HELPING PROFESSIONS FOR SOCIAL PROGRESS: PERSPECTIVES OF THE GRADUATE STUDENTS

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Abstract. *The paper aims to explore how future practitioners in helping professions grasp the wider societal problems and represent their professional practice in terms of social progress. The inquiry illustrates the perspectives of students by triangulation between their understanding of main societal issues in Latvia in the context of national planning documents (NPDs), social capital (SC), and expectations about their future work. Data of 34 first-year graduate students were collected using the open questionnaire and analyzed employing inductive and deductive thematic analysis. The largest group of societal issues contained the socio-psychological problems followed by economic challenges. Only half of the answers concerning SC were in tune with the theoretical conceptualization of this term. The students' views on societal issues and SC did not align well with the NPDs. The mentioned socio-psychological problems contained the issues of relationship and value aspects of SC, omitting the social networks. One-third of answers in terms of professional expectations were related to the development of SC, other answers focused on the demands of external entities, and the students' features. The views of graduate students can become an important signpost for the development of graduate programs in times of global interest in core competencies for helping professions.*
Keywords: *graduate students, helping professions, national planning documents, professional practice, social capital, social problems, thematic analysis.*

Introduction

The study describes how the graduate students represent their future professional practice in helping professions in a wider context of social progress and advancement. Triangulation between the students' understanding of main societal issues in Latvia in the framework of national planning documents (NPDs), social capital (SC), and students' expectations about their future job will provide a clearer view on the research topic. Thus, the theoretical background of the study connects the graduate students' interpretation of main societal issues in the country with the content of current NPDs and theoretical concept of SC (as the determinants and prerequisites of social progress and SD), while linking with

the students' expectations for their future practice in helping professions. Figure 1 illustrates the relationships between the main conceptual categories of the study, including the NPDs and SC as both current and future-oriented prerequisites of social advancement and sustainable development (SD) of the society. It should be mentioned that these, of course, are not the only determinants of social progress. A short description of these conceptual categories will be provided below the Figure 1.
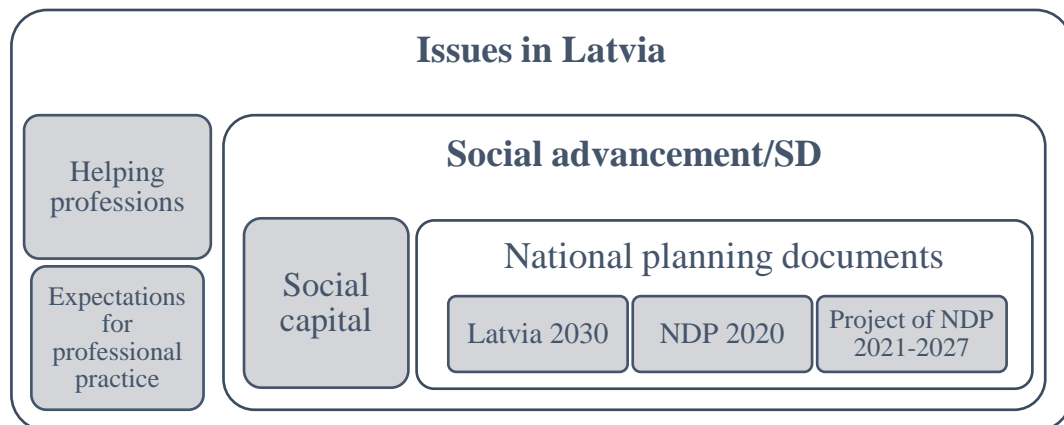

*Figure 1 **Main Conceptual Categories of the Study***

Helping professions and professional practice

Helping professions represent the career for those who strive to help others live better, providing health and educational services to individuals and groups. People in this type of occupation nurture the growth of or address the problems of a person's physical, psychological, intellectual, emotional, or spiritual well-being. Helping professions include, for example, social work, psychology, counseling, and public health (APA, 2020). Professionals in these occupations may deliver patient care, provide help in making the community safer, or deliver programs to protect and rehabilitate vulnerable populations. Helping professions could also be defined as those providing human and social services (Miller & Considine, 2009). Addressing the practice of the helping professions in the context of social progress, it seems that, in the past, social development was mainly oriented toward social equalization, while today it is aimed mostly to promote individual idiosyncrasy. However, individual autonomy is based on a person's relational nature, according to one's history and characteristics. Also, it should be stressed that human dignity is the core value to activate each person's fulfillment, thus promoting a better society (Ricou, Cordeiro, Franco, & Lobo, 2014).

Social capital for social advancement

The SC is a concept, under which the social structure, its constituent elements, the factors affecting these elements, and the results of this interaction, both at the individual and society level, are examined (Šuriņa & Mārtinsone, 2020). The concept is rooted in sociology, but it is often studied in other scientific disciplines and interdisciplinary research (Claridge, 2018). Our study will focus on the following theoretical concept of three dimensional SC: Structural SC relates to the social structure and designates the roles, rules, precedents, behaviors, social networks, institutions, Cognitive SC emphasizes the shared understandings and contains language, codes, narratives, values, attitudes, and beliefs, while Relational SC features the nature and quality of relationships reflected by trust and trustworthiness, norms and sanctions, obligations and expectations, identity and identification (Claridge, 2018; Lin, 2001; Turner, 2011).

SC plays an important role in the social production of health in general (Song, Son, & Lin, 2010) and, specifically, mental health (McKenzie, Whitley, & Weich, 2002). SC was found to be positively associated with life satisfaction, self-reported health net of social support and personal capital (Song & Lin, 2009) and negatively related to anomie (Acock & Hurlbert,1993), the incidence of common mental disorders (Webber & Huxley, 2007), and psychological distress. All in all, SC has proved to be one of the "most robust correlates of subjective well-being" (Helliwell & Putnam, 2004, p.1437).

Despite the strong development of interpersonal informal networking, similarly, like other European post-communist countries (Heineck & Sussmuth, 2010), Latvia features low levels of SC (Sechi & Šķilters, 2018). The level of trust and cooperation attitude among Latvian people is considerably lower than the EU average (EUI, 2020), and the engagement in socially conscious activities is low as well. The generalized trust showed a sharp decrease after the 2008-09 crisis. Also, intra-community gaps like generational, ethnic gaps are evident in society. The studies show a problematic relationship between integration and linkage (Woolcock, 1998): trust and goodwill limited to the family members, friends, and close acquaintances, insufficient exploitation of potential civic linkages, and the missing link between community and institutions (Laboratory of Analytic and Strategic Studies, 2007; Zobena, 2007).

National planning documents for social advancement

Although, the national planning documents (NPDs) in Latvia can be described as long, medium, and short term documents, we will analyze only the main features and principles of the highest national-level development planning

documents according to the field of research. The main long term document in this context (at the moment the data were collected) was the Sustainable Development Strategy of Latvia until 2030 (Latvia 2030) outlining seven priorities for national development. The next important medium-term documents were the National Development Plan of Latvia for 2014-2020 (NDP 2020) with its focus on economic development and human securitability and the project of the National Development Plan of Latvia 2021-2027 (currently NDP 2027) featuring the framework or context, axioms, and aims of national development.

Latvia 2030 is hierarchically the highest national-level, long-term planning document, outlining the following development priorities: 1) development of cultural space, 2) investment in human capital, 2) change of paradigm in education, 3) innovative and eco-efficient economy, 4) nature as a future capital, 5) perspective of spatial development, 6) innovative government, and 7) participation of the society. In its turn, NDP 2020 set the most important medium-term objectives, priorities, and performance indicators, areas of action, outcomes, and responsible institutions. The guiding principle for NDP 2020 was "economic breakthrough" in coordination with three priorities, namely, the growth of the national economy, human securitability (a form of resilience), and growth for regions. The NDP 2027 project envisaged the framework determined by the crisis of trust/polarization, population aging, migration and urbanization, the fourth industrial revolution, climate change, and integration of the economy in global value chains. The project was based on the axioms like responsible fiscal policy/cyclicality, productivity – key toward competitiveness, innovation, digital economics, SD, reducing inequality/equal opportunities, and social trust. The NDP 2027 project was aimed toward stable growth and an increase in quality of life for all. This included increased birth rate and survival, related to a healthy lifestyle, health care, and social inclusion as well as development of statehood and sense of belonging to the country (security, justice, belonging, cohesion, participation).

The NPDs can be analyzed from different points of view, one of such perspectives would be the exploration of possibilities for the real-life implementation of these documents, related to the quality of communication and dissemination of the main ideas to the wider society (Kruks, 2021). In this paper, we will describe the consistency between the perspective on societal issues by the future practitioners and NPDs.

According to the theoretical framework, the study aimed to explore how the future practitioners in helping professions grasp the wider social issues and represent their profession in terms of social progress. Following research questions were set for this study, namely:

1) What are the main issues of Latvia from the perspective of graduate students in helping professions?

2)   How the mentioned issues coincide with the current NPDs (for Latvia)?
3)   What is the SC from the perspective of graduate students in helping professions?
4)   Do the graduate students in helping professions see the issues of SC among the main issues of Latvia?
5)   Do/how the graduate students in helping professions include the development of SC in their professional mission and expectations for their practice?

Methodology

Research design. In the study, the qualitative exploration embedded in a multidisciplinary context provides insight into the perspectives of graduate students in helping professions by triangulation between their understanding of main societal issues in Latvia, SC, NPDs, and expectations about their professional practice.

Sample. Thirty-four first-year graduate students (32 women and 2 men) participated in the study conducted at a large university in Latvia. The age of participants, representing different helping professions, ranged from 23 to 50 years (M=35, SD=8.03). Some students did not provide the answers to all questions, thus the sample size for various research questions differs.

Data collection. The open questionnaire for this study was created within a framework of the National Research Program "Challenges and solutions for Latvia's state and society in an international context (INTERFRAME-LV)". The questionnaire consisted of socio-demographic (identifying age, gender, education) and the main part of the questionnaire enclosing four open questions asking to 1) name the three main issues of Latvia, 2) describe the resources of Latvia, 3) explain 12 concepts related to the research topic (e.g., psychological help, SC, knowledge society) and 4) outline the expectations regarding the perfect professional practice. The questionnaire was administered in paper format and it took about 25 minutes to fill it out. Appropriate principles of research ethics regarding the administration of questionnaires were considered during the study. For the given study, only the data obtained from the first question (regarding the main issues of Latvia), description of SC, and expectations regarding the professional practice were included in the analysis.

Data analysis. The thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006) in combination with the quantification of results (Howitt, 2011) was used for this study. Because of the nature of data and research questions, the data analysis features two interrelated trends: inductive and deductive trend. The inductive approach involved the coding and theme development directed by the content of the data,

while the deductive approach envisaged the coding and theme development directed by existing concepts or ideas on SC. The inductive trend was applied to the RQ1, 4, and 5, in terms of the main issues of Latvia, issues of SC among the main issues of Latvia, and inclusion of the development of SC of their clients in the expectations of the professional practice of students. The deductive trend was used to compare the correspondence of the data from RQ2 and 3 to the above mentioned theoretical background (on SC and NPDs).

Following the guidelines of the thematic analysis, also the quantification of themes (percentage) was used to establish the frequency of answers aligning with specific theme/subtheme because of 1) specific nature of data (mostly short sentences/phrases), 2) orientation of RQ 2 and 3, and 3) to enhance the scientific rigor of the study. Data analysis followed three chronological phases (Bardin, 2011): pre-analysis, an examination of the material, data processing, and interpretation of results. The thematic analysis was performed and data were coded by two researchers with experience in qualitative data analysis and expertise in a research topic.

Findings

Main issues of Latvia (N=32)

The largest group of current issues in Latvia depicts the social psychological problems (91.2%) (e.g., intolerance, lack of responsibility, the role of victim, short term thinking, lack of trust in social institutions/between different layers of society, lack of empathy, aims, identity, etc.), followed by economic problems (67.6%) (e.g. low salaries, unemployment, etc.). At a much smaller rate, the students named the health (23.5%), educational (23.5%), political (23.5%) issues as well as demography (20.6%), behavioral (17.6%) issues, and social inequality (17.6%). Just a couple of students mentioned the issues with solidarity, inclusion, language, and ecology.

The social capital (N=28)

Only the half of answers were in tune with the above-mentioned theoretical conceptualization of SC: the largest group of answers reflected social networks/relationships (35.7%), the smaller group described the norms, values, and attitudes (25%), while the smallest group contained descriptions of common social resources (10.7%). Another half of answers were mistakenly related to other types of capital (financial capital – 28.6%, human capital – 17.9%) or irrelevant matters.

Alignment of issues with national documents

The students' views on the main issues did not align well with the NPDs in general, only about 15% of answers spoke to the social development in line with the national perspective and plans for the future. Table 1 pictures the qualitative view on the alignment of students' answers with the national documents.

*Table 1 **Alignment of Students' Answers with the NPDs: Qualitative View***

National document	Development priorities in the document	Quotes of students' answers in terms of issues
Latvia 2030	Change of paradigm in education Social participation	Elementary education is outdated Role of victim, social indifference, aimlessness, lack of empathy, selfishness
NDP 2020	Growth of national economy Growth of regions Human securitability	Tax system, pensions, weak middle class, decline in rural regions Imbalance of regional development Unawareness of own rights
Project of NDP 2021-2027	Migration and urbanization Reducing inequality/equal opportunities Social trust Social inclusion Health care, belonging, cohesion, participation	Migration, demographic problems, lack of labour force Social and economic inequality Lack of trust to social institutions/between the layers of society Exclusion of marginalized groups, people with special needs Accessibility of qualitative health care, alienation, lack of cohesion

Social capital issues among the main issues of Latvia

Among the main issues of Latvia, the largest group of issues directly related to SC was social psychological problems (91.2%), only some answers were indirectly related to SC, for instance, behavior (violence), lack of solidarity, problems with the inclusion of marginalized groups, and social inequality. It appears that among the SC related problems discerned by the students, dominated the issues of identity and relationships as well as the aspects of the values, while the element of social networks was completely missing.

Considering the alignment of social psychological problems, mentioned by students, with the social structure perspective of SC described at the beginning of the paper, the most often mentioned problems were associated with Cognitive SC (22.6%): lack of tolerance, responsibility, values, empathy, indifference toward

other citizens, aggression and hostility, selfishness. The next largest groups were related to Structural SC (6.5%) – lack of sense of belonging, sense of social powerlessness, and Relational SC (6.5%) – a deficit of mutual respect and trust between the layers of society, lack of trust to helping professions, institutions.

Social capital development for psychological practice (N=33)

About one-fourth of all answers (24%) in terms of expectations for the individual professional practice was somehow related to the development of SC. These examples illustrate the students' emphases on the following matters: *to act in the public interest; to reduce social inequality, contribute to a healthy society; help people who can not afford to pay for the service;* w*ork with the community;* c*ontribution to the social cohesion and ability to relieve and manage the processes with negative influence on individual and society.*

Other answers could be divided into two groups: larger one expressed the demands to external entities (e.g., relevant taxes, professional support, motivated clients) and smaller group – related to the students' own professional and personal characteristics (e.g., provision of qualitative practice, constant professional development, enjoyment /love for one's work).

Discussion and Conclusions

The aim of this study to explore the perspectives of future practitioners in helping professions on wider social issues and their profession in terms of social progress was reached. Triangulation between the students' understanding of main societal issues in the context of NPDs, SC, and their expectations about the future job enabled a more focused and detailed view on the perspectives of graduate students. Thus, the main issues of Latvia from the perspective of graduate students in a relevant framework of NPDs and theoretical structure of SC were identified, and the students' readiness to include the development of SC of their clients/patients in their professional mission and expectations for their practice was clarified. Because of the lack of similar studies in Latvia or abroad, the authors will observe the results from a general point of view, comparing the findings related to different research questions.

The causes of specific denomination and ranking of national issues can be possibly related both to the specific nature of the sample (helping professions) and the current economic situation in the country. This situation designates the high level of insecurity, especially related to the job (OECD, 2019), that is exposed also in the answers about the ideal professional practice: the major emphasis is put on relevant economic rewards, not on the mission toward personal or social development.

The situation with SC is a little better as about half of the respondents provided the correct understanding of SC. The majority of correct answers related to the idea of social networks/relationships could be determined by the specific professional knowledge of respondents representing helping professions. The mistake of confusing the SC with human capital probably could be explained by the same factors.

The fact that only a few students have observed the social development in line with a national perspective and plans for the future shows that future professionals are not fully aware of national issues (at least, as conceived by politicians/government) or, possibly, their outlook of life at the moment of data collection did not allow them to grasp the full scope of national problems (e.g. directions toward digitalization, "greening" of society, improvement of governance, SD, etc.). Findings from the recent action research study in Latvia with novice teachers and youth reveal a similar orientation, suggesting that "novice teachers and youngsters tend to feel alienated from the state because they fail to comprehend the process of drafting national planning documents and see no opportunities to participate in strategic planning" (Kravale-Pauliņa & Oļehnoviča, 2015).

It is self-evident, that the issues with SC were mentioned mostly within the group of social psychological problems discerned among the main issues of Latvia. Students prioritized Cognitive SC over Structural and Relational SC, possibly because Cognitive SC is well observable on an individual level (the main level of help).

An interesting contradiction can be noticed between the determination of main national issues and representation of own professional practice in future. While the largest group of national issues relates to the general social psychological issues, giving the second place for the economic issues, turning to the own professional practice, students prioritize the external contingencies (mostly economic rewards) over personal development and social development. This inconsistency asks for future research also in other groups of future professionals – would it be some kind of projection mechanism between the state and individual? The representation of dealing with SC issues in the students' future vision about the professional practice also was not strong and pervasive, however, considering the real economic situation, even one-fourth of answers, related to SC, designates the certain hope for the future society in Latvia.

One of the limitations of this study relates to the rather small sample selected for the research, however, considering the suggestions for qualitative research, especially in terms of the data analysis, the given amount of the research participants, probably, can provide the preliminary insight into the studied topic. Another limitation pertains to the gender disproportion in the sample with the

majority of woman, though, similarly as in education, the helping professions in Latvia is largely represented by women.

All in all, the study suggests that graduate students from the helping professions see the main societal issues in Latvia through their specific professional lenses, besides, they use the same lenses also for the SC that does not always bring the proper understanding of the term. Speaking about their views regarding their future profession, graduate students focus mainly on external rewards. Because only the part of students views their future professional contribution in terms of SC, this designates the avenue for the further development of help providers' understanding and commitment for the SD of individuals and society. The views of students commencing their professional path can become very important signposts for the further development of this professional field in terms of pre-service and in-service programs in times of global interest in core competencies of helping professions.

Acknowledgement

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