A generalist approach to forensic social work : a qualitative analysis

A generalist approach to forensic social work: a qualitative analysis.

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Abstract

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

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

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

Keywords: Collaboration, Criminal justice, Social work practice, Justice, Qualitative Research

Introduction

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

In the literature, generalist social work practice is often understood as social workers focusing on all of the problems and needs of their target group (Blom, 2004, p. 27). In contrast to specialists, who only focus on one specific problem area, such as housing or drug addiction, generalists adopt a holistic view and pay attention to all aspects of the lives or life domains of

their clients. Different authors agree that generalist practice is indispensable when social work is confronted with the needs of very complex target groups characterized by 'wicked problems' (Rittel and Webber, 1973; Ferlie et al., 2011; Blom, 2004; Raeymaeckers, 2016). Generalist social work requires a broad spectrum of knowledge and skills and is capable of finding solutions that touch upon a number of societal spheres (Blom, 2004, p 27). However, recent studies focusing on specialist and generalist social work agree that complex target groups struggling with different problems in a variety of life domains will benefit when social work makes a connection between a generalist approach and profound specialist knowledge (Ellem et al., 2012; Raeymaeckers, 2016). We therefore agree with Blom (2004), who concludes that it is difficult to provide an answer to the question of whether generalist practice is better than specialist practice or vice versa. He argues that both types of social work are crucial for helping vulnerable target groups suffering from complex problems. For these clients, a balance between the need for a generalist perspective and the need for highly specialized competence is necessary (Blom, 2004). Different authors emphasize the important role of generalist social workers in a network of specialist service providers. Earlier work, for example, shows that generalists are able to facilitate the interaction among specialists and their clients by adopting a mediating and brokering role (Raeymaeckers, 2016).

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

social workers. The article then proceeds with the methodology and the results of our research.

Forensic Social Work

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

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

Another approach to social work involving offenders can be found in the description of 'Criminal justice social work' (McNeill, Bracken & Clarke, 2010). These authors state that CJSW '*is practised by people who work for "correctional services", "offender management services" or "probation departments"*' (p. 438). Under this approach, social work with people involved in the justice system is narrowed down to social work within a compulsory framework of criminal justice interventions. The articles on this field of practice frequently focus on the double role of practitioners within this field (Brennan et al., 1986). This double role concerns the tension between control and emancipation. On the one hand, forensic social workers want to meet their clients' welfare needs or their need for treatment. On the other hand, these social workers exercise a control function that involves the protection of society and an obligation to limit the risk of new offences (Brennan et al., 1986; Roberts and Brownell, 1999; Ward, 2012). These social workers are therefore expected to develop a relationship of trust with their client, while at the same time having a control function that requires them to report back to courts of law or the justice department about their client's life (Whitmer, 1983; Brennan et al., 1986; Stutterheim & Weymers, 1999; Barker & Branson, 2000; Halliday et al., 2009; Munson, 2011).

The combination of these two roles can be considered as an important challenge for social work (Brennan et al., 1986). FSW is considered a specialization within the wider field of social work precisely because it involves such a complex task within this professional sphere (Green, Thorpe & Traupmann, 2005).

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

FSW is also defined as '*policies, practices, and social work roles with juvenile and adult offenders and victims of crimes'* (Roberts & Brownell, 1999, p. 360; Brownell & Roberts, 2002, p. 3; Wormer et al., 2008, p. 316). These authors stress that the FSW target group faces a variety of problems. Their situations are not only characterized by legal problems, but may also include a low level of education, addiction, financial struggles, relationship problems, etc. They are frequently in a vulnerable position in society and are faced with a combination of social problems in various areas of life, also known as 'wicked problems' (Rittel & Webber, 1973; Ferlie et al., 2011). This suggests that social workers in a wide range of sectors are confronted with (former) prisoners (Roberts & Brownell, 1999, p. 360; Brownell & Roberts, 2002, p. 3; Wormer et al., 2008; Maschi et al., 2009); for instance, social workers in homelessness services, substance abuse programmes, training and education programmes, and so on. Despite the interpretation of FSW as a type of specialist practice within the wider sphere of social work, several sectors in social work are confronted with the welfare needs of (former) prisoners and their families. Consequently, forensic social work is not limited to one sector but extends to a much wider sphere. A broader FSW approach is of interest because such an interpretation would not restrict FSW to one sector, method or target group (offender, victim, problem), which increases the risk of fragmentation.

Starting from this perspective, we would like to highlight Maschi's approach to FSW (2009). Maschi coined the term '*collaborative forensic social work',* which is defined as '*an integrative approach (i.e., generalist, specialised, and collaborative) to social work practice with diverse*

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

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

Collaboration between specialist and generalist practice

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

roles generalist social workers fulfil within this particular field of practice. Thus, in this part of this article, we will refer to previously conducted research on the collaboration between generalist and specialist social work.

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

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

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

In addition to the roles of broker, mediator and key figure, another important role arises in the literature concerning the treatment and care of offenders. This target group often has difficulties accessing specialized care (Solomon & Draine, 1995; Roskes et al., 1999). As a consequence, social workers assume the role of *advocate* for this target group while trying to establish change (Severson, 1994; Agllias, 2004; Sheenan, 2012; Dominelli, 2009). If '*a social worker educates the society and policy-makers about implications of policy and funding in the*

lives of their clients, the social worker acts as an advocate' (Sun, 2004). Because of the nature of their needs and problems, this target group needs social workers who advocate for improved access to services (Roberts & Brownell, 1999; Reamer, 2004).

Method

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

The case of Brussels

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

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

Data collection

The main source of data used in this research was a series of qualitative interviews. We interviewed social workers from seven forensic social work organization in Brussels. The

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

We began our interviews by collecting general information about the respondent and their organization (seniority, mission, history of the service and services offered). Next, the questionnaire included questions about their collaboration with other organizations to address their clients' needs. The collaboration was queried at three levels: (1) with other generalist organizations, (2) with specialized organizations offering services inside the prison, and (3) with specialized organizations outside the prison. We also questioned the social workers about the difficulties they experience with collaboration. All interviews were recorded. All the participants in the study were informed that their participation was voluntary and that their anonymity would be guaranteed in the presentation of the results.

Analysis of the interviews

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

Results

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

Generalist approach

First, all respondents emphasize the important role of generalist social work in providing support to the target group of offenders. Most of our respondents refer to the complex problems with which the target group of offenders is confronted. More specifically, they state that offenders struggle with a variety of different problems in several areas of life.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The role of the generalist

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

> *'I met the account manager of the health insurance fund to explain the situation and the context in the hope of achieving something. Many of our clients are not that good at administration. For example, they (the clients) will send back paperwork, but don't always provide the bigger picture. I still find that if I provide some additional explanation and request a phone number and call back a second time, that things will start moving'* (R5).

Our respondents emphasize that collaboration with specialist organizations is made difficult when clients are unable to explain their situation. Some are not able to provide the information the social worker of the specialist organization requires before they can provide the necessary services. In addition, our respondents indicate that the problems of the target group of offenders are frequently reduced to the crimes they committed. As a result, their actual request for assistance to meet their complex situation is often overlooked and emphasis is placed on

the client as an offender rather than as an individual requiring support and assistance. This finding is what Warner (2007) describes as a *narrowing of perspectives*. Our respondents state that, when this happens, they often act as a broker when explaining the broader life context and needs of the client to the social worker of the specialist organizations. By providing more contextual information, the social worker attempts to neutralize the prejudice the clients face. Respondents emphasize that they only share information about their client's context after the client gives them the green light. In addition, the respondents stress that they encourage their clients to approach other organizations themselves. In practice, however, many clients seem to experience difficulties in doing so.

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

A second role is that of the **mediator** (Raeymaeckers, 2016). A generalist social worker adopts this role when a conflict arises between a social worker affiliated with a specialist service organization and the client. The generalist acts as a mediator to create an understanding between the two parties and prevents the conflict from escalating even further. The following quotation about a conflict between a client and a social housing company sheds some light on this role:

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

Unlike the previous role, the mediator is not limited to only explaining the request for assistance. When taking on the role of mediator, there is always a conflict involved. The generalist social worker attempts to translate and synthesize the point of view of each of the parties involved. The expectations and the options of the various parties are clarified in such a way that a solution to the conflict can be found. By doing so, these social workers try to

prevent further escalation. In the example above, the objective was to avoid an escalation that would result in the client's eviction. By mediating between the client and the other organization, the social worker prevents the client from ending up in an even worse situation.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In other words, the generalist forensic social workers address issues and problems that are often considered as the responsibility of other specialized organizations. An important example that is mentioned in many interviews concerns a client that is confronted with a waiting list when applying for support from a mental health organization. In this case, some of our respondents state that they tend to see the client on a regular basis to ensure the client's wellbeing. The generalist social worker addresses the needs of the client while waiting for that

client to obtain access to the specific services of a specialist organization. In this role, the generalist prevents clients from falling "*between the cracks of the system*".

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

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

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

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

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

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

Limitations

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

provide more scientific knowledge on the importance of generalist social work, further work must be conducted including the client's perspective.

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

Conclusion

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

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

Another finding of our study is that social workers want to invest in advocacy to change organizational policies that prevent clients from gaining access to necessary services. When adopting this role, generalist social workers connect the micro level of their clients with the meso level of the specialist service organizations and the macro policy level while trying to make sure that social work organizations take the complex needs of offenders into account.

Our results confirm earlier studies that stated that advocacy is an important role of forensic social workers (Severson, 1994; Agllias, 2004; Green, Thorpe & Traupmann, 2005; Wormer et al., 2008; Sheenan, 2012; Reamer, 2004; Garrett, 2016). Our respondents advocate when their individual clients experience problems when trying to gain access to the necessary specialist services. Because human rights and social justice are considered as crucial values for social work, realizing the rights of incarcerated people should be high on the social work agenda (Maschi & Killian, 2009; Fenton, 2013; Cummins, 2017; Garrett, 2016). Although it is tempting to focus on crime and the risk of re-offending, addressing welfare and social problems should always be a key focus of social workers who work with offenders. Therefore, we emphasize that advocacy is not only necessary at the case level but that social work must also adopt this role at the systemic level when trying to change policies at different levels for the entire target group of prisoners (Weiss-Gal & Gal, 2009).

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

Research Ethics:

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

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