forensic social work should be developed if it is to succeed as a human rights practice. However, the analysis also revealed some concerns. Therefore some remaining tasks for forensic social work as a human rights practice were formulated and implemented in the model.



# Author contribution

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## **Chapter 1: Welfare work in the Brussels prisons: a puzzle with many pieces**

Liesbeth Naessens: conception of the study, setup of the method, data analyses, drafting and revising of the manuscript.

Peter Raeymaeckers: Discussion of research ideas, feedback on the study and method

## **Chapter 2: A generalist approach to forensic social work: a qualitative analysis**

Liesbeth Naessens: conception of the study, setup of the method, data analyses, drafting and revising of the manuscript.

Peter Raeymaeckers: Discussion of research ideas, feedback on the study and method, critical revision and feedback on the manuscript

## **Chapter 3: Analysing professional support in a befriending project with people who have left prison**

Liesbeth Naessens: conception of the study, setup of the method, data analyses, drafting and revising of the manuscript.

Sarah Dury: critical revision and feedback on the manuscript

Peter Raeymaeckers: Discussion of research ideas, feedback on the study and method, critical revision and feedback on the manuscript

## **Chapter 4: Addressing the needs of people in prison: the case of prison work**

Liesbeth Naessens: conception of the study, setup of the method, data analyses, drafting and revising of the manuscript.

Peter Raeymaeckers: Discussion of research ideas