


A Common Purpose? Social Work Students' Social Justice Related Views in Finland and the island of Ireland

Paula McFadden ^{1,*}, Helena Bloomberg²,
Johanna Kallio³, Christian Kroll², Claire McCartan⁴,
Niamh Flanagan⁵, Gloria Kirwin⁵, Maria Pentaraki⁴ and
Elaine Wilson⁶

¹*School of Applied Social and Policy Sciences, Derry-Londonderry Campus, Ulster University, UK*

²*Swedish School of Social Science, University of Helsinki, Finland*

³*Department of Social Work, University of Turku, Finland* Christian Kroll, *Swedish School of Social Science, University of Helsinki, Finland*

⁴*Regional Trauma Network, Impact Research Centre, Northern Health & Social Care Trust, & School of Social Sciences, Education and Social Work, Queen's University Belfast, UK*

⁵*Graduate School of Healthcare Management, Royal College of Surgeons, Ireland*

⁶*School of Social Policy, Social Work and Social Justice, University College Dublin, Ireland*

*Correspondence to Paula McFadden, School of Applied Social Policy Sciences, Ulster University, Magee Campus, Derry BT48 7JL, UK. E-mail: p.mcfadden@ulster.ac.uk

Abstract

Exploring social work students' views to understand how equipped they are to pursue the social justice mission of the profession should be of central academic and practical interest. There are, however, surprisingly few empirical studies focussing on social work students' views on social justice-related issues from a comparative viewpoint. Such knowledge is thought to be of a wider international interest from a number of perspectives, including social work education and student exchange and, in a wider context, for the development of social work as a profession and for discussing the prerequisites for shared international notions of social work. This article explores the views of social work students studying in different socio-economic contexts and welfare regimes in relation to some key aspects assumed to be vital for the profession. The results based on survey data from student cohorts in Finland ($N=608$) and the

© The Author(s) 2024. Published by Oxford University Press on behalf of The British Association of Social Workers. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. For commercial re-use, please contact journals.permissions@oup.com

island of Ireland ($N=279$) support the general conclusion that there are important, similar patterns of motivations and understandings amongst the students, despite substantial differences in histories, welfare state developments, current policies and social conditions in various jurisdictions. The results are of interest to educators across countries internationally and provide an important basis for future similar studies.

Keywords: island of Ireland and Finland, motivations to career, poverty perceptions, social justice, social work student survey

Accepted: December 2023

Introduction

Social justice is commonly viewed as one of the social work profession's core values. Thus, social workers should challenge social injustice by working for and with oppressed individuals and groups and by addressing issues of poverty, unemployment and discrimination (NASW, 2021; Marsh, 2005).

Exploring social work students' views to understand how equipped they are to pursue the social justice mission of the profession should therefore be of central academic and practical interest. There are, however, surprisingly few empirical studies focussing on social work students' views on social justice-related issues from a comparative viewpoint. Such an approach is believed to help clarify whether future social workers are driven by common normative views that are important for (future) social workers' readiness to challenge social injustice, or whether, instead, it seems as if variations in factors such as institutional, cultural and socio-economic circumstances at a macro-level shape views of social work students. Thus, such knowledge is thought to be of a wider international interest from a number of perspectives, including social work education and student exchange and in a wider context, for the development of social work as a profession and for discussing the prerequisites for shared international notions of social work.

Thus, this article explores the views of social work students studying in different socio-economic contexts and welfare regimes in relation to some key aspects assumed to be vital for the profession. Our specific research questions are as follows: Do social work students' motivations to study social work and their understandings of poverty seem to comply with the profession's goal of advancing social justice? Are there differences in social work students' views between the different jurisdictions as a result of varying institutional and structural conditions affecting social work education and practice?

This article describes the social work profession as part of the broader welfare policy context of Finland, the Republic of Ireland and Northern

Ireland, and reports findings from student surveys, with the aim of exploring the differences and similarities of social work students' views in Finland and across the island of Ireland. With reference to our aim of exploring possible commonalities in views, the jurisdictions chosen are taken to represent substantially different contexts, at least from a European perspective. Two different indicators related to social justice in a student context are also discussed and utilised: various general perceptions on poverty and various motivations for studying social work, respectively.

The social work profession: a common purpose?

Promoting social justice underpins the origins of social work, but, over the last century, the profession has struggled to effectively meet this challenge (Stoeffler and Joseph, 2020). According to the Global Definition of Social Work, social justice is a core principle of the profession (International Federation of Social Workers, 2014) and is recognised as one of the main professional values and a key aim and aspiration of the profession (Austin, 2013; Watts and Hodgson, 2019). Social justice is one of the main organising values for social work practice and education (Marsh, 2005; Sewpaul, 2014; Lundy, 2011; Onalu and Okoye, 2021) and is a 'shared ethical ground for social workers' across the world (Postan-Aizik et al., 2020).

A commitment to social justice specifically relating to addressing issues of poverty is outlined in the profession's ethical codes of the jurisdictions included in this study (Talentia Union of Professional Social Workers, 2019; British Association of Social Workers, 2021; NASW, 2021), in practice frameworks (Department of Health, 2017) and standards (Northern Ireland Social Care Council, 2019), and social work scholarship (Sewpaul, 2014; Lundy, 2011; Onalu and Okoye, 2021). Rising levels of inequality and poverty globally (Oxfam, 2021) mean the pursuit of social justice by the social work profession is particularly urgent and necessitates working in solidarity with those who are oppressed to alleviate poverty (NASW, 2021). According to the Department of Health of Northern Ireland (2018), 'poverty is a social injustice' which needs to be tackled by the social work profession to enhance social well-being. This requires an understanding of the systemic nature of poverty and rejecting individualistic perceptions of the causes of poverty.

Perceptions of poverty

It has often been argued that attempts at alleviating social injustices are connected to a worldview in which poverty is caused by unjust structural

features in society rather than individual flaws and shortcomings of people themselves. Theoretical discussions on the causes of poverty are traditionally divided into individual and structural categories (Delavega *et al.*, 2017) or into three categories: individual, structural and fatalistic (Feather, 1974). Individualistic approaches refer to the importance of the behaviour of the poor, such as poor decision-making and poor work ethic. In the research literature, individual causes have also been linked to the concept of individual blame (Van Oorschot and Halman, 2000; Larsen, 2006; Kallio and Niemelä, 2014), attributing the causes of poverty to the individual, created by idleness and low morale. A structural approach to poverty relates to factors outside the individual's control (Cozzarelli *et al.*, 2001). Here, poverty is seen as the result of low wages, high unemployment, lack of educational opportunities and other structural features which an individual is unable to influence. According to fatalistic explanations, poverty is the result of fate, such as illness or poor luck.

In this article, we focus empirically on the attitudes of students on *individual* and *structural* causes, an approach common to previous attitude studies on poverty. Based on available research, social workers and social work students in various countries more often support structural rather than individual explanations for poverty (Kus and Fan 2015), findings which have been explained by, for example, social work education, professional ethics and the exposure to various social problems, like poverty (Clark, 2007; Byrne, 2019). Notwithstanding, within-group variations in views have not been uncommon (e.g. Blomberg *et al.*, 2013).

Assumptions regarding cross-national variation in views on the reasons for poverty have commonly been based on an 'institutional logic', assuming that values and attitudes of individuals are, on average, affected by those of the welfare state model of their country. From this point of departure (cf Larsen 2006), one might assume a higher support for individual poverty explanations on the island of Ireland than in Finland (cf further below). However, findings so far have not provided any clear-cut support for such assumptions as regards the general public's views regarding the jurisdiction included in their study (see Kallio and Niemelä, 2014), whilst there have been national variations in views between Nordic countries (Blomberg *et al.*, 2013).

Commitment to social justice and other study motivations

Another way of approaching students' commitment to social justice, is by investigating to what extent whether their Motivations for choice of career may be related to core values of social justice, human rights and equality (cf Bradley *et al.*, 2012). In previous research, motivations for

studying social work have often been divided into intrinsic (or ideological), extrinsic (or instrumental) and those related to personal life experiences, such as childhood adversities (Byrne, 2019), respectively. Intrinsic motivations, which emphasise different ways of helping people, especially those in vulnerable and disadvantaged positions, have been regarded as closely linked to social justice (cf Hackett et al., 2003; Furness, 2007).

Several previous studies have demonstrated that a majority of social workers and/or social work students embrace 'altruistic', 'ideological' or 'intrinsic' values (cf Hackett et al., 2003; Furness, 2007). Nevertheless, some studies have demonstrated that also more extrinsic, instrumental motivations, linked to questions of obtaining a secure position in the labour market, favourable career prospects, a good salary level or a respected status in society, might be of importance (Puhakka et al., 2010; Stevens et al., 2010). This speaks in favour of also considering the prevalence of other than intrinsic motivations amongst students.

In addition, difficult personal life experiences in particular, when relating to violence and psychological problems in the family as a child, have resulted in estimations by students that their family background had influenced their career choice (cf Sellers and Hunter, 2005). Further, positive experiences of being a social work client (Hackett et al., 2003, p. 170) have been linked to the choice of the (social work) profession and have also been associated with a desire to influence and improve social work practice.

It could be assumed that also all these types of motivations discussed could be affected by country context in general and/or the position of social work in the student's country (cf further below). In addition to an impact of differences in welfare systems and underlying values, for example, on poverty and inequality (which might lead to cross-country variation concerning the importance of intrinsic motivations), the relatively high status of social workers in the Nordics (Meeuwisse and Swärd 2006, pp. 216–17) could lead to external motivations being ranked as fairly important in Finland. Contextual, socio-economic, country differences could also affect students' previous personal experiences of social problems and/or social work, and thus their study motivations.

Welfare states of Finland, the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland

The welfare states of Finland, the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland (as part of the UK) have often proven somewhat challenging to typologise. Esping-Andersen's (1999) revisit of his seminal *Worlds of Welfare* describes the Finnish welfare state as Social Democratic (cf also Ferragina and Seeleib-Kaiser, 2011), characterised by the ideologies of

universalism and equality, under which services and benefits are generous and accessible to all, taking on many aspects of traditional family responsibility, and social stratification is low. To achieve this, full employment and high taxes are essential (cf [Alestalo and Kuhnle, 1986](#)).

The UK is typically classified as a liberal welfare state ([Ferragina and Seeleib-Kaiser, 2011](#)), influenced by the thinking that higher levels of benefit will reduce incentives to work. Therefore, in this regime, sourcing of private welfare or insurance from the market is encouraged by the state, either actively through subsidisation of private welfare schemes, or passively by keeping social welfare benefits at a modest or residual level. Welfare spending in this regime is at the lowest end of the spectrum, with high-threshold, means-tested, targeted and time-limited benefits aiming only to ameliorate poverty. Consequently, taxation, redistribution of income and social rights are low, whilst income inequality and social stratification are high. Like Finland, the UK is not considered a pure example of its welfare regime. Rather it is modestly liberal with some universalistic provisions such as the National Health Service.

Esping-Andersen originally classified the Republic of Ireland as a liberal welfare state (1990) and later failed to categorise it at all (1999). Classification of the Irish welfare state has proven challenging, often situated between the Liberal and Christian Democratic paradigms ([Ferragina and Seeleib-Kaiser, 2011](#)). The Christian Democratic regime is characterised by intermediate levels of welfare spending arising from a balance between state and private provision of welfare. Taking up a mid-way position between Liberal and Social Democratic, Christian Democratic welfare states combine both social insurance and social assistance schemes.

Lorentz (1994) has discussed the position of social work in relation to welfare state typologies, departing from a slightly different categorisation by [Leibfried \(1992\)](#). According to this classification, Finland belongs to the Scandinavian welfare state model, whilst (the republic of) Ireland is placed within what is called the 'rudimentary welfare model' and the UK is placed within the residual welfare model, whilst Meuwisse and Swärd (2006) place both Ireland and the UK within the residual model regarding social work. In the Scandinavian model, social workers are mainly employed in the public sector as a part of a multidisciplinary network of services, aiming at minimising stigmatising effects of decisions and measures, giving social workers a relatively high social status. Social work within both the residual and the rudimentary model seems, in comparison with the Scandinavian model, to be more focused on measures directed at vulnerable population groups, whilst one difference between these latter models, at least historically, seems to have been related to differences in the scope of social work as part of the public sector in relation to other sectors ([Lorenz, 1994](#)).

Welfare and social work in Finland

Taking a closer look at the Finnish welfare state, it has, like its Scandinavian neighbours, been characterised by a strong reliance on publicly organised and high-quality health and social services, covering the whole population (Anttonen and Sipilä, 1996). Also social work is performed as a part of these services, and thus, a vast majority of the social workers are employed as civil servants and are given a wide range of tasks (cf Läheteinen *et al.*, 2017). Social workers are required to have a master's degree from a university, with social work as the major subject or equivalent (Valvira, 2017). This means that social work education in Finland is both extensive and strongly research-orientated both in intra- and extra-Nordic perspective (cf Juliusdottir, 2003), and it is attracting a high number of applicants often with high grades from secondary education.

Finland was hit more severely by economic crises in the early 1990s as compared to other Nordic and European countries, in part due to the cessation of trade after the collapse of the Soviet Union. As a result, the fairly comprehensive Finnish welfare system became subject to various reforms and retrenchments, resulting in rising income inequality amongst other things (Kananen, 2016). Yet, as compared to the UK, welfare cuts in Finland have been rather subtle, gradually weakening social security benefits by not raising income transfers at the same rate as rising wages, combined with various tax cuts as well as by the introduction of stricter activation measures (Outinen, 2012). Public responsibility for services had also been narrowed down and subjected to various New Public Management (NPM) inspired changes and reforms (e.g. Blomberg and Kroll, 2017), but the responsibility for a wide range of mandatory social services, including social work, has remained within the public sphere.

Welfare and social work on the island of Ireland

The social welfare systems of the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, whilst different (cf above), have many commonalities. The Irish welfare system developed in close alignment with the UK following the 1922 partition of Ireland; however, comparable levels of protection were not offered to Irish citizens compared to residents in Northern Ireland (Fitzpatrick and O'Sullivan, 2021). From 1979, the UK Conservative Thatcher government began a protracted shift away from welfare protection towards activation measures that required the unemployed to qualify for support (Adler, 2008). Politics of austerity following the financial crash in 2008 led to a suite of measures designed to reduce the welfare burden, dovetailing with the neo-liberal policies of the Conservative Party who has dominated government in one form or another since

2010. Activation policies for welfare entitlement aimed at enhancing employability and labour market participation for the unemployed did not become a feature of the Irish welfare system until the financial crash of 2008 (McGann *et al.*, 2020).

To the current day, social work practice principles and theories in both jurisdictions of Northern Ireland and Ireland continue to occupy and flow from a shared professional foundation, but simultaneously there are some clear examples of different approaches and emphases within specific fields of practice (Wilson and Kirwan, 2007).

Social work in Northern Ireland has, for example, distinct differences from the rest of the UK not least because of the thirty-year history of conflict (cf. Heenan and Birrell, 2018). Differences in the political and social context are also reflected in the administration of social policy. In contrast to the rest of the UK, Northern Ireland has had an integrated health and social service for almost fifty years and this has contributed to increasing the numbers and prestige of social work as a profession (Pinkerton and Campbell, 2002).

Despite differences in welfare provision to Finland, also most social work in the North and Republic of Ireland are today provided by statutory services and both jurisdictions require a minimum of a degree-level qualification to practice in the profession (McCartan *et al.*, 2022).

In conclusion, whilst not always quite clear exactly what may be the possible effects related to various differences between Finland and the island of Ireland when it comes to social work students' views on social justice and their importance as part of their choice of profession, our assumption is that an effect of the structural and institutional differences between the respective jurisdictions would be reflected in the patterns of views revealed in our surveys, which will be of considerable interest. If differences were to be minor, however, the assumption of the dominance of common views amongst students in the social work profession would gain support.

Materials and methods

The present study is based on a common interest amongst a group of researchers from Finland and the island of Ireland in increasing the knowledge concerning the factors behind the thinking of social work students on issues of social justice.

The analyses are based on two national surveys (for details, see below) with similar ambitions as regards views on issues of social justice, which have been carried out in the respective jurisdictions. Through recurring discussions amongst the group of researchers involved on the interpretation of the questions to be included and their interpretation in their respective societal context, the ambition has been to guarantee sufficient conformity between the questions included to justify a comparison.

The questions utilised are based on similar theoretical assumptions regarding study motives (e.g. Stevens *et al.* 2010) and perceptions of poverty (e.g. Van Oorschot and Halman, 2000) and, whilst not identical, they are chosen to match each other as far as possible with the intention of capturing intrinsic, extrinsic and personal motivations, and general perceptions of poverty, respectively.

In order to further strengthen our assumptions, principal component analyses (not shown) were performed in order to determine whether the respective questions used to ensure study motivations load into three different components (intrinsic, extrinsic and personal motivations) in both countries, as should be expected. This was found to clearly be the case. However, since the questions used are not identical, the analysis focuses on the respective patterns of motivations and perceptions amongst the students in Finland and the island of Ireland, and the comparison focuses on the relative importance of different types of motivations, and of different types of poverty perceptions.

The Irish data are based on The Social Work Student Survey conducted in 2018 by The All-Ireland Social Work Research and Education Forum in order to establish the demographic characteristics of applicants and explore beliefs about politics, society and factors informing their motivation to become a social worker. All students in their first year of study 2018–2019 were invited to participate in an anonymised online survey. (Students at UCC were in their third year of a four-year degree, but this was equivalent to the other social work pathways.) The studies received ethical approval from the research ethics committee in each participating institution, and students were provided with study information, so they could provide informed consent.

Although there are some differences in the health and welfare system, there are close parallels between the two systems in the North and South of Ireland—the academic routes into social work, the role that religion plays in education, and welfare modelled on a centralised, insurance-based system, and the impact of austerity. Each year, a number of social work students educated in Northern Ireland will work in the Republic and vice versa. For these reasons, we chose to merge the student data and treat it as a single cohort of students across the island of Ireland.

The Finnish national social work student survey data were collected in the autumn of 2019. The survey was sent by e-mail to the major social work students at the Universities of Helsinki, Jyväskylä, Lapland, Eastern Finland, Tampere and Turku, who had registered as present during the autumn term of 2019 and who had given permission to the student registrar to provide their e-mail addresses for research purposes. According to Finnish practice, a separate ethical approval from a research ethics committee is not required in this type of study. Two reminder rounds were made for the students.

Table 1. Social work students' perceptions of the causes of poverty in Finland and Ireland (%)

Causes of poverty	Individual causes (%)		Structural causes (%)	
	Finland (N = 607)	Ireland (N = 276)	Finland (N = 607)	Ireland (N = 276)
Strongly agree	0.8	0.0	30.3	38.9
Somewhat agree	5.6	3.8	46.1	29.5
Neither agree nor disagree	13.0	10.8	12.7	27.8
Somewhat disagree	41.2	30.8	9.6	2.6
Strongly disagree	39.4	52.9	1.3	1.3

Since the Finnish data included students at all levels, not only first-year students as in Ireland, analyses were performed by study level (results not shown). No major differences were detected when it comes to motivations and perceptions, with the exception of intrinsic study motivations: if the Finnish data would have consisted of first-year students, the importance of intrinsic motivations would have been even more similar to the Irish results.

Motivation to study social work in Ireland was assessed using a nine-item, six-point Likert scale constructed from themes in the literature. Respondents were asked to rate the nine statements from one to six (one 'not important at all' to six 'extremely important'). Six of these items were considered to be similar to those asked of the Finland students (see Table 1 for the wording of the Irish and Finnish items). The Irish items were recoded as a three-point Likert scale (very important, fairly important and not important at all) to be more comparable with the Finnish data, which used a three-point Likert scale.

Further, two of Delavega's items belonging to the 'Blame Index' (Delavega *et al.*, 2017) were considered similar enough to be compared to the individual and structural poverty items developed by Van Oorschot and Halman (2000) included in the Finnish survey. All students were asked to rate statements concerning individual and structural causes of poverty on a five-point Likert scale.

The methods used consisted of direct distributions and cross-tabulations. For statistical testing, we used chi-squared analysis. Independent variables, that were comparable between Finland and Ireland, included cross-tabulations were age, current family structure and political party preference.

Results

The total sample of students in the Finnish study was 608 (response rate of 36 per cent), of which the majority were female (92 per cent), whilst the largest age group consisted of those aged between twenty-three to

thirty years (39 per cent). Sixteen per cent of students were 22 or under, with a further 25 per cent aged thirty-one to forty years, whilst 20 per cent were forty-one years or older. One-third of the students were living with their children (32 per cent).

A total sample of students in the Ireland study was 279 (response rate of 54 per cent). Also here, a majority of students were female (82 per cent) and more likely to be mature students aged between twenty-three and thirty years (41 per cent) or over thirty years old (37 per cent), reflecting the relevant graduate entry pathways that are available. Twenty-two per cent were aged twenty-two years or under, 20 per cent were aged thirty-one to forty years, 15 per cent were forty-one to fifty years, and only 2 per cent were fifty-one to sixty years old. One-third of students were parents (32 per cent).

Figures 1 and 2 show social work students' motivations to study social work in Finland and Ireland, respectively. The tables show that the intrinsic motivations to study social work were widely embraced both in Finland and in Ireland. In both countries, a majority of the students stated that helping people and working for social change (contribute to solving societal grievances/help people to overcome oppression) were very important drivers for studying social work.

Further, also extrinsic motivations are important for the students from Finland and Ireland, but not as important as intrinsic motivations. About half of the respondents in both countries stated that motivations related to good employment prospects/stable jobs and becoming a professional, respectively, were very important motivations for starting studying social work.

Amongst Irish students, also personal experiences were nearly as important a motivation for entering a social work education as extrinsic

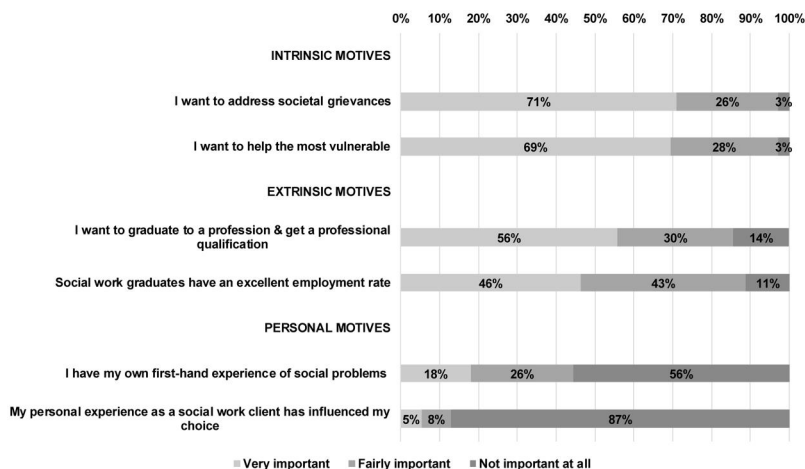


Figure 1: Social work students' motivation to study social work in Finland (%).

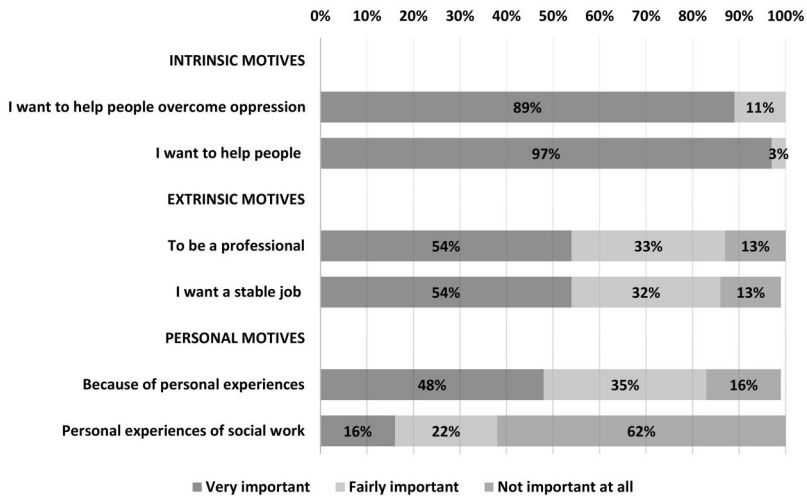


Figure 2: Social work students' motivation to study social work in Ireland (%).^Å

motivations. In Finland, this motivation was, in contrast, far less common than extrinsic motivations. Having had personal experiences of social work was, in turn, the least important type of motivation both in Ireland and in Finland. The order of importance of the various motivations was the same in Finland and Ireland.

Concerning perceptions of poverty, both students in Finland and Ireland supported structural explanations and disagreed with individual explanations (Table 1). In both countries, only a very small share of the students endorsed individual explanations of poverty.

Next, we focus on the cross-tabulations between motivations to study social work and some relevant background variables. Motivations related to personal experience of social work were excluded from the analysis because of a small number of observations. According to the results in Table 2, students with children in Finland were more motivated by extrinsic factors (the desire to get a professional qualification) (62 per cent) than other students (53 per cent). Furthermore, their choice of career was less motivated by first-hand personal experiences of social problems (13 per cent) than it was amongst students without children (20 per cent). In Ireland, in turn, students without children were less driven to studying social work by personal experiences. Political party preference, in turn, was related to some study motivations in the Finnish data. Finnish students with a conservative party preference less often perceived that addressing societal grievances was a very important reason for studying social work (59 per cent) compared to students with a non-conservative party preference (73 per cent). Conservative voters were also less motivated to study social work by first-hand experiences of social problems (7 per cent) than other students (20 per cent). In Ireland,

Table 2. Cross-tabulations of baseline characteristics and motivations to study social work (very important reason, %, n).

Baseline characteristic	Intrinsic: address societal grievances/help people overcome oppression		Intrinsic: help the most vulnerable/people		Extrinsic: to be a professional		Extrinsic: good employment prospects/stable job		Personal motives: own experience (of social problems)	
	Finland % (n)	Ireland % (n)	Finland % (n)	Ireland % (n)	Finland % (n)	Ireland % (n)	Finland % (n)	Ireland % (n)	Finland % (n)	Ireland % (n)
Age										
30 or younger	74.6 (247)*	89.2 (132)	77.9 (258)**	97.3 (144)	55.2 (182)	56.1 (83)	49.1 (162)	58.1 (86)	20.7 (67)	44.6 (66)
31 or older	66.9 (180)*	86.2 (75)	59.0 (157)**	95.4 (83)	56.6 (150)	54.0 (47)	42.2 (113)	46.4 (43)	15.3 (40)	57.0 (49)
Current family structure										
Living with children	71.5 (138)	85.7 (66)	64.2 (122)	94.8 (73)	62.3 (119)*	54.5 (42)	46.9 (90)	49.4 (38)	13.3 (25)*	64.5 (49)*
Others	70.9 (292)	89.3 (142)	71.8 (296)	97.5 (155)	52.8 (216)*	54.7 (87)	46.0 (189)	56.6 (90)	20.4 (82)*	42.1 (67)*
Political party preference										
Conservative/right	58.5 (55)*	83.9 (52)	64.9 (61)	95.2 (59)	61.5 (59)	61.3 (38)	40.6 (39)	61.3 (38)	7.4 (7)*	58.1 (36)
Other	73.4 (375)*	89.6 (43)	70.3 (357)	95.8 (46)	54.8 (276)	52.1 (25)	47.3 (240)	58.3 (28)	20.2 (100)*	37.5 (18)

Note: Chi-squared analysis.
 * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.001$.

Table 3. Cross-tabulation of demographics and causes of poverty (%).

Baseline characteristic	Strongly or somewhat agree with structural causes	
	Finland % (n)	Ireland % (n)
Age		
30 or younger	75.0 (249)	70.1 (101)
31 or older	78.9 (213)	66.7 (58)
Current family structure		
Living with children	76.2 (147)	68.8 (53)
Others	76.6 (317)	68.4 (106)
Political party preference		
Conservative/right	65.6 (63)**	54.1 (33)
Other	78.5 (401)**	68.8 (33)

Note: Using chi-squared analysis, we compared structural and individual causes of poverty.

** $p < 0.001$.

political party preference did not differentiate study motivations of students. Lastly, younger students in Finland more often perceived that ‘helping the most vulnerable’ and addressing societal grievances were very important reasons to study social work than did older students. In the Irish data, no significant differences in motivations according to age were found.

Turning to students’ perceptions of poverty, we excluded ‘individual causes’ from the cross-tabulations, since almost none of the students in either country were critical towards individual poverty explanations. According to results in Table 3, political party preference was connected to students’ poverty perceptions in Finland, but not in Ireland. Those who had voted conservative were less likely to endorse structural explanations (66 per cent) as compared to others (79 per cent). Age or current family structure was not connected to perceptions of poverty.

Discussion

This article set out to study social work students’ motivations—in the different socio-economic and welfare state contexts of the island of Ireland and Finland respectively—for becoming a social worker and their understanding of poverty, key aspects underpinning the central commitment of the social work profession to promote social justice.

Our results suggest that social work students in different contexts are to a large extent committed to promoting social justice as a general goal; there are no clear indications of social work students’ views on these matters being influenced considerably by the respective welfare regimes’ *varying prioritising of issues of equality*, but appear instead to be influenced by issues of vulnerability and poverty *per se*, existing in all welfare regimes.

However, the commitment to social justice shown by students is unlikely to diminish the potential challenges for future social workers emerging from a conflict between ideals and real-world conditions, such as financial constraints, undesired political contexts and/or institutional procedures and policy instruments. When sufficient structures and pre-conditions for helping clients are not in place, this might lead both to job-related moral distress and, in the long term, impact on job retention (Mänttari-Van Der Kuip, 2016).

When it comes to extrinsic motivations, respondents across jurisdictions were similarly motivated by the prospect of becoming a professional, by good job prospects and stability. This seems intelligible, considering that studying social work results in a degree including formal professional qualifications, it provides a comparatively favourable position in terms of working life attachment and job security, as compared to many 'generalist' university educations (Puhakka et al., 2010).

In sum, and whilst remembering that some caution is advisable as our analyses are based on similar, but not entirely identical questions for the island of Ireland and Finland, the results from our international comparison support the general conclusion that there are important, similar patterns of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations for students' choices to become social work professionals, despite substantial differences in histories, welfare state developments, current policies and societal conditions in various jurisdictions, and despite international variation in political beliefs amongst students. Notwithstanding some effects of varying societal conditions, the results might indicate the persistent prevalence of some basic, general drivers behind students' wishes to become a social worker also in today's turbulent societies.

As in most international comparisons, similarities are accompanied by variations, making straightforward conclusions more demanding. In our data, *personal experiences* stood out as an important driver for students in Ireland, but not in Finland. Also, this might reflect higher levels of economic inequality, poverty and more severe impact of austerity measures (at least so far) in the jurisdictions on the island of Ireland as compared to Finland. In addition, results might reflect that gaining admission to social work programmes in Finland is very difficult, with only some 10 per cent of the (best) applicants being enrolled. Since school success correlates with parents' socio-economic status (Kestilä et al., 2019), it seems fair to assume that the differences in personal experience-related study motivations reflect a middle-class background of majority of Finnish social work students, thus differing compared to the students in the Irish jurisdictions. This is, however, an assumption we have not explicitly measured in the current study. Further, we also find some within-group differences, mainly in Finland. Overall, the different background variables are, however, not of any major importance for students' views.

Some twenty years ago, [Hackett et al. \(2003\)](#) concluded in their comparative study of student motivations for choosing to study social work that there was little research comparing social work students in different European contexts. Up until today, that situation does not seem to have changed in any decisive way; also, our comparative study can only hope to contribute with some fairly general observations on the matter. At the same time, new challenges, many of which are of an international nature, seem to have only increased the need for comparative studies on social work students' motivations, perceptions and values and their development.

Limitations and strengths

The limitation of this article relates to the comparative contexts for students, whose geopolitical and socio-economic circumstances are both varied and complex, and comparisons are influenced by extraneous variables, outside of the measurements applied. However, the strength of this article tends to outweigh the limitation, as this is a beginning opportunity to compare and begin a wider discussion about the alignment of core social work values and principles and how these align with those who are attracted to work in this career. This will be an increasingly important international discussion for the profession in the decades ahead.

Conclusion

This article is an attempt at comparing social work students'—in different comparative settings—views on social justice, a central mission of their future profession, as measured by their motivations to study social work and their understandings of poverty. As a relatively uncharted topic, this work could be scaled up and replicated across other countries, to compare the same type of factors in a range of geopolitical contexts and test our results more broadly. Our findings point at similarities, rather than decisive differences, in students' views between clearly different social contexts and (socio-)political systems. Thus, there seems to be an intrinsic drive for social justice and integrity with the espoused values of the social work profession amongst social work students. As we have argued elsewhere ([McCartan et al., 2022](#)), better insights into social work students' backgrounds, motivations and values can provide educators with important knowledge for developing social work programmes and this article provides the potential for further international comparisons about these important areas.

Funding

This research project is not funded. Funding for assistance with analysis was provided by Ulster University, through seed funding from the Department of Health Northern Ireland.

Conflict of interest statement. None declared.

References

- Adler, M. (2008) *The Justice Implications of 'Activation Policies' in the UK*, Göteborg, Centre for European Research, University of Gothenburg.
- Alestalo, M. and Kuhnle, S. (1986) 'The Scandinavian route: Economic, social, and political developments in Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden', *International Journal of Sociology*, **16**(3–4), pp. 1–38.
- Anttonen, A. and Sipilä, J. (1996) 'European social care services: Is it possible to identify models?', *Journal of European Social Policy*, **6**(2), pp. 87–100.
- Austin, M. J. (2013) *Social Justice and Social Work: Rediscovering a Core Value of the Profession*, California, USA, SAGE Publications.
- Blomberg, H. and Kroll, C. (2017) 'Welfare Policy Support [Hyvinvointipolitiikan Kannatus]', in Kananen, J. (ed.), *Riding the Competition State [Kilpailuvalltion Kyydissä]*, Helsinki, Gaudeamus.
- Blomberg, H., Kroll, C., Kallio, J. and Erola, J. (2013) 'Social workers' perceptions of the causes of poverty in the Nordic countries', *Journal of European Social Policy*, **23**(1), pp. 68–82.
- Bradley, C., Maschi, T., O'Brien, H., Morgen, K. and Ward, K. (2012) 'Faithful but different: Clinical social workers speak out about career motivation and professional values', *Journal of Social Work Education*, **48**(3), pp. 459–77.
- British Association of Social Workers (2021) *The Code of Ethics for Social Work*. Available online at: <https://www.basw.co.uk/about-basw/code-ethics> (accessed May 22, 2023).
- Byrne, N. (2019) 'Social work students' professional and personal exposure to social work: An Australian experience', *European Journal of Social Work*, **22**(4), pp. 702–11.
- Clark, S. (2007) 'Social work students' perceptions of poverty', *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, **16**(1–2), pp. 149–66.
- Cozzarelli, C., Wilkinson, A. V. and Tagler, M. J. (2001) 'Attitudes toward the poor and attributions for poverty', *Journal of Social Issues*, **57**(2), pp. 207–27.
- Delavega, E., Kindle, P. A., Peterson, S. and Schwartz, C. (2017) 'The blame index: Exploring the change in social work students' perceptions of poverty', *Journal of Social Work Education*, **53**(4), pp. 664–75.
- Department of Health (2017) *The Purpose of Social Work: Improving and Safeguarding Social Wellbeing*. Available online at: <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/health/swswb.PDF> (accessed January 30, 2022).
- Department of Health (2018) *Anti-poverty Practice Framework for Social Work in Northern Ireland*. Available online at: <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/health/Povertyframework.pdf> (accessed May 22, 2023).

- Esping-Andersen, G. (1990) *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*, Princeton, Princeton University Press.
- Esping-Andersen, G. (1999) *Social Foundations of Postindustrial Economies*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Feather, N. T. (1974) 'Explanations of poverty in Australian and American samples: The person, society, or fate?', *Australian Journal of Psychology*, **26**(3), pp. 199–216.
- Ferragina, E. and Seeleib-Kaiser, M. (2011) 'Thematic review: Welfare regime debate: Past, present, futures?' *Policy & Politics*, **39**(4), pp. 583–611.
- Fitzpatrick, C. and O'Sullivan, C. (2021) 'Comparing social security provision North and South of Ireland: past developments and future challenges', *Irish Studies in International Affairs*, **32**(2), pp. 283–313.
- Furness, S. (2007) 'An enquiry into students' motivations to train as social workers in England', *Journal of Social Work*, **7**(2), pp. 239–53.
- Hackett, S., Kuronen, M., Matthies, A.-L. and Kresal, B. (2003) 'The motivation, professional development and identity of social work students in four European countries', *European Journal of Social Work*, **6**(2), pp. 163–78.
- Heenan, D. and Birrell, D. (2018) *The Integration of Health and Social Care in the UK: Policy and Practice*. UK, Macmillan Education.
- International Federation of Social Workers (2014) *Global Definition of Social Work*. Available online at: <https://www.ifsw.org/what-is-social-work/global-definition-of-social-work/> (accessed May 22, 2023).
- Juliusdottir, S. (2003) 'Common social work education standards in the Nordic countries—opening an issue', *Social Work & Society*, **1**(1), pp. 78–93.
- Kallio, J. and Niemelä, M. (2014) 'Who blames the poor? Multilevel evidence of support for and determinants of individualistic explanation of poverty in Europe', *European Societies*, **16**(1), pp. 112–35.
- Kananen, J. (2016) *The Nordic Welfare State in Three Eras: From Emancipation to Discipline*, New York, Routledge.
- Kestilä, L., Karvonen, S., Parikka, S., Seppänen, J., Haapakorva, P. and Sutela, E. (2019) 'Nuorten Hyvinvoinnin Erot [Differences in Youth Well-Being]', in Kestilä, L. and Karvonen, S. (eds), *Suomalaisten Hyvinvointi 2018 [the Welfare of Finns 2018]*, Helsinki, Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare.
- Kus, B. and Fan, W. (2015) 'Income inequality, credit and public support for redistribution', *Intereconomics*, **50**(4), pp. 198–205.
- Lähteinen, S., Raitakari, S., Hänninen, K., Kaittä, A., Kekoni, T., Krok, S. and Skaffari, P. (2017) *Social Work Education in Finland: Courses for Competency*, Finnish National University Network for Social Work. Available online at: <https://www.sosnet.fi/loader.aspx?id=43aacd5d-7a96-44b7-8dcb-62dcd7ea6d65> (accessed May 22, 2023).
- Larsen, C. A. (2006) *How Welfare Regimes Influence Judgement of Deservingness and Public Support for Welfare Policy*, Aalborg, Department of Economics, Politics and Public Administration, Aalborg University.
- Leibfried, S. (1992) 'Europe's Could-Be Social State: Social Policy in European Integration after 1992', in Adams, W. (ed), *Singular Europe: Economy and Polity of the European Community after, 1992*, USA, University of Michigan Press, 97–118.
- Lorenz, W. A. (1994) *Social Work in a Changing Europe*, New York, Routledge.

- Lundy, C. (2011) *Social Work, Social Justice & Human Rights: A Structural Approach to Practice*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press.
- Mänttari-Van Der Kuip, M. (2016) 'Moral distress among social workers: The role of insufficient resources', *International Journal of Social Welfare*, **25**(1), pp. 86–97.
- Marsh, J. C. (2005) 'Social justice: Social work's organizing value', *Social Work*, **50**(4), pp. 293–4.
- McCartan, C., Byrne, J., Campbell, J., Coogan, D., Davidson, G., Hayes, D., Kirwan, G., MacDonald, M., McCaughren, S., McFadden, P., McGregor, C., Montgomery, L., Pentaraki, M., Roddy, S., Roulston, A., Shore, C. and Wilson, E. (2022) 'Social work students on the island of Ireland: a cross-sectional survey', *Social Work Education*, **41**(2), pp. 228–47.
- McGann, M., Murphy, M. P. and Whelan, N. (2020) 'Workfare redux? Pandemic unemployment, labour activation and the lessons of post-crisis welfare reform in Ireland', *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, **40**(9/10), pp. 963–78.
- Meeuwisse, A. and Swärd, H. (2006) 'Socialt Arbete i Ett Internationellt Perspektiv', in Meeuwisse, A., Sunesson, S. and Swärd, H. (eds), *Socialt Arbete: en Grundbok*, Stockholm, Sweden, Natur och kultur.
- NASW (2021) *Code of Ethics of the National Association of Social Workers*. Available online at: <https://www.socialworkers.org/About/Ethics/Code-of-Ethics/Code-of-Ethics-English> (accessed January 30, 2022).
- Northern Ireland Social Care Council (2019) *Standards for Contact and Practice for Social Workers*. Available online at: <https://niscc.info/app/uploads/2020/09/standards-of-conduct-and-practice-for-social-workers-2019.pdf> (accessed January 30, 2022).
- Onalu, C. E. and Okoye, U. O. (2021) 'Social Justice and Social Work Curriculum at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nigeria', *Research on Social Work Practice*, **31**(6), pp. 576–83.
- Outinen, S. (2012) 'Labour market activation in Finland in the 1990s: Workfare reforms and labour market flexibilisation', *Local Economy: The Journal of the Local Economy Policy Unit*, **27**(5–6), pp. 629–36.
- Oxfam (2021) The inequality virus. Bringing together a world torn apart by coronavirus through a fair, just and sustainable economy. Summary. Available online at: <https://oxfamilibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/621149/bp-the-in-equality-virus-sum-250121-en.pdf> (accessed April 8, 2023).
- Pinkerton, J. and Campbell, J. (2002) 'Social work and social justice in Northern Ireland: Towards a new occupational space', *British Journal of Social Work*, **32**(6), pp. 723–37.
- Postan-Aizik, D., Shdaimah, C. S. and Strier, R. (2020) 'Positioning social justice: Reclaiming social work's organising value', *The British Journal of Social Work*, **50**(6), pp. 1652–68.
- Puhakka, A., Rautopuro, J. and Tuominen, V. (2010) 'Employability and Finnish university graduates', *European Educational Research Journal*, **9**(1), pp. 45–55.
- Sellers, S. and Hunter, A. (2005) 'Private pain, public choices: Influence of problems in the family of origin on career choices among a cohort of MWS students', *Social Work Education*, **24**(8), pp. 869–81.
- Sewpaul, V. (2014) 'A structural social justice approach to family policy: A critique of the Draft South African Family Policy', *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, **41**(4), pp. 310–23.

- Stevens, M., Moriarty, J., Manthorpe, J., Hussein, S., Sharpe, E., Orme, J., Mcyntyre, G., Cavanagh, K., Green-Lister, P. and Crisp, B. R. (2010) 'Helping others or rewarding career? Investigating student motivations to train as social workers in England', *Journal of Social Work*, **12**(1), pp. 16–36.
- Stoeffler, S. W. and Joseph, R. (2020) 'Poverty and social justice: The building stones of social work identity', *Journal of Poverty*, **24**(4), pp. 284–99.
- Talentia Union of Professional Social Workers (2019) *Work, Values and Ethics*. Available online at: <https://talentia.e-julkaisu.com/2019/ethical-guidelines/#page=1> (accessed September 30, 2022).
- Valvira (2017) *Professional Practice Rights for Social Welfare Professionals*. Available online at: http://www.valvira.fi/web/en/social_welfare/professional-practice-rights-for-social-welfare-professionals (accessed September 30, 2022).
- Van Oorschot, W. and Halman, L. (2000) 'Blame or fate, individual or social? An international comparison of popular explanations of poverty', *European Societies*, **2**(1), pp. 1–28.
- Watts, L. and Hodgson, D. (2019) *Social Justice Theory and Practice for Social Work*, Berlin, Springer.
- Wilson, G. and Kirwan, G. (2007) 'Mental health social work in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland: Challenges and opportunities for developing practice', *European Journal of Social Work*, **10**(2), pp. 175–91.

© The Author(s) 2024. Published by Oxford University Press on behalf of The British Association of Social Workers.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. For commercial re-use, please contact journals.permissions@oup.com

British Journal of Social Work, 2024, 54, 1236–1255

<https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcad270>

Original article