

## **Intra-national similarities and differences in social work and their significance for developing European dimensions of research and education**

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**Abstract** The linguistic, historical, social, cultural, economic, political and ideological divisions of Belgium are reflected in social work. Whereas social work has recently received full academic recognition in the Dutch speaking part of Belgium with BA programmes at University Colleges of Applied Sciences ('Hogescholen') and MA programmes at the universities of Ghent, Leuven and Antwerp, in the French speaking part its academic status has only been recognized at BA level and through a Master at University Colleges of Applied Sciences ('Hautes Ecoles') and still mainly depends on 'bordering disciplines' such as sociology and social policy at university-level. However, although scholars in both parts of Belgium are open-minded towards different European versions and traditions of social work, exchanges in social work research, policy, practice and education between Flanders, Brussels, and Wallonia have been rare. Structural factors like the lack of a lingua franca and the erosion of shared policy, practice and funding structures obstructed the sharing of social work notions across Belgium. In our contribution, we draw on research insights emerging from a joint seminar between social work scholars to identify strategies for the development of a social work research agenda and for better utilizing intra-national diversity.

**Key words** social work as an academic discipline, Belgium, historical-genealogical awareness, social work education, (inter)national networking

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## 1 Introduction

In this chapter we reflect on interesting intra-national similarities and differences in social work research, policy, practice and education in Belgium, and their significance for developing Belgian as well as European dimensions of social work research, policy, practice and education. In the context of this volume and its various reflections on the impact of political border issues on social work Belgium can serve as an interesting example of an internal linguistic border leading to quite different approaches to social work and social work education. The discussion is embedded in the vital debate on the recognition of the status of social work as an academic discipline in international circles (see for example Ramsay 2003; Hare 2004; Green 2006; Lorenz 2008). The emphasis on the academic and scientific underpinning of social work has been taking place for decades but strongly re-emerged in Belgium in the slipstream of the development of the global definition of social work by the *International Association of Schools of Social Work* (IASSW) and the *International Federation of Social Workers* (IFSW) (see Sewpaul and Jones 2005; Ornellas et al. 2018), and of developments during which the Bachelor/Master structure as a unified framework for European higher education was introduced and implemented following the Bologna agreements (Lorenz 2008). Whereas social work has been recognized in the Dutch speaking part of Belgium as a specific academic discipline during the last 15 years, which has led to the development of a Bachelor/Master structure in the universities of Ghent, Leuven and Antwerp, social work has not received full recognition on a university academic level in the French speaking part of Belgium. Social work has been consolidated in the French speaking part of Belgium on the Bachelor level, and the French community government preferred in 2013 to create a new professional Master in social work and engineering<sup>7</sup> at the University Colleges of Applied Sciences (cf. *Haute Ecoles*) which were linked to newly recognized (but not financed) “applied” research centres (Laloy 2019). However, on the academic level social work finds expressions in the French speaking part of Belgium only in ‘bordering disciplines’ in sociology, anthropology, social, economic and political sciences. There is no specific social work curriculum, but students can choose different courses related to social work and social policy.

Belgium was created as country with three language communities after the revolution of 1830 which had demanded its independence from the Netherlands. Social work as a recognizable activity originated in the Belgian realm at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as a response to industrialization and urbanization and the strong “pillarization” of society (meaning that the Catholic and Socialist unions, the women’s movement and civil society organisations played an essential role by developing their own approaches to giving assistance according to their respective normative orientation, see Coenen 2013; Hermans and De Bie 2017). The first School for social work was founded in 1920 in Brussels and from the start the social work schools educated three types of social workers: (1) case workers; (2) social workers engaged in adult learning and social action (often employed in various civil society organisations); and (3) social workers committed to addressing relations in the workplace. Social work was then introduced and framed as a profession in 1948, as a consequence of a bill proposed by Maria Baers, one of the leaders of the Catholic women’s movement. From the 1970s onwards, Belgium became a federal state consisting of regions and communities while still of being a constitutional monarchy since 1830. The first two state reforms which were enacted in 1970 and 1980 resulted in the establishment of a complex state structure currently consisting of a nation-wide federal level (responsible for social security, national defence, internal and external

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. In french : *Master en ingénierie et action sociales*

affairs, justice and the largest part of health care), three Communities (a Dutch-, French-, and German-speaking Community based on language differences and with responsibilities for person-related issues such as culture, well-being, social services and education) and three Regions (a Flemish, Brussels-Capital and Walloon region each being responsible for territorial issues such as economic and labour market issues, agriculture, environmental issues, energy, housing, and foreign trade). The country thus has a federal government and a federal parliament consisting of two chambers (the Chamber of Representatives and the Senate), and comprises three Regions and three Communities. Each of them has executive and legislative powers, with the purpose that various groups of people with different cultural backgrounds and languages could live together in harmony<sup>8</sup>. Until today, the federal level is responsible for social security (minus child benefits since the last reform in 2011), health care and justice. These different phases of state reforms also had an important impact on social work. Only limited amounts of services in which social workers operate pertain to the federal or national level. The main public services are the Public Centres for Social Welfare that implement the social assistance law, the social services in general and psychiatric hospitals, and the role of social work in prisons. In addition, specific inter-federal institutions such as the Combat Poverty, Insecurity and Social Exclusion Service<sup>9</sup>, and Unia, the independent public institution that combats discrimination and promotes equal opportunities<sup>10</sup> facilitate the dialogue between the different regions and communities.

Surprisingly, however, although the work of scholars in the Dutch and French speaking communities of Belgium, including Brussels (bilingual), is strongly rooted and positioned in an open-minded orientation towards different European interpretations and influences of social work, we find ourselves in a certain void in terms of the exchange of fruitful insights in social work research, policy, practice and education between Flanders, Brussels, and Wallonia<sup>11</sup>. In this chapter, we therefore first try to frame the causes and complexities of this void. We draw on research insights that emerge from a joint seminar between social work scholars<sup>12</sup> located at universities in Flanders, Brussels and Wallonia and ongoing seminars in the recently renewed IGOA/GIREP network of poverty researchers at the federal level. IGOA/GIREP represents the Interuniversity Group on Research and Poverty, which is a network of poverty researchers recently revived due to stringent social policy rationing in Belgium. The core mission of the network is to promote the reflexive exchange and positioning of researchers in relation to predominant policies and practices. It recognises that approaches to poverty and anti-poverty strategies are not neutral but contested constructs, differing according to the ways in which different actors in societies define them. The network takes into account that the ways in which poverty and anti-poverty policy-making are defined and pursued are also influenced by prevailing welfare state regimes, in which notions of anti-poverty policy-making largely depend on their respective historical as well as contemporary social, political and ideological contexts and motives. This calls upon researchers in the different parts of the country to make sense of poverty and anti-poverty strategies in well-considered and contextualised ways, and to take a critical and reflexive stance in the research projects and approaches with respect to research traditions and (inter-)disciplinary backgrounds of the respective researchers. The network therefore organizes three internal seminars/year, and one public seminar to discuss approaches

<sup>8</sup> See [https://www.belgium.be/en/about\\_belgium/government/](https://www.belgium.be/en/about_belgium/government/)

<sup>9</sup> See <https://www.combatpoverty.be/centre>

<sup>10</sup> See <https://www.unia.be/en>

<sup>11</sup> In order to be complete, we should note that Belgium also has a German speaking community, which represents a little bit less than 1 percent of the population. Most social workers there have completed studies in social work in the French speaking community and a minority in Germany.

<sup>12</sup> The seminar took place in Leuven on the 28th of August 2019.

and positionings in a democratic debate with policy and practice. In the network we discuss contemporary intra-national as well as international similarities, differences and influences emerging in our academic work across Belgium. In this contribution, we try to identify strategies to tackle this lack of mutual production and exchange of knowledge between the linguistically defined communities for the future under three headings: (1) developing a critical historical-genealogical awareness in social work research, policy, practice and education; (2) paying particular attention to the disciplinary identity of social work research and implications for social work education, and (3) (inter)national networking, joint research projects and exchange.

## **2 Framing the Belgian void: linguistic, historical, social, cultural, economic, political and ideological divisions**

We currently realize that there is a relative yet worrisome void in the development of social work research, policy, practice and education across Belgium.

The most obvious element of this void in academia is the current lack of a *lingua franca*. Whereas we all have been educated in reading, speaking and writing French as well as Dutch and German across Belgium during our educational pathways, many social work researchers and practitioners do not master either French, Dutch or German enough and consider these languages as foreign rather than native languages. The limited intra-national exchange in Belgian social work might also be considered a generational issue. What could be called our ‘founding fathers and mothers’ in academia have been reading academic books and works in Dutch, French, and German, collaborated on the federal level in large-scale research projects funded by the federal government and were teaching students on subject matters that we now continue to update and reorient according to new research, policy and practice developments and continue to focus on, in line with our own research interests. During our seminar, we discovered that very influential books for our discipline had been developed recently at both sides of the country by these pioneers, like the book in Dutch ‘40 years of public centers for social welfare and social assistance’ (editors De Wilde, Cantillon, Vandenbroucke and De Bie, 2016), and the book in French ‘100 years of professionalization of social work’ (edited by Artois et al. in 2019). However we were not even aware of the existence of the books on the other side of the country. Given the Anglo-Saxon turn in social work academia in Flanders during the last 20 years as a consequence of the growing pressure to publish in peer-reviewed journals, the reading habits of Flemish researchers has changed. The French speaking social work researchers are mostly in contact with developments in France, Quebec and French-speaking Switzerland. Although we have to deal with the growing importance and dominance of peer-reviewed journals and Anglo-Saxon literature, we consider the writing of books and research reports in Dutch and French (and reading them) as an important activity in academic careers. In addition, the three regions have their own scientific funds. There is still a federal scientific policy, but this is increasingly under pressure since policy makers believe that this is regional instead of national/federal competence. During the last years, some policy makers also express their doubts on ideological grounds, arguing that research on social issues (such as poverty, migration, culture and arts,...) can no longer be considered relevant as it only draws attention to these issues..

Because we are trying to take these influences into account in our current work, as the next generation of researchers we started to communicate across the language barriers most of the time in English. Our hesitance to do so comes from the awareness that we respect Dutch, French and German as native languages in Belgium, yet our preference for English seems to be rooted in the increasing pressure of our academic environments to locate our work in the context of

the international social work research community and to publish articles in high-ranking peer-reviewed journals in English. Nevertheless, in Belgium, journals continue to exist that disseminate national research findings in Dutch and French for a diversity of audiences, such as frontline field workers and (local) social policy makers. Although publications in these journals for professional social work are only in a relative way taken into account by our universities as influential contributions that count in our track records for having an academic career, we continue to make efforts to publish in national journals and books in order to reach the audience for whom our research results should matter primarily.

However, the issue of language is not the only and the main source of complexity. As social work researchers, we are confronted with different historical, social, cultural, economic, ideological and political developments in the different parts of Belgium that deeply influence our academic work and the disciplinary identity of social work. Although the scope of this chapter is too limited to explain all this complexity, during the last decades it is clear that Belgian social policy making has been hampered by extreme differences in ideological, social, cultural, economic and political contexts and orientations. The results of the elections on the federal level in 2014 and 2019, for example, show that citizens in the Dutch speaking part of Belgium vote far more right-wing, liberal and centre-stage Christian-democratic parties who promote Flemish nationalism and even racism, yet citizens in Brussels and the French speaking part vote more left-wing for socialist, green, and moderate-minded liberal and centre-stage Christian-democratic politicians. The complex and long-term negotiations after these elections reflect deeply-rooted ideological differences, for example in approaching principles of social protection, social security and social inequalities related to poverty and migration. As a topical case in point, our group discussed some of the developments in the social and political struggle against poverty and social inequality since our work concentrates on these issues. During the last decade, we witnessed an active political dismantling and disappearance of shared policy and practice frameworks and structures, and pressure on shared funding opportunities for research on the federal as well as community level in this field of social work research. In terms of policy structures, for example, the long-term existence of the Belgian as well as Flemish ‘Yearbook on Poverty Affairs’, which provided a state of the art picture on a yearly basis for the last decades, has been abolished by policy makers and is now funded by civil society organisations.

In this chapter, we therefore try to identify strategies to take a critical and reflexive stance in relation to prevailing policy and practice with respect to different research traditions and backgrounds of the respective researchers. The three identified strategies are interrelated.

### ***2.1 Developing a critical historical-genealogical awareness in social work research, policy, practice and education***

In our discussions, we discovered the significance of raising a critical historical-genealogical awareness of our common history in Belgium in order to reconsider continuities and discontinuities in contemporary ideas in social work research, policy, practice and education (Lorenz 2007; Zamora 2018). As a vital example, we considered that although principles of citizenship and social rights have been institutionalised and led to social security and protection structures uniformly as a continuity across Belgium, the dependency of citizens on the social welfare system is currently in parts framed as a ‘dangerous development’ by various policy makers. This is especially the case in Flanders on account of the centre-right political climate, and shows the discontinuity between, and political path dependency of, Flanders, Brussels and Wallonia. Mainly in Flemish social policy rhetoric, poverty has been scrutinized under the

social and political microscope as a personal problem of people living at the bottom of the social and economic scale while dynamics of inequality and wealth are largely ignored. This results in concerns and measures being focused on the behaviour of the poor- This echoes a binary and pre-welfare state distinction between deserving and undeserving citizens (see Garrett 2018, Jacquet et al. forthcoming). Although the benefit structures mostly remain, an erosion of social protection and social security principles is at stake. For instance, in social assistance as well as in health insurance, more and more activation measures are implemented which stress the individual responsibility of the social beneficiaries and which raise further barriers to access which lead to more exclusion and non-take-up of benefits (Zune, De Mazière & Ugeux, 2017). In addition, there is a growing policy attention at the federal level given to detecting social fraud, which changes the public image from welfare beneficiaries to so-called frauds. Also recently, we notice social work being involved in the production of so-called charity economies in the shadow of the welfare state. These systematically but mainly voluntarily organised distribution initiatives of food and clothing to poor people are expressions of neo-philanthropy in areas of frontline social work practice and challenge the profession to take position to these developments (see Villadsen 2007; Kessl et al. 2019 for European developments; Roets et al. forthcoming for developments in Flanders; Jacquet et al. forthcoming for developments in Wallonia; Malherbe et al. 2019 for developments in Brussels). In times where poverty reduction seems to lose ground regarding the explicit public mandate of professional social workers, public policy tends to give more incentives towards a greater involvement of non-state actors such as civil society, the market, and volunteer and citizen action groups as agents of social justice (Dean 2015; Dermaut et al. 2019) thereby diminishing the social rights of welfare recipients and infringing their social citizenship status.

A historical-genealogical approach is therefore highly important to tease out historical roots as well as contemporary manifestations of recent shifts in the normative value orientation of social policy and social work which comparative approaches highlight most vividly. These comparisons ultimately carry the message that policies and approaches to social phenomena are historically and culturally contingent and therefore never just 'given' but shaped according to political principles and interests. A major milestone in recent history in Belgium was the institutionalisation of the *universal and unconditional right to human dignity* being guaranteed by local centres for social welfare across Belgium (see the OCMW/CPAS-law, art. 1, 1976), and implemented by professionally trained social workers (Hermans and De Bie 2017). The contemporary welfare reforms, which take place under the cover of a so-called transformation and crisis of the welfare state across Europe and Belgium, will be crucial to the extent that they foreshadow the coming conflicts around the role of the state and the visions that must be produced by social policy makers. The modernized assistance systems, since 1976 organized around the key principle of a right to social welfare to realise the human dignity of each person, constitute a key evolution in conceptions of Belgian social policy: instead of reducing poverty, human dignity became the new criterion to decide whether a public intervention by the Public Centre for Social Welfare is needed. At the same time, although a new law was created, there remained a strong link with poverty reduction, especially because of the impact of the economic crisis in the seventies on the increase of poverty. This discourse, partly inherited from civil society mobilizations in the late sixties, will be ambiguous with reference to its relationship with universal protections measures such as social security and macro-economic policies. It will redraw especially the boundaries of social policy by distinguishing the "indirect" policy against poverty - organized around social security, labour market regulation and collective

provision - from a more “direct” one - organized around a guaranteed ‘floor’ of income. Within this framework, it is argued that the post-war ideal of the universal social security will slowly decline in favour of more targeted, individualized, conditional and specific interventions for the “poor”. As the Flemish sociologist Vranken (1998) argued, this shift could become “the cornerstone of a new social policy, residual type”.

In short, historically there was a broad understanding of public social welfare which was complemented by different civil society actions that were also funded by the state. More recent policy developments no longer address poverty as a complex phenomenon that requires both a structural redistribution of resources and of power, and tend to reinforce and reproduce social inequalities and precarity. Even if different and new categories of people and types of poverty are addressed, structural and rights-oriented poverty reduction strategies are losing ground in Belgium and shift into more individualized and charity-based approaches. Gaining an in-depth historical-genealogical understanding of the changing normative value orientation which is at stake in the Belgian welfare state across the communities thus makes us realise even better that we need to continue to commit ourselves to social work’s quest for social justice (see Boone, Roets and Roose 2018; Vandekinderen, Roose, Raeymaeckers and Hermans 2019). This also raises the vital question how we want social workers to be educated in the contemporary time juncture (see Hermans and De Bie 2017). Indeed, to implement the OCMW/CPAS-law in frontline and street-level social work practice, for example, requires processes of professionalization of social workers, which is a central part of our mandate as teachers in social work academia.

## ***2.2 Exchange on the disciplinary identity of social work and implications for social work education***

In the context of social work education in particular, the key question lingers on whether and how social work as an academic discipline relates to the social work profession (Wheeler and Gibbons 1992; Green 2006). Scholars have found that social work risks having a subordinate academic status and an associated poor professional credibility, and therefore needs to be fully incorporated in university curricula to support processes of professionalization (Nash, 2003; Green, 2006). The discussion on the recognition of social work as an academic discipline formed the impulse for many university departments in countries throughout Europe to formulate an explicit point of view about the academic grounding and disciplinary identity of social work (see Sewpaul and Jones 2005; Lorenz 2008). This is also the case in Belgium where the historical emergence of social work education programmes is rife with complexity due to different normative and ideological orientations (Hermans and De Bie 2017). From the beginning, the trade unions, the workers’ organisations and the women’s movement all founded different schools for social work. As such, social work became part of the “pillarisation” of the Belgian society. However, as a reaction against this, the larger cities founded their own schools for social work to reach out more to the lower social classes that did not always find their way to the schools in catholic university cities. This former ideological orientation diminished as a consequence of different rounds of take-overs between organisations managing schools of social work, but is still influential in contemporary times, given the fact that there is still a strong connection between schools and practice organisations. These organisations are still present as partners in research projects, in practice placements of students and in boards of practice organisations that have an advisory function towards the schools.

In all of Belgium, social work finds inspiration on the academic level from ‘bordering disciplines’ in social, economic and political sciences, such as sociology, social policy, and social pedagogy/educational sciences. On the academic level, social work at universities in Flanders is currently established in faculties or departments of social pedagogy and educational sciences (Ghent), sociology and social policy (Leuven and Antwerp) and offers Bachelor and Master degrees. There are also study programmes at University Colleges of Applied Sciences but only at professional Bachelor level. In Brussels and at Wallonian Universities, social work is not recognized as a discipline within academic Masters degrees. Master students with degrees in Sociology, Labour Sciences and Economic and Social Policy<sup>13</sup> at Master level may choose different courses related to social work and with some social policy in their program. A professional Master degree in social work and engineering was implemented in 2013 at different University Colleges of Applied Sciences. In Flanders, Brussels and Wallonia, however, research is separated by the different decrees that regulate the educational system as “fundamental” for universities and “applied” or “practice-based” for university colleges, even if the research practice of scholars in both settings cannot be distinguished neatly between these two orientations. Interestingly, a new generation of scholars at University Colleges of Applied Sciences in both Flanders, Brussels and Wallonia obtained their PhD at universities. This complexity is not to be found only in Belgium but is intensified here due to the institutional border between universities and University Colleges of Applied Sciences. These complicated institutional differences and relationships are the case in Flanders, Brussels and Wallonia, but the pressure for social work researchers to profile and publish in international journals requires time and space that prevents us from embracing cultural differences and engaging in a mutual exchange between the institutions. Moreover, these complexities continue to generate debate about the question whether social work should have and further establish its own academic knowledge base or find its academic grounding in ‘bordering disciplines’ ranging from psychology to education, sociology, economy, and political sciences (Lorenz 2008).

Due to these institutional differences within Belgium, we consider the question how we perceive the disciplinary identity of social work and the implications for social work education as a very relevant one. In that sense, we follow Lorenz (2016) who observes that social work has an explicit *social* agenda as an activity that cannot strive to distance itself from prevailing historical, social, cultural (including linguistic), economic, political and ideological processes and changing welfare state regimes, evolutions and contexts, and from the quest for social justice (Lorenz 2016; Boone et al. 2019). Although the disciplinary identity of social work always remains ambiguous, social work practice is nonetheless crucially influenced by theoretical resources and inspirations (see Healy 2000). During our seminar, we discussed the international and institutional influences in both the Dutch and the French speaking part of Belgium, including Brussels, and the main influences in, and differences between our research and educational programmes. It was clear, for example, that we all adopt a multi-level approach in which critical analyses of history (such as the role of social movements and trade unions), social problems, economy, law, rights-oriented welfare state arrangements, local social policy, organizational and frontline dynamics of discretion are at the heart of the professionalization process of social workers. Our exchange made us discover that we have very different and elementary histories and dynamics in our respective regions, and therefore it remains difficult to fully understand each other across the regions. Yet we also rediscovered more unity in diversity than we expected. The fact that we are all, relatively seen, early career professors and

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<sup>13</sup> The faculties of labour sciences and ‘economic and social policies’ were historically created in relation to the socialist workers movement in Brussels and the Christian workers movement in Louvain-la-neuve/Leuven as a tool to foster science on employment-related issues as well as to strengthen continuous education for workers and trade union representatives at Master level.



researchers enabled us to reflect upon the ‘territories’ of, and lack of exchange between, established professors and research groups across the country, and to openly discuss both the complexities we experience and the capacities we have in relation to our academic environments across Belgium. This reflexive openness and exchange already currently leads to new and joint research commitments across Belgium, and to new energy and solidarity in taking a more differentiated stance in relation to policy and practice, both in the national and international realm.

### ***2.3 (Inter)national networking, joint research projects and exchange***

During the discussions in our joint seminar, we agreed with one another that we need to develop strategies to tackle the above-mentioned lack of exchange and collaboration. In other words, an open-minded search for a common social work research, policy, practice and education agenda requires due attention in Belgium. This calls upon researchers in the different parts of the country to develop strategies for exchange, collaboration and networking in well-considered and contextualised ways.

For us, using English as a *lingua franca* is therefore inevitable as a bare minimum in the current time juncture and might be seen as both a necessary evil as well as an enriching opportunity to revive the exchange of vital ideas and the development of social work across Belgium and across Europe. The identity of social work requires commitment and partnership with social policy makers and practitioners, and therefore it remains crucial to continue exchanges in the language that all the stakeholders feel comfortable with. Using English is, in that sense, a necessary evil and intrinsically leads to new complexities, particularly when there is no ‘native speaker’ among the participants and all bring different associations from their own linguistic background to a commonly used term. However, using different languages, including English, is also extremely relevant in the development of the identity of social work as an academic discipline and as a profession, and in the execution of joint research projects. An example of this is the doctoral research project of Nicolas Jacquet, who is affiliated as a doctoral student to both the University of Liège and Ghent University for a joint PhD on the erosion of social protection principles in Belgium, a project based on the analysis of historical, theoretical and qualitative sources of the lives of citizens in precarious situations and belonging to different language communities. Another example concerns a recent ‘evaluative research project’ that was installed by the federal government and commissioned by the ‘Inter-federal Public Service for the eradication of poverty, social insecurity and social exclusion’. This had existed for more than two decades yet its existence recently came under threat of cancellation by the federal State Secretary of Poverty Affairs. As researchers at Ghent and Liège University, we were joining hands from our different cultural backgrounds in order to deepen the analysis of strengths and weaknesses of the Inter-federal Service from different perspectives, yet we were united in our refusal to contribute to the disappearance of this service. This increased the complexity in dealing with this research project, but created also extra capacities in dealing with the pressure exercised by policy makers.

We are also convinced that international and European networking requires efforts in learning to communicate in other European languages – especially of neighbouring countries like Germany and France - in at least the passive sense. We consider openness for the active as well as passive use of different languages key to our academic work so as to be able to read original articles, books, and research reports that are not translated in English yet can be considered as innovative and major contributions to our field (especially the historical ones!). Getting access to such material from specific social, historical and political contexts would enable us to become aware of our self-referential biases as well as the value of the variety of cultural

traditions and other differences which we could embrace. In our current academic environments, which are dominated by positivist epistemologies of scientific subjects which neglect to pay attention to cultural specificities, these endeavours are often received with scepticism and resistance, and this even from our own colleagues and students who are afraid of meeting the challenges of unfamiliar languages rather than trying to engage with them. This retreat to what appears familiar and avoids risks is also reflected in a reluctance to make wider use of Erasmus exchanges across Europe which are still considered by many students and academics a burden rather than an opportunity for mutual learning. Particularly in social work, European exchanges – just as much as exchanges in a national context between different language regions – provide opportunities for reflecting on the significance of language and other historical, social, cultural, political and ideological differences that can be instrumentalised to further exclusion and therefore need to be confronted constructively. Reaching out across such borders is essential for social work research, policy and, practice developments and education programmes.

Our reflections on the value of intra-national collaboration made us aware also that opportunities are still not being used sufficiently with regard to exchanges with countries that became accessible and joined the EU after 1989. In this regard, learning how to negotiate language differences within one country could be a basis for a better understanding of the limitations and opportunities arising from encounters with completely unknown languages, particularly since this becomes increasingly a practice reality of social workers under the impact of migration. Several of us are therefore committed to networking across Belgium, for example in the Interuniversity Group Research and Poverty (IGOA/GIREP), and simultaneously across Europe in networks such as the International Social Work and Society Academy (see [www.tissa.net](http://www.tissa.net)), the European Social Work Research Association (see [www.eswra.org](http://www.eswra.org)), the French-speaking networks of social work scholars and professionals AIFRIS (see <https://aifris.eu>) and the French-speaking network of university scholars in social work REFUTS (see <http://www.refuts.eu>), the European Sociological Association (see <https://www.europeansociology.org/>), Just listing these examples highlights also the fact that many of those European or international organisations often implicitly foster membership among certain linguistic regions as evidenced by the uneven representation of German- and particularly of French-speaking countries in organisations where it is automatically assumed that the language of communication is English.

### 3. Conclusions

From these reflections we concluded that our intra-national exchange efforts strengthen our commitment to the joint development of social policy and social work practices in Belgium. Our commitment to becoming ‘intra-national polyglots’ instead of turning more and more into monoglots will have benefits in terms of teaching, researching, publishing and ultimately disseminating research findings in Dutch, French, German and English. This will also make our work accessible in more academic formats, geared towards the requirements of the audiences we want to reach. Ultimately, this might also enhance our search for an identity of social work in the European and inter-national realm, an identity that is based both on universally valid scientific insights and on sensitivity to cultural diversity from a perspective of rights and equality. This reflects a more encompassing willingness to embrace a diversity of research traditions and cultures while strengthening our efforts in the academic grounding of social work to consolidate the identity of the social work family of professions.

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