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Wind of change? Social work students' policy engagement and career preferences in Finland

Johanna Marketta Kallio^a, Anne-Mari Jaakola^a, Helena Blomberg^b and Christian Kroll^b

^aSocial Work, Department of Social Research, University of Turku, Turku, Finland; ^bSwedish School of Social Science, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland

ABSTRACT

Although a general mission of social workers is to advance social justice, it has been claimed that many social workers, including those studying to become social workers, have a rather weak commitment to policy engagement (PE). It has been a common assumption that Nordic social workers lack a tradition of PE due to their primary role as public employees in the comprehensive Nordic welfare state. We address these topics by empirically analyzing Finnish social work students' views toward PE. Do Finnish social work students perceive PE as an integral part of the social work profession? Moreover, if so, what ideological, sociodemographic and study-related factors explain their perceptions? Are views toward PE connected to future career preferences among students? Drawing on data from a nationwide survey among Finnish social work students, the results show that the majority of students perceive PE as important in social work. PE is explained by factors such as the respondent's political party preference, previous education and personal experiences of poverty. Students who strongly support PE are less eager to engage in individual case work with clients than other students. In addition, positive views toward PE are connected to students' preferences for working with immigrants and refugees.

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Introduction

The task of social work is often seen as bringing about social change and promoting social justice. Accordingly, in many contexts, it is emphasized that social workers must be actively involved not only in micro-level processes that can change social conditions for certain individuals but also in promoting changes in macro-level processes that affect the well-being and living conditions of different groups or even in society as a whole (Gal & Weiss-Gal, 2013). However, it has also been claimed by various researchers that many social workers, including social work students, seem to have a rather weak commitment to various types of policy engagement (PE) where macro-level change is concerned (Kaufman et al., 2012; Richter, 2018). It has been argued that social workers have become influenced by the

CONTACT Johanna Marketta Kallio  jomkall@utu.fi  Social Work, Department of Social Research, University of Turku, Turku 20014, Finland

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neoliberal agenda and, thus, have ended up working with the consequences of social problems rather than on the causes of problems at the societal level (Howe, 2017). Similar tendencies have been found among students of social work: At least in residual welfare states like the United Kingdom, social work students seem to prefer to work mainly at the micro-level, using therapeutic skills within a casework-based strategy with individuals and families (Lustig-Gants & Weiss-Gal, 2015; Woodcock & Dixon, 2005). However, not much research concerning social workers' commitment to PE has, so far, focused on Nordic societies (Weiss-Gal, 2017).

In the Nordic countries, a common assumption has been that social workers lack a will for PE due to their primary role as public employees within the framework of comprehensive Nordic welfare states. According to this assumption, social workers are primarily executors of the official political goal, which is largely concordant with the general goals of the social work profession. It has been claimed that social workers in the Nordic countries have been remarkably passive and unengaged when it comes to macro-level policy issues. In this vein, Thoren and Salonen (2014, p. 146) conclude that, especially after the 1970s, the comprehensive welfare state and a strong welfare state consensus lessened the need for social workers' policy engagement.

Even if such assumptions could be justified as regards the 'golden era of the Nordic welfare state', later social policy developments might be assumed to have 'changed the setting' in important ways: The long-standing consensus on the social policies making up the welfare state has begun to crack during the last decades. As a result, the welfare systems have become the subject of retrenchment and restructuring measures in all the Nordic countries (Pierson, 2001). These developments might have triggered social workers and social work students to become aware of the need to engage in policy-related issues, promoting social work values more than before. In some Nordic countries, there have also been some signs of new forms of policy activism among social workers (Thoren & Salonen, 2014).

Simultaneously, in Finland, the latest reform (in 2014) of the Law on Social Services 1301/2014 interestingly included the concept of 'structural social work' and made it an explicit task of social workers, to be performed in parallel to the otherwise mainly casework-oriented tasks of this profession within public sector social services. In this law, 'structural social work' means not only social reporting but also ambitions to identify and change shortcomings prevailing within society and social groups, for example, by suggesting revisions to existing policies and legislation (Matthies, 2022). Thus, while perhaps not complying with the most radical views of 'structural social work', the law arguably expects active PE by publicly employed social workers. 'structural social work' should be part of the job description of every publicly employed social worker—including those who perform individual casework with clients.

The law has also resulted in a stronger emphasis on issues related to structural social work and PE in Finnish universities' social work curricula. Still, almost a decade after the reform, it is unclear to what extent Finnish students perceive PE as an important part of social work. Furthermore, it is unclear how integral PE is to their professional role as future social workers and how PE relates to their career preferences and orientations. In Finland, the social work curriculum is designed to educate students to engage in both micro and macro practice. The assumption is that this dual preparation will better prepare students to meet social work's simultaneous commitment to individual well-being, structural change and social action on behalf of vulnerable populations.

Considering the above development, we aim to empirically analyze current Finnish social work students' views toward PE. We ask: **Do Finnish social work students consider PE an important aspect of their professional role? If so, what ideological, sociodemographic and study-related factors seem to explain such views?** Furthermore, we also investigate **how an interest in PE is related to students' career preferences.** This seems a relevant aspect, for instance, since existing international studies often seem to assume that there are specific orientations among students, either toward casework or PE (Segal-Engelchin & Kaufman, 2008).

Social work education in the Finnish context

Social work academia can be assumed to influence social work students not only by providing them with information and knowledge, but also by influencing their ways of thinking on social work missions and visions. As will be discussed below, there are reasons to assume that 'structural' perspectives on social work have been and are on the agenda in Finnish social work education and that it is, indeed, one of the factors that led to the inclusion of tasks of 'structural social work' in the present legislation, as previously described.

In Finland, a national characteristic regarding the development of both social work practice and education has arguably been a close co-development of general social policy and social work, not only at the policy level but also when it comes to the development of the academic subjects of social policy and social work, respectively—albeit this academic relationship has been of varying intensity and character during different historical phases.

When the first social work educations were established in the 1940s, there was an emphasis on judicial-administrative aspects of social work, while the 1950s and 1960s also saw a growing interest in psychological, casework-oriented approaches. In the 1960s, social worker education was also elevated to the university level, becoming a sub-programme of the discipline of social policy. The general leftist turn in society in the 1970s brought a Marxist approach, used as a basis for a general critique of the prevailing social order, which also affected Finnish social work education. Thus, in the 1960s, and 1970s in particular, the task of social work in society was, especially in academia, seen as not only to eliminate the difficulties and problems experienced by citizens but also to influence social reforms and highlight various anomalies to prevent social problems. The idea was to contribute to the transformation of society in the name of equality and justice, together with the 'underserving'. However, these ideas of radical social work did not materialize as such, in social work education or in practice. (Satka, 1994, pp. 326–327; Satka et al., 2003)

In the 1980s, there was an increasing focus on enhancing various general scientific and scholarly aspects of social work education (Juhila, 2006; see also Mutka, 1998): this was realized by making a Master's degree including a sufficient number of courses in social work a requirement for qualifying as a social worker in the public sector, with some exceptions. There also were efforts to develop what was called 'investigative social work', aiming at producing information needed for the development of municipal social services. Social workers, experts in and of the welfare state, were thus expected to convey information as a basis for decision-making and planning. However, the results of these

efforts in terms of their integration into social work practices remained fairly modest (Satka et al., 2003).

The development of social work education in Finland during the 1990s could be characterized as rather contradictory and complex. On the one hand, what was now called ‘social reporting’ –producing information and influencing the strategic work of municipalities—was seen as an important aspect of social work. On the other hand, research within the social sciences in Finland, including in social work, became increasingly fragmented and largely influenced by the so-called ‘linguistic turn’, in which the focus was placed on the importance of speech and language when constructing ‘reality’, as well as on the individual client’s status and position (Satka et al., 2003). Simultaneously, academic social work gained a new status by becoming an independent academic discipline, thus ceasing to be a sub-programme within the discipline of social policy. During this time there was arguably a declining emphasis in social work education on societal structures, social policies and people’s general living conditions, and social workers’ engagement in addressing such structural-level issues.

However, later on, especially during the 2010s, various aspects of policy engagement made a comeback in (academic) social work under the heading of ‘structural social work’, which, as mentioned, has resulted in municipalities being obliged by law to conduct ‘structural’ social work, meant to be an integrated part of the job description of publicly employed social workers who conduct client work (Matthies, 2022). This could mean that micro-level casework should not be separated from addressing related issues at an aggregated macro level but should include knowledge formation based on the client for the benefit of planning, based on work with clients and expert knowledge of various involved parties. This knowledge should serve as a basis for planning, decision-making and developing services. It has also been emphasized that knowledge gathered through structural social work can be used for promoting residents’ participation or for furthering national guidelines and, thus, at least in principle, for promoting national equality in social policy (Liukko et al., 2022). However, as also indicated by this short overview, the actual scope and main contents of ‘structural social work’ as laid down in Finnish legislation remain somewhat vague and will probably be made more concrete through its implementation over a longer period.

One already quite noteworthy impact of the law, however, is the inclusion of various perspectives on issues related to ‘structural social work’ into the curriculum of social work education in Finland, while it is not necessarily given the same meaning as in the law. Thus, the question arises of whether this latest ‘structural turn’ in policy and education might be reflected in current social work students’ thinking on PE.

Policy engagement in social work

Conceptualisations of policy engagement

Social workers’ policy involvement, or engagement, comes in many forms and has been conceptualized in different ways, historically and in various societal contexts. One term used in connection with the academic discussion of PE is ‘policy practice’. Coined (Jansson, 1984) to describe social workers’ role in the social policy arena, this refers to activities undertaken by social workers as an integral part of their professional activity,

focusing on the formulation and implementation of new policies, as well as on existing policies and suggested changes to them (Gal & Weiss-Gal, 2013). The assumption is that the core of the social work profession is to be committed to promoting social justice and creating a more just environment for service users (Cummins et al., 2011). In her meta-analysis, Weiss-Gal (2017) identified four main types of policy practice-related engagement: legislative advocacy (e.g. contacting legislators/public officials), social action (e.g. organising/participating in a social action group), research, analysis and documentation and internal advocacy (e.g. ‘arguing for better policies within the agency’).

Gal and Weiss-Gal (2013) developed the Policy Practice Engagement (PPE) framework to conceptualize and explain policy engagement among social workers. It draws on diverse theoretical sources to shed light on the factors influencing social workers’ involvement in social policy in different policy arenas and national settings. More specifically, it seeks to explain why social workers engage in social policies and how they tend to intervene in the policy process. According to this framework, PE is dependent on the extent to which social workers have access to policy-making institutions to influence the policy process (opportunity) and on the extent to which the employee’s organizational context enables, or even encourages, policy involvement (Gal & Weiss-Gal, 2017, p. 6). Further, professional socialization is seen to affect a social worker’s values, attitudes, professional identity and sense of competence. (Gal & Weiss-Gal, 2015, p. 1090; Lustig-Gants & Weiss-Gal, 2015). Thus, a prerequisite for social workers, PE is seen as a set of policy-related resources: *the motivation, the knowledge required, the commitment, the self-efficacy and the skills* necessary to influence social policy (Gal & Weiss-Gal, 2017, p. 12).

Structural social work as policy engagement

Inspired by the above PPE framework, this paper focuses on various aspects of ‘policy engagement’ among Finnish social work students. We assume that professional socialization begins already within the social work education system where future social workers’ values, attitudes, identity and sense of competence are shaped and remolded. But we deliberately continue to use the more generic term ‘policy engagement’ (PE), rather than, for example, policy practice engagement, since, in a Finnish context, more specifically defined concepts could be difficult to operationalize in a way relevant to a social work student perspective and locally used terminology. As spelled out above, PE is, in the Finnish context, strongly associated with the concept of ‘structural social work’. The Finnish National University Network for Social Work, ‘Sosnet’, defines the central objectives of advanced studies in social work as students acquiring ‘the knowledge and skills needed for conducting structural social work and advocacy work with the aim to pinpoint and dismantle societal practices and legal provisions that create injustice, poverty and disadvantage’ (Lähteinen et al., 2017, p. 12).

Thus, PE is here seen as being intertwined with structural social work. Within academia, ‘structural social work’ is often defined more broadly and radically than in the current Finnish legislation. It is seen as a social work practice that works for social justice through societal transformation while simultaneously addressing individuals’ immediate needs. It corrects modern liberal humanist thinking by broadening the

discussion of ethical concerns beyond a dyadic relationship between social worker and client to wide-ranging political issues. (Matthies, 2022)

Mullaly has defined structural social work in the following way ‘Structural social work is a moral theory. It suggests that the underlying causes for social problems are the differential control of resources and political power inherent in capitalistic societies. The system is viewed as faulty’. (Mullaly, 1997, p. 119). The primary goal of structural social work, according to this view, is, thus, to fundamentally transform oppressive and inequitable structures in society. It contrasts with social work, which focuses only on individuals and places them in a dependent position by making them adjust and adapt to existing structures. To achieve social welfare in the real sense, fundamental changes must be made in the way resources and power are distributed.

Although such views might be part of teaching on structural social work, the Finnish views on structural social work have not been particularly radical. Still, they seem to have included traits of all the types of PE among social workers identified by Weiss-Gal (2017). However, in particular, Finnish social work has aimed to integrate research and documentation into social work practice: Documentation, policy analysis and/or social reporting are, or at least should be, a daily, integrated part of social workers’ practice.

Previous empirical research on policy engagement

Predicting factors of PE

Because a considerable part of previous quantitative research on PE has been descriptive, there is only limited information available about predicting factors of PE among social workers and social work students (see, however, Lustig-Gants & Weiss-Gal, 2015; Weiss-Gal & Gal, 2020). In general, social workers’ and social work students’ attitudes toward societal issues like causes of poverty, welfare deservingness and social policy programmes have often been explained by determinants related to ideology, social work occupation, social work studies and sociodemographic factors (Han & Chun-Chung Chow, 2010; Kallio et al., 2021). In this study, we focus on political party preference (measuring ideological factors), age, gender, previous degrees, personal experience of poverty and the year when the respondents started studying social work within the university.

Perceptions toward PE can vary by political party preference: Previous research suggests that voters for left-wing parties are more inclined to support structural causes of poverty, perceive clients of social services as deserving, support a more extensive welfare state and perceive that they have chosen to become social workers because of ideological factors like the desire to influence social issues at the structural level (Kallio & Kouvo, 2015; Kallio et al., 2021; Rehner et al., 1997). Further, studies from the United States have pointed out that political party preference is connected to social work students’ perception of the social work mission. Students who self-identify as politically liberal are more likely to support social change as the primary mission of social work than those who identify as moderate or conservative (Han & Chun-Chung Chow, 2010).

There is a shortage of studies focusing on how demographic factors of students are connected to PE. However, it was noted that the gender or age of students is not related to the perception that societal change is one of the primary missions of social work in the United States (Han & Chun-Chung Chow, 2010). Male social workers are more inclined

to agree with individual causes but less inclined to support structural causes of poverty than female social workers in the Nordic countries (Blomberg et al., 2013). The mechanisms behind the gender differences in attitudes are not known, but it has been observed that men differ from women already in their motivations for choosing a social work profession (Kallio et al., 2021; Stevens et al., 2010).

Support for universalism and public responsibility among social work students has been found to increase as social work studies progress in Israel and the United States (Weiss et al., 2005). Even if the mechanism behind the phase of the studies and the attitudes of social work students is still unclear, it has been suggested that the content of the studies and the accumulation of work experience in the field could be relevant factors here (Greeno et al., 2018; Weiss et al., 2005). Work experience can increase knowledge on the weaknesses of social security and structural causes of social problems. Greater professional resources like knowledge of structural social work or PE increase during studies. Therefore, those who have studied social work for a long time may be more positive toward PE than other students. According to research outside the Nordic countries, those social workers who possessed more policy (practice) skills were more engaged with policy practice (Schwartz-Tayri, 2021; Weiss-Gal & Gal, 2020). Further, those social workers who were more positive toward PE reported having more training in policy practice (Lustig-Gants & Weiss-Gal, 2015, p. 186). However, no research is available from Finland, where structural social work has become an evident part of the social work curriculum in recent years.

According to previous research, personal experience of poverty or receipt of social assistance (a last-resort and heavily means-tested social benefit) can shape social workers' and social work students' attitudes toward social issues like causes of poverty, welfare deservingness and social policy programmes (Kallio & Kouvo, 2015; Weiss, 2003). Personal experience may also increase empathy and knowledge, which increases the individual's mission to increase social justice in society. Personal experience of poverty may also increase an individual's experiences of the weaknesses and injustices of social security, which in turn encourages PE.

In Finland, a majority of social work students already have a Bachelor's or Master's degree before they study social work at university. According to data used in this article, circa 40% of students have a Master's or Bachelor's degree before entering university social work studies (see Table A1). These students' educational background is comprehensive, including degrees in sociology, social policy, social services, education or nursing. It seems that previous degrees increase students' positive views toward PE (Gewirtz-Meydan & Even-Zohar, 2017).

PE and career preferences of students

Previous studies showed that social work students are highly committed to social work's mission of helping the most disadvantaged groups in society (Kallio et al., 2021). Furthermore, the proportion of social work students who do not commit to the structural mission of social work is quite small in Finland. Finnish social work students are committed to helping the most disadvantaged groups and eager to influence social problems at the structural level (Kallio et al., 2021). On the other hand, the social work profession in countries such as Australia, Britain, Israel and the

United States has been characterized by a greater tendency on the part of practitioners to engage in direct services to individuals or psychotherapy-oriented practice with much less involvement in community development, social activism or policy-related activities. Tendencies are already prevalent in the initial stages of the professional socialization process. (Lustig-Gants & Weiss-Gal, 2015; Woodcock & Dixon, 2005)

Based on previous research outside the Nordic countries, social work students prefer working with children and families after graduation. Areas including physical or intellectual disability and older people are less popular among students. (Gewirtz-Meydan & Even-Zohar, 2017; McCartan et al., 2022) Further, there is reason to assume that PE is connected to career preferences among social work students. According to previous research, some social work students can be seen as macro-oriented, meaning that they are more interested in working with communities and engaging in activities related to social change. These macro-oriented students express a higher desire to work in social change organizations within the nonprofit sector than their counterparts. (Segal-Engelchin & Kaufman, 2008, p. 152.)

Data

We used nationwide survey data on Finnish social work students collected in autumn 2019. The questionnaire was sent by e-mail to social work students at the universities of Helsinki, Jyväskylä, Lapland, Eastern Finland, Tampere and Turku who attended the autumn 2019 semester and had given permission to the student register to provide their e-mail address for research use. The data includes all universities where social work can be studied in Finland. The survey questionnaire could be completed in Finnish or Swedish, the two national languages in Finland. The survey's Internet link was sent by e-mail to 1,680 students, and 608 responded to the survey (response rate 36%). Students were given two rounds of reminders. Despite the rather modest response rate, the data is rather representative of those background variables we were able to check, for example, the respondents' home university and the year when they began social work studies.

Here, we empirically analyze Finnish social work students' views toward PE by focusing on views that relate to the four essential dimensions identified by Gal and Weiss-Gal (2017): motivation, commitment, skills and self-efficacy. Motivation was operationalized by the following statement: *I am interested in policy engagement*. Commitment was measured by: *Policy engagement related to social justice is an important part of my life*. Skills were operationalized by: *I have a lot of expertise related to policy engagement*. Lastly, self-efficacy was measured by: *I think I can influence social issues as a social worker*. The response categories were strongly agree, partly agree, neither agree or disagree, partly disagree and strongly disagree. In the multivariate analysis, we recoded the response categories as follows: 1 agree (includes strongly and partly agree) and 0 other response.

We measured future career preferences by the question: *What kind of population groups do you want to work with after graduation?* The response categories were strongly agree, partly agree, neither agree or disagree, partly disagree and strongly disagree. Population groups mentioned were substance users, homeless, clients of correctional service, unemployed, chronically ill, people with disabilities, elderly, refugees, immigrants, children, families and young people. After descriptive analysis, regression factor

score variables, including these population groups, were produced. Career preferences were also measured by the question: *What is your preferred job description after graduation?* Here we focus on individual casework with clients (1=client work, 0=other job description). Missing cases of any used dependent variables were not included in the analysis.

We investigated what ideological, sociodemographic and study-related factors explain social work students' views toward PE. As independent variables, we used political party preference, age, gender, previous university degree (other than social work), personal experience of poverty and year when the respondent started their social work studies. Political party preference was measured by the question: *Which party's candidate did you vote for in the last parliamentary elections?* Answers were recorded in the following categories: Social Democratic Party, Left Alliance, Green League, Other party or politically passive, Conservatives or Centre Party. The category 'other party or politically passive' includes respondents who did not want to say or did not answer the question. The category also includes supporters of the Finns Party because of some difficulties in placing this party on the left-right axis. Despite recent widespread support among Finnish voters, only three per cent of students in social work answered that they voted for this populist party in the 2019 parliamentary elections.

Further, we used gender and age as categorical variables (41 years or more, 36–40, 31–35, 30 years or less). The variable measuring previous university degrees makes a distinction between social work students with a) a Bachelor of social services, education given at universities of applied sciences, which does not give a qualification for social work positions, b) any other degree from a university or a university of applied science and c) no previous university degree or degree from a university of applied science. Personal experience of poverty was measured by the question: *Have you experienced poverty in your life?* (answering options: often, occasionally, seldom or never). The year the respondent started social work studies was also used as a categorical variable (2019, 2018, 2017, 2015–2016, 1992–2014). The data distribution according to the independent variables is reported in [Table A1](#). The analysis did not include missing cases of the independent variables (except political party preference).

Methods

We began our empirical analysis by looking at the results of the descriptive analysis. When views toward PE were focused on, the method used was binary logistic regression analysis because the dependent variables were recoded as dichotomous. Factor analysis was applied to explore the possible dimensions along which the preferred population groups can be combined. The Varimax rotation method with Kaiser Normalisation was utilized. The regression factor scores measuring preferences of different population groups were used as constant variables. Therefore linear regression analysis was used when we focused on the possible connection between PE and students' future career preferences, measured here by readiness to work with different population groups after graduation. Further, career preferences were operationalized by dichotomous variables focusing on students' willingness to do individual casework with clients. Here, binary logistic regression analysis was utilized again.

The multivariate models are presented in [Tables 2, 5 and 6](#), which include odds ratios or beta values, standard errors and the statistical significance of the independent variables. [Tables 5 and 6](#) also include bivariate analysis to focus on how students' perceptions toward PE are connected to future career preferences before (bivariate analysis) and after controlling for the other used independent variables (full model). We used 5% ($p < 0.05$) as a statistical significance level because the number of cases in different subgroups was rather small.

Results

According to descriptive statistics (see [Table 1](#)), social work students are very motivated to engage in PE: 39% strongly agreed and 46% partly agreed with the motivation statement (I am interested in policy engagement). None of the respondents strongly disagreed with the motivation statements, and only six per cent partly disagreed. Social work students in Finland are also rather committed to PE (policy engagement related to social justice is an important part of my life). Fifteen per cent strongly agreed and 31% partly agreed with the commitment statement. Only four per cent of students strongly disagreed and 18% partly disagreed with the commitment statement. Social work students view self-efficacy positively: 29% strongly agreed and 48% partly agreed that they can influence social issues as a social worker. Only three per cent of students strongly disagreed and nine per cent partly disagreed with the self-efficacy statement.

Despite the high level of motivation and self-efficacy, a few students feel they have a lot of skills related to policy engagement. Seven per cent of students strongly agreed and 26% partly agreed (I have a lot of expertise related to policy engagement). However, 11% of students strongly disagreed and 28% partly disagreed with the statement measuring skills.

In summary, most social work students perceive PE as important in social work. They display high motivation for and commitment to PE and believe in their possibilities (self-efficacy) to affect macro-level issues. However, they seem considerably less confident about their personal skills needed for PE. This raises questions about the role of social work education in promoting PE in Finland.

Students' views on PE also seem to be related to factors such as previous university degree, personal experience of poverty, age, and gender, as well as political party preferences and how long they have been studying social work. According to the results presented in [Table 2](#), political party preference is connected to students' views toward self-efficacy, motivation and commitment. Those students who voted for the Left Alliance believed they could influence social issues as social workers (self-efficacy)

Table 1. Social work students' views toward policy engagement (PE), %.

	Strongly agree	Partly agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Partly disagree	Strongly disagree
Motivation: I am interested in policy engagement	39	46	9	6	0
Commitment: Policy engagement related to social justice is an important part of my life	15	31	32	18	4
Skills: I have a lot of expertise related to policy engagement	7	26	28	28	11
Self-efficacy: I think I can influence social issues as a social worker	29	48	11	9	3

Table 2. Binary logistic regression, odds ratios, statistical significances by stars and standard errors.

	Self-efficacy: I think I can influence social issues as a social worker		Skills: I have a lot of expertise related to policy engagement		Motivation: I am interested in policy engagement		Commitment: Policy engagement related to social justice is an important part of my life	
	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE
Political party preference								
Social Democratic Party	1		1		1		1	
Left Alliance	2.982**	0.375	1.531	0.343	4.889***	0.445	3.744***	0.332
Green League	1.752	0.314	1.113	0.317	4.479***	0.368	1.964*	0.302
Other or politically passive	1.477	0.338	0.944	0.342	2.349*	0.381	1.990*	0.324
Conservatives or Centre Party	1.470	0.407	1.521	0.391	0.890	0.405	1.201	0.385
Age								
41 years or more	1.175	0.328	1.741	0.289	0.640	0.395	0.865	0.277
36–40	1.111	0.396	2.108*	0.337	0.607	0.487	0.879	0.328
31–35	1.127	0.349	1.152	0.314	0.922	0.462	0.874	0.295
30 years or less	1		1		1		1	
Gender								
Male	0.334***	0.345	1.358	0.348	0.800	0.468	0.884	0.335
Female	1		1		1		1	
Previous degrees accomplished before social work studies								
Bachelor of social services (<i>sosionomi</i>)	0.793	0.314	1.347	0.288	1.765	0.400	1.589	0.272
Any other university or university of applied science degree	1.242	0.316	1.882*	0.270	2.919*	0.430	1.765*	0.261
No previous university or university of applied science degree	1		1		1		1	
Personal experience of poverty								
Have experienced poverty often	1.157	0.370	2.613***	0.292	6.477*	0.755	1.725	0.286
Occasionally	0.685	0.224	1.119	0.209	1.155	0.269	1.272	0.192
Seldom or never	1		1		1		1	
Started social work studies in								
2019	0.860	0.303	1.513	0.277	2.162*	0.362	1.216	0.262
2018	0.848	0.341	1.198	0.315	1.495	0.389	1.076	0.295
2017	1.029	0.330	1.071	0.300	2.158*	0.393	1.002	0.279
2015–2016	1.572	0.349	0.731	0.309	2.532*	0.400	0.930	0.278
1992–2014	1		1		1		1	
R2 (Nagelkerke)	0.074		0.112		0.167		0.081	
N	576		576		576		575	

more often than those who voted for the Social Democratic Party. Those who voted for the Left Alliance and Green League were more motivated and committed to PE than those who voted for the Social Democratic Party in the last parliamentary elections. We can conclude that those who voted for the Social Democratic Party were more critical toward PE than those who voted for the Left Alliance and Green League. Also, those who voted for 'other parties' or were 'politically passive' (did not vote or respond to the question) in the last parliamentary elections were more motivated and committed to PE than those who voted for the Social Democratic Party. Supporters of the right-wing parties like the Conservatives and the Centre Party did not differ from those who voted for the Social Democratic Party.

The older students perceived more often that they had a lot of expertise related to social advocacy than younger students. Male respondents perceived less self-efficacy than females. Further, those who already had a degree (other than in social work or social services) were more motivated and committed to PE and had more skills than those who

did not have a previous degree. Students who assessed that they had experienced poverty often in their life perceived that they had more skills and motivation related to PE than those who assessed that they had experienced poverty seldom or never. Further, students who had studied social work the longest showed lower levels of motivation in PE than other students.

According to the descriptive analysis, social work students preferred working with children, families and young people (see Table 3). Sixty-nine per cent of students would like to work with children and families after graduation, 75% preferred working with young people, 66% would like to work with clients of correctional services, 55% with the unemployed, 52% with substance users and 50% with homeless people. If we focus only on those students who selected the 'strongly agree' category, the most popular population groups are children, families and young people.

The least popular population groups among social work students were the chronically ill, people with disabilities and the elderly. Thirty-one per cent of students would like to work with people with disabilities, 39% with the elderly and 37% with the chronically ill. Only 8% of students selected the strongly agree category for the chronically ill. Students slightly prefer working with immigrants and refugees: 42% with refugees and 41% immigrants.

Factor analysis was applied to explore the possible dimensions along which the preferred population groups could be combined (see Table 4). According to the analysis, four factors were formed. The first one included substance users, the homeless, clients of correctional services and the unemployed. We named this factor marginalized groups. The second factor included the chronically ill, people with disabilities and the elderly. The third included two population groups: refugees and immigrants. The last factor included children, families and young people. To answer our second research question, we focused on how PE is connected to career preferences measured by regression factor scores based on these four factors.

To measure PE on a general level, we summed up the three variables: motivation, skills and commitment (Cronbach's Alpha 0.75). The variable measuring self-efficacy was dropped from the constant sum variable because it decreased the alpha-value considerably. To answer our second research question, we ran a linear regression analysis using regression factor scores as dependent variables. According to these analyses, those students who were more positive toward PE were more inclined to work with immigrants

Table 3. Social work students' preferences related to different population groups, %.

	Strongly agree	Partly agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Partly disagree	Strongly disagree
Substance users	19	33	21	20	7
Homeless	15	35	25	17	8
Clients of correctional service	21	35	23	14	7
Unemployed	14	41	26	13	6
Chronically ill	8	29	28	22	13
People with disabilities	10	21	24	27	18
Elderly	10	29	25	21	15
Refugees	14	27	25	22	13
Immigrants	14	28	25	20	13
Children. Families with children	40	29	11	13	7
Young people	35	42	12	8	4

Table 4. Factor analysis and descriptive statistics of the regression factor scores. Rotation method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalisation.

	I (Marginalized groups)	II (Chronically ill people)	III (Immigrants. refugees)	IV (Children. families and young people)
Substance users	.859	-.065	-.023	.050
Homeless	.840	.160	.190	-.121
Clients of correctional service	.757	-.136	.087	.193
Unemployed	.662	.315	.073	-.072
Chronically ill	.137	.829	.041	-.090
People with disabilities	-.058	.790	.099	.062
Elderly	.057	.777	.064	-.127
Refugees	.114	.098	.976	.070
Immigrants	.117	.105	.975	.080
Children. Families with children	-.057	-.062	.040	.878
Young people	.106	-.063	.091	.863
Factor score: Mean	0	0	0	0
Factor score: Max	2.04536	2.39778	2.07072	1.55705
Factor score: Min	-2.68139	-2.50499	-2.00242	-3.26673

Table 5. Linear regression analysis. Regression scores (beta), standard errors, and statistical significances by stars.

	Marginalized groups		Chronically ill people		Immigrants. refugees		Children, families, and young people	
	I	II	I	II	I	II	I	II
Perceptions toward PE (constant variable ¹)	.067 (0.017)	.089 (0.018)	.016 (0.017)	.011 (0.019)	.172*** (0.017)	.134** (0.018)	.011 (0.017)	.038 (0.018)
R Square	0.003	0.056	0.000	0.031	0.030	0.099	0.000	0.051
N	558	530	558	530	558	530	558	530

I Bivariate analysis, II Full model (all the used independent variables are included in the model).

¹Perception toward PE is a constant sum variable where a larger value means larger support for PE.

Table 6. Binary logistic regression, odds ratios, statistical significances by stars and standard errors.

	Prefer individual case work with clients after graduation	
	I	II
Perceptions toward PE (constant variable ¹)	0.828*** (0.035)	0.846*** (0.039)
R2 (Nagelkerke)	0.066	0.107
N	605	575

I Bivariate analysis, II Full model (all the used independent variables are included in the model).

¹Perceptions toward PE is a constant sum variable where a larger value means stronger support for PE.

and refugees (see Table 5.). PE was statistically significantly connected to preferences to work with immigrants/refugees in the bivariate analysis and in a full model where all the used independent variables (political party preference, age, gender, previous degrees, personal experience of poverty and year started studies) were included in the analysis.

Lastly, we focused on students' willingness to do individual casework with clients. According to the descriptive statistics, 45% of students preferred to do client work after graduation. This proportion may sound small, but here it should be considered that in the original survey question, the students were allowed to choose the job description they

liked best. The results of the binary logistic regression analysis showed that perceptions toward PE were related to a weaker desire to do individual casework with clients (see Table 6). Perceptions toward PE were statistically significantly connected to students' willingness to do client work in the bivariate analysis and full model. This gives us reason to claim that students' perceptions toward PE can shape their career preferences.

Discussion

Based on our empirical results, Finnish social work students perceive that they have the motivation, commitment and self-efficacy to influence social issues. However, many students consider that they do not have a lot of expertise (skills) in PE. Perceptions of insufficient working skills among social work students have also been reported concerning other types of skills and competencies needed in the social work profession (Tham & Lynch, 2020). While our results might reflect difficulties in teaching PE skills and the need to expand and develop teaching in PE, as a whole, the results do not support the image discussed above of social work students disinterested in or unmotivated for PE in Nordic welfare state contexts. Still, previous studies have indicated that individual factors, such as perceived PE resources, are just one aspect that influences social workers' PE. For them to be encouraged, the working context also has to offer social workers PE-enabling institutional opportunity structures and organizational facilitating factors (Lustig-Gants & Weiss-Gal, 2015).

Further, our results show that ideological, sociodemographic and study-related factors explain students' views on PE. Based on our results, older students more often perceived that they had better skills in PE than younger students. The length of time studying social work was also connected to motivation for PE: The students with the longest history of social work studies were the least motivated in PE. This might echo changes in the curricula of Finnish social work education, in which structural social work and issues of policy engagement have received growing attention. Since our study is based on cross-sectional data, this interpretation is highly speculative.

Male respondents perceived less self-efficacy in PE than females. Our empirical analysis does not clearly explain this gender difference. Concerning the impact of possible previous degrees, the results show that students with a previous degree in social services from universities of applied sciences did not display the highest PE levels. This is perhaps a little surprising since the universities of applied sciences within the field of social services have emphasized social change and practical skills in their curricula. Instead, students with a previous degree from another university or university of applied science show the highest levels of commitment, skills and motivation in PE. This group consists mainly of holders of other university social science degrees, mainly in social policy or sociology. Thus, a previous degree leaning toward more general societal issues and 'macro-perspectives' on social issues seems to further PE among social work students.

Further, based on our analysis, students' policy engagement is also connected to ideological factors and poverty experience. We found that experiences of poverty strengthen PE: these experiences are associated with higher motivation and skills regarding PE. What is essential here is expertise by experience and tacit knowledge, which not all students have. Regarding the influence of ideological-political

preferences, our results show that support for the Left Alliance or Green Party is associated with higher PE. Political party preferences are strongly connected to multiple issues like motives to study social work and welfare attitudes (e.g. deservingness and causes of poverty) among social work students and social workers (Blomberg et al., 2015; Kallio & Kouvo, 2015; Kallio et al., 2021; Rehner et al., 1997). One interesting finding is that students who vote for the Social Democratic Party do not differ in their PE compared to those who vote for more conservative parties.

Overall, the results above appear to be somewhat challenging given some of the current developments—initiated by the Ministry of Education—concerning university education in Finland: applicants with no previous university (or university of applied sciences) degrees (thus, in practice, generally younger applicants) are to be favored in the admissions system, and upper secondary school diplomas are to be given more and more weight instead of entrance examinations arranged by universities. Thus, it has become increasingly difficult to study social work for students showing the highest levels of PE on, at least, some of the dimensions studied: older students and students holding (certain) previous degrees. There might also be reason to believe that the new emphasis on secondary-level diplomas for admission will not favor students who have experienced poverty, in turn, a type of experience clearly connected to better perceived PE resources.

Regarding career preferences, our results show that students are highly interested in working with families, children and young people, but they also show an interest in helping many other needy groups. However, students display less interest in working with some population groups: the chronically ill, the disabled and the elderly, immigrants and refugees. While the reasons for this are likely to be manifold, it can be concluded that social work with families, children and young people ranks high among students in other welfare state contexts (cf. McCartan et al., 2022). Further, it might reflect the reality of Finnish institutional welfare services, where a considerable part of social work is with families, children and the young, in practice constituting the largest field within Finnish social work.

From the viewpoint of this research, these findings are interesting, for instance, when viewed in light of other results indicating that it is social work students with a strong PE who show a greater interest in working with immigrants and refugees as compared to students with weaker PE. Since immigrants and refugees often have the greatest risk of ‘falling through the net’ when it comes to the functioning of the network of different authorities and having the weakest social rights, the results may not seem altogether surprising.

At the same time, the results may also indicate challenges, since (future) social workers with strong policy engagement are needed in all sectors of social work. For instance, child protection and welfare services are faced with many difficult issues requiring policy involvement and the advocacy of social workers. According to the Social Welfare Act, social workers play a central role and have vast responsibilities, especially in child protection-related matters.

However, our findings may still provide some comfort to those concerned about the (future) PE of social work professionals in Nordic welfare state contexts. Most social work students were strongly committed to social work’s broad mission of promoting changes in macro-level processes and policies. Most students were also willing to work with various client groups. Further, when asking which type of work the students would prefer, not even

half of the respondents considered individual client work as their first option, which contradicts the picture of individually oriented Nordic social workers.

At the same time, the picture of Finnish social work students' PE seems to be complex. PE varies by ideological, sociodemographic and study-related factors and is also connected with certain career preferences. Thus, the future of PE in social work also becomes an issue involving not only education in universities but also national policies affecting student admission: Who is allowed to study social work? How are students recruited into social work education? Such issues do not seem to have been very much in focus so far when the future of social work, including PE perspectives, is discussed.

Further, while the finding that PE is negatively related, at least among students, to an interest in doing client-related work might seem logical from a general point of view, it does not seem to be in line with the intentions of the Finnish legislation's view on structural social work and policy engagement, according to which micro-level casework should not be separated from addressing related policy issues at an aggregated macro-level. Here, university educations thus have a role in counteracting such notions of a contradiction between client work and policy engagement.

Finally, it should be mentioned that research on PE in social work has to a great extent, focused on social workers' engagement in local or national policies. An interesting but empirically seldom studied question concerns social workers' or future social workers' engagement in wider policy issues, for example, how social work can contribute to sustainable development by furthering social, economic and environmental justice (Lombard & Viviers, 2020).

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Notes on contributors

Johanna Marketta Kallio is a professor of social work in the Department of Social Research at the University of Turku, Finland. Her research focuses on various aspects of welfare attitudes, poverty, socioeconomic disadvantage, and social work.

Anne-Mari Jaakola, PhD in social work, is a senior researcher in the Department of Social Research at the University of Turku, Finland. Her current research areas include social work, social services, and child welfare.

Helena Blomberg is a professor of social work at the University of Helsinki, Finland (Swedish School of Social Science). Her research focuses on various aspects of social work, social policy, welfare attitudes, and Nordic welfare states.

Christian Kroll is a senior lecturer of social work and social policy at the University of Helsinki, Finland (Swedish School of Social Science). His current research areas include social work, social policy, social services, welfare attitudes, and Nordic welfare states.

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Appendix

Table A1. Independent variables. % N.

	%	N
Political party preference		
Social Democratic Party	12	72
Left Alliance	22	133
Green League	34	211
Other or politically passive	22	133
Conservatives or Centre Party	10	59
Age		
41 years or more	20	120
36–40	11	68
31–35	14	83
30 years or less	55	332
Gender		
Male	8	49
Female	92	547
Previous degrees accomplished before social work studies		
Bachelor of social services (<i>sosionomi</i>)	21	126
Any other degree (university or university of applied science)	24	142
No previous university or university of applied science degree	55	328
Personal experience of poverty		
Have experienced poverty often	12	71
Occasionally	35	216
Seldom or never	53	321
Started social work studies in		
2019	20	122
2018	19	113
2017	16	95
2015–2016	25	151
1992–2014	20	122