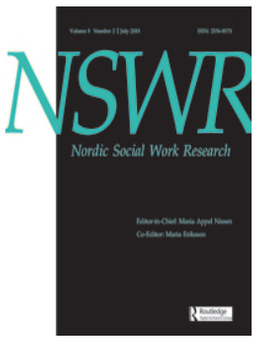

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The compassionate bureaucrat: processing cases, facilitating change, being human

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ABSTRACT

This article reports on a study the aim of which was to sketch a tentative model for illuminating variations in the professional role of a social worker, based on Swedish social work students' own experiences of knowledge use and its premises in client meetings during field practice. Social work students voluntarily submitted narratives depicting problematic and unproblematic situations experienced during field practice in one of three broad occupational positions of social work: casework; counselling; and social assistance. Three different formative aspects were identified as constituting premises for knowledge use in social work. Knowledge use from differing epistemological domains are set in relation to the identified formative aspects, all together comprising a role that we label 'the Compassionate Bureaucrat'.

KEYWORDS

Professional role; knowledge use; field practice; occupational position; client meeting

Introduction

Central to the academic discipline of social work – and intimately related to its definition – are the questions of what characterizes *good* social work and how it is to be attained. Already in the early twentieth century Gerda Meyerson, a founder of the Swedish National Association of Social Work (CSA) working to promote 'professional' social work based on knowledge and education, stated that 'For both voluntary and professional Social Work to be of some real use for individuals and society, knowledge of both the theoretical and the practical kind is needed, as well as love and persistence' (Meyerson 1912, 95, translation author's own).

While the goals and policies of social work are a matter of political governance, the task for social work academics, and subsequently social work education, is to lay out this 'knowledge of both the theoretical and the practical kind' that is essential for providing quality social services. A particularly intriguing challenge is to describe the notions of *love* and *persistence* in an academic context if they are to be taken seriously as intrinsic elements of quality social work. Social work is a broad professional field, and there is a wide variety of possible positions for employment, including a *diverse range of professional roles* that a social worker is expected to be prepared to undertake after obtaining a social work degree. This is reflected in the global definition of social work adopted by IFSW and IASSW (2014) stating that 'Social work practice spans a range of activities including various forms of therapy and counselling, group work, and community work; policy formulation and analysis; and advocacy and political interventions'.

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To highlight the diversity of the professional role in social work and the knowledge and skills required in differing, upcoming, occupational positions social work students' reflections after a semester of field practice might provide an ideal starting point. As the combination of academic study and the field practice settings together aim to create a range of opportunities for students to practice social work, the occupational diversity can to a certain extent be expected to be represented.

In an earlier study of social work students' use of knowledge in practice, based on narratives written in hindsight, two kinds of strategies were identified in relation to critical situations: a fact-based and a skill-based, and one of the conclusions of that study was 'that it is difficult to a priori define the types and proportions of knowledge to use in social work practice' (Blom et al. 2007, 46). One limitation of that study was that concepts that were used by the students – in order to respond to instructional questions like 'What kind of knowledge was it?' (48) – to a certain extent mirrored the concepts that the researchers had introduced in a lecture preceding the data collection (54).

In order to learn more about the use of knowledge in social work practice, we suggest more open-ended questions in order to explore *situations*, and *aspects of these situations that are formative* to the professional relation and the social work intervention in question, such as for example the key function of that occupational position.

Research questions

The aim of this study was to investigate social work students' own experiences during field practice, in order to identify *knowledge use* and *premises for knowledge use* in meeting with clients and further to, based on this, sketch a tentative model for illuminating variations in the professional role of a social worker.

The following questions seek to provide a basis for reaching this aim:

- In differing occupational positions – what aspects that were *formative* of the professional relation to the client can be identified as constituting premises for knowledge use?
- What types of knowledge were used or can be identified as essential in the client meetings?
- With regard to the professional role in social work: what conclusions can be drawn in terms of premises for knowledge use?

In this study, we have chosen to focus on the experiences and knowledge use of social work students in the later part of their social work bachelor programme, that is, after a whole semester of field practice in which they work directly with clients. In settings of social work practice we judge that the students' 'narrated experience from social work practice' (Nygren and Blom 2001, 371) is similar enough to that of social work practice in general, and that the students can here be regarded as 'carriers of the discourse being studied' (376). Further, since students in field practice are formally engaged in a learning process, with access to a facilitator for guidance, challenge and reflection, we argue that they are in a position where they are required to actively reflect upon their own knowledge, skills and development needs in relation to their assigned working environment.

The range of social work positions represented in this study are naturally limited to the Swedish context, i.e. positions involving more or less direct client-professional relations, often organized through public administration.

Theoretical background

The knowledge base of social work and the relation between social work research, knowledge and practice has been a widely-debated issue for some decades. This has resulted in a range of literature focussing on themes such as the foundations for social work knowledge; essential competencies and skills in social work practice; the wide range of available theories relevant for social work; and the role

and purpose of social work research, in relation to the knowledge base of social work and practice (see e.g. Payne 2005; Reamer 1994; Shaw et al. 2010; Vass 1996).

In an overview of key writings on the subject of knowledge in social work, Trevithick (2008) roughly distinguishes between three overarching forms of knowledge: (I) theoretical; (II) factual; and (III) practice/practical/personal knowledge, thereby presenting a terminology and thinking closely related to the work of Aristotle, the philosopher on which writings most theorizing in the field of practical knowledge is based.

While Trevithick uses the term *theoretical knowledge* to distinguish between different theoretical fields relevant to social work (2008, 1219), *factual knowledge* refers to areas of knowledge concerning legislation, policy and procedure as well as information relating to specific groups of people and specific personal and social problems (2008, 1219–1222).

The knowledge use concerning legislation, policy and procedure we regard as related to the writings of Lipsky who coined the term 'street-level bureaucrats' to describe professions, such as social work, that 'mediate aspects of the constitutional relationship of citizens to the state' (1980, 4). Putting to use knowledge concerning specific groups of people and specific issues we regard as not only a matter of providing effective services, but also a central point when it comes to the dilemma of just allocation of scarce resources inherent in social work professions. From a *distributive justice* perspective, the main concern is to ensure that *all* clients get their individual needs met by acknowledging specific circumstances in order to provide *equality in outcome*. The competing rationale of *procedural justice* instead calls for processing cases in an equal manner for all clients regardless of individual considerations and, in principle, regardless of outcome (cf. Törnblom and Vermunt 2007).

The third form of knowledge, Trevithick labels '*practice-*', '*practical-*', and '*personal knowledge*' interchangeably, to catch 'the way that knowledge can be applied to the world of social work practice' (2008, 1226). She suggests that when social workers adapt knowledge they have acquired in order to make it useful in the given situation, they are in fact practising a form of knowledge, often referred to as '*practice wisdom*' (Trevithick 2008, 1231).

However, it is important to note here that the terms 'practice-', 'practical-', and 'personal knowledge' chosen by Trevithick actually cover quite a broad range of capabilities and competencies that are expressed in the performance of skills and in knowledge use. The exercise of practical knowledge, *praxis* in Aristotelian terms, cannot be a matter of mere 'application' (Aristotle 1980). This is highlighted, for example, in Dalrymple and Burke's (2001) argument for how assessment in social work 'does not just consist of applying technical skill' (203), but should be recognized as a process, a 'highly skilled, multidimensional activity which has 'intrinsic', 'therapeutic' benefits beyond the goal of gathering information en route to the allocation of resources or to judgements of risk' (202). One example of such benefit we suggest is the achievement of a meaningful relationship, or in psychoanalytic terminology a *working alliance*, described by Bordin (1979, 252) as 'one of the keys, if not the key, to the change process'. With respect to legislation, and the risk of 'using the law oppressively rather than creatively', Dalrymple and Burke point to the possibility of using 'our knowledge of the law, our values and skills (the basis of our framework)' … 'as a resource whereby we can provide services which allow service users and user groups an element of choice' (2001, 176).

Thus, *practical wisdom* must be recognized as a continuous exercise in ethical deliberation and acting (Aristotle 1980). Being attentive, withholding judgement in relation to the other, and to the particularities of a situation and of context, weighing alternative ways of acting and measuring these actions and their possible outcomes to the value base and aims of social work, are all part and parcel of social work praxis. Warning against too early and too certain judgments when a position of respectful uncertainty might be more appropriate, Taylor and White (2006, 937) argue for the importance of equipping social workers with the skills to exercise wise judgment under conditions of uncertainty. Brandon (1991, 40) suggests that the heart of professionalism is putting oneself in the shoes of the other, 'imagining how it is for him or her'. Such attention points us to the ways in which we actually can be

claimed to be responsible for what we perceive – the perception of the 'other' and the particularities of the situation in question. The desire to be thus perceptive, 'to be open and involved' in the words of Brandon (1991, 35), we claim to be a sign of love, in the broadest sense.

For the purposes of this article with its' focus on 'knowledge use' we have chosen to adapt Trevithick's categories. The use of theoretical knowledge and factual knowledge respectively have been set together in one epistemological domain, whereas the use of knowledge from Trevithick's broad category of practice/practical/personal knowledge is divided into two domains: practical knowledge and practical wisdom respectively.

Methods and material

As part of their course requirements, bachelor level social work students at Umeå University were asked to write two narratives at the conclusion of their semester of field practice (semester five of seven in total). In the narratives, they were expected to describe and reflect upon one problematic and (at least) one unproblematic situation that they had encountered during field practice and how they had chosen to act, this in order to explore and make sense of dilemmas, problematic situations, and particularities experienced during field practice. These narratives formed the basis for an exercise in collegial supervision during a seminar led by the educational supervisor at the end of the term. The questions were consciously chosen to have an open and broad character, and it was left to the students themselves to define and include whatever was experienced as such during their field practice – whether concerning lack of ability or knowledge on their own part, lack of support from placement supervisors, ethical or value dilemmas, or something else. Two written narratives (one-half to one page each) were requested that responded to the following statements: 'Describe one problematic situation that occurred during your field education' and 'Give one or more examples of situations or kinds of situations that you experienced as unproblematic.' The statements were followed by some instructions on how to respond, that is: describe what made the situation problematic and how this influenced or affected their actions, and further to describe how they reached their decision to act in the chosen way and whether there had been alternatives to act differently. In relation to the unproblematic situations, they were also asked to describe why it was experienced as such, if there had been alternative ways of acting – and if so, how the choice was made between the alternatives.

Not only did these narratives depict problematic *and* unproblematic situations alike, but also the students' deliberations on their actions and their decisions to act as they did. Thus, it was assumed that taken together the narratives would afford the researchers with both examples of knowledge use *per se*, and of situations deemed critical from a knowledge use perspective – this without explicitly affording the students with concepts of differing kinds of knowledge. The students were invited to voluntarily submit their narratives to be a part of this study, and this resulted in 23 students, 20 women (mean age 25.5 years) and 3 men (mean age 30.7 years), submitting a total of 46 narratives of which half depicted problematic situations and half unproblematic.

Neither of the authors was engaged in the teaching or field practice of these students, nor present at the discussion of narratives during the conclusive seminar at the end of the term. Note that the analysis is based only on the written narratives which were submitted before the conclusive seminars. In these seminars simplistic conclusions, problematic statements, and inherent tensions in the narratives are challenged by the educational supervisor and used as the focus for reflected discussion.

The conclusive seminar in which the narratives were used is mandatory, but not graded. To pass, it is enough for the student to write the narratives and participate in the seminar. Whether one seems to have acted as a 'good' social worker in one's narrative or not, makes no difference. It might still be argued, though, that this kind of assignment and exercise invites the students to depict themselves as having performed well in their professional roles as social workers during field practice. However, very

few of the narratives have given us reason to entertain such thoughts and objections on the usability of the narratives for the purpose of this article.

The qualitative analysis of the empirical material was conducted in two stages, and the first stage consisted of three steps. The first step was to do an inductive, naïve reading of the narratives to get a general understanding of the material. In this first reading three broad groups of occupational positions were identified, those of *caseworkers*, *counsellors*, and *social assistants*. The general understanding provided by this first reading also paved the way for the next step which was to code the material in terms of knowledge premises and knowledge use – i.e. a form of *meaning categorization* to de-contextualize the material. The final step was to re-contextualize the results using *meaning interpretation* to analyse the codes with regard to their occurrence and manifestation in each of the three occupational positions (cf. Creswell 2009, 184 ff.). The first author coded the narratives and the two authors jointly discussed the coding and the results of the categorization.

In the second stage, the findings were set in relation to the theoretical background and discussed within the broader context of the professional role in social work in order to suggest an outline for a model that could set knowledge use in relation to the professional premises of social work. Such a model might be used as a tool for reflection and discussion in social work education – in preparation for and reflection on field practice, and for giving social work students an idea of what to prepare for as social workers.

Ethical approval

The study has been approved by the Regional Ethical Committee in Umeå.

Results and analysis

Occupational positions

About half of the respondents had done their field practice in *casework* positions involving the exercise of public authority, a quarter of them in settings for individual or group *counselling*, and another quarter were in positions here referred to as *social assistants*, in different ways responsible for supporting clients in their everyday lives. Since occupational positions in social work naturally varies between countries depending on socio-political context and economic factors, we will here give a brief account of what these broad categories imply in a Swedish context where social work is mainly organized through the local public authorities, often according to a client-contractor model.

While a caseworker at the municipal social services office in meetings with clients assesses the client's needs and eligibility for benefits, the social assistant is generally active in performing the services in question, working for example at a treatment centre, a day care centre for the elderly, or providing different types of housing care and support. Such services can either be organized as units within the municipality itself or provided by a contracted private enterprise.

A counsellor, on the other hand, who works at a school or a health centre can often be contacted by the client directly, and this leaves it up to the counsellor to both assess the client's needs and provide the appropriate service. Another distinction is that while the counsellor has a natural focus on therapeutic work during scheduled appointments, social assistants often take part in their clients' daily lives and use the client's environment and everyday experiences to promote personal progress and skills.

Services provided directly by non-profit organizations are in the Swedish context generally limited to target groups that public services do not (sufficiently) address, such as undocumented immigrants, EU-migrants, the homeless and also to some degree battered women. This study included one student at a women's shelter, here categorized as a social assistant mainly due to the close presence in the client's personal life.

Formative aspects

While the *occupational positions* mentioned above form three broad categories, the client meetings as such were found to display *legal*, *facilitating*, and *relational* aspects as being formative for the students' deliberations and chosen course of action in the particular situation. When citing student narratives, the occupational position the student has been practising is put within brackets after the citation.

Legal aspects

A common theme in many of the narratives was that they considered *legal* aspects that were formative for how the students perceived their professional relation to the client and their own role vis-à-vis legislation in that particular situation and how they on that basis chose a course of action. This could for some be perceived as being unproblematic since legislation seemingly gave clear directions about how to act. As one respondent put it, 'What made this situation unproblematic is that the law says how it is and it can't be understood in any other way. That's it, end of story.'(counsellor) Even though the quote itself is somewhat simplistic, it does point to the presence of a clear legal aspect and the function of legislation as a moral agent.

In other cases, the legal aspect was experienced as being more problematic because it meant that certain decisions had to be made regardless of the practitioner's sympathy for the client or own judgement. For non-caseworkers, the legal aspect included raising concerns to social authorities and providing legal guidance. A respondent (social assistant) working at a women's shelter described a client meeting with clear legal aspects. The client was not only a victim of domestic violence by her husband, but they also had two children together that brought up the question of custody rights. One of the challenges described was the uncertainty about whether the social authorities would take responsibility and provide adequate assistance.

Facilitating aspects

Another theme described as being formative of the work in relation to the client was the expectation for the social work student to act as a *facilitator* for bringing about a positive change in the client's life situation. This theme, which was particularly common among students in the counselling position, often presented challenges for the students because the clients' life situations could be very complex. Some students also expressed difficulty in handling the therapeutic role and in setting aside their own experiences and conceptions when meeting with clients. A crucial factor for this type of meeting was the client's self-awareness, understanding of the situation, and own motivation for change. For students in the position of social assistance, bringing about a positive change for the client became a question of how the client could best be supported in her own development process, for example, by training new skills in her daily life. While some of the students in casework positions mainly focused on the legal aspect, others were eager to also ensure a positive outcome for the client. One example: the case of a client who had worked in school catering for forty years and who now, due to dementia, forgot to eat and failed to recognize her apparent need of dietary assistance:

> This became somewhat of an ethical dilemma for me, and it also brought my own ability into question. Would I accept [the client's] refusal on the phone and thereby let her diet falter? And if I were to visit her, would it result in anything helpful for her? (caseworker)

Relational aspects

A third theme brought forth was the *relational* aspect of the client meeting. A student at a day-care centre for the elderly described how an important part of the job was to establish good relations and create 'the good meeting', which was generally experienced as an unproblematic and enjoyable undertaking (social assistant). Another student acting as a contact person (social assistant) in support of a teenage girl described how her presence in the client's daily life required a good amount of patience, clear communication, and relation building. A third student, who was guiding unaccompanied refugee

adolescents into an independent life in Sweden, gave a picture of the importance of the relationship and understanding between the social worker and the client:

> The alliance between me and the boy has been seriously damaged, which is sad for me but also for him because he is in need of a lot of support and guidance. The next time I will make sure that the communication is clear and that he has really understood. (social assistant)

This concept of alliance was also present among the narratives of the students in casework and counselling positions, and a good relationship was often regarded as having been crucial for the outcome.

Formative aspects and the differing occupational positions

One of the research questions for this study concerned *what formative aspects, in the differing occupational positions, can be identified as constituting premises for knowledge use*. Without claiming our categorization to be exhaustive, our results suggest a framing of such formative aspects in terms of legal, facilitating, and relational aspects.

The results are incorporated in Table 1 in which a *key function* for each occupational position is further suggested.

The *legal aspect* can be understood from the background that many of the clients in social work are subject to exercise of public authority and in a sense party to a legal case. The focal aim of the legal aspect is arguably to attain *justness*, i.e. a *handling of the case* that is satisfactory from a procedural justice perspective and an *outcome* that is satisfactory from a distributive justice perspective. While the legal aspect concerns all positions of social work, in this regard *casework* fits most clearly into Lipsky's (1980) idea of what it means to be a 'street-level bureaucrat'. Casework for the social authorities involves exercise of public authority, and this gives the caseworker both the mandate and the obligation to take legal measures if the particular prerequisites for doing so are met. For social assistants, who are often the ones tasked with implementing the services granted by a caseworker, the legal aspect takes the shape of procedures and formalities that regulate service provision. For a counsellor, the laws and regulations that need to be considered generally vary with employment and type of institution.

The expectation that the social worker will act as a *facilitator of (positive) change* gives the client meeting a *facilitating aspect*. In this the social worker is expected to attain client-related *results* as the focal aim of the facilitating aspect. In this study, *counselling* appears to be the occupational position that distinguishes itself when it comes to the facilitating aspect. With the role of a counsellor being to address the client's problems and to work towards client-related goals, the facilitating aspect involves every part of that process – from alliance building to interviewing techniques. For a caseworker, this aspect can be a reminder that even though the job involves an emphasis on legal exercise, the purpose is still to address and prevent social problems, and that regulations are merely means to an end. For social assistants, the facilitating aspect revolves around promoting change on a personal level with the client-professional relationship as a critical factor. While a counsellor can help the client contemplate certain situations in a clinical setting, the social assistant follows the clients more closely and can thereby help train social and practical skills in action.

Building *trust* is arguably an indispensable part of all types of social work. The relational aspect of social work captures this focus. In this study, the occupational position most closely related to the

Table 1. Formative aspects and occupational positions.

	Legal aspect	Facilitating aspect	Relational aspect
	-> Justness	*-> Results*	*-> Trust*
Casework	Exercise Public Authority	Identify Goals and Measures	Promote Mutual Respect
Counselling	Take Legal Measures	Conduct Therapy	Alliance Building
Social Assistance	Report to Caseworker	Facilitate Treatment	Everyday Support

Notes: The table shows some examples of what undertakings the three common formative aspects involve for each of the occupational positions, just to give an idea of what type of action/activity that we refer to. Each position has a natural focus on one of the aspects that indicates that position's **key function** (underlined in the table), which does not preclude that other aspects are present as well.

relational aspect seems to be that of *social assistance*. Working in the context of social care, social assistants in particular seem to be completely reliant on establishing trustful relations with their clients. In this case, the relationship *is* the intervention, or at least a substantial part of it. In casework and counselling, the relational aspect seems to have more of an instrumental value making it possible to assess and reach client-related goals. In meetings with clients as a caseworker, the relational aspect can balance an otherwise dominant legal approach. An example of this might be when a social worker is involved and perceptive to the particularities of the situation, takes care to explain and clearly communicate the legal and professional room for manoeuvre, and if possible, presents available alternatives for the client as well. In counselling the relational aspect can invoke the trust needed to establish a working alliance that makes therapy possible (cf. Bordin 1979).

While different occupational positions imply an emphasis on one of the formative aspects – that is, the *key function* of each position – all three aspects are found to some degree in all positions. For instance, it has been shown how the legal aspect involves being a *gatekeeper*, but as we have seen it also brings with it the possibility of acting as a *recruiter* by actively inviting clients to receive support. The facilitating aspect may give the social worker the role of a *pathfinder*, one who can help the client find a way forward that the client did not see or did not think of as realistic before. Finally, the relational aspect points out the important role of being not only an 'expert' or a 'bureaucrat' but also, and perhaps even most importantly, a (professional) *fellow human being* in the exercise of social work, regardless of the occupational position in question.

Knowledge use

We will here present examples of differing types of knowledge we found significant in the material, broadly categorized into three epistemological domains.

Factual and theoretical knowledge

When looking at the different types of knowledge use described in the narratives, we found several references to the possession of factual knowledge that was of value for tackling specific situations. For example, many of the students described situations where an understanding of the *legal framework* was fundamental:

> I explained that [the client] has the right to apply, but that the application will be turned down for two reasons. Partly because he is supposed to live with his parents since [at age 21] he is still young and partly because he is not even registered at the address that the application concerns. (caseworker)

An understanding of the legal framework was experienced as essential, not only when it came to casework but also as a 'moral agent' in relation to social work in general. In this case, the facilitator of the student, a school counsellor, had filed an official report of concern to the social authorities regarding a pupil:

> I felt confident with the legislation as a moral agent – that it wasn't me or my facilitator who had in any way decided that this had to be done, but that it was actually a legal obligation for us to file this report. (counsellor)

Another type of knowledge use was the ability to relate to *theory* in the sense of explanatory models that helped the student as a professional-to-be to understand the situation at hand. An example of this was a student's reflection on the role of cultural competence in the meeting with an unaccompanied refugee child while referring to the academic literature on the subject (social assistant). Such examples display the students' experiences of how working with clients in specific precarious life situations or conditions required a theoretical basis for understanding the client's situation and needs.

Client understanding based on personal information, and an open and involved engagement with the client on part of the social worker, is another type of factual knowledge that proved important. One student described a meeting with a client, 'Thanks to my knowledge about the client and the client's issues, I know how to act when we meet, which makes the meetings unproblematic and fruitful.' (counsellor)

Practical knowledge

Another type of knowledge referred to in the students' narratives was the practical knowledge and skill in putting factual knowledge to use. One such type of knowledge was the ability to translate the understanding of laws and regulations into an effective course of action, which is an ability here called *legal application*. One example illustrated how legal application in social work can be a matter of very direct interventions that require a high level of judgment and assessment ability. A student joined her facilitator on an acute home visit to a client with drinking problems, and she learned on the way that the client might very well be dead when they got there. When they arrived, the landlord helped them open the door to the client's apartment and the client, who was alive but heavily intoxicated, was given an ultimatum:

> My facilitator explained that the client had two choices, either to come with us to the detox unit voluntarily for the client's own sake or that we would make a forced disposal in accordance with the Care of Abusers (Special Provisions) Act. The client somewhat reluctantly decided to come with us, first to the psychiatric emergency department for examination and then to the detox unit. (caseworker)

This type of legal provision creates a situation where the social worker can make legislation not only a matter of following directives but also a framework which the practitioner elucidates and accounts for in their meetings with clients, in order to offer the client choices – albeit when choices are starkly limited as in this case, it rather becomes consent by persuasion.

One kind of practical knowledge apparent in the study, which we call *treatment skill*, refers to conversational and therapeutic techniques meant to guide the client in order to bring about desired client-related goals. One student described the challenge in finding a way forward with a client in counselling who was in a very stressful life situation.

> The problem is that I don't know how to reach [the client]. I feel that she is much overstrained and to even get a word in I have to interrupt her because she speaks constantly when we meet. /…/ As soon as I try to direct the conversation towards possible solutions, I feel that she goes into a defensive position. (counsellor)

Another student (counsellor) described a difficult situation while holding a group counselling session for alcohol and drug abusers when one senior participant, who was somewhat of a role model for the whole group, expressed troubling thoughts of a relapse. Emotionally unprepared, the student had trouble responding to this information in the group session.

A related form of knowledge is the ability to bring about desired results, not by means of therapeutic techniques, but through appropriate social interaction – i.e. *social competence*. In the case earlier mentioned, of the elderly woman unwilling to admit her need for dietary assistance which her relatives had informed the student of, the student decided on the strategy of booking a home visit. This as the client had refused help in this matter in contacts over the phone. With the pretext of checking up on the help she was already receiving, the real aim was to get a conversation going and to establish trust. When they started talking about food and the client agreed that it was important to eat in the mornings, the student cautiously concluded, 'Great! Then I will make sure that a home assistant will be able to be here for you in the mornings just in case.' (caseworker) Here the student describes an experience of how the outcome may rely on the ability to find an approach that will make an intervention possible. The client had not asked for more assistance herself, but the student talked her into it by taking on the approach of a caring public official who was sincerely concerned.

Practical wisdom

In the students' attempts to find the best course of action, their narratives also demonstrated the exercise of deliberative, personal, and emotional traits – a type of knowledge we refer to using the Aristotelian term practical wisdom. An example of this was the possession of *ethical confidence*, i.e. the ability to assess the client's situation from an ethical point of view and to act accordingly. A student (caseworker) assessing the needs of home-care assistance for the elderly described a meeting with a woman with multiple diagnoses who was in need of extensive assistance leading to expenses that were out of the question for her already troubled financial situation. The student was put in a dilemma between regulations on the one hand and her own idea of what the client's situation called for on the

other. Together with her facilitator, the student finally managed to resolve the situation by finding a sympathetic fee administrator who was willing to reduce the fee even though it was in this case against official procedures, but strongly related to the overall goals of social work.

Another skill related to practical wisdom was *personal responsiveness*. A noticeable overlap between this ability and social competence was found, but while social competence in this context captures a social and cultural knowhow on a more general level, personal responsiveness captures the ability of mindful, considerate and honest interaction in response to the particular client. For many of those students who had done their field practice in the position of social assistants, personal responsiveness proved to make up a substantial part of the job. An example of this was given by a student whose field practice involved taking on a mission as a contact person for a teenager. On one occasion the client had become very upset with her for not answering the phone during non-working hours, and the client had come into the office very upset, questioning their work and accusing the staff of not doing anything for her and not caring about her. After the incident, the client would not answer the phone for a week, but eventually the student managed to regain contact and the two could meet up and talk it through (social assistant).

Caseworkers on the other hand often used personal responsiveness to compensate for their otherwise strict and bureaucratic role: 'Even though it can feel 'good' to hide behind this [authoritative] role, I also want to show the client that I am a human.' (caseworker). Several narratives described the effort to be clear and communicative as decisive for obtaining a good working relationship in meetings with clients:

> I gave perspicuous information on how I would proceed to get the information needed in order to be able to decide on whether they would be granted economic support or not. I explained to them what guidelines and legislation I was attending to in my work. (caseworker).

In counselling, personal responsiveness was found to be critical in the attainment of a working alliance:

> I remained responsive and at the same time tried to reduce her feeling of shame by pointing out that being able to ask for help in a difficult life situation is a strength. I could build trust by my way of acting and this trust became a precondition for our fruitful sessions. (counsellor)

Many personally challenging situations for the students involved the difficulty in keeping a professional emotional distance from the client, and this required *emotional autonomy* on the part of the practitioner. In the counselling role, for example, one challenge was to handle the client's story in itself. One student (counsellor) described how she was overwhelmed with powerlessness and felt dejected when confronted with the client's life situation during counselling. Another student described what happened to her in a counselling session with an unaccompanied refugee child who had just been denied a residence permit in Sweden: 'Just his gaze made me stiffen inside and I wanted to cry when I was in the room. His pain was so apparent.' (counsellor) The challenge of emotional autonomy apparently involves both harbouring a client's tragedy and resisting being drawn into a state of affect at the expense of one's judgment either by pity or provocation.

Knowledge use as related to formative aspects

The second field of interest for the study was the question of *what types of knowledge the students use or that can be identified as essential* in their experience of client meetings. We found that each of the formative aspects identified in the study implies specific challenges that call for an appropriate response by the professional-to-be. Such appropriate responses in turn appear to require knowledge relating to three different epistemological domains.

In the narratives in this study, *factual knowledge* has involved an understanding of the legal framework, along with familiarity with *theories*, and a certain understanding of the particular client's needs, background, and point of view. While the first two can be taught and trained during studies, the third involves getting to know the client. The use of *practical knowledge* refers to the know-how that is essential for putting the factual knowledge to use, for employing relevant theoretical models and methods,

for implementing legislation as well as exercising (culturally pertinent) social competence in client meetings. Manifestations of the need for, and exercise of, *practical wisdom* has been displayed in the complex rational, emotional, and social deliberations made by the students in relation to the client and situation at hand, as well as to their chosen way of acting. In the case of legal exercise, practical wisdom has been critical in the balancing of procedural and distributive justice. Practical wisdom has also involved personal responsiveness in order to convey honest sympathy, and the ability to maintain emotional integrity when coming close to a client's existential vulnerability.

Combining the formative aspects with these three domains of knowledge use, we get a partly inductive and partly deductive compilation of nine different knowledge types as exemplified in the results (Table 2).

Wrapping up the findings, we have employed the concepts of *occupational position*, *formative aspects*, and *epistemological domains* for together forming a tentative model of knowledge use and a basis for conceptualizing the professional role in social work.

Discussion – social workers as 'compassionate bureaucrats'

To adequately act and react in relation to different clients in different situations as a social work professional, our results testify to the need for a social worker to obtain a vast repertoire of knowledge and skills. This repertoire, together with what is judged to be the prominent formative aspects in a given situation, determines the social workers' leeway and perceived set of possibilities for action at hand. While different occupational positions imply an emphasis on one of the formative aspects – i.e. the *key function* of each position – all types of knowledge use were to some degree required in all three occupational positions. It is important to here recognize that the differing domains of knowledge discussed are integrated, and by no means discrete and compartmentalized other than in an analytical sense. Thus, making use of different types of knowledge is more a question of emphasis than the exclusive use of one domain. Taken together these comprise a role we label 'the compassionate bureaucrat' (see Figure 1). This concept in many ways resonates with the professional role for social work envisioned by Gerda Meyerson over a century ago: 'For both voluntary and professional Social Work to be of some real use for individuals and society, knowledge of both the theoretical and the practical kind is needed, as well as love and persistence' (1912, 95).

As illustrated in Figure 1, the professional role in social work – being a compassionate bureaucrat – is certainly multifaceted, with three aspects of equal weight: relational (compassion), facilitating (effectiveness) and legal (the bureaucrat). The figure shows the professional role in social work, which we label 'the compassionate bureaucrat'. Premises, described as formative aspects, require the exercise of different types of knowledge in three epistemological domains in the pursuit of the associated focal aims. Note, however, that the use of different types of knowledge is more a question of emphasis than the exclusive use of one domain.

Speaking of the professional role in social work, it is also of interest to look at some different types of loyalty and norms surrounding the profession. While legal exercise requires loyalty to legislation and the institutional norms that are sanctioned by the employer, professionals themselves are often organized in unions and other branch organizations where norms and loyalties are constructed on the

Table 2. Knowledge use as related to formative aspects.

	Legal Aspect	Facilitating Aspect	Relational Aspect
Factual and Theoretical Knowledge	Legal Framework	Theory	Client Understanding
Practical Knowledge	Legal Application	Treatment Skill	Social Competence
Practical Wisdom	Ethical Confidence	Personal Responsiveness	Emotional Autonomy

Notes: The table shows nine types of knowledge use set in three broadly defined epistemological domains – factual and theoretical knowledge, practical knowledge, and practical wisdom – while simultaneously relating to one of the three aspects that were formative of the work and/in relation to the client. Put together, we find a typology that suggests a model for reflecting on the variety of knowledge and skills required in social work.

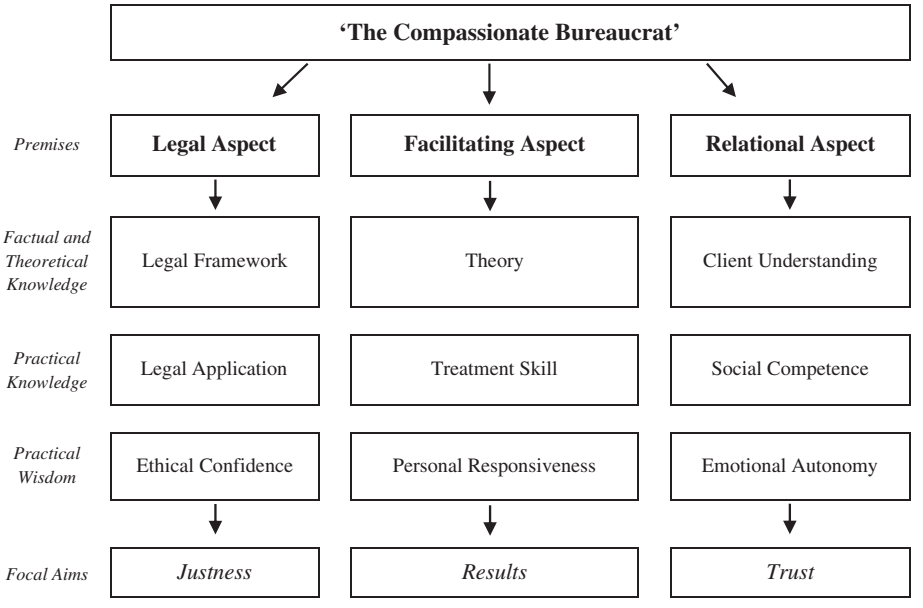

Figure 1. The compassionate bureaucrat.

basis of research, trends, and professional ethics. On a personal level, we can speak of loyalty both in relation to the client and in relation to the professional's own conscience and loyalty to those ethical, judicial, and professional principles and norms to which one is committed. The different focal aims that the described aspects of social work involve can be a cause of conflicting interests. At best, the different types of loyalty and aims coincide and create a consensus of justifications for the professional in a given situation. If not so fortunate, the compassionate bureaucrat might end up having to choose what is most important at the moment, and we have also seen examples of this in the narratives for this study.

With the concept of the compassionate bureaucrat, as encapsulated in Figure 1, we hope to shed some light on the theoretical and practical knowledge that Meyerson called for. Regarding the notions of love and persistence, the results of this study suggest that they are closely related to knowledge use in social work, where 'love' in this context is exemplified by the phronetic skills of personal responsiveness and ethical confidence because they require a degree of genuine compassion. The notion of 'persistence' points to the need for patience in client relations, particularly in positions with a strong relational aspect. It must be noted here that a prerequisite for persistent social work is having social workers who are well equipped for meeting the challenges that the profession entails, who are confident in their professional roles, and who are given both the resources and the organizational conditions to do the job they are expected to.

Conclusions

Social work is a broad professional field with a wide variety of possible positions for employment. On the basis of this fact, a reflection concerns the social work training programmes available, and the fact that a single programme is expected to target such a broad variety of occupational positions. For the students, the semester of field practice (30 ECTS) means only a limited chance to try an occupational position in the field while having access to a facilitator with professional experience and in direct relation to the theoretical educational context. Thus, while all positions to a certain degree will afford the student the possibility to practice all aspects of social work, this means that, depending on the key function of the occupational position in question, a student is not likely to get a chance to practice the

differing kinds of knowledge use to the same extent and in different contexts. The findings and the suggested model of this study might provide students with a basis for reflecting upon the professional role they are expected to take on and what this role implies in terms of different kinds of knowledge, abilities, challenges, and contradictions.

On the basis of this study, we argue that investigating the diversity of professional roles that social work entails can give social workers the tools to reflect upon their professional contexts and approaches.

Further, a large-scale study of how experienced social workers in different countries describe knowledge use and premises within differing occupational positions would be of great value to allow for a thorough examination of the variety of knowledge use in the international field of social work. It is not a wild guess that our model for analysis would have to be supplemented with (at least) one more occupational position, namely that of the advocate – focusing on finding ways to tackle discrimination or other unjust life conditions. This would open up for discussion on how the compassionate bureaucrat is manifested in different social-political contexts.

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