How do Social Work Students Navigate Professional Practice Situations?
Exploring Student Strategies, Challenges and Influential Factors
A Grounded Theory Study

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Abstract

Professional practice in social work is primarily considered as the capacity to pursue scientifically informed, method- and value-based interventions under conditions of complexity, paradoxes and uncertainties inherent in social work. As a nexus connecting knowledge and competence, professional practice aims at ensuring comprehensive examination, contextualisation, and interpretation of social problems of individuals or communities in a collaborative, solution-oriented approach. An essential target of social work education and training is therefore to thoroughly qualify students for professional practice. In order to equip students for the demanding practice of social work, universities have developed comprehensive curricula covering both, scientific knowledge, as well as practical skills. Nevertheless, there is little evidence about how social work students implement their theoretically acquired knowledge in the context of professional practice and how they approach complex and unpredictable situations of social work practice.

This dissertation aims at closing this gap by investigating professional practices of social work students. The overall aim of this explorative research is to analyse and conceptualise the scope of students' approaches and strategies for professional practice in-depth, as well as to identify possible influential factors on their actions. Research that strives to understand student professional practice strategies also attempts to improve and foster professional development and thus, enhancing quality of teaching by proposing suggestions for improving classroom quality. By providing findings from two empirical studies, this dissertation aims at contributing to social work education. The two consecutive empirical studies of this thesis were conducted applying the grounded theory methodology. Subsequently, to address the research aims to the fullest extent possible, a qualitative-exploratory approach to research was used. When

pursuing to assess students' professional practice with a high level of authenticity, a realistic portrayal of social work practice was crucial. Therefore, a simulation involving a trained actress standardised client was developed as the research design's superstructure. By modelling an initial assessment process, the students were encouraged to step into the role of a social worker and to interact professionally with an overstrained client. In total, 25 social work students (bachelor's level), from four different universities across Germany participated voluntarily.

In the first study, the students' professional practice was observed directly, based on non-participatory ethnographic observation and the examination of the video-taped simulations. Building upon the findings of this first study, the students' reflections about their professional practice were placed at the core of the second study. This was accomplished through individual problem-centred interviews conducted after the simulation experience. More than 550 minutes of transcribed video and 650 minutes of interview material were analysed by using grounded theory's systematic methods of open, axial and selective coding.

As a result of this investigation, two conceptual models were developed. These models detail action patterns, strategies, challenges, and influential aspects of the students' professional practice. Evidence provided by both studies reveal the complexity of learning professional practice in social work. The findings highlight challenges encountered by students in performing the professional role of a social worker, building and maintaining a professional relationship with the client, and dealing with the assessment process in general. Misunderstanding the demands of the professional situation results in adopting alternative strategies, such as recourse to day-to-day knowledge, individual reflection criteria and evasive actions. Furthermore, there is

evidence that the students' prior experiences, whether professional or personal, may influence their professional practice.

Altogether, the results highlight substantial difficulties that the students face in terms of their capacity to engage in scientifically informed, method- and value- based activities under dynamic and unpredictable conditions of social work practice. Both studies strongly suggest that students should be given greater learning support in order to engage in the challenging practice of social work. Beyond this, the findings emphasise the relevance of providing students with opportunities to reflect on personal beliefs as well as prior experiences and, about how these may be influencing their professional practice.

Considering all this, it is reasonable to conclude that students need access to more authentic, realistic exercises with individual feedback to systematically develop their capacities for professional practice in social work. Providing simulations relating to particular practice situations of social work involving standardised clients seems to be a promising approach for social work education and the professional development of future social workers.

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Part I – Theoretical Background

1. General Introduction

1.1. Problem Statement

As a discipline and profession, social work is dedicated to changing and improving challenging life circumstances and marginalising structures that individuals or communities experience, aiming at creating environments in which people are able to thrive in their everyday lives, through participation, collaboration and social responsibility (Bogo, 2006, 2018; Howe, 2009; ISFW - International Federation of Social Workers, 2018; Trevithick, 2012b). Due to the proximity to the individual and to the everyday problems of the clients, the inherent complexity of social work practice is often overlooked (Unterkofler, 2018). Clients' mostly sensitive, as well as constantly changing life circumstances, and the societal mandate assigned to social work, constitute a responsible yet paradox and tension-filled professional work field, that is characterised by its dynamic, its unpredictability and its uncertainty (Effinger, 2021a; Fook et al., 2000; Hood, 2018; Schütze, 2021). Social workers need to handle this uncertainty and volatility persistently. They are required to thoroughly comprehend the multifaceted issues and needs of their clients (Bogo, 2018; Rüegger, 2021), to establish and maintain a sustainable working alliance (Parker, 2021; Trevithick, 2003) and to make decisions and judgements (Helm, 2011; Taylor & Whittaker, 2020).

To meet these demands, social workers are required to address and integrate a wide array of elements in a collaborative process with their clients. Social work practice encompasses synthesising comprehensive knowledge and capabilities, while integrating fundamental profession values (Bogo, 2018; Hood, 2018; Payne & Reith-Hall, 2019b; Trevithick, 2012b). By drawing on a wealth of scientific knowledge, theories and methods, the body of social work expertise is intended to facilitate multifaceted explanations as well

as possible resolutions applicable to professional practice (Gray et al., 2012; Payne, 2021; Trevithick, 2012a, 2012b). However, at this point, a gap between theoretical demands and social work practice emerges. Numerous recent studies have demonstrated, that scientific and theoretical substantiation is of minor relevance in actual social work practice (Brielmaier & Roth, 2019; Finne et al., 2022; Ghanem et al., 2018; James et al., 2019). Among other sources, social workers are more likely to draw on their practical knowledge, advice from colleagues and supervisors, and their intuition, due to for example insecurities of theory utilisation and a deficiency of practice confidence (Bogo et al., 2017; Finne et al., 2022; McCafferty & Taylor, 2022; Ståhl & Lundälv, 2022).

In many ways, professional social work practice can be considered as highly challenging and demanding for practitioners and, as a consequence, for education and training of future professionals. Main target of social work education is to thoroughly equip students for professional practice, covering both theoretical and practical aspects (Bogo, 2006, 2018; Eraut, 2007; Howe, 2009; Payne, 2021; Trevithick, 2012b). But surprisingly little is known, however, about how social work students implement their acquired knowledge and capacities into professional practice and how they handle complexity and unpredictability inherent to social work. In light of these facts, the present research aims to address this research gap.

1.2. Aim and Structure of this Thesis

This doctoral research examines social work students' professional practice or respectively their perceptions about it. This entire inquiry addresses overarching questions of how students engage within the complex, unpredictable and dynamic situations of professional practice in social work to derive implications for the professional development of future social workers and subsequently for social work education. In order to investigate students' professional practices in breadth and depth, I decided to implement a qualitative

and explorative research approach, framed by grounded theory methodology (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Based on an open, explorative research procedure according to the grounded theory methodology, the research questions are formulated in a comprehensive and broad manner. Both studies' underlying research questions target the observation and analysis regarding the actions, taken by the students, as well as their individual reflections. The inquiry has been driven by the following overall research questions:

- How do the students act and interact in a complex situation of social work practice? Which particular strategies, approaches, interventions and which recurring patterns can be identified?
- How do they subsequently reflect on their actions in the professional encounter? How do they evaluate their actions? Which perceptions of professional practice are emerging?

These overarching research questions have been refined and adjusted throughout the progression of the data analyses. In line with grounded theory theoretical sampling, the second study was therefore built on the first study's findings (Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

This dissertation is structured into three major parts. The first part (Chapter 1-3) includes this introduction, the overall theoretical and methodological background to contextualise the area under study and an outline of the empirical studies, that were conducted. The second part of this thesis comprises two empirical studies (Chapter 4 and 5). The third (Chapter 6-9) part covers a general discussion, implications and an outlook.

Part I, starting with Chapter 1, is dedicated to clarify the relevant theoretical and empirical context of the area under study. Therefore, central discourses concerning professional practice in social work are discussed. Along with the introduction to the

tensions and requirements of social work practice, this chapter establishes the theoretical foundation regarding professional practice and professional knowledge. Chapter 2 details the theoretical considerations required to explore students' professional practice. To capture professional practice realistically, both empirical and theoretical examination of possibilities is required here. First, the approach of simulation-based learning is introduced, followed by more detailed examination of the method of simulation-based learning involving standardised clients. The second part of this chapter discusses then core concepts of assessment as a major component of social work practice. In parallel, assessment with its essential procedures is anchored as a scientific informed process. Therefore, a comparison with an interdisciplinary framework for scientific reasoning and argumentation is provided. Chapter 3 provides a detailed account of the entire methodological and methodological framework of this research. To start with, the qualitative approach is substantiated and the potential of the grounded theory is stressed. Thereafter, the methods of data collection are elaborated on and the research design is transparently outlined. The chapter is supplemented by an explanation of applied research ethics and the evaluation of quality in grounded theory research.

Part II covers two empirical studies, that are presented in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5. These studies have been submitted for publication in peer-reviewed scientific journals. Therefore, each chapter includes a full-length scientific journal article.

Part III critically appraises the findings from the empirical studies on several levels. Chapter 6 comprises a summary and an integrated discussion of the main findings across the studies. Chapter 7 suggests implications for social work as a discipline and profession. Further, some tentative hypotheses on improving social work education are proposed. The closing chapters 8 and 9 consider limitations of the present research, and future directions as well as an overall conclusion.

1.3. Professional Practice in Social Work

This introductory section focuses on the complex and dynamic professional practice of social work. The contradictions inherent in the profession of social work are discussed, along with significant aspects of professional interactions and collaboration with clients, that are of key importance for social work. Developing from this, insights into professional knowledge and factors of knowledge utilisation are also outlined. This chapter concludes by highlighting key findings of students' professional development.

1.3.1. Social work practice – an introduction into a complex profession

> Social work practice is highly complex. Practitioners are challenged to integrate and apply a wide range of elements and to do so in a collaboration with clients. Professional practice involves the synthesis of the knowledge and value base of the profession, helping processes and skills, in a way that is compatible with the social workers 'personal self". (Bogo, 2018, p. xi)

In these few words, Bogo outlines challenges placed on professionals due to the demanding nature of social work practice. At the same time, the comment lays out the characteristics constitutive of social work practice: a high level of complexity inherent in a heterogeneous work field; a direct professional interaction with clients as the basis for further assistance; the essential nexus between knowledge, competence and values of the profession within professional practice; and, particularly, the individual of a social worker with their own personal background, both private and professional.

Heterogeneity of social work practice scenarios: social work is characterised by dynamic and complex processes that involve a high level of unpredictability and uncertainty (Drisko, 2015; Effinger, 2021a; Fook et al., 2000; Schütze, 2021; Sommerfeld, 2014b). Contradictions and paradoxes are inherent in social work's double mandate, between offering individual assistance and fulfilling a governmental function of controlling

problematic situations in society. This contradiction between help and control, between proximity and distance, need to be continuously and appropriately integrated within professional practice (Helsper, 2021; Howe, 2009; Schütze, 2021; Staub-Bernasconi, 2018; Wendt, 2021). Heiner (2010) discusses this in terms of interrelated polarities involving the social, governmental and financial regulations of social work, the circumstances of clients and professional social workers alike, and the existing infrastructure/resources (Heiner, 2010). To respond to the highly diverse demands of providing an appropriate support adapted to each situation, social work must operate in a process-oriented manner, yet intervention predictability is barely calculable, at least in the short run (Effinger, 2021a; Helsper, 2021; Schützeichel, 2007). Helm's observation that 'Social workers are routinely required to make complex, subjective judgements in conditions of chronic uncertainty' stresses the tensions that exist in the field of professional practice, which are also evident in the interaction with clients (Helm, 2022, p. 2330).

Collaboration with clients: social work is characterised by heterogeneity of practice areas, and a target groups and social problems (Gray & Webb, 2013; Longhofer & Floersch, 2012; Payne & Reith-Hall, 2019a). As a result of the continuous expansion and diversification of the work fields and tasks of social work, it is difficult to define a standardised classification system in the discipline. Attempts to systematise the nature of social work focused on particular topics, such as the classification of social problems, target groups, intervention forms and institutional structures (Heiner, 2010; Thole, 2012). This diversification is also reflected in the various approaches to and understandings of collaboration with clients, which is concretely shaped within organisations and by professionals (Heiner, 2010; Scherr, 2018; Sommerfeld, 2014b; Thole, 2012). Above all, professional practice in social work unfolds through interaction with a client or community (Parker, 2021; Trotter, 2015). Each case and its specific case-relevant information, the

individual situation and challenges faced by clients, is identified and processed in the working relationship between the social worker and the client. Thus the development and maintenance of a viable working relationship is crucial (Bogo, 2006, 2018; Parker, 2021; Perlman, 1979; Rüegger, 2021; Strasser & Gruber, 2015; Trotter, 2015). Further collaboration with clients in social work is marked by inherent contradictions. As such, professional interactions are characterised by a given structural asymmetry due to the unequal positioning between a professional and a private person (the client) who usually finds themselves in a challenging life situation. Nonetheless, this structure in turn, is required to provide professional support. The client's trust in both process and social worker is essential to a viable working alliance, although there is a degree of dependency when working, for example, with involuntary clients in the probation service (Halls et al., 2003; Helsper, 2021; Payne, 2006; Sagebiel & Pankofer, 2022; Schütze, 2021; Schützeichel, 2007; Trotter, 2015).

When providing assistance in everyday life, questions of proximity and distance between social workers and clients need to be constantly addressed (Howe, 2009; Killick & Taylor, 2020; Rüegger, 2021; Trevithick, 2012b). To enable a productive working relationship, trust must be consistently strengthened and maintained in professional interactions. Furthermore, the processes of assessing individual problem contexts and jointly elaborating and specifying personalised support should be based on direct cooperation with clients (Bogo, 2018; Perlman, 1979; Rüegger, 2021; Thole, 2012). Developing a reciprocal dialogue and participative processes poses a constant challenge both for social workers and clients. More specifically, a constant open and participative attitude on the part of the social worker is required (Bogo, 2018; Parker, 2021; Payne, 2006; Trevithick, 2003, 2008). This also indicates another crucial aspect of the question,

namely the interplay of knowledge, competence and values of the profession for a multifaceted social work practice.

Integration of knowledge, competence and values of the profession[1]*:* there has been a long controversial discourse within social work around differing perceptions of what knowledge constitutes its foundation (Engelke et al., 2016; Gambrill, 2013; Gray & Schubert, 2013; Rüegger et al., 2019; Trevithick, 2012b; Unterkofler, 2018). 'Social work's body of knowledge contains a variety of approaches. It offers no single prescriptions for how to think or act, but multiple explanations and solutions. Circumstances for knowledge application vary considerably from one instance to another' (van Bommel et al., 2012, p. 279). Van Bommel et al. underline the complexity of social work practice in terms of knowledge and knowledge utilisation. Consensus exists, however, that a comprehensive scientific knowledge base and corresponding practical competencies are necessary for addressing the multiple demands of social work practice (Bogo, 2018; Gambrill, 2012; Howe, 2009; McNeece & Thyer, 2004; Obrecht, 2012; Payne, 2006; Payne & Reith-Hall, 2019b; Trevithick, 2008, 2012a, 2012b).

In general, social work practice entails a situationally quick response, dependent on the support, obligations and resources available. At the same time, the challenges faced by clients might be multifaceted, requiring extended periods of social work assessment. Creating potential approaches and solutions for addressing difficult and unpredictable life situations cannot be accomplished by formula or by general knowledge. Furthermore, social workers must make decisions based on incomplete information, while still being able to justify their actions professionally (Cooper, 2009; Eraut, 2007; D. Helm, 2011;

[1] Please note: Professional knowledge in social work will be discussed in detail below (see section 1.3.2: Professional practice and professional knowledge in social work).

Helm, 2022; Killick & Taylor, 2020; Parker, 2021; Schütze, 2021; Schützeichel, 2007). As such, professional practice requires a comprehensive body of knowledge and the ability to utilise this in a process-oriented manner. To be precise, it requires the ability to transfer abstract knowledge to particular settings (Dewe & Otto, 2012; Gray et al., 2015; Gredig & Sommerfeld, 2008; Rüegger, 2021; Sommerfeld, 2014a; Unterkofler, 2020).

Besides knowledge and capabilities, social work as a people-oriented profession is committed to high ethical standards, which are discussed at both international (see ISFW - International Federation of Social Workers, 2018) and national levels (e.g. for Germany: DBSH - Deutscher Berufsverband für Soziale Arbeit e.V.). Responsibility for the practical implementation of ethical regulations is left to each organisation of social work, but primarily to each social worker individually (Howe, 2009; Scherr, 2018; Schütze, 2021). The high level of responsibility of social workers in professional practice is evident here, and is discussed next.

The individual social worker: professional practice is significantly characterised by the social worker's capacity to apply knowledge, competence and values (Eraut, 2007; Seden, 2011; Sommerfeld, 2014b; Staub-Bernasconi, 2018; Trevithick, 2003, 2012b; Webb, 2016). In line with this, Bogo states 'It is through our interpersonal actions, the words we use, the attitudes and feelings we convey verbally and nonverbally that we may achieve whatever goals social workers and clients set for their work together' (Bogo, 2006, p. 3). This clearly highlights the accountability of the social worker, and also the importance of responsible and professional practice. In their model of holistic competence, Bogo et al. indicate the requirement of self-regulating competences. This embraces an awareness of subjective, stereotyped patterns of thinking and interpreting and regulating one's own emotions in professional interactions, as well as the capacity for self-reflection (Bogo et al., 2014). Effinger uses the term 'self-competence' to cover this. Accordingly, a

self-competent person is capable of using various impulses for successful, productive self-regulation. Self-competence has mostly been biographically accumulated and is largely an unconscious, implicit knowledge (Effinger, 2021b). Several researchers have emphasised the critical function of (self-)reflection for professional practice (Cooper, 2011; D'Cruz et al., 2007; Ebert & Klüger, 2017; Ferguson, 2018; Ixner, 1999; Korthagen & Nuijten, 2022; Schön, 1983). Personal qualities may contribute to the fulfilment of the professional role, but one must also take account of their ideals, values, and assumptions about the professional role by paying attention to the given social, legal and financial circumstances, crucial to social work practice (Dewe et al., 2011; Heiner, 2010; Helm & Roesch-Marsh, 2017; Scherr, 2018; Sommerfeld, 2014b).

Taken overall, social work practice is a multifaceted and dynamic area of work which places considerable demands on professional practice. To understand its complexities, uncertainties and potential risks and respond to them adequately are key prerequisites for professional practice (Bogo, 2018; Dewe & Otto, 2012; Effinger, 2021a, 2021b; Helsper, 2021; Schütze, 2021; Sommerfeld & Hollenstein, 2011). Such complex areas of work require a sound body of knowledge along with profound competencies in order to provide a professional approach to the challenging practice of social work.

1.3.2. Professional practice and professional knowledge in social work

Professional practice is another extensively discussed notion in social work. This discourse covers essential characteristics, such as professionalism and professional knowledge, as well as specific practices (Bogo, 2018; Dewe et al., 2011; Halton et al., 2013; Obrecht, 2012; Payne, 2006; Pfadenhauer, 2005; Scourfield, 2018). Sommerfeld, for instance, argues that, ‘Professional action in a theoretical perspective is based on scientific knowledge (and values) or it is not professional’ (Sommerfeld, 2014b, p. 592). His quote touches on some of the most important issues raised in the multifaceted discourse

regarding professionalism and professional practice in social work. First, it highlights the relevance of scientific knowledge for professional practice, from a theoretical perspective. Second, it emphasises potential disparities in scientific knowledge perception and appraisal between theory, social work as a discipline, and practice, social work as a profession. Third, it also identifies the notion of professional practice, which is widely used and discussed within social work. These aspects will now be elaborated further.

For decades, scholars have attempted to answer the question of what constitutes the profession of social work, what counts as professionalism and how professionalisation can be pursued and promoted in higher education (Brekke, 2012; Gredig & Sommerfeld, 2008; Higgins, 2016; Payne & Reith-Hall, 2019b; Scourfield, 2018; Sommerfeld, 2014b). Social work, particularly in German-speaking countries, has struggled to consolidate its status as an academic discipline (Dewe & Otto, 2018b; Ghanem et al., 2017; Schmitt & Witte, 2021; Taube & Bördlein, 2020). For the multi-faceted (mainly German) discussion of whether social work qualifies as a profession, readers are referred to Dewe & Otto, 2018a, 2018b; Engelke et al., 2016; Lambers, 2020; Motzke, 2014; Schmitt & Witte, 2021. This thesis assumes that social work is an applied science and a profession (Motzke, 2014; Sommerfeld, 2013, 2014b). The profession of social work has developed with an extensive foundation of disciplinary knowledge, such as social work research and theories of social work, supported by various reference sciences as well as elaborated methods and techniques.

Returning to professionalism, Scourfield suggests the term itself encompasses the overarching practices and culture of a specific professional group, while professionality and professional practice indicate the individual perception and implementation of professional practice requirements (Scourfield, 2018). Differing stances on the professional conceptualisation of social work create an obstacle to achieving a joint, underlying

definition of professionalism, professionality and professional practice (Brekke, 2012; Dewe & Otto, 2018b; Gray & Schubert, 2013; Gredig & Sommerfeld, 2008; Payne, 2006; Trevithick, 2008, 2012b).

As previously stated, the discourse on the knowledge base of social work is highly controversial and diverse. At its forefront stand the relations between scientific, theoretical, practical and intuitive (or tacit/implicit) knowledge (Gambrill, 2013; Gray & Schubert, 2013; Heinsch et al., 2016; Kahneman, 2012; Neuweg, 2015; Payne & Reith-Hall, 2019b; Shaw, 2013). Various international backgrounds still influence this discourse today. In the United States, for instance, due social work's proximity to the health system, concepts and practices of evidence-based practice (EBP) constitute an integral part of social work as a domain and subsequently of social work in education and practice (Gambrill, 2013, 2019; Ghanem et al., 2018; Parrish & Rubin, 2012; Spensberger et al., 2020; Thyer, 2012). In Germany, by contrast, the social work profession developed historically within a deeply institutionalised system of social welfare that was influenced by sociology, pedagogy and social pedagogy (Schmitt & Witte, 2021; Taube & Bördlein, 2020).

All in all, a substantial body of knowledge is widely regarded as an essential prerequisite for successful professional practice (Bogo, 2018; Eraut, 2007; Helsper, 2021; Prince & Boshuizen, 2004; Shulman, 1987; Trevithick, 2012a, 2012b). To conceptualise professional knowledge in applied sciences generally, numerous theoretical approaches have been proposed with various foci, for example, within educational sciences (see Förtsch et al., 2018 for an example of interdisciplinary systematisation of professional knowledge in medical and teacher education). In social work, Trevithick's comprehensive knowledge and competence framework covers different levels of knowledge:

- The theoretical knowledge domain, like reference sciences, practice theories and theories of professional roles and social work's functions.

- The factual knowledge domain, such as knowledge about specific social problems, policies and procedures of authorities.
- The practice knowledge domain, for instance the professional use of self, self-knowledge, and abilities to utilise knowledge.
- Skills and interventions, including communications skills, values and the development of abilities to work creatively with complex and unpredictable situations.

This framework of knowledge and competencies prioritises professional interaction and incorporates capabilities of critical thinking and reflection at each level (c. f. Trevithick, 2012b, p. 33). There is considerable agreement on the assumption that scientific knowledge is not transferable directly into social work practice, but rather has to be transformed appropriately (Dewe et al., 2011; Parker, 2021; Payne & Reith-Hall, 2019b; Rüegger et al., 2019; Unterkofler, 2020). Professional practice is generally considered as scientifically substantiated problem-solving in practice and was long regarded as the connector between theory and practice (Helsper, 2021).

In more recent discourse, professional practice is understood primarily in terms of the ability to engage in scientifically informed, method- and value-based practice under conditions of uncertainty, in order to analyse, contextualise and interpret social problems and clients' challenging life situations in a solution-oriented manner. As a result, professional knowledge is recognised as a hybrid and not standardisable body of knowledge that explicitly integrates scientific and practice-based knowledge with the practical competencies required to inform and lead professional practice (Bogo, 2018; Dewe et al., 2011; Gredig & Sommerfeld, 2008; Heiner, 2010; Ruttert, 2020; Taylor & White, 2005).

1.3.3. Factors of knowledge utilisation in social work practice

As highlighted above, professional practice in social work involves the ability to turn an array of knowledge sources to a specific practice situation (Trevithick, 2012b). Scholars use a variety of terms to describe the process by which knowledge is transferred to practice, with knowledge utilisation seemingly the most common (Gray et al., 2015; Heinsch et al., 2016; Ståhl & Lundälv, 2022). According to Gray et al. (2015), knowledge utilisation encompasses 'the tangible ways in which knowledge is taken up, adopted, implemented and used in practice' (Gray et al., 2015, p. 1953). Processes of knowledge utilisation, in concrete application or in the translation of a wide range of existing knowledge into specific practice settings or particular situations, remain a continuous challenge for social work (Becker-Lenz & Müller, 2009; Ghanem et al., 2018; Sommerfeld, 2014b; Trevithick, 2012b). These challenges are also reflected in recent studies. Several European studies investigating the utilisation of (scientific) knowledge in social work practice have drawn renewed attention to discrepancies among professionals in the context of the interplay between theory and practice. Both empirical and theoretical knowledge seem to be of minor relevance in (daily) professional practice (e.g. Brielmaier & Roth, 2019; Ekeland et al., 2019; Finne et al., 2022; Ghanem et al., 2018; James et al., 2019; McCafferty & Taylor, 2022).

In their study of the use of knowledge in an evidence-based framework with professional social workers, Finne et al. identified two striking sources of knowledge, that informed decisions: first, individual work experiences, including acquired subject-related know-how and skills, and second, exchange and reflection on concrete practice cases with colleagues and supervisors. Research literature seems to be less relevant for everyday practice (Finne et al., 2022). Helm critically points out that complex decisions in social work tend to be made intuitively, especially when there are unfamiliar aspects to the

situation, time pressures or no opportunity to receive feedback from colleagues or supervisors (Helm, 2022).

Research with social work students uncovered comparable results. For instance, Gentle-Genitty et al., Bogo et al. and Unterkofler found, that students are challenged with appropriately and flexibly implementing theories in the dynamic processes of social work practice. At the same time, critical and contextual reflection, just like theory-informed justification, turns out to be difficult (Bogo et al., 2017; Gentle-Genitty et al., 2014; Unterkofler, 2019, 2020). In their study of cognitive and affective aspects of professional confidence (embracing knowledge utilisation, capabilities for emotional self-regulation and capacities for transformation), Bogo et al. also observed a close link between self-awareness, capabilities for (self-) reflection and confidence. Emotional self-regulation during practice seem to be a vital factor in professional self-confidence, which may affect the capacity for knowledge utilisation (Bogo et al., 2017).

As stressed in this section, the task of transforming various knowledge sources into specific practice scenarios (and vice versa) proves a challenging for professionals and students alike. Social workers and students tend to apply scientific knowledge autonomously and selectively (Rüegger, 2021). Scientific knowledge relatively subordinate in social work practice, which is partly down to factors such as professional self-confidence and the capacity for critical (self-) reflection. This gives rise to the questions of how this complex construct can be learned, a construct intended to combine scientific and practical knowledge with specific situations of social work. A brief introduction to processes of professionalisation of social work students is outlined below.

1.3.4. Professionalisation processes of students

As demonstrated in the previous sections, social work's highly dynamic and complex practice places considerable demands on professionals, which they need to

address through knowledge and competence. Numerous models relating to the development of professional expertise have been proposed, defining professional development as a gradual progression through several phases or levels, such as the model by Dreyfus and Dreyfus's five-stage model. All the models depict the progression and changes in knowledge and capacities from novice (for example student) to expert professional (Boshuizen et al., 2004; Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1986; Fook et al., 2000; Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003; Strasser & Gruber, 2015). Considering the heterogeneity of social work students and the broad spectrum of their prior professional experiences (Byrne, 2019; Freund et al., 2017; Liedgren & Elvhage, 2015; Petersén, 2022; Pulver & Matti, 2021), it is widely acknowledged that professionalisation in social work evolves individually, contextually and through action-orientation, but also in a complex and interactional process (Boshuizen et al., 2004; Eraut, 2007; Halton et al., 2013; Miller et al., 2021; Ruttert, 2020; van Bommel et al., 2012).

As indicated above, this complexity of social work practice and its required comprehensive knowledge base is echoed in curricula of social work education. These have the intention to thoroughly introduce students in the multifaceted knowledge base of social work, from discipline-specific scientific and theoretical knowledge, and numerous reference sciences such as psychology and sociology, through to concrete approaches and the techniques of social work practice. Beyond that, during predefined phases of practice-oriented education (e.g. field education, internships and other formats), students are also encouraged to encounter social work practice and connect this with their existing knowledge and competences (see e.g. Council on Social Work Education - CSWE, 2022 for the United States; DGSA - Deutsche Gesellschaft für Soziale Arbeit, 2016 for Germany; Tham et al., 2021 for a comparison between six countries).

On the inherently broad range of reference sciences and important disciplinary sources of knowledge, Sommerfeld critically observes that there is a certain danger of an unconnected coexistence between different subjects in social work education, which also affects, for example, the phases of field education (Sommerfeld, 2013, 2014b; Sommerfeld & Hollenstein, 2011). Schumacher compares social work education to a puzzle, that students must piece together (Schumacher, 2011). Bogo summarises the aims of social work education in this way:

> Hence, it is important for students to recognize that their formal education will provide them with a firm foundation of generalist or core competencies and the capacity for future self-directed learning. Possessing a foundation of core competencies ensures that social workers are cognizant of the processes needed to individualize each practice situation, transferring and adapting general principles according to the uniqueness and contingencies they encounter. And these competencies provide the basis on which to develop competence in specialized practice. (Bogo, 2018, p. 49)

Bogo stresses academic studies here as a sound foundation for the further advancement of professional practice, underlining the additional observation that this includes continuous processes of learning and personal development that go far beyond university studies.

Overall there is no conclusive empirical evidence on the contribution of social work education to the professional development of students. According to Busse and Ehlert (2012), for instance, previously established patterns of learning and practice are barely modified during the course of study (Busse & Ehlert, 2012). As such, the relevance of prior experiences, both personal and vocational, for professional development as a social worker is empirically inconclusive (Becker-Lenz & Müller, 2009; Ghanem et al., 2018; Gruber & Harteis, 2018; Harmsen, 2014; Miller et al., 2021; Navrátil, 2019; Ruttert, 2020). Other

findings are provided through investigations which assign social work education an essential foundational professional function. Practical experiences such as internships and study projects, appear to be particularly relevant for the development of a professional identity as a social worker, yet the reflective effect of social work theories on practice is not acknowledged by students (Harmsen, 2013, 2014; Heiner, 2010; Ruttert, 2020; Webb, 2016). Nevertheless, Becker-Lenz et al. consider the university a mediating area between science and practice which is supposed to serve as preparation for professional social work practice (Becker-Lenz et al., 2012).

Finally, note should be taken of research into the experiences of newly qualified social workers (in their first two years). These investigations indicate that the new professionals considered themselves insufficiently prepared in terms of knowledge and skills by their studies. One major theme that emerged in these studies, was how to conduct professional interactions with clients in general, but particularly with highly troubled or angry clients. Professional practice itself, involving the new professional role as well as the workplace realities of social work, emerged as highly demanding and stressful for new social work practitioners across these studies (Becker-Lenz & Müller, 2009; Byrne, 2019; Joubert, 2021; Pithouse & Scourfield, 2002; Tham & Lynch, 2019).

1.3.5. Summary - professional practice in social work

This chapter presented a comprehensive overview of social work's inherent complexity. This involved illustrating the heterogeneity of social work practice settings and stressing the significance of a sound client collaboration for providing appropriate assistance. Essential questions of integrating knowledge, competence and values in professional social work practice were elucidated, highlighting furthermore the crucial role of the individual social worker. Based on this, the dynamics, tensions and paradoxes in which social work practice operates became evident. This introductory chapter placed a further emphasis on

introducing the discourse of professional practice in social work. Different perspectives on professional practice in social work were discussed with focus on professional knowledge. By discussing the findings of current studies on the application of scientific knowledge in social work practice, the difficulties that practitioners encounter were demonstrated. The task of translating multiple knowledge sources into specific practice scenarios was highlighted as being highly challenging for both professionals and students. Uncertainty regarding the appropriate application of theories was one of the critical factors described here. The high demands of professional social work practice place particular demands on students. During their development process as future social workers, the students need to learn to piece the ‘puzzle’ (Schumacher, 2011) of social work education together. Based on several recent investigations, the as yet inconclusive influence of social work education on students’ developmental processes as social worker was then demonstrated.

2. Exploring Professional Practice with Students

Investigating students' action strategies requires a detailed conceptual approach that corresponds to professional practice. This section introduces important aspects for simulating professional social work practice with standardised clients. Social work assessment is then presented as an overarching and key activity within professional interaction and discussed as a scientific process.

2.1. Simulation of Professional Practice with Standardised Clients

2.1.1. Simulation-based learning in social work education

As the sections above have demonstrated, social work practice places considerable demands on professionals. Social work students are equally tasked with comprehending the complexity and unpredictability and with developing their professional capacities to respond accordingly. Helm refers to social work as a 'wicked' learning environment because of the absence, delay or unspecific nature of the essential feedback required by students, for example, in the context of professional interactions (Helm, 2022). General statements are repeatedly found to the effect that the opportunities for engaging in professional social work practice are inadequate (Banach et al., 2020; Logie et al., 2013; Tham & Lynch, 2019; Unterkofler, 2019). Among critical aspects identified by Kourgiantakis et al. concerning poor practice, they state 'Social work students do not have enough direct practice opportunities in the field, seldom observe field instructors' practice, and rarely have their own practice observed. This implies, that students are not receiving feedback on the extent to which they are demonstrating social work practice competencies' (Kourgiantakis et al., 2020, p. 433). Moreover, this particular statement refers to the function of field education during social work education, a topic explored in numerous studies. It became apparent, for example, that the professional supervision of students

varies considerably in quality or in some cases does not happen at all (Bogo, 2010; Caspersen & Smeby, 2021; Chen & Russell, 2019; Pithouse & Scourfield, 2002).

Beyond field education, the core of social work education involves multiple approaches and teaching methods for the integration of theoretical contents into the multifaceted practice of social work. A major challenge of social work education remains that social work students, for ethical reasons, cannot practice with actual clients in the field. Simultaneously, scholarly consensus exists that there must be a sustained exercising of the capacity for relating knowledge to the dynamic practice of social work, with and through feedback and guidance (Bogo, 2010; Kourgiantakis, Bogo, & Sewell, 2019; Kourgiantakis, Sewell, & Bogo, 2019; Unterkofler, 2020). Therefore, university opportunities to practise require that assignments shall cover realistic topics, but also that they remain under laboratory conditions, since it would be unethical to let students train with clients.

To address this dilemma of social work education, the simulation approach is promising. In simulated practice scenarios, essential opportunities for learning and experiencing can be facilitated. Simulations can model complex situations and 'replace or amplify real-world practice, which, otherwise can be too risky, unethical, costly, or difficult to organize' (Coninck et al., 2019, p. 264). With their realistic portrayals, simulations allow for a reasonable application of knowledge to professional problems (Bogo et al., 2014; Chernikova et al., 2020; Grossman et al., 2009; Heitzmann et al., 2019; Kourgiantakis et al., 2020).

As an educational approach, simulations are widely known, for instance, in medicine, teacher training and social work. Research across disciplines indicates that students benefit significantly by engaging with authentic practice situations (E. Bauer et al., 2020; Bogo et al., 2014; Chernikova et al., 2020; Coninck et al., 2019; Fischer & Opitz,

2022; Heitzmann et al., 2019; Kourgiantakis et al., 2020; Meredith et al., 2021). Simulations allow repeatable and observable interactions, as a foundation for systematic (individual) feedback and debriefing processes, which are considered as to be crucial in promoting comprehensive learning processes (Bogo et al., 2014; Heitzmann et al., 2019; Meredith et al., 2021). From an educational science perspective, simulation-based learning is commonly associated with theories of experiential learning (Kolb, 2015), problem-based learning (Kolodner et al., 2003), case-based learning (Egonsdotter & Bengtsson, 2022; Stark et al., 2011) or situated learning (Handley et al., 2007; Lave & Wenger-Trayner, 1991; Renkl et al., 1996). These approaches vary in terms of their objectives and their implementation in teaching. In case-based learning, for instance, the objective is to systematically allow students to practice with authentic cases, which is supposed to facilitate their abilities for theory-practice transformation. Moreover, students gather experiences and accumulate knowledge that can be drawn upon later (Stark et al., 2011; Thistlethwaite et al., 2012).

The overall design of the simulation environment is regarded as critical. Simulations need to be framed within appropriately designed learning environments to be effective. Such learning environments must be designed based on authentic and profession-relevant scenarios involving realistic assignments for the learners (Benbenishty, 1992; Bogo et al., 2014; Coninck et al., 2019; Heitzmann et al., 2019).

2.1.2. Simulations with standardised clients in social work education

There are several ways implementing simulation in social work education. Along with well-known formats such as role play, for example in classes with fellow students (Banach et al., 2020; Jones & Conner, 2021; Osborn & Costas, 2013; Widulle, 2009), innovative virtual simulations or simulations involving standardised clients (trained actors) are particularly valuable for practice professional interactions and assessments. With this

method, students work with well-trained actors simulating key situations of social work in live settings (Bogo et al., 2014; Dodds et al., 2018; Kourgiantakis, Bogo, & Sewell, 2019; Logie et al., 2013; Meredith et al., 2021), and in virtual formats such as computer-based simulations (Asakura et al., 2018; Baker & Jenney, 2023; Egonsdotter & Bengtsson, 2022). Key elements with standardised clients include elaborated scripts of professional practice situations in order to create an interaction as realistic as possible. In the context of simulated professional interactions, the relevance of a thorough debriefing phase is also emphasised (Kourgiantakis, Bogo, & Sewell, 2019; Kourgiantakis et al., 2020; Logie et al., 2013).

Simulated practice with standardised clients is regarded as being more realistic than role playing, for instance with other students, in part because of the experience of emotional intensity. When actively navigating dynamic and complex professional interactions, the individual learner takes on an important role. In simulated practice, factors such as prior knowledge and experience of all types as well as personal qualities can also be examined (Bogo et al., 2014; Chernikova et al., 2020; Egonsdotter & Bengtsson, 2022; Heitzmann et al., 2019; Heitzmann et al., 2022; Meredith et al., 2021; Weinhardt, 2015).

As these points suggest, simulations provide opportunities for a meaningful application of knowledge to professional practice. As simulations can model complex practice situations, they appear an appropriate method for engaging students in professional practice situations of social work. At the same time, they allow for students' activities to be closely observed and further analysed, thereby providing a valuable source of comprehensive feedback (Bogo et al., 2014; Dodds et al., 2018; Kourgiantakis, Bogo, & Sewell, 2019; Meredith et al., 2021).

In social work education, simulations with standardised clients usually target particular interventions or the practice of specific approaches, such as communication

techniques in counselling. Simulations as generalised learning environments are far less familiar and explored in social work education. More specifically, students have not been trained in a particular instruction or method beforehand, but they engage in the exercises by drawing on their existing know-how. While this variation of simulation-based learning offers a comprehensive insight into the students' development process, it also provides a differentiated opportunity for students to synchronise the competencies they have gained so far and their acquired knowledge with their personal patterns and preferences. As a result, simulation-based learning may be considered a reference point for self- and external evaluation of the professional development (Egonsdotter & Bengtsson, 2022; Heitzmann et al., 2022; Sicora, 2017; Auner, 2023 in press).

2.2. Assessment and Scientific Reasoning and Argumentation in Social Work

2.2.1. Assessment - a core activity in social work practice

The professional practice of social work focuses primarily on those situations where individuals or groups no longer have the capacity to handle social problems or life crises by themselves and thus require external expertise and support. Individual problem contexts (referred to as 'case'), are thus central to professional practice and institutionalised social work assistance. A professional assessment of a client's case with the goal of responding to a social problem practically demands a continuous process of relating scientific and practical knowledge to its specific context (Killick & Taylor, 2020; Milner et al., 2020; Parker, 2021; Rüegger, 2021; Schützeichel, 2007).

Killick and Taylor (2020), describe assessment as a 'purposeful, systematic, collaborative process of information gathering which supports analysis, recommendations and shared decision making' (Killick & Taylor, 2020, p. 5). This appraisal emphasises again the importance of a sustainable working relationship between the social worker and the client, because all case-relevant information is identified and processed within the

professional interaction. Further, as Parker notes, assessment is a continuous, evolving and dynamic process (Parker, 2021), which unfolds primarily through the triad of client, social worker and agency (Milner et al., 2020; Parker, 2021; Rüegger, 2021; Trotter, 2015). Assessment represents an overarching activity within social work which extends through all sectors and target groups and there are numerous assessment models and approaches (see e.g. Crisp & Lister, 2002; Holland, 2000; Milner et al., 2020; Parker, 2021; Trevithick, 2012b).

The present research project concentrates on assessment processes as an overarching activity in general and, how students approach and respond to assessment requirements in particular. Interrelated subjects covering far-reaching research areas such as social diagnostics (Ader & Schrapper, 2022; Buttner et al., 2018; Richmond, 1917), decision making and professional judgement (Helm, 2011; Helm & Roesch-Marsh, 2017; Taylor, 2017; Taylor & Whittaker, 2020), and so forth, have not been explicitly researched as part of this explorative investigation.

2.2.2. Assessment as a process of scientific reasoning and argumentation

A scientific foundation of assessment processes is a precondition for successful practice in social work (Bogo, 2018; Bogo et al., 2014; Killick & Taylor, 2020; Milner et al., 2020; Sommerfeld, 2014b; Whittington, 2007). The significance of scientific substantiation for professional practice emerges from the high level of accountability required of social workers in the assessment process (Milner et al., 2020; Parker, 2021; Rüegger, 2021; Trevithick, 2012b). In particular, given that it entails working with clients in demanding or precarious personal situations, social work has strong obligations concerning responsible treatment of those people involved and the sensitive information revealed in professional encounters. Social work is committed to providing the best assistance possible on the premise of not causing any kind of harm. In critical cases such as

risk assessments, especially, a scientifically informed, analytical process is crucial, covering every possible dimension of a case (Gambrill, 2013, 2019; Gibbs, 1991; Killick & Taylor, 2020; Milner et al., 2020; Parker, 2021; Whittington, 2007). Generally, in professional interactions between social workers and clients, the key assessment steps need to be clearly justified, so that sound assistance interventions can be planned. This is ultimately also required for other stakeholders, such as colleagues, public authorities or courts, since the social worker is accountable here. This highlights the fact that scientific reasoning and practice not only constitute a core capability of the twenty-first century (see for example Ehlers, 2020; Fischer et al., 2014; Trilling & Fadel, 2009), but are of great importance for the domain of social work in particular (Gambrill, 2013, 2019; Gibbs, 1991; McNeece & Thyer, 2004; Sommerfeld, 2014b; Trevithick, 2012a, 2012b).

Assessment as demanding activity of social work is a challenge not only for social work practice but also for social work education. Cultivating competencies associated with scientific reasoning and argumentation, such as developing targeted questions, aiming for objective criteria, formulating and testing hypotheses, and appraising empirical evidence, ought to be integral to education. Several models for systematically undertaking assessments have been developed, and have also been applied to instruction (Bogo, 2018; Crisp et al., 2004; Killick & Taylor, 2020; Milner et al., 2020). This provides students with a scaffold for conducting assessments, while also defining requirements for a scientifically informed procedure. Trevithick (2012) provides, for example, a model of a six-stage assessment process, with these stages understood as cyclical-processual, rather than linear:

1. Analysis and interpretation of received data and defining missing information
2. Problem clarification, contextualisation and prioritisation - based on (preliminary) hypotheses

3. Identification of the collaboration mode between social worker, client and if necessary further networks of assistance
4. Definition and justification of goals of the support
5. Definition of an implementation and monitoring strategy
6. Evaluation of the interventions and progress and, if necessary adjustments within the assistance (c.f. Trevithick, 2012b, p. 176).

Due to the unpredictable and dynamic nature of social work practice, required activities may vary significantly across the heterogeneous areas of social work. Nevertheless, all assessment steps need to be informed by professional knowledge, such as scientific and practice knowledge, to thoroughly analyse, comprehend and judge the information received and to verify or disprove the generated hypotheses (Gambrill, 2019; Milner et al., 2020; Trevithick, 2012b).

Such a process involving knowledge-based problem analysis and processing might be defined as a process of scientific-based reasoning and argumentation in social work practice. Using the interdisciplinary research framework of scientific reasoning and argumentation in education elaborated by Fischer et al., it could be argued that this constitutes an epistemic mode: ‘In this mode, learners aim at developing solutions for contextualised problems using scientific concepts, theories, and methods’ (Fischer et al., 2014, p. 32). Applying that statement to social work, it could be argued that not only students but also social work professionals strive to process various aspects of a social problem in the light of the information available at that moment. The processual, heuristic procedures of an assessment stress the value of a sustained assessment process itself. Although social workers strive for practical solutions to social problems, it is mostly the entire process of assistance which is in the forefront. Therefore, it is even more vital to

ensure a sustained foundation throughout the entire process (Killick & Taylor, 2020; Milner et al., 2020; Parker, 2021; Whittington, 2007).

In their model of scientific reasoning and argumentation, Fischer et al. present eight non-linear epistemic activities that could be elements of reasoning processes in several domains. The model proceeds from (1) problem identification: identifying a scientific or practical problem that calls for advancement in provided theories or methods to explain or resolve it; (2) problem identification is followed by the subsequent activity of questioning; (3) hypothesis generation: by creating hypotheses, based on credible models, current knowledge or empirical evidence, the epistemological process is oriented towards the objective of finding potential answers to the questions; (4) those hypotheses are supported by constructing and /or redesigning artefacts, built and modified as methodological tools for scientifically testing the generated hypotheses, ideally in an authentic environment; (5) evidence generation: through several scientific approaches for evidence generation such as hypothetico-deductive, inductive and deductive inquiries, the hypotheses and artefacts are examined; (6) evidence evaluation: the evidence obtained is evaluated and rated in light of existing scientific standards of a domain, which takes the process into (7) drawing conclusions, although as well as responding to the initial question, these may themselves to additional inquiries or to a redirection of the process; in the last step (8) communicating and scrutinising, the results are critically discussed and reviewed with others. By critically reviewing and scrutinising findings collaboratively, their quality is to be further enhanced.

A comparison of Trevithick's assessment model and Fischer et al.'s conceptual model of scientific reasoning and its underlying cognitive processes reveals several apparent parallels. For instance, the first steps in the assessment model are concerned with analysing and interpreting the data received from clients (and/or authorities) and identifying information missing from the case, followed by extensive problem clarification,

contextualisation and prioritisation of the client's case, on the basis of (preliminary) hypotheses (Trevithick, 2012b). This is equivalent to activities such as problem identification, questioning and hypothesis generation, in which practical or scientific problems are defined, particular questions raised and hypotheses generated in order allow further investigation (Fischer et al., 2014). Nevertheless, Sommerfeld critically stresses the fact that, due to their complexity, social work professional practice and assessments constitute a distinct epistemological mode which cannot simply be substituted with a strictly scientific approach. He argues that this particular reasoning must be integrated into a scientific mode (Sommerfeld, 2014b).

In general, it can be said, that both theoretical and practical learning of holistic assessment models and procedures may support scientific thinking, reasoning and argumentation in social work, above all if they are underpinned with practice exercises. As already indicated, it is essential for students to learn to relate theory to practice systematically and consolidate this understanding through reflection (Bogo, 2018; Cooper, 2009, 2011). Although a broad range of assessment practices and teaching approaches exists (Crisp et al., 2004; Crisp & Lister, 2002; Killick & Taylor, 2020; Milner et al., 2020; Navrátil, 2019), it remains unclear how students learn and perform assessments (Cooper, 2009; Crisp et al., 2004; Kourgiantakis et al., 2020).

2.2.3. Summary - exploring professional practice with students

The objective of this chapter was to provide a comprehensive theoretical foundation for the explorative investigation of social work students' action strategies. For a meaningful appraisal of a suitable approach to research, evidence on simulation-based learning with standardised clients in social work education were discussed under various aspects. Following on from this, concepts of assessment as a cross-cutting activity in social work was introduced. A crucial aspect was not just to understand assessment as a

methodological approach, but also to emphasise the importance of a scientific informed approach to the assessment processes in social work. This chapter argued that assessment involves processes of scientific reasoning and argumentation, by comparison of a social work assessment model (Trevithick, 2012b) and an interdisciplinary conceptual model of scientific reasoning and argumentation (Fischer et al., 2014). Furthermore, it was also highlighted that learning to conduct assessments in social work represents a highly demanding task, not only for educators, but above all for students.

Drawing on these detailed theoretical accounts, particularly chapter 1.3 (professional practice in social work) and on this chapter 2 (exploring professional practice with students), the comprehensive area of research was elaborated. Based on these insights, the methodological approach of the grounded theory methodology as one of the core elements of this thesis and the encompassing research design are detailed in the following chapter.

3. Methodological Approach and Methods

This chapter provides a comprehensive overview on the qualitative research approach, along with the framework and procedures of grounded theory methodology and its implications for the research. The in-depth analyses presented in this dissertation are anchored in a three-year period of investigation incorporating distinct research procedures of grounded theory methodology, both of which are reflected throughout the two key studies examined in this dissertation.

3.1. A Qualitative Approach to Research Complex Actions

The aim of this study was to gain a comprehensive understanding of students' approaches und strategies of professional practice in social work, and to map these approaches in breadth and depth. Considering the limited empirical evidence about how students apply and implement the content they are taught to specific practice situations of social work, a qualitative, open-explorative research approach was indicated. In qualitative research, researchers strive to profoundly understand the experiences of the participants involved in the study as thoroughly as possible, by reconstructing their subjective meanings (Flick, 2022, 2023; Helfferich, 2011; Przyborski & Wohlrab-Sahr, 2021; Silverman, 2022).

In light of my specific research interests, my intention was to explore many distinctive characteristics of professional practice, focusing on the students' actions, reflections, and perceptions. The present studies did not seek to measure the research topic in quantitative terms by testing theoretically pre-structured hypotheses. Thus, this analytical research targets at a 'conceptual representativity' (Strübing, 2021, p. 35) by proposing a thorough theoretical explanation of social work students' practices. The research approach of grounded theory methodology with its interactionist stance was identified as highly appropriate for accomplishing these overarching aims of this study (Clarke, 2019; 2015; Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strübing, 2021).

3.2. Theoretical Potential of the Grounded Theory Approach

The grounded theory methodology[2] was invented in the late 1960s by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss to provide a rigorous, systematic foundation for qualitative research and for theory development of middle range theories (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Grounded theory is highly diversified nowadays and includes various epistemological orientations, approaches and methods (for the historical background and the various development lines of grounded theory, readers are referred to Bryant, 2017; Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

The Grounded theory methodology (according to the pragmatistic orientation of Corbin and Strauss) places phenomena and processes of social actions at the core of analysis and allows for the systematic identification and conceptualisation of actions and experiences. Through a multifaceted analytical process, in which data collection and research analysis are interrelated, a theory is developed which is explicitly grounded in the empirical data (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). This analytical process comprises a systematic and comparative procedure, which entails an inductive, but also deductive and abductive approach throughout the inquiry (Bryant, 2017; Charmaz, 2014; Kruse, 2015; Suddaby, 2006). Stressing the inductive stance emphasises grounded theory's focus on the empirical data. Deduction is defined as deriving theoretical implications from continuous data analysis and verifying them with data. Initially, Corbin and Strauss regarded the inductive focus as being at the core of grounded theory. In their further advancement of grounded theory, Strauss and Corbin highlight the reciprocal nature between inductive and deductive features to also account for the researcher's subjectivity (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; 1990).

[2] I consider the GTM to be both a method, in the sense of a particular research framework with techniques and procedures for data collection and analysis, as well as a methodology, which encompasses an explicit justification for the research approach.

‘Sensitivity does not mean forcing meanings on data. At all times, the researcher must keep in mind that findings are the result of the interplay between data and what a researcher brings to the analysis, and all interpretations should be considered provisional until supported by additional data or verified with participants.’ (Corbin & Strauss, 2015, p. 78). At this point, also the notion of theoretical sensitivity is regarded to be central, being characterised as researcher’s abilities to discover fine nuances of the data and the reflective utilisation of prior knowledge and experiences throughout the analytical process. Moreover, scientific literature should and can improve the theoretical sensitivity of the research process. Theoretical knowledge applied in the research process serves this sensibility but needs to be critically evaluated against the empirical data (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Strauss & Corbin, 1996). Theoretical sensitivity is supposed to enhance the emergence of new insights during the research process, which is relevant for the abduction. Abduction signifies the sustained reciprocal action between these new insights, empirical data, and literature (Bryant, 2017; Strübing, 2021; Suddaby, 2006). In parallel, the role of creativity is also attributed to abduction within the analyses (Charmaz, 2014; Reichertz, 2007).

Above all, the analytical process also unfolds through the writing of memos. These are considered as an essential part of grounded theory. Lempert identifies the essential function as follows: ‘Memo writing is the methodological link, the distillation process, through which the researcher transforms data into theory. In the memo writing process, the researcher analytically interprets data. Through sorting, analyzing, and coding the ‘raw’ data in memos, the Grounded Theorist discovers emergent social patterns. By writing memos continuously throughout the research process, the researcher explores, explicates, and theorizes these emergent patterns’ (Lempert, 2007, p. 245). As the analysis process progresses, the focus of memos may change. Early on, these are closer to questions about particular issues in the data. At a later stage, for example, literature might be included to

reflect on findings. Throughout this wide-ranging analytic process, researchers are in constant interaction with their data to subsequently map out and examine all characteristics and potential theoretical explanations for the findings (Bryant, 2017; Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Analysis as theorising, as proposed by the grounded theory methodology, allows for the conceptualisation of experiences and actions, which is the guiding rationale for the present grounded theory study on social work students' professional practices.

3.3. Data Collection Methods

Complex research questions involving human (inter-)actions necessitate comprehensive data collection methods. Grounded theory methodology is defined as an integrative approach to data collection in which combining a wide range of data collection methods is not only reasonable, but also beneficial for achieving conceptual density (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; 1990). This section presents the conceptual superstructure for the research design used to investigate students' professional practice. Further, the resulting core methods of the data collection are outlined.

As stated previously, the aim of this research is to empirically assess how students navigate complex and dynamic situations of professional practice in social work. To cover complex social actions comprehensively, different perspectives on the same object were required, both in data collection and analysis (Flick, 2022, 2023; Przyborski & Wohlrab-Sahr, 2021). Capturing students' actions directly, along with their perceptions and justifications behind their actions, proved of immense importance. To be able to empirically detect such actions and reflections, a research design was required that would realistically represent situations of professional practice in social work.

A challenge involved developing a superstructure for the research design that could model the dynamic and complexity of professional practice, encourages students to engage in the role of a social worker, while generating comparable and varied data. To address

these demands on the research design, I developed a comprehensive simulation of a social work practice scenario. Hence, this simulation of professional practice constitutes the conceptual framework upon which we generated the central data sources: protocols of observations during the simulation, transcripts of the video recordings and individual interviews with the students. In this section, I will illustrate the simulation framework and then describe briefly the different types of data collected.

3.3.1. Simulation with standardised clients as research superstructure

As introduced, I employed the method of simulation as a research framework to allow students to engage in a realistic practical experience. The simulation's selected area of social work represents a one-on-one consultation with a client during an initial assessment process, situated in the general social service in Germany (for an overview see Merchel, 2019). This way of proceeding proved to be reasonable on two counts: For one, students were thereby encouraged to facilitate the professional interaction and assessment, drawing on their individual backgrounds of previous knowledge, competencies, perceptions, and strategies. Second, this simulation provided a concrete foundation for reflection about their experience (Gruber, 2021).

The simulation based on a highly detailed case vignette (Benbenishty, 1992; Longhofer et al., 2017; Wilks, 2004), portrayed by a trained actress (standardised client). Both the case vignette and the elaborated script, including a role portrayal were examined and then verified independently by two highly experienced social workers. The underlying scenario of the case vignette focused on a single working mother facing multiple stresses, whose post-separation economic situation is precarious and contact between her children (ages 5 and 13) and the father has not yet been clarified.

The developed case vignette was not supposed to pose an overstraining task for the participants. Rather, I wanted to depict a realistic scenario of multiple social problems to

achieve an adequate degree of reality on both a factual and a psychosocial level. Thus, the case based on a reasonable set of tasks[3] for higher semester students. In my professional estimation, advanced social work students at bachelors' level should be capable of recognising and addressing at least some of the important sub-aspects within this case, such as the financial stability issue (e.g. lack of child support), custody and access arrangements of the child's father, overburdening of the mother. Here, I would like to stress again that the intention was not about testing whether they detected all these topics. Instead, the focus here was on determining which of these aspects were addressed and how students processed them. Moreover, this broad, explorative design of the simulation also addressed presumed variations in curricula across the four different German universities I recruited participants from.

Following extensive multilevel coaching of the engaged actress and a test run during the pilot phase of this study (June-July 2020), the simulation procedures and case vignette were adjusted with the involvement of an expert circle. In this instance, a crucial issue was to provide students the opportunity to evolve in their role as a social worker, while also presenting key stimuli of the case vignette comparably. Conceptually, and especially in the training process together with the actress, I approached this as follows: To enable data comparability, the actress was instructed to represent key elements to make sure the core aspects of the case come across, but then to follow the individual guidance of the students in their role as social workers. More specifically, for example, if students decide upon certain issues, those topics remain the midpoint, to which the actress needs to respond with flexibility. In cases where the topics focused on extended beyond the explanations provided

[3]In this context, I refer to the core curriculum of social work from the German Association of Social Work (DGSA). For details see DGSA - Deutsche Gesellschaft für Soziale Arbeit (2016).

in the script, for instance, by asking more detailed questions regarding the father of the children, the actress was instructed to briefly represent again the main topics of the assessment. However, the goal with this approach was to ensure that the students would be able to unfold their individual professional practices and pursue their respective strategies.

Through this conceptual superstructure, the overall research aims of examining the possible spectrum of professional actions in both breadth and depth ought to be achieved. Using of this approach resulted in these main sources of data: observations of each simulation, the video recordings and subsequent transcription of practice simulation, plus the data collected from interviews.

3.3.2. Observing professional practice - the ethnographic approach

As has been shown above, this framework, consistent with grounded theory, was designed to facilitate an integrative data collection approach for gathering meaningful data for analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). As such, FitzGerald and Mills (2022) argue for the application of ethnographic observation methods: ‘The inclusion of ethnographic observational data within grounded theory designs allows for the explicit inclusion of context in all its human complexity.’ (FitzGerald & Mills, 2022, p. 8).

Observation methods of various kinds are commonly attributed with ethnography and anthropology (e.g. Beer & König, 2020; Fetterman, 2020; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Quinn, 2005). Most ethnographic observational methods share the fundamental concern of observing and experiencing interactions and behaviour in everyday life first-hand (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). ‘Ethnography selects for interaction and the interpretation of such interactions in their naturalistic unfolding, it aims to learn about how and why people behave, think, and make meaning as they do in the daily unfolding of life.’ (Timmermans & Tavory, 2007, p. 497). This quote emphasises the importance of observing (professional) practice in order to gain a better understanding of how and why.

One of the strengths within systematic observations is that researchers are given direct access to details of social interactions - under the premise that humans are acting authentically to a large extent. The level of involvement of the researcher within the observational environment can range from mere monitoring to participatory observation to full engagement in the field of research (Fetterman, 2020; FitzGerald & Mills, 2022; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Through video recordings of the particular situation, observations and therefore details of actions can be repeatedly reviewed real-time (Derry et al., 2018; Knoblauch & Schnettler, 2012).

For present research, I adjusted the aforementioned premises of ethnographic observations and modified them for the overall research framework. The adjustments mainly consisted in the fact that I had not conducted long-term field research, as is common in many strands of ethnography (Beer & König, 2020; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). As noted, my approach was to draw on the strength of non-participating observational research (Flick, 2023) to intensively explore students' concrete actions, in a setting which is closely resembling an actual situation of professional practice in social work. My observations were thus based on two essential foundations: Firstly, on the direct (non-participatory) observations during each simulation, i.e. observing the interaction between the students (in their role as social workers) and the actress as first-time-client, which are documented in short observation protocols (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Przyborski & Wohlrab-Sahr, 2021). Secondly, on the observation and subsequent analysis of the video recordings of each individual simulation and the corresponding transcripts.

3.3.3. Reflection of professional practice - problem-centred interviews

A substantial data source consisted in the data gathered from interviewing the students. The interview, in its various forms, is one of the most common methods of data collection in qualitative research (Flick, 2023; Helfferich, 2011; Kruse, 2015; Przyborski &

Wohlrab-Sahr, 2021; Silverman, 2022). In a nutshell, the various forms mainly differ in their alignment between openness and structure, which results in unstructured, semi-structured or structured interviews (Brinkmann, 2020; Flick, 2022; Helfferich, 2011; Kruse, 2015). In comparison to standardised surveys, qualitative interviews are designed to enable interviewees to verbally unfold their personal explanations and interpretations of a certain topic (Kruse, 2015).

The problem-centred interview approach is a dialogue-based method for reconstructing knowledge concerning relevant problems (c.f. Witzel & Reiter, 2012, p. 12). Problem-centred interviews are typically semi-structured, meaning they are guideline-based with open-narrative elements. The consideration of theoretical and problem-specific prior knowledge in the context of a specific problem is distinctive to this approach. The researcher may also include own theoretical knowledge to facilitate the interview and establish a dialogue about the particular themes (Kruse, 2015; Witzel & Reiter, 2012).

When developing the interview guideline for this study, it was also important for me to consider crucial criticism of this method. The interview's predefined structure may be limiting the participants' expressions. Simultaneously, given the potential proximity to the realm under investigation, the researcher must be highly reflective as well as accountable and transparent about one's role in the interview process (Charmaz, 2020; Helfferich, 2011). To carefully address these concerns, multiple test runs were conducted with an expert circle and I implemented adjustments in response to their suggestions. Furthermore, it was important to create a confidential and trustful environment for conducting the interviews, enabling the students to share their experiences openly and authentically (Brinkmann, 2020; Helfferich, 2011; Kruse, 2015).

Given the context of this research, the (individual) experience of (simulated) professional practice in social work is the essential 'problem' for the purpose of the

interview. Therefore, the designed interview guideline focused on students' reflections of this experience, along their perceptions, justifications and feelings behind their actions. The interview guidelines were intended to foster three central aspects within the interview dialogue:

- Capturing the individual experiences of the professional practice situation (for example: How did you experience the situation? What was challenging for you? What came easy to you in that situation?)
- Linking the simulation experience to academic content and prior professional (including internships) and/or volunteer experiences (for instance: Thinking about your personal background, what prior experience, personally or professionally, has informed your processing in this situation?)
- Additional thoughts and questions arising from the simulation, including questions about the simulation method with standardised clients

The interviews were conducted immediately following the individual appointments of the simulation and lasted approximately 25-30 minutes in each case. After each appointment, the video recordings of the simulations and interviews were transcribed. About the transcription rules applied: When transcribing the videos and interviews, I decided to adopt a slightly polished transcription that moderately corrects for dialect, slang, and fillers, to improve readability. Non-verbal elements such as laughing, nodding or other noticeable gestures from the videos were integrated into the transcripts (Fuß & Karbach, 2019).

Table 1 briefly summarises types and quantities regarding the data collected and illustrates the entire body of data.

Table 3.1

overview of data resources

Data collection period: June-December 2020	**Observation protocols**	**Video recordings of each simulation**	**Problem-centred interviews**
Quantity	25 Observed simulations	25 Video recordings (approx.22-24 minutes each) Over 550 minutes of video data material	25 Interviews (approx. 25-30 minutes each) Over 650 minutes of interview material
Data management	Observation protocols	Simulations video-taped and fully transcribed	Interviews recorded and fully transcribed

Generating of data by different methods related to the same research area is referred to as data triangulation. Analytically comparing multiple perspectives has the potential of increasing the validity of the data (Flick, 2022, 2023). To facilitate data triangulation, I collected additional data such as observation protocols, (written) feedback from the actress and students after their assignment, and notes from the individual debriefing session with each student.

3.4. Sampling Strategy and Saturation

Theoretical sampling is an important component of grounded theory in terms of sampling and case selection. By analysing the data starting with the initial data gathered, a researcher shall proceed based on these emerging data-driven concepts. Researchers are encouraged to identify those research sites and populations best suited for the development of concepts for a data-grounded theory by taking an open and flexible approach (Bryant, 2017; Corbin & Strauss, 2015). This arises primarily through a successive and processual manner. The sample and sample size are ideally not predetermined, but rather emerge

sequentially during the process. This also implies flexibility to adjust methods of data collection continually, like placing more targeted questions within an interview (Charmaz, 2014; 2015; Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Morse, 2007). 'The purpose of theoretical sampling is to collect data from places, people or events that will maximize opportunities to develop concepts in terms of their properties and dimensions, uncover variations, and identify relationships between concepts' (Corbin & Strauss, 2015, p. 134). This process is continued until theoretical saturation is achieved as no new insights, i.e., categories and relevant themes, are revealed in the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Morse, 2007).

For the present research, I needed to modify the sampling procedure regarding the target group itself. Initially, I intended to implement theoretical sampling to the extent possible as proposed by grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014; Strauss & Corbin, 1996). The period for collecting the data for this research was scheduled for the month of July to December 2020. The Covid-19 pandemic's outbreak in early 2020 affected data collection decisions and also limited theoretical sampling options. Given the uncertain pandemic situation with its changing restrictions, I decided to collect as much data as possible. Aiming to explore professional practices of social work students, the overall target group was predefined. Nevertheless, student recruitment adhered to the maxim of achieving a high variability, in age, gender, study progress, and different universities, to allow for maximum contrasts according to grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Kruse, 2015; Suddaby, 2006). Furthermore, I integrated theoretical sampling across the various data collected. The empirical findings of the first study (using an ethnographic approach) resulted in a more focused and defined approach strategy for the second study (interview approach). As a result, the two studies in this thesis are epistemologically linked.

The students for the sample were actively recruited through in-person presentations of the intended project at (online) classes, networks of lecturers and professors, university-

related social media, and official university e-mail services. At that time, all participants were enrolled in a social work bachelor's degree program in one of the four participating Universities of Applied Sciences in Germany. The final sample included 25 social work students (n = 25, *Mage*= 24.12, *MDage* = 23, *SD* = 4.52; Gender distribution: 20 female / 5 male students). Study progress extended from 3rd to 7th semester, with a focus upon semester 5-6.

I also pursued the strategy of being guided by the concept of theoretical sampling based on the data I had gathered (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Kruse, 2015). For example, based on the current state of analysis, I would determine which sections to consider relevant and with which focus to proceed.

3.5. Data Analysis

This section describes my proceeding of data analysis employing grounded theory procedures by exemplifying the comprehensive processes involved in coding. The process of coding data is the essential process by which the analysis is gradually brought to a higher level of abstraction and thus the core for advancing theory building (Holton, 2007; Saldaña, 2016, 2020; Strübing, 2021). While data sources may vary, the process of systematically analysing the collected data remains consistent.

In Corbin and Strauss' methodological alignment, they propose coding process involving three types coding, open, axial, and selective coding, along with the other analytical procedures like the constant comparison of data and concepts, that I outlined earlier (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; 1990; Strauss & Corbin, 1996). 'The iterative process of moving back and forth between empirical data and emerging analysis makes the collected data progressively more focused and the analysis successively more theoretical' (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007, p. 1). The cyclic processual procedure resulting in the systematic abstraction of data towards a theorising is highlighted in this quote and illustrates the data

analysis procedures applied in grounded theory. While open and axial coding constitute the direct iterative-cyclical analyses proximate to the data, the selective coding targets the conceptual-abstract theory generation (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Holton, 2007).

3.5.1. Open coding process - conceptualising data

The most exploratory coding procedure of the analytical process is open coding. Identifying significant concepts contained in the data and forming preliminary (tentative) groups of concepts for categories are critical to this analytic effort. The purpose behind open coding is to generate multiple concepts and categories to capture many different aspects of the same topic and ultimately avoid narrowing down the scope of the analysis too early (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; 1990).

In the present investigation, the open coding process was initially very exploratory employing a line-by-line analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). For me, the leading question at the beginning of the open coding was: What are students actually doing in their role as social workers during the simulated practice situation? How are they acting? How are they interacting with the client? Which themes are they following and what are they leaving out? I purposefully chose datasets from five students from very different backgrounds for preliminary analyses in order to address those questions through a micro-analysis of professional practice. Concurrently, I used the method of constant comparison and wrote memos about my data analysis reflections. Memos constitute an important analytical element within the context of theory development (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Lempert, 2007; Strübing, 2021).

Table 3.2

example for open coding process: conceptualising expressions form the data through in-vivo-codes and memos

Expressions from the data	In-vivo-codes	Memo
What is the most urgent thing for you today? (…) would it be more important to you that we first sort out the financial situation? What is the most urgent thing for you today? (Hanna[4], paragraph 21)	The most urgent thing for you	This code implies: By asking different kinds of questions, the social worker seemingly attempts to assess her client's needs. My first impression is that she uses the various questions to make it easier for the client to express her needs. At the same time, the student, in her role as a social worker, points out where assistance might be provided.
And from what I've read about you, (…)-, there are many things that affect you. And I try to offer you support, so that you regain a bit of perspective. (…). But it's also about making sure that you come out of this stronger than before and that you have both feet on the ground again. (Tamara, paragraph 12)	Regain perspective Making sure that you come out of this stronger than before	This code implies: Here it appears to me that the social worker has a specific goal or course of action in mind. These sentences seem rather ascriptive. How does she know that the client is not strong right now? Social worker does not ask the client about her needs.

Analytical memo concerning different approaches to assessing needs:

These brief segments and in-vivo extracts may represent different ways of addressing the needs of the client. What is noticeable in expressions out of the data is that quote no. 1 mainly uses open, dialogue-oriented questioning, whereas quote no. 2 displays no questioning, but rather a monologue orientation.

My attention was drawn to the statements in quote no. 2 that are presumably (that is my initial hypothesis here) intended to encourage and motivate the client. Noteworthy is that there was no previous discussion about needs and that the passage of the (monologue) pointing out perspectives was long (in comparison to other students).

Task for further analyses: I should more precisely analyse the various aspects of need assessment - including datasets from other students.

[4] For the protection of personal data, all names of students were pseudonymised.

To organise the entire coding process with the huge amount of data systematically and traceable, I used MAXQDA 2020 analysis software.

3.5.2. Axial coding – analysing relations between data

The axial coding procedure is utilised to further substantiate the analysed categories and identify potential relationships between them. Therefore, after open coding, data are recombined to consolidate categories and to form subcategories (Bryant, 2017; Strauss & Corbin, 1996; Strübing, 2021). Strauss and Corbin (2015) aptly summarise these actions of researchers as follows: 'They are locating and linking action-interaction within a framework of subconcepts that give it meaning and enable it to explain what interactions are occurring, and why and what consequences real or anticipated are happening because of action-interaction' (Corbin & Strauss, 2015, p. 156). This quotation highlights the relevance of axial coding to comprehensively analyse the conditions of a categories to its subcategories. Strauss and Corbin propose the application of the so-called coding paradigm to systematically elaborate the contexts, actions and interactions and consequences (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Strauss & Corbin, 1996).

In the process of axial coding, I was particularly interested in the conditions, consequences of students' professional practices in the assessment and in the (development of the professional) interaction between students and the client. Throughout the heuristic procedure, I identified critical phenomena and conceptually linked and consolidated the categories. For instance, it became increasingly clear that aspects of assuming the role of a social worker, as well as building a professional working relationship and conducting the assessment, thus case processing, were central phenomena. A wide range of characteristics emerged around these key phenomena, for example, varying approaches in shaping the interaction between the social worker (students) and their client. For example, during in-depth analysis, it became evident that the clients' statements about her current situation and

needs were handled quite differently. Themes of interpretative power of the client's situation and of decision-making authority became increasingly evident. Through axial coding, the category dealing with structural asymmetry was then underpinned empirically by successively analysing these different approaches. The following example illustrates some of the underlying concepts for this category briefly:

Table 3.3

example of the classification of subcategories / categories

Category	
Dealing with structural asymmetry	
consolidate or deconstruct asymmetry as social worker	
Subcategory (example)	
Decision-making power	
Concepts Decision-making power is with the client	**Concepts** Decision-making power is with the social worker
Empirical evidence from the data	Empirical evidence from the data
Would it be more important to you if you spent more time with Ida instead of her staying longer in kindergarten? (Antonia paragraph 32-36)	I think (…) you have to talk about this with the kids, of course. You cannot keep that quiet. And the kids surely experience that you are burdened right now. (Tamara, paragraph 34)
Okay. Mhm. So, what would you say, what do you actually need? Where could I help you? (Joris, paragraph 31)	Of course, it's always better if you tell him first. Because when I call now and say, 'Hello, this is the youth welfare office. We had your wife here', is too straight to the point. (...) You could tell him that you are overwhelmed and are getting help right now. (Marie, paragraph 50)

As the analysis of data and concepts progressed towards greater abstraction, memos grew more theoretical, while sketches and diagrams of the complex interrelations became

increasingly important. I gradually reached theoretical saturation by contextualising, modifying, and reshaping the data in-depth to develop a conceptual frame with all its possible properties and variations (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; 1990; Strübing, 2021).

3.5.3. Selective coding - integrating categories under a key category

This previously described process of saturating and contextualising the categories constitutes the foundation for selective coding. The essential target of selective coding is to identify and define a key category (or core category), in other words, a thoroughly central phenomena of the entire analysis. 'A core category is a concept that is abstract and broad enough to be representative of all participants in the study. In addition, it is the category among others that seems to have the greatest explanatory power and the ability to link the other categories to it and to each other' (Corbin & Strauss, 2015, pp. 188–189). Selective coding involves prioritising the analysis and making empirically justified decisions whether to include or exclude particular categories to define the remaining reasonably to identify the key category. The developed key categories are considered tentative until their explanatory power can be confirmed by examination against the data and existing literature (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Holton, 2007; Strübing, 2021). In this way, relevant categories are integrated theoretically in a coherent overarching theory. Such developed and grounded theory might be expressed in various ways, such as a concept, framework or model (J. Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Strauss & Corbin, 1996).

For selective coding, I engaged with existing theories and relevant studies more explicitly in order to find scientific reference points to reflect on and further validate my consolidated analytical concepts and categories developed through axial coding. Furthermore, I performed additional re-analyses to further strengthen the empirical consistency around the key categories. This approach enabled me a more targeted proceeding for integrating the relevant categories in the respective key categories, and thus

ultimately for developing the final theoretical model of my studies. Finally, this approach led to the challenging process of selective coding and to the development of the framework for presenting my empirical findings.

This thesis is composed by two consecutive grounded theory research studies which represent two key categories. Both findings are expressed as theoretical conceptual models, each encompassing a continuum of students' patterns of action and reflection within the context of professional social work practice. During theory development, it became evident that no typifications of students' practices could be created, since the spectrum of patterns in professional practice was enormously diverse. Moreover, students frequently demonstrated patterns across the whole continuum. Deciding on a continuum of action and reflection patterns was intended to reflect this plurality.

3.6. Research Ethics

This section provides a concise overview of ethical considerations and their implementation throughout the research process of this research. I would like to provide information on data security and the integrity of the participants. After this, I will outline my position as a researcher.

3.6.1. Data protection, confidentiality and integrity of the target group

Considerations of integrity are critical in qualitative research, particularly when it involves individuals (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Hammersley, 2012). Questions of data protection, confidentiality and anonymity should thus be addressed comprehensively throughout the research process and have to be part of an agreement (informed consent) with the participants (Hopf, 2004; Kiegelmann, 2020). These issues were of particular concern to me when planning the research, especially in light of collecting, processing, and archiving highly sensitive data such as video recordings. Due to the sensitivity of the data, I opted to apply a high level on anonymisation right from the transcription process.

Original personal data of each data set are only accessible to me. To guarantee greater privacy of the target group, I made the decision, together with my doctoral supervisors, to refrain from publishing even the anonymised data sources (e.g. in open science repositories).

Study participation was strictly voluntary. All students were repeatedly reminded of their right to withdraw from the study any time without explanation and signed the informed consent. Also, the actress signed a confidentiality contract for the privacy of the students. Students with whom I had a teaching or counseling affiliation were not permitted to participate in order to avoid role entanglements.

All these factors were taken fully into account in a detailed concept for privacy prior to data collection (January-June 2020). The Interdisciplinary Ethics Committee for Research at the Catholic University of Applied Sciences Munich has approved this study, under the registration number 2020/N8 (dated 15.06.2020).

3.6.2. My position as a researcher

In most qualitative research methods, proximity to the field and to the participants are inherent, for instance in research settings where participants are asked to share experiences openly. Researchers (in grounded theory) are held accountable for their position in research processes to self, participants, and the profession (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Suddaby, 2006). Strauss and Corbin ask for transparency in light of the researcher's prior experiences and potential effects on the research process (Strauss & Corbin, 1996). A continuous process of (self-)reflection on one's own experiences, personal world view, prejudices, and beliefs is essential for this. Transparent disclosure of these considerations is one measure in grounded theory for preventing harm to the researched target group (Helfferich, 2011; Kiegelmann, 2020; Suddaby, 2006).

To address potential entanglements resulting from my own experiences as a lecturer in social work education as well as my own professional perspective on professional practice, I engaged in a continual reflection process with several expert circles about my field role at the outset of the research. Of particular significance were the reflections on not including normative judgements or ratings of the students' actions when analysing the data. Primary objective was a comprehensive mapping, not an assessment of their performance. Therefore, it was important to develop a high sensitivity for a descriptive, non-judgemental, labelling of the codes, especially in grounded theory analysis coding processes.

As a researcher, I was aware of my responsibility to the students who participated, especially given the experimental, qualitative research approach I used. I acknowledge, that processes of professional development of students may be characterised by vulnerability and uncertainty. Moreover, I was conscious that by participating, students were exposing themselves to this (mostly) novel method of simulation. Additionally, for many of the students it was their first one-to-one assessment as a 'social worker'. It was therefore critical for me to be very responsible with the data generated, while also providing an extensive debriefing session for the students to reflect on this experience and articulate any questions or concerns.

3.7. Evaluation Criteria for Quality of Research in Grounded Theory

Due to differing research rationales, the classic evaluation criteria used in standardised quantitative research, such as validity, reliability and objectivity, are not applicable to qualitative research[5] (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Helfferich, 2011; Steinke, 2004; Strübing, 2021). According to the quantitative paradigm, research instruments

[5] For concise insights regarding the discourse of qualitative evaluation criteria readers are referred to Corbin and Strauss (2015); Flick (2023); Steinke (2004); Strübing (2021)

should produce identical measurement results using the same instruments and target group, regardless of context. Qualitative data is contextual - replications, for instance of interviews, can never be identical. Helfferich (2011) states, that the lack of objectivity is not necessarily a deficiency, but rather a premise of qualitative research. Thus, rather than objectivity in the quantitative sense, the goal is an adequate approach with subjectivity (Helfferich, 2011). In other words, evaluating qualitative research is about intersubjective comprehensibility, not intersubjective verifiability (Steinke, 2004). Two central aspects will be considered to reflect on the quality and validity of my research (adapted from Helfferich, 2011; Steinke, 2004): Methodological rigour in the context of grounded theory and actions taken to address subjectivity in an accountable, and transparent way.

3.7.1. Methodological rigor and comprehensibility

As a systematic method, grounded theory aims to achieve a high level of rigour and comprehensibility throughout the entire research process by applying a variety of different techniques and procedures (Bryant, 2017; Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Oktay, 2012). Continuous verification is thus seen as a function of the iterative-cyclical processes of theory development in grounded theory (Strübing, 2021). This is primarily accomplished through the writing of analytic-theoretical memos and the ongoing verification and validation of emerging empirical concepts and categories, such as through the method of constant comparison (Strauss & Corbin, 1996).

As elaborated in chapter 3 (3.5 Data Analysis), I adhered to the indicated approaches of grounded theory to the greatest extent possible, or adjusted them with critical reflection according to my research conditions. A critical aspect has been gaining a thorough understanding of this methodology and its methods, and subsequently aligning my entire research project accordingly. For both studies presented in this thesis, the coding and analysis procedures proposed by Corbin and Strauss were carefully and rigorously

followed. Furthermore, I wanted to ensure maximum transparency throughout the whole data analysis process by documenting the process and progress of investigation (please see chapter 3.5 and both empirical studies of this doctoral thesis). This study used multiple methods to collect various types of data in order to facilitate data triangulation and thus increase data validity (Flick, 2022, 2023).

To ensure methodological rigor in terms of comparability and comprehensibility of the data collections methods. Therefore, I established standards for each key section of data collection (Flick, 2022, 2023; Morse, 2022; Silverman, 2022): All students were introduced to the same case scenario presented in the simulation and all of them were asked the same questions to a high degree. Prior to data collection, I evaluated all instruments and methodological approaches for adequacy and appropriateness with diverse experts and my doctoral supervisors. After several trials with students during the pilot study phase (June-July 2020), the interview guide and simulation with the actress were modified. Additionally, the research questions were continually refined prior to the main study. To further enhance quality, I established frequent interim evaluations with various expert circles to reflect on critical phases of the entire analysis and theory development process.

3.7.2. Intersubjective comprehensibility

Transparency is also considered necessary for the researcher's stance in interpretative qualitative research, as previously discussed. Among others, Steinke (2004), emphasises this in relation to quality evaluation and advises critical reflection on potential influences (Alveson et al., 2022; Helfferich, 2011; Steinke, 2004). To control for potential bias, I engaged in continuous reflection processes using a variety of strategies throughout the entire research process (Alveson et al., 2022; Charmaz, 2014, 2020). As a result, it was critical to maintain a critical mindset throughout the interpretative coding process and to seek the advice of expert circles on a regular basis. I define expert circles in terms of

occasions where I presented and discussed extracts of my data material, coding, hypotheses developed or theoretical considerations to a wider audience consisting of professors, doctoral students and other experts and have thus provided a 'Committee and Institutional Review Board' (Corbin & Strauss, 2015, p. 42 original emphasis). Several research colloquia provided me with the opportunity to participate in this intensive debate and reflection (for example, the colloquium at the Catholic University of Applied Sciences in Munich, Germany and the regular meetings of my international doctoral school REASON at the Ludwig-Maximilians-University Munich, Germany). Furthermore, as part of the continuous research process with grounded theory, I participated in a weekly exchange with two other PhD students in which we critically discussed methodology, research approaches, and findings. These 'wider networks in our qualitative work' (c.f. Flick, 2022, p. 17) circles, proved to be extremely impactful, particularly during crucial stages of the research process, and are thus a cornerstone of the methodological integrity of my research.

3.8. Summary on Methodology

This chapter covered a transparent and detailed outline on the research methodology and the different methods implemented. This chapter on methodology aimed to provide a comprehensible account of the entire research process, demonstrating how the methodological requirements of grounded theory were implemented and applied throughout my studies. The importance of a qualitative research approach to investigate complex actions and interactions was addressed at the outset. To better comprehend the overarching research design underlying the present studies, the conceptual superstructure was elaborated and the specific instruments of data collection were anchored theoretically and their practical implementation then explained.

With this research design and through the systematic procedures of grounded theory data analysis, it was possible to empirically assess and examine how students handle

complex and dynamic situations of professional practice in social work. This section also addressed major concerns of research ethics. In addition, evaluation criteria for grounded theory research were discussed. Against these criteria, the process of data analysis carried out in the presented studies was critically appraised.

Part II: Empirical Studies

The main objective of this explorative research is to analyse and conceptualise the spectrum of students' approaches and strategies for professional practice in-depth, with a further objective to identify potential influential factors for professional practice. Drawing on this research questions, two consecutive empirical studies were conducted. The first study presented below is a microanalysis, based on direct observations (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Knoblauch & Schnettler, 2012) of students' professional actions and strategies, by using an ethnographic approach. The first study addressed this research questions: How do social work students act in complex situations of professional practice?

Which strategies do the students apply? Building on the multifaceted results of students' performance obtained in the first study, the focus of the research in the second study emerged to gain more insights into the difficulties faced by students in their professional practice. Therefore the ensuing study based on problem-centred interviews (Witzel & Reiter, 2012) and followed these research questions: How do students reflect about their professional practice? What strategies are they pursuing and which challenges about professional practice emerge in their reflections?

A general note to the reader: The following empirical studies are all based on submitted manuscripts for publication in peer-reviewed journals. Although the two empirical studies were conceptualised and conducted as consecutive studies, they are self-contained and may be redundant to some extent. The title, journal details, submission progress and listing of co-authors are provided in the footnotes on the first page of each study chapter. The two articles are first-authored by Carolin Auner. She wrote all the drafts, on which the co-authors gave feedback.

Study 1[6]
Professional Intervention Strategies of Social Work Students in Practice Situations.
A Microanalysis.

4. Study 1: Professional Intervention Strategies of Social Work Students in Practice Situations. A Microanalysis.

Abstract

Training students to approach practice situations professionally is crucial in social work education. Universities adopted different approaches in their curricula to equip students with theoretical knowledge and practical skills for social work's demanding situations. However, there is little evidence on how social work students implement the knowledge acquired into practice. This study utilizes the grounded theory methodology to conduct an in-depth analysis of social work students' strategies throughout practice situations. Using simulation with a trained actress, we stipulated students' engagement with a client during the initial stage of an assessment. 25 social work students from four different universities of social work in Germany participated. Our findings reveal the most challenging aspects for students: developing a working relationship with the client and processing professional problem-solving. With these results, we present a model representing students´ intervention strategies as a continuum varying between patterns of co- and mono-

[6] **Reference:** Auner, C.; Dorner, B and Pankofer, S. (under review): Professional Intervention Strategies of Social Work Students in Practice Situations. A Microanalysis. Manuscript submitted for publication to the European Journal Social Work, February 14th, 2023.

construction. The results highlight the importance of offering students opportunities to practice assessment and reflection about professional attitudes as a way to enhance professional competence.

Keywords: professional practice, social work education, simulation-based learning, grounded theory methodology.

4.1. Introduction

Social work is characterized by very dynamic, complex, and unpredictable practice situations (Fook et al., 2000; Sommerfeld & Hollenstein, 2011; C. Taylor & White, 2005). Professional knowledge is not standardizable (f.e. Drisko, 2015; Eraut, 2007; Payne, 2006; Trevithick, 2012b). It does follow a certain process and needs to be individualized to the client's context. It is therefore important to consider the unique situation of each client, paying attention to their daily problems and crises. This process requires an interplay of professional and practice-based knowledge (c.f. Unterkofler, 2018, p. 15). These situations of social work practice can be overwhelming for professionals but are especially demanding for social work students (f.e. Becker-Lenz & Müller, 2009; Effinger, 2021a). Students are to be equipped for social work practice with a variety of theoretical models and methods (Halton et al., 2013; Payne, 2006). However, there is limited empirical evidence about how students apply and implement the content they are taught to specific practice situations, such as when they encounter with people in challenging life situations. The overall objective of this study is to gain an understanding of students' patterns of problem-solving and to derive implications for their professional development.

4.1.1. Professional knowledge and competence in social work

Across all complex domains such as medicine and educational sciences, professional knowledge is seen as a key precondition to successful professional action

(Shulman, 1987; Trevithick, 2012b). Within social work, numerous practice models exist simultaneously yet there is no overarching framework for professional knowledge (Gray & Webb, 2013; Heinsch et al., 2016). Several studies have demonstrated that the actual utilization of (empirical and theoretical) knowledge remains a crucial issue in social work practice (Finne et al., 2022; Ghanem et al., 2018; Ståhl & Lundälv, 2022). Nevertheless, there appears to be a far-reaching agreement on the need for a scientific-theoretical knowledge base that is complemented by practical knowledge (f.e. Hudson, 1997; Sommerfeld, 2014b; Trevithick, 2012a), which at best unfold in professional competence (Trevithick, 2012b). In addition, Webb (2016) emphasizes, that the development of a professional role encompasses knowledge, skills and behaviour. Furthermore, it embraces awareness of the profession's key values, objectives, and attitudes (Webb, 2016).

As a result, the question arises, how do students acquire and develop these essential foundations of social work knowledge and competences? Consensus exists, that professionalisation in social work as an ill-structured domain evolves in a contextual and individual way and concurrently in a complex and interactive process (van Bommel et al., 2012; Webb, 2016). Throughout their professional education, students are required to learn how to relate theoretical knowledge to real professional practice situations (Becker-Lenz & Müller, 2009; Lave & Wenger-Trayner, 1991; van Bommel et al., 2012).

4.1.2. Assessment as a key activity in social work practice

To better understand the learning processes of students, we wanted to identify, how they engage in situations of professional practice, in particular assessments. Assessment can be considered a comprehensive, fundamental and overarching activity in social work practice. As defined by Killick and Taylor (2020), assessment is a “purposeful, systematic, collaborative process of information gathering which supports analysis, recommendations and shared decision making” (Killick & Taylor, 2020, p. 5). Furthermore, it is essential to

carry out specific responsibilities and goals of the respective organization within the professional role of a social worker and form these responsibilities with the clients in a transparent way (Killick & Taylor, 2020; Parker, 2021). Within the context of assessment, the social worker is required to relate knowledge to the particular situation and the information provided by the client to identify core issues for further case processing like diagnosing and intervention planning (Holland, 2000; Killick & Taylor, 2020; Milner et al., 2020). A wide range of theories and approaches to assessment exist. The nexus of all is the direct personal interaction involving a social worker and client(s). “All social work includes assessment and all assessment includes a relationship.” (Killick & Taylor, 2020, p. XV). The importance of a sustainable working relationship in social work in general, and assessments in particular, is also emphasized by other researchers (f.e. Becker-Lenz & Müller, 2009; Rüegger, 2021; Strasser & Gruber, 2015).

4.1.3. Research questions

This study strives to contribute to this research area of professional development with a microanalysis of students’ approaches in complex and dynamic situations of professional practice in social work. The following research questions guided our investigation:

- How do social work students act in complex situations of professional practice?
- Which strategies do the students apply?

4.2. Method

To answer these research questions purposefully, we employed a grounded theory approach for an in-depth investigation of students’ intervention strategies (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Strauss & Corbin, 1996; Strübing, 2007). The grounded theory methodology is most appropriate where tacit meanings of participants’ (inter-)actions are to be

investigated and contextualized in an emergent framework (Charmaz, 2014; Suddaby, 2006).

4.2.1. Context of the study and participants

We collected data from 25 social work students (*Mage*= 24.12, *MDage = 23, SD* = 4.52) from four different Universities of Applied Sciences in Germany. 75% of participants were female and 25% male. The mean study duration was 5,48 (*MDsemester* = 5, *SD* = 1.12) with a minimum of three and a maximum of seven semesters. In Germany, the standard study period for a bachelor's degree in social work is between 6 and 7 semesters. The main data collection was realised between October and December 2020. Due to the unpredictable pandemic situation in 2020 and the necessary shift to an online-only teaching curriculum, we modified the research design to a digital simulation environment. Hence the sample is randomly divided in terms of digital study participation (n = 18) and on-site (n = 7).

Participation was voluntary with informed consent. On account of highly sensitive data, high standards for data protection were defined and implemented.

4.2.2. Study design –simulation of professional practice with standardised clients

Like in most applied professions, opportunities to practice authentic situations are rare but much needed (Bogo et al., 2014; Kourgiantakis, Bogo, & Sewell, 2019). Simulations can model complex situations and "replace or amplify real-world practice, which, otherwise can be too risky, unethical, costly, or difficult to organize" (Coninck et al., 2019, p. 264). Simulations ensure an opportunity for the meaningful application of knowledge to professional problems (Bogo et al., 2014; Heitzmann et al., 2019; Kourgiantakis et al., 2020). In recent years, researchers and practitioners have become increasingly interested in such approaches with standardised clients. With this method, students work with well-trained actors simulating key situations of social work in live

settings (see f.e. Bogo et al., 2014; Kourgiantakis et al., 2020; Logie et al., 2013), and also in virtual formats (e.g. Egonsdotter & Bengtsson, 2022).

Since simulations model complex practice situations, they seem to be a promising approach for observing students‘ professional intervention strategies extensively. We designed a realistic scenario of social work practice, in which students are encouraged to step into a role of a professional social worker. We assumed that an effective way to stipulate students’ engagement would be in a one-to-one counselling session during an initial stage of an assessment. Thus, we developed a comprehensive case vignette (f.e. Wilks, 2004) and derived a role portrayal for the actress as a standardised client. The case is situated in the general social service at the district social work, located in Munich, Germany. We depicted a common scenario of social work, including different interrelated issues of a client’s challenging life situation. The vignette was authenticated by two experienced district social workers. This was followed by in-depth training of the actresses and a continuous adjustment with an expert circle during the pre-test phase (June-July 2020). We defined a standardised procedure to ensure similar conditions for all participants. Students were asked not to do any extra preparation or research in advance. The following information was given to the participants:

Table 4.1

instructions for participants

Information for the social worker: You are a social worker in the general social service at the district social work in Munich / municipality of Ramersdorf-Perlach. The district social work BSA offers services in many social areas. It is a contact point for citizens with their concerns, challenges, and problems and offers advice and support in many areas of life. If necessary, the general social service organizes concrete support services and cooperates with other departments, authorities, and organizations.
Information for the assessment: Your client is Martha Palmeri, and she has asked for a consultation. Ms. Palmeri is a single mother of two children - a 13-year-old boy (Ben) who is in the 7th grade of secondary school and a 5-year-old girl (Ida) who is in a kindergarten nearby the family apartment until 2:30 pm. Since the separation from her partner, Ms. Palmeri is stressed in everyday family life – and she may need support in her new life situation.

The individual assessment began with the client's entrance into the (virtual) room and ended with an alarm tone (after 25 minutes).

4.3. Data Sources and Analysis

To capture the dense interaction between the social worker and the client in real-time, we recorded each consultation. The sampling comprised 25 video-recorded simulations, thus over 550 minutes of video material were transcribed and analysed in accordance with a videography approach (FitzGerald & Mills, 2022; Knoblauch & Schnettler, 2012).

All data material was analysed by grounded theory coding and intensive analyses of key incidents of professional practice in the (simulated) initial assessment. The grounded theory methodology offers a comprehensive set of analysis procedures and implies an iterative-cyclic, non-linear (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Strübing, 2007) process of coding for

patterns, categories, and mutual interdependencies emerging from the data. Suddaby (2006) aggregates the process of analytic induction within the grounded theory as a "process by which a researcher moves between induction and deduction while practising the constant comparative method" (Suddaby, 2006, p. 639). This exploration was continuously refined through writing theoretical memos and using a comparative perspective, aiming to map analytical concepts and abstract categories on a higher level (Charmaz, 2014; J. Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Holton, 2007). Key or core categories are the major theme(s) of the data analysis and interpretation process (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Additionally, to assure necessary conditions of qualitative research like validity and reliability we realized interim evaluations with various expert circles to reflect on crucial stages of the data analyses (Strübing, 2007).

4.4. Results

This exploratory microanalysis aims to identify how students approach professional practice situations in social work. The key category and its main subcategories are introduced in this part, highlighted by expressions from the empirical data.

4.4.1. Key category: Patterns between co-construction and mono-construction

The key category is represented here as a model that reflects all conceptual categories in our empirical findings. We identified a key category, that we present as a continuum of students' patterns between co-construction and mono-construction (see figure 1).

Figure 4.1:

model of key categories, presented as a continuum of intervention strategies

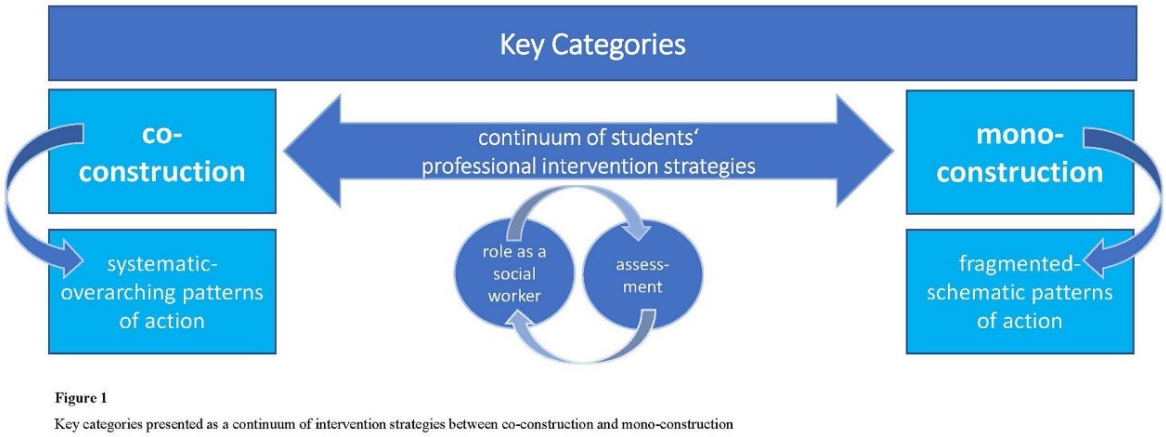

Figure 1

Key categories presented as a continuum of intervention strategies between co-construction and mono-construction

Kindly note: This conceptual continuum of action patterns is not to be considered as a grading of student performance. Although tendencies toward the poles are evident, students show to some extent hybrid patterns across the continuum. In the following sections, we will focus intensely on contrasts, since they seem to appear quite helpful to this discourse.

We conceptualise co-construction to be a cluster of students' patterns, which are integrating actions for an overarching, systematic, and participatory approach, oriented toward the client's issues and needs. The category of mono-construction stands for patterns of action that are respectively fragmented and schematic, which signifies a repetitive and rather mechanical pattern unrelated to the client's context. Those patterns are oriented to one's own -here the social worker- (individual) agenda rather than to the client's particular life situation.

Before elaborating on key findings, we highlight major subcategories. In the process of coding to theorising (e.g. Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Saldaña, 2016; Strauss & Corbin, 1996), two significant subcategories emerged from the data: The core dimensions carry out the role of a social worker and the processing of the case, summarized here as assessment, which are highly interconnected. They can hardly be separated analytically

from the underlying data but must be viewed as a reciprocal process. Through this framework of key category and analytic subcategories, our findings can be mapped concisely.

4.4.2. Carrying out the role of a social worker –align relationship and asymmetry

In the further conceptualisation within the analytical category role, we integrated the subcategory working relationship, which includes vital aspects of structuring the communication and interaction communication with the client. One major emerging theme here is dealing with the given structural asymmetry (and the underlying topic of power) between a professional representative of an authority and a private person experiencing a challenging life situation.

Taking a closer look at concepts of interaction in the category of mono-construction, it was observable that the communication process is barely reciprocally and interactive. The client's statements are given little attention, instead, another topic is pursued. The expertise appears one-sided, and the decision-making authority is with the social worker (student). This occurs through (partially strong) attributions that are not to be seen as reviewed with the client. An example from the data:

> I know of a few good counselling agencies, parenting counselling agencies, where couples and even separated couples can see how to resolve the issue of contact. Because the children obviously want to see the father. You're overwhelmed with the children. A counselling centre would be a good idea. (Marie, paragraph 48)

In contrast, concepts of student-patterns assigned to co-construction develop a communication process, that is characterized by having a dialogue with the client, interpreting and defining the client's situation reciprocally. The decision-making process is especially characterized by collaborative dialogue in which the client plays a key role.

> Now, today, what would be most important for you to clarify today? Would it be more important to you that we first clarify the emotional situation at home today? (…) Or would it be more important to you that we first sort out the financial situation? (…) Maybe we'll get to the other one as well. But simply that we can discuss what is the priority for you right now. (Hanna, paragraph 21)

We additionally examined how students construct their image of the client. On the mono-construction side, the client is defined as a person who is overburdened or has excessive demands (a generally needy person):

> You are now completely somehow struggling and have lost the ground under your feet. (…). Yes, I have the feeling that what is, quite understandably, so insanely overburdening is that you actually are confronted with the enormous challenge of having to do a job alone for two people (...). And then it's totally clear that you're so overstrained by that. (Felix, paragraphs 14 and 22)

These attributions are barely aligned and adjusted with the client.

Shifting to concepts of co-construction, a client is perceived as an autonomous person who is encouraged to actively make suggestions for potential solutions. These are discussed collaboratively:

> Yes. I would like to ask you one more question. What can I do for you to make your everyday life a little bit less stressful? So, in which areas could you imagine that you might need support and where support would be welcome? (Antonia, paragraph 28)

All in all, the continuum extends between constructing-manifesting the given asymmetry and forming-deconstructing the given structural asymmetry.

4.5. Mastering Assessment: How Students Navigate the Complexity of Topics Presented by the Client

After elaborating on the first subcategory role, we are now highlighting the second subcategory assessment. These findings reveal the most substantial conceptual contrasts of the continuum.

4.5.1. Fragmented and schematic approaches – mono-construction

As outlined above, the concepts of mono-construction comprise patterns of rather one-sided and fragmentary approaches, which are most evident in strong schematic action patterns. Recurring schemes are for instance:

- Presenting solutions (“being a saviour”): concepts here include providing solutions, pursuing them vehemently or imposing solutions, that accumulate occasionally in strong interventions like suggesting support from youth welfare. Other forms here are vague assurances.
- Individualization of problems (“attributing causes and faults”): the causes of the problem situation are primarily sought in the client’s person, the situation is often seen from a psychological angle.
- Adhering to perceptions (“pursuing an idea rigorously”): another recurring pattern is to stay with certain intervention ideas or (presumably learned) methods and techniques also if the client expresses other wishes.
- Not assuming responsibility (“escaping from the case”): this concept includes strategies through which the client is referred (rather quickly) to specialists like psychotherapists, other departments, or organisations.

Altogether, these schematic patterns show, that students tend to concentrate on details and focusing minor aspects, in many cases combined with erratic proceeding. The

client's topics are partially identified in a narrow and de-contextualised way. One's own interpretations or understandings of the themes are rarely reviewed or negotiated with the client. There is also a tendency to focus either on the factual level:

> This is a difficult situation. However, I would refer you now to colleagues from the child support office for the financial situation and give you the contact details so you can get advice and help again. (Eva, paragraph 24)

or on the psychosocial level of the represented case:

> And you're giving me the impression right now, you've lowered your head, (student lowers her head and shoulders very much), are you finding it very difficult right now to have come here? So, I notice right now that something is weighing extremely heavily on you. (Silke, paragraph 17)

In sum, the cluster of students' approaches to capture the case shows fragmented and selective patterns of actions and procedures.

4.5.2. In contrast: systematised approaches and meta-communication – co-construction

While the mono-construction reveals highly fragmented practices, the co-construction concepts highlight significantly different patterns, that are much more homogenous. The assessment process is characterised by systematised procedures, that could be defined as identifying appropriate support, according to the client's wishes and needs. Students in this cluster show multidimensional interpretations, which are continuously adjusted with the client, and be set by an act of contracting. Client's themes are processed with a wide perspective on the case, contextual factors are considered and interdependencies are captured in great measure. Students implementing these patterns try to engage with both the professional and psychosocial aspects of the case. They are demonstrating an understanding of processuality in counselling, which is shown in

iterative-cyclical proceedings and context sensitivity. Furthermore, they are presenting competencies of meta-communication in the client interaction, for instance:

> Coming back to the judicial story from earlier. I did not intend to scare you with such a suggestion. That's just always an option, but that may also-, yeah, like that can be additionally supportive, so that you're not alone with that. (Client: Mhm. Nods.). (…) Now if we agree on having a conversation like that right now with your ex-partner, I think that would be a really good way to (MP19: Mhm. Okay. Nods approving.) make a start where you also get support. (Helena, paragraph 28)

Students in this recurring action pattern show the ability to initiate reviewing dialogues of their actions and are capable of recognising miscommunication, addressing and correcting this together with the client. These elaborated results highlight some of the major contrasts within the intervention strategies employed during the practice situation.

4.6. Discussion

The findings of multifaceted approaches evident in our data address crucial processes of connecting social work education and practice. We found out, that the different concepts of assessment are characterized by varying concepts of working relationships, which are significantly influencing the further assessment process. Subsequently, the support efforts are affected. The efforts stretch from generalised solutions, which are rather case-independent on the conceptual pole of mono-construction to case-specific, customised support on the co-construction side of the continuum.

4.6.1. Challenge: Understanding assignments and assuming responsibility

As discussed above, conceptualized patterns closer to mono-construction display the difficulties of identifying crucial topics, and deriving concrete tasks. For example, student ‘Felix’ strongly focused on the emotional aspects (mainly the separation), whereas

his client repeatedly emphasized her overload and financial distress. During the final minutes of the counselling session, Felix poses this question:

> Now I would like to briefly ask again-, now I think I have a broad overview of your current situation. But what is still not quite clear for me what is your request to me. So how can I help you? In what are you looking for advice? (Felix, paragraph 22)

Our analyses indicate that some students are highly challenged to identify the responsibilities of a social worker and to interact in accordance with the client's expressed requirements. Similar findings are stressed in a study on professional development by Becker-Lenz and Müller (2009). They identified distinct problems of social work students' problem solving like the clarification of the assignment and recognizing responsibilities (Becker-Lenz & Müller, 2009). Also, Strasser and Gruber (2004) found out, that beginners (like students) are struggling to apply their theoretical and methodical knowledge to the given situation: "During counselling, beginners are primarily concerned with themselves and therefore pay little attention to the information clients present." (Strasser & Gruber, 2004, p. 13). Further, Tham and Lynch (2019) underline, that beginners tend to employ rather context-free strategies (Tham & Lynch, 2019). It seems reasonable to assume that students of mono-construction are very preoccupied with themselves and their professional role and cannot yet fully engage in the complexity of the case.

In contrast, patterns mapped to the category of co-construction contain mostly client-and case-centred, context-specific, and systemised approaches. Data suggest, that these students can differentiate the case procedurally together with the client, jointly prioritise explored issues, and make agreements. But in particular, they are assigning tasks for themselves systematically.

> I would suggest that I write this down as one central topic, that we somehow manage to bring you and your ex-husband to the same table, accompanied by me (client nods). We will try to find a way for your children to be able to have contact with their father again.
> Client: Yes, that would be important to me. That would be very, very important to me, yes!
> Okay, then I'll note that down as an important point (client nods), that the contact with the father is re-established. (...) In order to relieve your financial situation a bit.
> Client: Yes, that would be really good, because that is really-, that drives me simply around. (Antonia, paragraphs 22-26)

Findings from several studies with more experienced social workers illustrate, that experts are using situation-specific skills (Tham & Lynch, 2019), identify problem interdependencies (Strasser & Gruber, 2015) and engage in reflection processes which are more nuanced and holistic (Fook et al., 2000; Ghanem et al., 2018). Although students assigned to co-construction may also be defined as beginners, their strategies of professional interventions appear to be interconnected, contextualised and differentiated.

4.6.2. Thresholds for building a viable professional relationship

Rüegger (2021) investigated professional interactions. Her study highlights, that social workers often position themselves as competent professionals, providing help and solutions (c.f. Rüegger, 2021, p. 302). Self-positioning might consolidate attributions and processes of social categorisation, which may result in the objectification of clients if not reflected upon. She identified a phase of pre-construction even before the initial client contact, where preliminary interpretations are made, based on problem notifications (c.f. Rüegger, 2021, pp. 289–300). These interpretations rely on experience and cultural interpretation patterns. Assumptions formed within this stage remain quite stable throughout the interaction with the clients. More concretely, this indicates that a

collaborative process may be strongly affected, e. g. through such (hidden) practices by the social worker (c.f. Rüegger, 2021, p. 319). One can assume that students' patterns conceptualized by the category of mono-construction rely on their experiential knowledge (Ruttert, 2020) and possibly work strongly with pre-constructions and hidden agendas (Rüegger, 2021). These insights are also evident in our findings and are particularly visible through the schematic interventions as outlined above. For instance, our elaborated schema individualisation of problems (attributing causes and faults") may indicate preconstruction as a strategy to gain certainty regarding further proceedings. Parker (2021) also states, that patterns of individualisation, commonly linked to the complexity reduction of a client's individual situation, may provide certainty regarding the decision of interventions (Parker, 2021). Milner et al. (2020) claim "It is easier to seek psychological explanations for events rather than explore complex interactions between the social and psychological dimensions of problems." (Milner et al., 2020, p. 8). Psychological explanations or further assumptions regarding the client may point out tendencies of expertocratic practices, which we observed in the scheme of adhering to perceptions ("pursuing an idea rigorously"). All these processes can be very powerful and may influence professional judgement (Milner et al., 2020) and a robust working relationship (Rüegger, 2021).

4.6.3. Balancing power and asymmetry

In their counselling research, Strasser and Gruber (2004) found out, that beginners (like students) feel uncertain and uncomfortable in their (new) professional role (Strasser & Gruber, 2004) and feel unprepared for professional interaction, especially with clients in challenging life situations (Tham & Lynch, 2019). In line with our findings, we can state that uncertainty applies throughout the professional role and relationship building. Our findings revealed, that dealing with asymmetrical power positions is challenging for patterns associated with the category of mono-construction. As elaborated above, roles and

asymmetry in social work practice are structurally inherent and highly functional to ensure fluent procedures (Juhila, 2003). That said, the given asymmetry becomes dysfunctional if there is no joint agreement regarding the purpose of the cooperation and/or incongruity regarding the reciprocal role and task expectations. This may lead to constant negotiation (open or covered) on roles and tasks without starting the process of problem-solving (c.f. Juhila, 2003, pp. 93–94). This may explain why some students (in the category of mono-construction) might not enter the actual process of assessment, for instance, a comprehensive problem analysis.

To conclude, social work students need to reflect on the power they have in the processes of assessments and interaction with clients and deeply acknowledge and appreciate the clients' self-determination (Payne, 2006) as experts for their individual situation (Parker, 2021). Differentiated interpretations are needed to capture specific situations (Milner et al., 2020). Moreover, Parker (2021) considers (self-) reflection including the work context as a prerequisite for a "co-creational approach to the assessment" (Parker, 2021, p. 9). This leads to the request that the subject of power and asymmetry in assessments needs to be discussed more intensively in social work education (Sagebiel & Pankofer, 2022). Social work educators need to help students to gain this awareness and to develop the competences required for this.

4.7. Implications: Preparing for Professional Practice through Training and Reflection

Dynamic and complex situations of professional practice (like assessment) require a comprehensive knowledge base intertwined with practice competencies, and the ability to relate those to the specific contexts of a client's situation. Thus, the practice of problem-contextualisation and the identification of interdependencies are of great relevance for the endeavour of learning how to conduct assessments. A high consensus exists that reflection

and deliberate practice are the core prerequisites of comprehensive learning for professional practice in social work (Blömeke et al., 2015; McLeod, 2022; Milner et al., 2020; Parker, 2021; Sommerfeld, 2014b; Strasser & Gruber, 2015).

For sustainable integration and further development of their professional knowledge and competence, social work students need more opportunities to practice authentic situations. The aim is not only to better apply knowledge in practice, situated learning environments (e.g. Boshuizen, 2004; Crisp et al., 2004; Ghanem et al., 2018) like simulations including systematic feedback (Bogo et al., 2013; Bogo et al., 2014; Kourgiantakis, Bogo, & Sewell, 2019) could be reasonable support of the elaborated learning tasks above. This requires safe spaces to learn how to engage with clients and the complex situations of social work. For their professional development, students need opportunities to explain and systematically reflect on their roles and actions, under professional guidance (Wheeler, 2017). Furthermore, simulations may also contribute to learning from one's errors, irritations and impasses (Heitzmann et al., 2022) that are inevitable in professional interactions in social work. Developing greater reflectivity through the experience of simulations also may increase the ability to reflect and analyse issues of power and asymmetry (Drisko, 2015). Therefore, it is a main task of social work education to increasingly provide simulations opportunities for practice and reflection, including both systematic and individual feedback. As evident from this study, subjects of a professional working relationship and the professional role as a social worker, as well as attitudes towards power and asymmetry need to be discussed more intensively. Moving forward, we argue for the incorporation of the subject area of professional attitudes in the curricula of social work education.

4.8. Limitations

This study is among the first to empirically observe and explore social work students' strategies of professional interventions in a particular practice situation. Therefore, it is of great importance to critically evaluate these findings. As described earlier, instructions for the students were concise, thus the role of the social worker was not outlined explicitly. This has revealed a wide range of students' perceptions of professional social work practice in our data. At the same time, we cannot entirely exclude that different results may have emerged from a more extensive task, for instance by specifying distinct responsibilities of district social work.

Further, it is important to note that the situation may have been challenging for students due to the complexity of the case and its representation in the simulated assessment. Simulations are not widely known (or not adopted) in universities of social work in Germany, it also proved to be a very novel approach for the participants. Some students may have experienced the simulation as stressful. Emotions such as stress or pressure to act might have affected the level of performance. Experiencing urgency with a client and being exposed to a situation that requires agency can nevertheless be an intense driving learning experience for further professional development.

4.9. Conclusion

With our study, we wanted to contribute to the research area of professional development in social work through an in-depth analysis of students' approaches in a complex and dynamic situation of professional practice. With our conceptual model defining a continuum from co- to mono-construction we mapped strategies of professional interventions systematically. Further research may focus on the patterns of what we defined as mono-construction to understand the barriers and difficulties that these students encounter in situations of professional practice in social work.

The results of our study reveal considerable demand for the training of practice situations and a differentiated reflection on both a personal and a professional level. At the same time, this conceptual model may serve as a reference point to reflect upon for professional social workers.

Disclosure Statement

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Study 2[7]:
Dealing with Complexity in Social Work. Student Reflections on Professional Practice: Strategies, Challenges and Influential Factors. An Explorative Study.

5. Study 2: Dealing with Complexity in Social Work. Student Reflections on Professional Practice: Strategies, Challenges and Influential Factors. An Explorative Study

Abstract

One of the main targets of social work education is to prepare social work students for professional practice. However, little is known of how students apply the knowledge acquired theoretically into professional practice, how they deal with complexity and the unpredictability of social work. To better understand students' strategies, challenges and factors that influence practice, we simulated an initial assessment encouraging them to assume the role of a social worker. Using the grounded theory methodology, this explorative study provides in-depth insights into how social work students reflect on their actions in the light of professional practice. 25 bachelor's level social work students from four universities in Germany participated in this study. Our findings indicate that students experience challenges assuming the professional role and navigating the assessment process. Students

[7] **Reference:** Auner, C.; Dorner, B und Pankofer, S. (submitted): Dealing with Complexity in Social Work. Student Reflections on Professional Practice – Strategies, Challenges and Influential Factors. An Explorative Study. Manuscript submitted for publication to Social Work Education, on May 12th, 2023

struggle to reflect broadly (taking different elements into consideration like assessment process, role of social worker etc). Instead, students employ personal criteria to reflect on their practice. We observed that students' prior experience influences their professional actions. The findings show that it is important to offer room for students to reflect about their personal beliefs and how they may affect professional practice. This can be achieved by providing learning opportunities in which students engage with close to real life scenarios.

Keywords: professional practice, social work education, knowledge utilisation, reflection, grounded theory methodology

5.1. Introduction

Professional actions in social work can hardly be standardised given the complex and dynamic nature of social work practice with people in challenging life situations (Gredig & Sommerfeld, 2008; Sommerfeld, 2014b; Trevithick, 2003). The impossibility of standardisation is most apparent in day-to-day situations in social work practice, which are marked by uncertainty, unpredictability and paradoxes (Effinger, 2021a; Duncan Helm, 2022; Schütze, 2021). This makes it all the more essential for professional social work practice to relate various types of knowledge to each specific case for its full comprehension and further processing in collaboration with the client (Trevithick, 2012a, 2012b; Unterkofler, 2020; van Bommel et al., 2012). Scherr (2018) defines professional practice in social work on the basis of complex problems demanding specialised knowledge and methodological competences for their comprehension and resolution. (c. f. Scherr, 2018, p. 9). Moreover, professional practice require an interplay of professional and practice-based knowledge sometimes referred to as experiential knowledge (Gray & Schubert, 2013; Gredig & Sommerfeld, 2008; Unterkofler, 2020). Consequently, one major target of social work education is theoretical and practical qualification for

professional practice. So far, little is known about how students apply their knowledge in situations of professional practice and how they adjust to the complexity and unpredictability of social work.

5.2. Learning for Professional Practice in Social Work

Throughout complex domains and professions such as the applied sciences medicine, educational sciences and, as discussed here social work, a comprehensive body of knowledge is considered an essential precondition for successful professional practice (Heinsch et al., 2016; Prince & Boshuizen, 2004; Shulman, 1987; Trevithick, 2008, 2012b). Numerous studies have discussed the limited relevance of science and theory for social work practice while also revealing the challenges social workers face in terms of knowledge utilisation (Finne et al., 2022; Ghanem et al., 2018; James et al., 2019; McCafferty & Taylor, 2022). Studies indicate, that individual work experience, colleagues, and supervision are the primary sources of knowledge for social workers, rather than science and theories (Finne et al., 2022; Ståhl & Lundälv, 2022).

Studies investigating barriers to knowledge utilisation, revealed that social workers considered as inadequate their ability to comprehend scientific literature and appropriately employ theories and scientific knowledge (Finne et al., 2022; McCafferty & Taylor, 2022). In a study with social work students, Gentle-Genitty et al. (2014) identified similar challenges. Students are concerned with applying theories in an appropriate and flexible manner within the dynamic processes inherent in social work. At the same time, critical and contextual reflection on those theories proves difficult (Gentle-Genitty et al., 2014). The influence of cognitive and affective aspects of professional confidence on social work practice was also explored by Bogo et al. (2017). While investigating professional confidence comprising knowledge utilisation, capabilities for emotional self-regulation and relational skills, they identified a connection between self-awareness, reflection, and

confidence (Bogo et al., 2017). Thus far, it remains empirically inconclusive how biographically acquired attitudes and patterns of action evolve during professional development and what impact they have on professional practice (Gruber & Harteis, 2018; Navrátil, 2019). All these studies discuss possible effects of personal background and prior experiences on (future) social workers' professional development.

Consensus exists, however, that students need to learn to question personal patterns of interpretation, and reflect on their personal experiences and beliefs, and their own evaluation benchmarks (Ferguson, 2018; Stanley & Mettilda, 2021; Unterkofler, 2019). Generally, to meet the complex requirements of professional practice under uncertainty, it is necessary to develop systematically the ability to reflect and think contextually (Ferguson, 2018). The concept of reflection across professional contexts is commonly associated with Donald Schön (Schön, 1983). Howe (2009) summarises: "Reflective practice demands that you learn from experience. It requires you to be self-critical. It expects you to analyse what you think, feel and do, and then learn from the analysis." (Howe, 2009, p. 171 original emphasis). For this study, we apply a broad understanding of reflection, as it addresses all the processes of thinking, explaining, reasoning and substantiating.

5.3. Initiating Reflection on Professional Practice through Simulation

Following Gruber (2021), we consider reflection as a source of potential indicators for knowledge assessment and professional development (Gruber, 2021). We assumed that constructing a realistic scenario of social work practice would be crucial stimulating reflection processes in order to explore professional practice empirically. Simulations are identified as an effective method of representing realistic scenarios of professional practice in applied sciences like medicine, and teacher training (E. Bauer et al., 2020; Chernikova et al., 2020; Heitzmann et al., 2019) and in social work (Bogo et al., 2014; Kourgiantakis et

al., 2020). As the focal point for our simulation scenario we selected assessment, which is a fundamental and overarching activity of social work. The case vignette (see e.g. Wilks, 2004) for our simulation study represented a one-to-one counselling situation within an assessment (Milner et al., 2020; Parker, 2021). Following Trevithick (2012), we understand assessment as encompassing six major tasks, which are to be seen as processual rather than linear. Initially, this involves a comprehensive analysis and interpretation of the received information, along with wider problem clarification. The scope of collaboration should then be defined, followed by a discussion of targets and their implementation. Ultimately, the strategies and solutions need to be implemented and their effectiveness evaluated (c. f. Trevithick, 2012b, pp. 176–177).

5.4. Research Questions

With in-depth analysis of student reflections, based on a realistic simulated situation of professional practice in social work, this explorative grounded theory study aims to contribute to the research area of professional development. From that broader interest, we developed the following research questions for this study:

- How do students reflect on their professional practice?
- What strategies are they pursuing and which challenges about professional practice emerge in their reflections?

5.5. Methods

5.5.1. Investigating complex actions with grounded theory methodology

To answer the research question as precisely as possible, we used the systematic approach of grounded theory methodology throughout the entire study (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 1990, 2015; Holton, 2007). Following Corbin and Strauss (2015) and Strübing (2007), grounded theory is highly appropriate for under-researched fields, where

dense and thorough analysis is required, with the aim of developing an empirically sound explanation (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Strübing, 2007). We followed the proposed systematic steps of grounded theory data analysis during the data analysis process. We implemented an iterative-cyclical process of data analysis with an interplay of inductive, deductive and abductive procedures, together with the method of constant comparison of central themes found in the data (Charmaz, 2014; 2015; Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Holton, 2007). Embracing sensitising concepts (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2015) of grounded theory, we aimed both to reflect on our preconceptions about the study and also to acknowledge the limits of empirical investigation. This approach enabled a comprehensive, reconstructive analysis for making sense of dense data material.

5.5.2. Context of the study and participants

The sample consisted of 25 social work students (n = 25, *Mage* = 24.12, *MDage* = 23, *SD* = 4.52; Gender[8]: 20 female / 5 male) from four Universities of Applied Sciences in Germany. All participants were enrolled in a social work bachelor's degree programme and in their fifth to seventh semester[9]. Participation in the study was voluntary. A comprehensive informed consent form and explanation of the data protection guidelines and publication plans were sent out in advance. This study is authorised by the *Interdisciplinary Ethics Committee for Research of the Catholic University of Applied Sciences Munich*, registration number: 2020/N8 (dated 15. June 2020).

[8] Gender information based on students' accounts.

9 The standard study period for a social work bachelor's degree in Germany is between six and seven semesters.

5.5.3. Study design - simulation and problem-centred interviews

Methodologically, we used simulation as a research environment to provide students with realistic practice stimuli. Using simulation with a standardised client seemed appropriate on two accounts: while encouraging students to engage as social workers, it also provided a concrete opportunity for them to reflect on their performance. Based on a comprehensive case vignette, a trained actress (referred to as standardised client) portrayed the client. The simulated initial assessment was located in the general social service in Germany. This of social welfare service aims to ensure low-threshold access for clients facing demanding life situations. The case scenario focused on a single mother, working part-time and facing numerous difficulties like a precarious financial situation after separation and as-yet unresolved issues around contact between the children (aged five and 13 years old) with their father. The case vignette was pre-tested and verified by experienced social workers from the general social service.

With our research, we aimed for an in-depth description of the students' reflections based on a professional practice situation. To achieve this, we found it important to create an individual interview setting with a confidential atmosphere of trust to encourage students to openly discuss their experiences (see e. g. Brinkmann, 2020). Drawing on experience gained from the simulation, we applied a problem-centred interview approach (Flick, 2022, 2023; Roulston & Halpin, 2022). The semi-structured interview guideline combined narrative and open questions. All questions were intended to capture the individual experiences gained during the professional practice situation.

5.5.4. Study procedure

We familiarised the participants with the aims, scope, and procedure to be followed in this study. The data was collected between July and December of 2021. Given the impact of the pandemic, we switched from a face-to-face live setting to a digital

simulation. Students were randomly assigned in line with to current pandemic requirements in Germany (distribution: on-site n = 7, digital: n = 18). The study procedure was standardised for all participants. The 22-minute simulation began with the client entering the room or virtual environment and ended with an automated acoustic signal. The individual interview started after a brief break.

5.5.5. Data analysis

In this study, the 25 audio-taped interviews represent the main data. More than 650 minutes of recorded interview material was transcribed and analysed. All data material was analysed using grounded theory coding (Bryant, 2017; Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Holton, 2007; Saldaña, 2016). Through single case studies, we investigated mainly explanations, representations, and justifications of actions in each participant's verbal protocols against the backdrop of the simulated initial assessment. Systematically, we developed overarching key categories with their significant concepts and dimensions (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Corbin & Strauss, 1990).

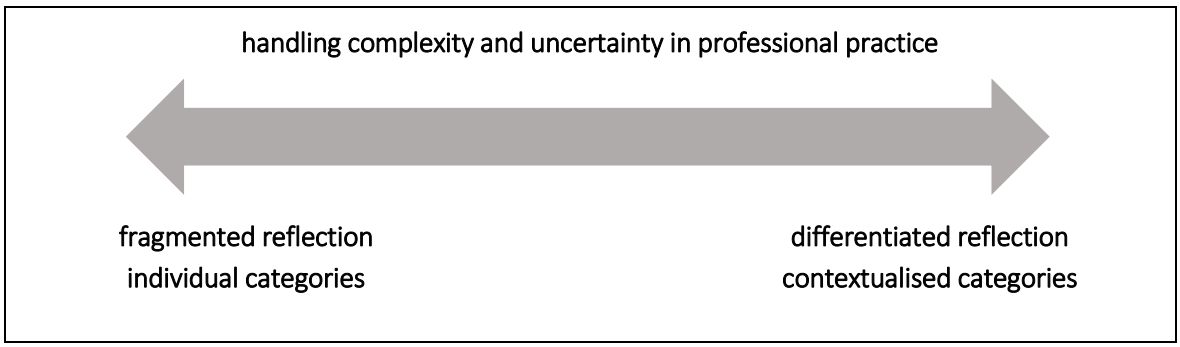
We will first elaborate on the key category handling complexity and uncertainty in professional practice, before proceeding to more in-depth analysis of the subcategories.

5.6. Results: Handling Complexity and Uncertainty in Professional Practice

We define our key category as the modes of dealing with dynamic and unpredictable practice situations in social work. The analysis revealed two underlying characteristics of this key category, which we present as *fragmented reflection along single factors* and *differentiated reflection along contextualised factors.*

Figure 5.1

model of modularised key category: reflection patterns of professional practice



5.6.1. Differentiated reflection

Conceptualised reflection patterns determined by this crucial component of the key category lead to comprehensive explanations of professional actions that are highly case- and process-related. The reflections of students' own actions are primarily accomplished through a broad contextualisation of the assessment, the client's case requirements, the interventions used, and a meta-reflection of their professional interaction. The client's perspective and the mutuality of professional interaction are simultaneously integrated into the reflection. In terms of the professional role of a social worker, our analysis revealed a sound perception and distinct framing of their role as defined by assessment requirements, as illustrated from the data:

> And then, however, there were still some gaps in my image of her and her family, and then I asked her if I understood her correctly, could she please explain the situation in detail again, including the financial, work situation and so forth. Exactly, in order to obtain a picture of it, of the family, of the people involved, of the relationship between her and her ex-partner, just to gain

> clarity. And, yes, then I tried to find out from this information, which topic we could talk about now. (Helena[10], paragraph 57)

The underlying patterns show a contextualisation between the demands of the practice situation, perceptions of the professional role, maintenance of the interaction, and the actual case processing.

5.6.2. Fragmented reflection

We define this category as the students' concepts that reflect on experienced professional practice in a fragmentary and less contextualised manner, implying a tendency to focus on single elements of the overall assessment. Moreover, the data indicate an unclear perception of professional role as a social worker in general. Thorough reflection on actions and anticipation of the impact of professional interventions appears to be rare. In fact, the data indicates that students in this conceptual category are defining a unique set of diverse criteria for reflecting on their practice.

We consider these empirical findings especially relevant for the discourse of learning and teaching for professional practice, as these are the real challenges which (future) social workers face. As the patterns inherent in this category were prevalent through our investigation, we will explore more closely the findings relating to our key category *fragmented interpretation* and its subcategories in the following sections.

Significant subcategories emerged within the multi-step data analysis, which shape and underpin the key category of this study. In-depth analysis revealed *reflection on the*

[10] For data protection purposes, pseudonyms were used for all student names and other personal data.

professional role and *as reflection on the professional interaction* to be major subcategories, followed by *individual criteria to reflect professional practice.*

5.6.3. Reflection on the professional role as social worker

This subcategory is comprised of themes that appeared in reflections and are directly related to the professional role of social worker. Patterns emerging here suggest a rather unclear perception of the professional role. Role perceptions range from an idealised myth of a professional social worker to a downgrading of the profession for example in statements, that being a social worker is more of a feeling, for which no qualification is needed. Reflections here are often based on generalised or idealised perceptions of a social worker's role – for example, the ideal of truly helping clients

> And that she also understands: okay, there really is help. (...) Yes, that was important to me, not to let her go empty-handed. (Eva, paragraph 118).

One recurring pattern addresses one's self perception and/or external impression, revealing a concern about appearing knowledgeable and capable as a social worker.

> Because I can't really provide anything of substance, I try somehow to bypass this situation by using any kind of dialogue techniques or by trying somehow to direct attention towards certain topics. I found it exhausting to shift the focus towards something that you could simply talk about, and not to reveal the fact that I actually have no clue. Yes, that's exactly what I felt was stressful. (Helena, paragraph 47)

Strikingly, there is uncertainty about how they are perceived as social workers and what effects their interactions may have on their clients. Above all, they are uncertain how to evaluate the quality of their working alliance with the client:

> I couldn't really grasp whether she was satisfied with the way the conversation went. (...). However, I didn't really know if it was good for her. Yes. That's maybe why I was a little bit insecure. (Marie, paragraph 84)

Moreover, distinct patterns arise involving reflection, from uncertainty through to full-blown anxiety, primarily addressing the complexity and unpredictability of social work practice in general.

> It makes me feel insecure, just to know that oh my god, there could come a case where I slide into that insecurity. (…) So, yes, also being able to handle the situation. Okay, now I can't really think of anything wise to say. (…). And I do not beat myself up for that now, but still try to just stay in the conversation. (Felix, paragraph 101)

The key cross-sectional themes concern dealing with not-knowing. Throughout the reflections, the notion of knowledge as a social worker remains unclear or vague, or is framed in a solution-oriented manner (for example, increased knowledge would enable the student to present more solutions). Instead, the overall concern is about getting 'stuck' in the professional interaction and not knowing what to do next, and about exposing their ignorance to their client. Worries about failure in the professional interaction arise. To summarise briefly: our findings indicate a strong preventive pattern associated with sustaining self-image independently of the simulated assessment.

5.6.4. Reflection on the professional interaction within the assessment

The second subcategory emphasises the professional interaction, including all the themes and underlying reflection patterns concerning the social worker-client interaction. One result is that the reflections barely refer back to the presented case information itself. Given the data, patterns emerge showing that students face a challenge in reflecting the multifaceted demands of the assessment process. Characteristic patterns of reflection show the tension and uncertainty presented by the challenge of collaborative problem solving,

systematically identifying and prioritising the client's needs, whether technical or psychosocial, and developing appropriate assistance:

> So, yes, that's a lot to somehow structure and prioritise then actually in the whole process. (...) I noticed myself that this sometimes gets confusing, but nevertheless giving a feeling: okay, we are now trying to solve this somehow competently. So, yes, I found that a challenge. (Tamara, paragraph 51)

Moreover, students are under incredible pressure to provide immediate assistance to the client. They evidently have the ideals of wishing to provide the client with prospects, solutions, or concrete outcomes. The students also assume high expectations from the client:

> And I found that a bit difficult - to get some structure into it, because a lot of stuff came from her. And I didn't quite know if I should start with collecting problems or resources, or should I start right away? Because somehow, she was like, 'Yes, can we do something about that?' And I didn't really want to be that (...) solution-oriented at first. (Marie, paragraph 80)

The challenge of establishing and maintaining a professional interaction is further reflected in strong patterns, for example involving the client actively:

> I guess I've just realised the complexity of it, that there's also the other person who passes you the ball and also influences where you go. (Tamara, paragraph 47)

Noticeable is the theme of responsibility, in the fragmented category of the ambiguity of professional responsibility:

> My assignment for me in this case (...) was to give the mother the feeling of holding her and to make her feel that she's right here, so that she doesn't drift away from me somehow. (Helena, paragraph 63)

They are also challenged to classify each client's case, such as identifying particular topics within it or determining its severity, which influences further interventions.

The general result of this subcategory is that the reflections barely refer back to the presented case itself. Furthermore, it is apparent that figuring out the requirements of the assessment and the professional interaction both present significant challenges for these students.

5.6.5. Individual criteria in reflecting professional practice

As elaborated above, students face a challenge in reflecting their performance using comprehensive professional criteria. Instead, results indicate that students develop, rather, individual factors to reflect on and categorise the experienced assessment. Distinctive themes emerge as a further subcategory that we conceptualise in light of the students' prior experiences and (professional) biographies.

Biographical factors:

- Formative experiences: this encompasses formative or even serious experiences, for example, gained in internships. Our findings repeatedly reveal the effects of difficult client interactions. The scope here includes physical and/or psychological encroachment with persistent consequences.
- Prior vocational experiences: this addresses issues related to incorporating previous (professional) experiences into one's development as a social worker. Students face the challenge of not knowing how to integrate their previously acquired knowledge into this career transition. This also has structural or organisational aspects. Certain policies, guidelines, or approaches, for example, have been implemented in current practices, regardless of their suitability.

Personal experience or evaluation benchmarks as parameters of reflection:

- Recourse to familiar themes: an additional pattern demonstrates reflection against the background of well-known topics. Essentially, this involves connecting the reflection to familiar content, where (seemingly daily) knowledge or skills are available. For instance, the topic of the client's separation is intertwined with previous experiences from 'lay counselling' with friends experiencing lovesickness.
- And during my internship in the second semester, I couldn't take out very much for myself. In fact, it's like this, that I've gained a lot from lay counseling with friends, that was my field of practice for quite a long time (...). [Interviewer: What exactly do you mean by that?]. Well, no idea, a typical situation, a friend of mine comes to me crying because of problems with her boyfriend [Nods. Laughs.]. (Felix, paragraph 93)
- Personal criteria as standard of judgment: this highlights a different facet of already familiar themes. Individual experiences, personal values or standards are used for evaluation, involving either judgment about the severity of the client's situation or the evaluation of interventions implemented within the practice situation. An example from the data illustrates this:

  That is such typical behaviour (...). So, I see that with me too, so I also always say, first everyone else must be well and then me, but yes. Or especially in situations like that, where things are just bad, you first want your relatives to be better and then you yourself. (Sophia, paragraph 71)

5.6.6. Reflection categories with normative orientation and strong beliefs or principles

The following patterns encompass perceptions and beliefs about social work practice and it's working principles, but these criteria might occasionally arise as strong principles or beliefs in the reflection process, directing students' reflections. These perceptions are mainly linked to the theme of interaction with the client, in issues such as of (professional) responsibility, demarcation, or expectations, for instance:

> I realised this in my internship, I am not in charge of the destiny the client (...) brings in here. She or he alone, is responsible or the circumstances, not me [speaks this sentence slowly and emphatically]. (Silke, paragraph 81)

And:

> I ended up thinking that I shouldn't be doing that much for her and figuring it all out for her. It is said, yeah, one should make sure that the person also does as much. (Sophia, paragraph 65)

The consequences of strong beliefs can be seen in the light of the reflection criteria: data analyses indicated that a strong demarcation may occur within the context of professional practice. As an example, the underlying patterns emerge partly as barriers within professional interactions, as with emphasising the importance on safeguarding own boundaries. This found expression in the data:

> That I now know clearly for myself where a boundary is, a personal boundary for me. (...). So now I know definitely where a limit of a consulting context is for me. (...). Once I recognised a limit too late, when working with a client (...). And such experiences just add to the fact that I've meanwhile learned, an absolute limit would be met by such a thing. (Silke, paragraph 93)

Throughout the interview, the student *Silke* stresses boundaries and demarcation repeatedly. Analysing her practice experience reveals that this has an impact on her interaction with the client. Keeping her boundaries also seems like a strong theme during the encounter with the client, which may have an influence on the professional interaction.

Overall, these themes indicate that a more specific contextualisation of the practice situation by means of professional criteria is a challenge or not (yet) feasible. By far the most significant challenges emerge over the question of professional role as a social worker and the development of a professional interaction. Overarching reflection criteria for professional practice are barely evident. Individual criteria are employed for reflecting on actions instead. Clearly, this conflicts strongly with curricular aims of social work education and a professional understanding of social work practice. What explanations might there be for these evasive actions?

5.7. Discussion

Our findings are consistent with studies that identified subject-specific knowledge and skills among the primary knowledge resources of experienced social workers. Those experiences include previous professional, volunteer, and/or personal experiences (e.g. Finne et al., 2022; Ståhl & Lundälv, 2022). For the most part, such knowledge is highly organisation- and context-specific (Scherr, 2018; Sommerfeld, 2014b). In analysis of the sample, a major theme was that students draw on individual experiences to deal with the situation of professional practice. In most cases, this applied know-how has no reference to the case.

As Sommerfeld (2014) points out, processes and styles of individual reasoning evolve throughout a person's life and education. He argues "But in the immediate interaction with the clients (who are an important social factor as well), the actors develop hybrid 'emotional-cognitive-action patterns' that are strongly structured by rules and

beliefs that are socially constructed and transmitted in the organization." (Sommerfeld, 2014b, p. 593 original emphasis). It seems reasonable to assume that some students utilise alternative strategies as emotional-cognitive-action-patterns based on their experiences in order to feel competent or to demonstrate competence when engaging in professional interactions. Navrátil (2019) states that personal values, attitudes, and beliefs always have an impact on social work. However, this becomes problematic when those beliefs are not reflected upon and/or the practitioner is unaware of them. If this is the case, negative influences in professional interactions may occur (Navrátil, 2019). Given our results, we suggest that the outlined strong beliefs are likely to interfere with the professional interaction and processing of the case. Gentle-Genitty et al. (2014) shed light on yet another aspect here. Strong beliefs may also manifest in the promotion and rigid application of certain approaches. As a consequence, the client's unique situation might be disregarded (Gentle-Genitty et al., 2014).

Ferguson (2018) provides a potential explanation for selective reflection. He stresses that, under some circumstances, professionals may need to limit reflection in order to make the job feasible or defend themselves. The complex nature of professional practice may be overwhelming for some students, so they develop strategies to cope with the given situation. This can be interpreted as a self-protection strategy, particularly in difficult situations of social work practice (Ferguson, 2018).

The capacity to handle uncertainty and unpredictability is considered to be a core competency in social work practice (Effinger, 2021a; Gredig & Sommerfeld, 2008; Sommerfeld, 2014b). Findings from our research show that there are significant uncertainties, particularly in the context of a social worker's professional role and responsibilities. More specifically, our results provide striking evidence that some students might develop preventive and generalised (rather than case-specific) strategies for their

professional practice to deal with complexity. McCafferty and Taylor (2022) state that uncertainty in applying theories might increase tendencies of practitioners towards oversimplified or inadequate solutions and heavy reliance on other approaches (c.f. McCafferty & Taylor, 2022, p. 99). In their study with career starters in social work, Tham and Lynch (2019) further found that experiencing critical incidents, disillusionment, disappointment, and threats for example with clients might increase feelings of uncertainty (Tham & Lynch, 2019).

Another critical discovery by Bogo et al. (2017) is that students with low professional confidence have difficulty applying knowledge and experience stress, confusion and doubts. In terms of relational skills, they are challenged by client interactions. Our investigation revealed similar findings: The recourse to preventive strategies appears whenever the relationship between the concrete requirements of the assessments, the (personal) experience of the professional encounter and the available knowledge cannot be established. Bogo et al. also discovered that emotional dysregulation was a key factor behind this. “Among students who rated themselves as low-confidence, emotional regulation appears as a primary factor that affects their ability to access the specialised knowledge that can guide their interview.” (Bogo et al., 2017, 712). In our research findings, this is reflected in evasive actions, as well as in the development of individual criteria and strong beliefs, which may possibly to some extent substitute for the application of theories that have not yet been feasible.

In conclusion, our results create a complex picture. Students are constantly challenged by the complex, dynamic, and unpredictable situations encountered in social work practice. Our findings highlight the significant levels of uncertainty and challenges that social work students face in the context of knowledge utilisation and professional practice in general. This may result in the development of personal categories and

evaluation schemes. Furthermore, the evidence strongly suggests that prior experiences of any type have a serious influence. They may appear to be important reference points in the utilisation of knowledge, in both a positive and a questionable sense.

5.8. Implications

Given our findings, students need to learn to question personal patterns of interpretation, to reflect on their personal experiences and beliefs and their own evaluation benchmarks. Along with others, we are calling for more serious opportunities to practice (Ghanem et al., 2018; Kourgiantakis, Bogo, & Sewell, 2019; Milner et al., 2020; Parker, 2021). Providing students with the opportunity to practise in authentic learning scenarios like simulations facilitates this. Thus, they might experience the importance of utilising knowledge and developing the necessary capabilities for this purpose. At the same time, the ability for reflection could be continually expanded. Ferguson (2018) emphasised that any form of non-reflection must be temporary and, if necessary, processed with support, such as from supervisors (Ferguson, 2018). To learn this against the background of a professional practice of social work, clear frameworks, individual feedback and supervision could be essential for the students (Gentle-Genitty et al., 2014; McCafferty & Taylor, 2022; van Bommel et al., 2012). These aims might be met the approach of using simulations (or other methods of situated learning) of professional practice with a comprehensive debriefing process (Asakura et al., 2018; Crisp & Hosken, 2016; Kourgiantakis, Bogo, & Sewell, 2019; Logie et al., 2013). New formats should also be explored and existing teaching approaches refined.

In light of these facts, there is a strong case for further research. The emergence and impact of (biographical) prior experiences on professional development, as well as critical incidents and the formation of strong beliefs or principles, should be investigated further.

5.9. Limitations

The findings of our study must be considered in the context of several limitations. By simulating professional practice, the realistic nature of the experience may have created or intensified feelings of insecurity and stress at various levels for some students. Such emotional responses could have influenced the level of performance in general or may have caused effects of cognitive overload (Blayney et al., 2016; Kalyuga, 2007; Sweller et al., 2011). Due to various organisational constraints (including the pandemic), we were required to run the interviews directly after completing the simulation. Some students were still excited or exhausted because of the experience, and an extended break might have increased their capacity for reflection. Interviewing as a research method likewise contains limitations. It is challenging to systematically reconstruct and articulate one's own professional actions. Although combining simulation with a subsequent interview was promising in terms of uncovering students' underlying knowledge, we do recognise that not all types of knowledge can be assessed empirically.

5.10. Conclusion

With the in-depth findings presented in this exploratory study, we highlighted challenges students face in their professional development as future social workers. The micro-analysis of the reflection processes revealed a wide range of strategies to address the complexity encountered in the practice situation. Professional social work practice is highly demanding and not easily learned. With this study, we aimed to increase the understanding of student learning processes with a view to developing even more focused educational approaches in social work education.

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Part III: Discussion and Implications

6. General Discussion: Summary and Critical Appraisal of Key Results

The overarching goal of this doctoral thesis was to empirically access and explain students' approaches and strategies in dynamic and complex situations of professional practice in social work. Moreover, this thesis aimed to increase understanding of how best to support learning for professional practice in social work. The general discussion section highlights unique findings identified in the two empirical studies before discussing them concisely. Implications for social work, social work research and social work education are detailed throughout the second section in this chapter.

At the centre of both empirical studies presented here was an investigation of students' professional practice as encountered during a simulated professional interaction with a standardised client. Generally, modelling a complex situation of social work practice for the purposes of exploratory inquiries is a novel approach to social work research in Germany (for an overview see P. Bauer & Weinhardt, 2014; Weinhardt, 2015). This methodical approach of simulation allowed for direct access to students' practices and subsequent explanations and thoughts. Particularly within social work education research, the simulation approach is an innovative way into otherwise invisible processes of students' professional actions and interactions.

Modelling of an initial assessment to exemplify a cross-cutting process of social work constituted the conceptual superstructure underlying both studies. While the first study directly observed students' professional practice, the second investigated on their reflections regarding the simulated practice experience. Both studies highlight the complexities of learning professional practice in social work, which have previously gone unacknowledged.

6.1. Unique Contribution of Study 1

The resulting conceptual model of the first empirical study details a continuum between mono- and co-construction. Co-construction is defined as a set of strategies integrating professional practices into an overarching and collaborative approach, that is consistently focused on the concerns and needs of the client. Client issues are addressed taking a broad view of the case, considering context-related factors and identifying interdependencies to a large extent. Mono-construction was conceptualised through the fragmentary, unsystematic and rather schematic strategies of the students, which were not aligned with the client's questions and needs. The strategies used were frequently strong interventions applied directly but without further problem assessment, and often did not correspond with the client's specific situation, a rather quick referral to therapists, for instance, or ordering youth welfare services.

Overall, in the category of mono-construction, patterns within the professional interaction reveal students' challenges in engaging in a reciprocal and sequential process of dialogue with the client. Evidence shows that recognising assessment tasks and a general diffusion of responsibility, leave the client's issues, technical and psychosocial, unrecognised or processed in a fragmented manner. This difficulty of comprehending the full picture of the situation gives rise to other significant student strategies for dealing with the situation, such as individualising problems or adhering to particular methods and interventions. All these strategies may prevent a professional interaction with the client and systematic assessment of the situation, and, eventually, the elaboration of possible responses to the problems.

This study contributes to the area of professional development with a deeper understanding of students' practices. The scope of students' strategies within the professional practice of social work is thoroughly outlined with this conceptual model.

This model of mono- and co-construction may be beneficial for social work education in order to counteract patterns of mono-construction and to positively enhance patterns of co-construction by providing purposeful content, both theoretical and practical.

6.2. Unique Contribution of Study 2

The focus of research for the second study was redirected on the basis of the remarkable findings of the first study. The second study sheds a new light on students' challenges, difficulties and perceptions regarding professional practice in social work.

The theoretical model developed in the second study encompasses significant modes of reflection of students' professional practice under the key category of 'dealing with dynamic and unpredictable practice situations. Two characteristic polarities of student reflections along a continuum became evident: fragmented reflection of individualised factors, and differentiated reflection of contextualised factors. To understand the difficulties, barriers and challenges students encounter, this study aimed at analysing mainly the fragmented reflection patterns. The conceptualised patterns of this reflection mode proved to be unsystematic, segmented reflections of the professional practices. For instance, reflection on the experienced professional interaction was highly selective and less contextualised. Students faced challenges in reflecting comprehensively and professionally on their experiences and evaluating their performance, but personal criteria were adopted for reflecting on practice. Such personal reflection parameters result from previous experiences, both occupational and private, as well as from (strong) beliefs and perceptions about social work practice. This kind of dense analysis and description, summarised under the key category of fragmented patterns of reflection, yields novel empirical insights for social work.

This in-depth analysis with its evidence of such personal reflection benchmarks contributes innovatively to the understanding of professional development of social work

students. These insights provide a greater understanding of the students' struggles and can therefore serve as a foundation to improve teaching strategies in social work education.

6.3. Overall Discussion of Findings

An integrated analysis of the studies at the core of this thesis revealed that the key areas of professional practice in social work, namely the development of a sustainable working alliance and the comprehension and contextualisation of a client's case, represent a significant challenge for students. Two remarkable insights are highlighted exemplarily in this section: (1) the difficulty of assuming the professional role as a social worker and of comprehending the assessment on the scale of a systematic approach to case understanding and development of a professional interaction; and (2) the application of multiple evasive strategies, such as schematic approaches or individually defined parameters, for evaluating professional practice.

6.3.1. Assuming the role and tasks of social work professional practice

Evidence from both studies supports assumptions of a complex interplay between individual perceptions of the professional role of a social worker, the understanding of professional responsibilities in general, and the course of the professional interaction / working alliance between social worker and client. Drawing on day-to-day knowledge resources or beliefs informing practice commonly occurs, when students cannot connect the assessment tasks, their ensuing responsibilities, and the requirements of professional interaction with their existing professional knowledge. White and Rüegger both provide corresponding findings from analyses of case assessment and subsequent processing by social work experts. Besides experiential and day-to-day knowledge, their investigations also detected discipline-specific knowledge in professional interactions. Nonetheless, information regarding the cases was not utilised for the purpose of refining analyses and

reaching a holistic understanding of the underlying causes and contextual factors behind problematic circumstances (Rüegger, 2021; White, 2003).

As outlined above, distinct case-independent strategies were evident in both present studies, as for example the tendency not to reciprocally develop the case in collaboration with the client, but instead process it through hasty interpretations and attributions, or by decisions taken by the social worker solely. Many other scholars echoed such challenges as, for example, the difficulty of clarifying the assessment and recognising responsibilities (Becker-Lenz & Müller, 2009; Bogo et al., 2017; Leonard & O'Connor, 2018; Rüegger et al., 2019), or the tendency to engage in context-free strategies (Fook et al., 2000; McCafferty & Taylor, 2022; Strasser & Gruber, 2004, 2015; Tham & Lynch, 2019) because a transfer of theoretical knowledge to the concrete scenario cannot be achieved (Finne et al., 2022; Ghanem et al., 2018; McCafferty & Taylor, 2022; Unterkofler, 2020), or the social worker's professional role being fraught by internal (individual) or external (e.g. organisational) uncertainties or ambiguities (Chen & Russell, 2019; Higgins, 2016; Hochman et al., 2022; Leonard & O'Connor, 2018; Tham & Lynch, 2019).

Rüegger also found, that the main priority was often to eliminate rapidly the occurring difficulties (Rüegger, 2021). Evidence from the present research also identified high levels of pressure among students to solve the situation fast or to provide the client with ample assistance. As a consequence, either case-unrelated solutions were proposed or inappropriate interventions were pursued. This was also discovered in other studies conducted with students and professionals. Uncertainty and feelings of distress in situations of professional practice can further intensify such practices (Bogo et al., 2017; Helm, 2011, 2022; Leonard & O'Connor, 2018; McCafferty & Taylor, 2022). In light of the findings of this present research, the case-unrelated strategies will be highlighted here.

6.3.2. Application of individual strategies - evasive actions

The commonality of what are described in the present studies as evasive strategies consists in schematic, inflexible approaches and benchmarks, rigidly applied regardless of the specific contexts of the client's case. Effinger discusses these phenomena as defensive avoidance behaviour and professional coping strategies. He identifies the main reasons for these patterns as being pressured to act, the absence of appropriate knowledge for the situation, a lack of empathy, and psychological mechanisms such as transference or projection. Dismissive behaviour (for example, by colleagues or clients) or self-doubt should also be considered as possible factors. Some examples of individual defensive avoidance behaviour are rushed responses, the avoidance of explicit responsibilities, or the provision of intense support without the involvement of the client. These strategies of 'evading the situation' are intended as a means of reducing complexity, handling uncertainties and, crucially, preventing or limiting personal failure (Effinger, 2021a, 2021b). Other investigations also uncovered an impact on the process of assessments, such as avoiding decisions or oversimplified or inappropriate solutions, due to uncertainty, fear of failure and concerns about being blamed. Such strategies are frequently interpreted as self-protection and complexity reduction mechanism (Bogo et al., 2017; Cooper, 2009; Ferguson, 2018; Gentle-Genitty et al., 2014; Helm, 2011; Leonard & O'Connor, 2018; McCafferty & Taylor, 2022).

In light of these insights, the present studies can be interpreted as the students' attempt to handle their uncertainties around the complexities of social work practice in general, but in particular within specific assignments, their professional role and professional collaboration with a client. The present studies demonstrate that students are very concerned about failing, getting stuck and the possibility of being perceived as incompetent. Numerous studies illustrate that there are very diverse perceptions about

social workers' professional roles, ranging from idealisation to deprecation. As a result, students struggle with reconciling the realities of the practice and their idealised perceptions of the profession (Freund et al., 2017; Hochman et al., 2022; Joubert, 2021; Petersén, 2022). Therefore, it seems reasonable to assume that perceptions of the professional role have an influence on professional practice. Following Sommerfeld it could be argued that not only professionals, but also students develop distinctive styles and processes of individual reasoning involving 'emotional-cognitive-action-patterns' when engaging in professional interactions, in order to feel competent or demonstrate competence. These are based on their prior vocational, organisational and life experiences (Sommerfeld, 2014b).

Given the findings of the present studies, the recourse to alternative, individual strategies of professional practice and reflection is significantly affected by multiple factors of uncertainty, influenced by prior experiences informing interaction as well as by not yet fully developed meta-competences that allow for a general context of action in unpredictable situations. As detailed in the first chapter, the influence of prior life and/or professional experiences on the professional development of social workers remains empirically inconclusive (Byrne, 2019; Gruber & Harteis, 2018; Harmsen, 2013, 2014; Helsper, 2021; Miller et al., 2021; Navrátil, 2019; Ruttert, 2020; Wiles, 2017). Scholars have shown that previous experiences within social work practice, critical incidents or threats with clients or colleagues, as well as feelings of disappointment or increased uncertainty can subsequently influence social work practice (Byrne, 2019; Chen & Russell, 2019; Leonard & O'Connor, 2018; Tham & Lynch, 2019).

This is in line with the second empirical research findings of this thesis. In particular, evidence indicates that students' prior experiences may influence their professional practice (see empirical Study 2). Evidence showed that formative experiences,

for instance in internships when working with clients, can have an influence on professional practice, such as protecting personal boundaries, resulting in an avoidance of collaboration with the client. Furthermore, powerful normative orientations with strong beliefs or perceptions about social work and its clients emerged. Navrátil (2019) stresses the influence of personal values, attitudes and beliefs on social work, which is also affected by the relevance of 'use of self' (Bogo, 2006, 2018; Howe, 2009; Seden, 2011). Values and attitudes become problematic if they are not carefully reflected on by the social worker, in which case negative influences may arise in professional practice (Navrátil, 2019).

Consensus exists across social work research about the crucial importance of the capacity for reflection and contextual reasoning in order to meet the high requirements placed on professional practice (Cooper, 2011; Ferguson, 2018; Fook et al., 2000; Killick & Taylor, 2020; Milner et al., 2020; Stanley & Mettilda, 2021; van Beveren et al., 2018). This means, for example, competencies of self-reflection, self-regulation, and meta-communication in the course of the interaction. As such, evidence from the present studies reveals that only a minority of students actually demonstrate these capabilities and can actively utilise them in professional encounters. By contrast, based on the key findings of this thesis, it seems reasonable to argue that some students do not yet have sufficient professional standards and competences to evaluate and reflect on their actions, both in and for professional activity (Ferguson, 2018; Schön, 1983; van Beveren et al., 2018). That in turn generates differing levels of reflection, and could result in the emergence of schematic approaches and personal beliefs and benchmarks. Ultimately, if all these identified strategies remain unconscious and unreflected, the unique situation of the client might be disregarded and appropriate assistance might not be realised.

Proceeding from the thorough elaborations given by this general discussion, considerations for potential implications are provided below.

7. Implications for Social Work Research and Practice

This chapter discusses selected theoretical, methodological and practical implications for social work research and social work education. These implications are derived concretely from the two empirical studies presented here. The theoretical and methodological implications for social work research are first outlined. Second, practical implications for social work education will be highlighted.

7.1. Methodological and Theoretical Implications

This section considers theoretical and methodological implications for social work research. This will be accomplished by discussing the theoretical implications of theory building for social work by evaluating the grounded theory methodology, the methodological superstructure of a simulated assessment as a basis for ethnographic observations and problem-centred interviews, which were utilised throughout this research. The following subsection argues that the present doctoral thesis contributed in several aspects to the further theoretical and methodological advancement of disciplinary social work.

7.1.1. Methodological implications for social work research

Since there are few empirical findings of how students translate learned content into the context of social work concrete demanding practice, a qualitative, explorative investigative approach was highly appropriate. Grounded theory methodology, with its inherently explorative, hermeneutic stance and its systematic procedures, constituted an apt frame of inquiry for this unexplored field. As outlined in Chapter 3, grounded theory has a great potential for building middle-range theories about social phenomena. In grounded theory, the term ‘theory’ denotes a substantive theory of middle range with a ‘conceptual representativity’ (Strübing, 2021, p. 35). The theory can be represented, for example, as a

framework, a model or a conceptualisation of the phenomena investigated (Bryant, 2017; Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Strauss & Corbin, 1996; Strübing, 2007, 2021).

As previously stated, the theory development in this thesis aimed to provide a comprehensive theoretical account of social work students' professional practices. To investigate students' professional practices as authentically as possible, the study was framed by the methodological framework of a simulated assessment with a standardised client. This innovative approach allowed for direct investigation of students' practices and reflections. Furthermore, simulation served as the foundation for individual reflections, providing immediate insights into the justifications, perceptions, and influencing factors underlying students' actions. With this novel approach I achieved valuable results, as outlined below. Both exploratory empirical studies of this thesis have resulted in conceptual models, characterised by an overarching analytical architecture formed through conceptual categories and concepts centred around the respective key categories of each study.

Taking an ethnographic approach, the first study investigated how social work students act in complex professional practice situations and what strategies they employ. Observing students' interactions in real-time directly under authentic professional practice conditions in social work constitutes novelty as such. 'The reason why observations are so important is that it is not unusual for person to say they are doing one thing but in reality they are doing something else. The only way to know is through observation' (Corbin & Strauss, 2015, p. 41). The ethnographic approach of the videotaped simulation resulted in a detailed, profound analysis of students' professional practices.

The second study used the method of problem-centred interviews to shed light on the research question of how students reflect on their professional practice, based on the simulated assessment experience. Examination of the problem-centred interviews (Reiter & Witzel, 2022; Witzel & Reiter, 2012), drawing on students' simulation experiences, yielded

valuable insights into students' actions, professional perceptions and narratives, difficulties and challenges. In summary, this study succeeded in conceptualising such individual factors empirically and in substantiating their effects on the professional interaction.

Both theoretical models generated far-reaching explanations of 'the beliefs and meanings that underlie action' (Corbin & Strauss, 2015, p. 11) and the strategies that social work students employ in order to handle their professional requirements and social work's complexity.

7.1.2. Theoretical implications

The empirical findings of the first study aggregate into a model of student action patterns representing a fluid continuum of performance as defined by the elaborated key categories of mono- and co-construction. Using these key categories, the first study identified interventions that interfere with an understanding of professional social work practice as well as with educational targets, for example, the tendency to individualise the client's problem situation or take over interpretative authority of the client's situation. The results further revealed substantial differences in interpreting the social worker's function and assessment assignments, which had a considerable influence throughout their professional interaction and further processing.

In the theoretical model elaborated as an integral result of the second study, a continuum of reflection patterns on professional practice is identified which ranges across the characteristics of both differentiated reflection through contextualised categories and fragmented reflection through individual categories. To better understand the challenges students encounter in complex and dynamic situations in social work, the second study concentrated on in-depth analysis of the fragmented reflection mode. Evidence revealed that the professional role frequently remains not understood and the assessment responsibilities unclear. If a comprehensive framework for professional reflection is not

available, students rely on individual reflection criteria. These criteria frequently include normative components, such as strong beliefs and principles, with individual, personal experiences also serving as benchmarks for reflection.

As this research has shown, there is a strong interplay between perceptions of the professional role and assignments as a social worker, and also with the processes of professional interaction. Students use alternative knowledge resources and personal paradigms when they struggle to conceptualise their task and professional role as social workers.

The empirical studies presented here are among the first to provide thorough qualitative investigation of the professional practices of social work students by simulating practice with a standardised client. Moreover, they reveal the complexity of both students' professional practices and the factors influencing their actions, which has not previously been clearly proved in other investigations. It is particularly noteworthy that this research identified questionable patterns of professional practice as well as their potential causes and their consequences for meeting professional requirements. These theoretical models might also be beneficial in various social work practice areas. Professionals may also consider using these insights to critically engage in reflection on their own performance in light of the presented models, and potentially realign themselves.

Taken all together, the theoretical contribution of this doctoral thesis for disciplinary social work can be thought of in two ways: first, through the theoretical models presented in terms of a cross-sectional study, it is possible for existing theories, such as studies of knowledge utilisation in social work, to be enhanced and complemented (e.g. Finne et al., 2022; Ghanem et al., 2018; James et al., 2019; McCafferty & Taylor, 2022; Ståhl & Lundälv, 2022). Second, this research addresses an existing research gap concerning the professional development of social work students (Becker-Lenz & Müller,

2009; Harmsen, 2014; Ruttert, 2020; van Bommel et al., 2012). Ultimately, this research might enable a valuable achievement concerning the approach of simulation learning in social work, since this is relatively unexplored in German-speaking countries (P. Bauer & Weinhardt, 2014).

7.2. Implications for Social Work Education

An overall target of theory development based on grounded theory methodology is to produce theory that has relevance and applicability for practice (Charmaz, 2014; Oktay, 2012; Strauss & Corbin, 1996). The purpose of this qualitative research was to discover how students engage in dynamic and complex situations of professional practice in order to better understand their learning processes. This subsection discusses selected findings from this research that are intended to inform social work education.

Several major findings from both empirical investigations are addressed again in respect of their implications for social work education. The present studies' microanalyses stressed that most of the students were constantly challenged by the complex, dynamic, and unforeseeable situations encountered in the simulated assessment (and beyond, as the interview data indicate). The evidence demonstrated significant uncertainties, particularly about the context of engaging in the professional role of a social worker and the tasks and responsibilities in an initial assessment. Developing a viable, collaborative working alliance is a demanding task for students, and indicates clearly that students need to increase their awareness of crucial questions like stereotypes or attribution processes, dealing with power structural asymmetry and their attitudes towards the (often marginalised) target group.

All students experienced uncertainty at various levels during the simulated professional practice. The critical point, though, is this: if the connection between the specific tasks of the assessment and the requirements of the professional interaction cannot

be (sufficiently) made with the necessary expertise and corresponding competences, then students are more likely to use day-to-day knowledge and alternative strategies instead, in order to master the situation of professional practice.

- In Study 1, these strategies were demonstrated through conceptualised patterns of action associated with ‘mono-construction’, particularly schematic approaches with limited client involvement, as well as rigid and often strong interventions.
- In Study 2, such strategies emerged as individual judgement benchmarks based partly on strong normative beliefs for their professional practices. Prior experiences of any kind shape such beliefs and personal judgement paradigms.

All these various strategies proved highly functional for helping the students cope with the professional situation. These findings highlight the fact that the students are not (yet) capable of putting the ‘puzzle of social work education’ together (Schumacher, 2011; Sommerfeld, 2014b). Hence, this research confirms that students need to systematically understand and acquire abilities connecting their theoretical knowledge to specific situations of social work practice. Moreover, it became evident, that these alternative strategies must be processed for the development and establishment of professional strategies to lead practice.

A brief remark should be made at this point: for most of the students, this was the first time in their studies they had conducted an assessment independently in the role of a social worker. They were mostly in their fifth or sixth semester, that is, almost at the end of their Bachelor’s degree, and had completed an internship semester working in some field of social work. Although many students appreciatively mentioned helpful classes and beneficial exercises in university, they also stated that they hardly encountered serious exercises that provided them with professional and personal feedback.

> To simply practise this, counselling situations generally, because, I think, otherwise you do not experience this. So, there is no class in which I truly practise actively (...). No matter how much theoretical background knowledge exists, if I never implement it in practice, it's pointless.
> (Antonia, paragraph 87)

Inspired by this quite representative quote and as many other scholars in social work have echoed, I call for providing students with more serious opportunities to practise. Students need real spaces for practice, in which they can actively engage in connecting theory with practice and learn how to act professionally within all the complexity and ambiguities of social work (Cooper, 2011; Effinger, 2021a, 2021b; Harmsen, 2014; Schütze, 2021; Unterkofler, 2020). Consensus exists, for the most part, that key dimensions for professional development include thoughtful practice and the capacity to reflect on those (inter)actions following professional criteria (Ebert & Klüger, 2017; Ferguson, 2018; Ghanem et al., 2018; Kourgiantakis, Bogo, & Sewell, 2019; McLeod, 2022; Unterkofler, 2020; Widulle, 2009). The thorough exercise of scientifically based practice by deliberate action and reflection can be positively intensified through systematically guided evaluation and professional as well as personal feedback (Bogo et al., 2013; Bogo et al., 2014; Ferguson, 2018; Kourgiantakis, Sewell, & Bogo, 2019). To achieve this, tangible and realistic learning scenarios such as simulations or further methods of situated learning are required, which allow students to learn professional practice in a secure and controlled environment (Dodds et al., 2018; Egonsdotter & Bengtsson, 2022; Lave & Wenger-Trayner, 1991; Meredith et al., 2021; Osborn & Costas, 2013; Tov et al., 2016).

Simulations with standardised clients, particularly, can model authentic situations of social work in which students are actually required to act. Learning by simulation may be considered a meaningful benchmark against which to evaluate the personal process of

learning, in alignment with the overarching aims of professional social work practice. Furthermore, questionable strategies may be addressed and processed and the integration of prior experiences may also be facilitated. Simulation may also encourage reflection and learning from one's own errors, irritations and impasses (Dodds et al., 2018; Egonsdotter & Bengtsson, 2022; Harmsen, 2013; Heitzmann et al., 2022; Milner et al., 2020; Sicora, 2017; Widulle, 2009). Through structured debriefing processes based on these experiences, it is reasonable to assume that a more comprehensive understanding of professional practice may emerge (Bogo et al., 2013; Ebert & Klüger, 2017; Egonsdotter & Bengtsson, 2022; Korthagen & Nuijten, 2022; Kourgiantakis, Bogo, & Sewell, 2019; Kourgiantakis, Sewell, & Bogo, 2019).

7.3. Concluding Hypotheses for Social Work Education

From the empirical findings may be exemplarily derived the following hypotheses, which are simultaneously a request of social work education. They are mapped below at a curricular and disciplinary levels.

7.3.1. Enhancing professional practice through social work education

- Students need to learn to challenge individual patterns of interpretation, as well as their personal evaluation paradigms such as attitudes toward clients and their beliefs about social work practice. Irritating personal beliefs and pre-conceptions may be key drivers for professional development, because more or different sources of knowledge are then required to explain and reflect upon them (Egonsdotter & Bengtsson, 2022; Harmsen, 2014; Helsper, 2021; Kahneman, 2012; Korthagen & Nuijten, 2022). The capacity to comprehensively reflect on (one's own) professional practice needs to be learned systematically. These processes of

reflection require support and continued encouragement (Ebert & Klüger, 2017; Ferguson, 2018; Kourgiantakis, Sewell, & Bogo, 2019).

- Students need targeted occasions to reflect on their prior life- and occupational experiences and their resulting motivation to study social work, and, if necessary, to critically evaluate (formative) prior experiences (Effinger, 2021b; Milner et al., 2020; Seden, 2011; Trevithick, 2011; Widulle, 2009). In this respect, it is certainly important to acknowledge the limitations of reflection. Individuals should not and cannot be obliged to engage in self-reflection, nor can all internal processes be made accessible to reflection (D'Cruz et al., 2007; Ferguson, 2018; Ixner, 1999; van Beveren et al., 2018).
- More weight should be placed in social work education programmes on social work's inherent paradoxes, ambiguities, requirements, and challenges (Effinger, 2021a; Fook et al., 2000; Helsper, 2021; Schütze, 2021; Seden et al., 2011). As part of their professional development, social work students need to engage realistically with the requirements of social work. Students also need opportunities to learn holding and enduring demanding situations. Moreover, it is vital to provide students with opportunities to reflect on and express their own feelings of uncertainty, anxiety or concerns in their professional practice (Bogo et al., 2017; Effinger, 2021b; Ferguson, 2018; Tham & Lynch, 2019; Trevithick, 2011).
- Students need to be taught to appraise the effect of the professional interventions they provide and their own person in the professional role of social worker. More attention needs to be paid to teaching students how to establish a collaborative, dialogical, reciprocal approach to their professional interactions (Killick & Taylor, 2020; Milner et al., 2020; Parker, 2021; Rüegger, 2021). This involves both addressing issues of power and structural asymmetry, and an exploration of valuing

a client's self-determination (Parker, 2021; Rüegger, 2021; Sagebiel & Pankofer, 2022)

- Students must frequently experience being not just practitioners but also academic learners, and experience the recognition that scientific knowledge is essential for professional social work practice (Becker-Lenz & Müller, 2009; Sommerfeld, 2014b; C. Taylor & White, 2005; Unterkofler, 2018, 2020). Interconnected teaching concepts, such as casuistry approaches or working with key situations of social work, seem to be promising in this regard (Hollenstein & Kunz, 2019; Tov et al., 2016).

7.3.2. Enhancing professionalisation at disciplinary level

- The role and function of social work have not been fully clarified either broadly within society or within the profession itself. Its diversification generally creates a rather diffuse image of social work in social perceptions. Scientific approaches such as the theoretical direction of social work and its curricular orientation are repeatedly the focal points of disciplinary debates (Harrer-Amersdorffer & Auner, 2022; Jakob, 2010; Sommerfeld, 2014b; Unterkofler, 2020). In the public sphere, contradictory images and narratives about social work exist (Harrer-Amersdorffer & Auner, 2022; Higgins, 2016), with social workers often labelled, for example, 'villains, fools or unsung heroes' (Higgins, 2016, p. 57). Which narratives and what image do social work students derive from this discourse, and what are the possible consequences for their professional development? These issues should also be addressed and discussed in social work education (Effinger, 2021a, 2021b; Higgins, 2016; Schütze, 2021; Webb, 2016).
- Professional practice demands awareness of personal patterns of action in order to prevent unwanted consequences of these patterns (Bogo et al., 2017; Effinger,

2021b; Seden, 2011). Social work education ought to foster explicit reflection on prior (formative) experiences (such as internships in social work placements). Standards concerning (self)reflection within social work education appear to be vague and unclear (DGSA - Deutsche Gesellschaft für Soziale Arbeit, 2016; see Schäfer & Bartosch, 2016). It might be of interest to critically appraise and adopt some ideas from the educational standards for psychotherapy. Therapeutic vocations show similar complexities to social work, but have other standards with regard to their self-reflexive components (GfVT-Gesellschaft für Verhaltenstherapie und -medizin).

8. Limitations and Future Directions

Considerable effort was invested in this research project to carefully conceptualise the entire investigation. The research methods were selected and implemented to provide for the validity of the data and results. Nevertheless, the empirical studies presented here need to be critically discussed in light of limitations, which are summarised as follows.

At first, methodological limitations are to be reviewed from a critical stance. The conceptual superstructure of simulation with a standardised client allowed for a realistic research environment to investigate students' professional practice, as outlined earlier in the empirical studies and in chapters 6 and 7 (general discussion and implications). Initially, the simulated assessment was conceptualised as a live face-to-face simulation. But due to severe and unpredictable restrictions of the corona pandemic, combined with a shift to online-only teaching formats, it was inevitable to modify this research concept at short notice. The students were randomly assigned to either live or virtual simulation, depending on the specific restrictions of the pandemic between July and December 2020. Virtual education was novel at that time and, as far as I know, the subject of virtual assessments neither in theory nor in practice was part of a social work curriculum. Running

the simulation virtually might have challenged the students participating in the online simulation even more. It cannot completely be excluded though, that the unfamiliar online setting might have increased feelings of insecurity or tension. Furthermore, as highlighted before, for many students this simulation experience was the first time ever they were required to act in a role as a social worker. Although the students knew that this is a lab situation, the highly realistic character of the simulation might have evoked feelings of stress at different levels. These emotional reactions may have influenced performance levels in general (Bogo et al., 2017) and may also have caused effects associated to cognitive overload (Blayney et al., 2016; Kalyuga, 2007; Sweller et al., 2011).

There are some further limits to the methods used for data collection that must be considered. The ethnographic background and observation method (J. Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Przyborski & Wohlrab-Sahr, 2021) applied in the first study call for an open and attentive approach. Given their inherent complexity, social interactions can never be fully assessed (Alveson et al., 2022; Przyborski & Wohlrab-Sahr, 2021). Hence, each observation also reduces the complexity of the situation in such a way that it becomes feasible. Nevertheless, even with all the efforts made to ensure quality, there may have been some data loss.

Due to organisational reasons, the interviews executed in the second study were conducted immediately after the simulated assessment. Several of the students were still very immersed by the experience and were challenged to reflect and explain on their actions. It also became apparent that students do not have a lot of practice in retrospectively describing and justifying their actions. Similarly, not all types of knowledge can be captured empirically. It may be that other methods of data collection, for example, approaches of stimulated recall (Messmer, 2014; Sanchez & Grimshaw, 2020), may have yielded even broader insights at this point.

As detailed in chapter 3 (methods), the aim of grounded theory studies is to develop a middle-range theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1996) of conceptual representativity (Strübing, 2021). The current grounded theory research centered on students (bachelor's level) enrolled in social work programmes at four distinct German universities of applied sciences. As such, the two studies need to be recognised in their contextuality (Helfferich, 2011; Steinke, 2004). Direct implications for social work education outside Germany may be limited. In addition, since the students only participated in the simulation once, and the data was collected at a certain point in time, situational considerations must be given careful consideration. However, this could be viewed as a limitation because the students' professional actions were not investigated and compared over time or at various points in time. Notwithstanding these limitations, both studies unravelled significant insights into patterns of action and reflection of social work students.

Given the comprehensive evidence presented in this thesis about critical patterns of students' actions and reflections, such as strong beliefs, evasive actions and individual reflection criteria (please see chapter 6 and 7 for an overview), more research in this particular area is crucial. It would be necessary to explore empirically how such strong beliefs and perceptions emerge and, how they are challenged or modified during the course of education. In light of the results presented, a direct and immediate question arises: which beliefs, perceptions, and normative stances of social work are being promoted in social work education and especially in practical phases of study? Potential influences, in both a positive and critical sense, should therefore be identified empirically, to then raise awareness among educators and practice supervisors.

As revealed by the present investigation, prior professional and personal experiences can influence actions and reflections of students. Therefore, more emphasis should to be placed on social work students' prior experiences of all types, as well as their

study motivation. Understanding the impact of experiences and motivations on professional development would be critical in adjusting components of education accordingly. Exploring patterns of action and reflection that emerge in longitudinal studies would certainly be of interest, as this would probably reveal the stability or variability of such patterns further. A comparative study, involving social work practitioners, could provide valuable insights into approaches and strategies of professional practice. An important aspect would be to empirically assess, how professional social workers handle complexity in social work, which might allow for more conclusions concerning education and further training.

The present inquiry may lead to a particular emphasis on reflection and self-reflection as a last broad subject for subsequent studies. Of particular significance in this regard is the question of how social work students can systematically acquire the capacity to critically reflect themselves, and their professional practice based on overarching criteria. Research should also address the meta-competences required for increasing the capacity for comprehensive reflection in social work.

9. Conclusion

This dissertation aims at contributing to an understanding of how students navigate complex and dynamic situations of professional practice in social work. This research advances the knowledge about students' approaches and strategies in professional social work practice. Beyond that, both studies in this dissertation expand the knowledge about challenges, barriers and potential influential factors in students' professional practice.

Let me conclude by considering the findings presented in this study from a different angle: the growth of social work as a discipline, but mainly as a profession, has gained an immense dynamic during the last quarter of the 20th century, particularly in industrialised western countries. Therefore, the significance of professional knowledge and, above all, of the ability to translate this knowledge into the diverse practice scenarios of social work will increase even more (Engelke et al., 2016). With the empirical studies presented, the students are showing us their challenges, struggles and efforts, that social work education should address. To better qualify future social workers, more authentic practice settings and systematic feedback for students are essential, as is more research on professional practice in social work. Hopefully, this dissertation will contribute to an enhanced understanding of the learning processes of students to inform and develop even more targeted approaches in social work education.

10. Appendix

List of tables

Table 10.1

outline of the study procedure

Chronological sequence	Content of procedure
Before simulation	Introduction to aims, scope, and the overall framework of the study. Arranging individual appointments Collection of demographic data, study progress, also professional (including internships, field experiences) and volunteer experiences.
Day before simulation	Briefing about the procedure, some technical instructions (mainly for the modified digital study). Introduction to their role as a social worker. Concise information about the upcoming appointment with their client Mrs. Martha Palmeri. Students were asked not to do any extra preparation or research
Day of simulation	On-site participants: personal arrangements in the room (a remodeled room in one of the cooperating universities) Online participants: personal preparation in the online virtual lab (including prior technical check, realized via platform Zoom) Implementation: the individual assessment began with the client's entrance into the (virtual) room and ended with an alarm tone (after 25 minutes)
Debriefing	An opportunity for individual multi-level feedback and critical reflection was provided. The feedback was based on significant incidents identified from the video material. All students in our sample made active use of this option.

Table 10.2

transcription rules

Transkriptionskopf	Der Transkriptionskopf beinhaltet die Nummer des Interviews, Pseudonymisierung von Namen und Organisationen, den das Datum und die Dauer des Gesprächs, die anwesenden SprecherInnen sowie Anmerkungen zur Gesprächssituation.
Berücksichtige Inhalte der Transkription	Das Transkript beginnt mit dem Beginn der Simulation. Das organisatorische Vorgespräch und der Technikcheck mit der Schauspielerin und mit den Studierenden wird nicht transkribiert. Ausnahme: in der kurzen Einführung mit den Studierenden erscheinen möglicherweise studienrelevante Informationen wie z. B. große Nervosität der Studierenden oder Internetprobleme. Diese werden unter dem Transkriptionskopf zusammenfassend erfasst und ggf. ein Memo verfasst.
Sprachglättung	Annäherung an die Standardorthographie, d.h. Korrektur des „breiten“ Dialektes. Beibehaltung umgangssprachlicher Ausdrucksweisen, Beibehaltung fehlerhafter Ausdrücke und eines fehlerhaften Satzbaus.
Pausen	Intervallskalierte Pausen (..) kurze Pause (ca. 2 Sekunden) (…) mittlere Pause (bis zu 5 Sekunden) (Pause) Pause ab 5 Sekunden
Sprachklang	Betonung: <u>unterstrichenes Wort</u>

Lautäußerungen	Planungsäußerungen z. B. ähm, mhm, werden transkribiert Wortabbruch und -Wiederaufnahme: wird mit einem Bindestrich markiert. Verschleifungen werden nicht berücksichtigt (z. B. schneller Anschluss)
Nicht-sprachliche Ereignisse	Parasprachliche Ereignisse: wie lachen (lacht) werden in Klammern als Kommentar vermerkt. Handlungen: z. B.: (haut auf den Tisch), hörbare / sichtbare Handlungen werden als Kommentar in Klammern vermerkt. Geräusche: z. B. (Handy vibriert) – Hintergrundgeräusche werden als Kommentar in Klammern vermerkt
Unverständliche Passagen	(…?) unverständliches Wort (…??) mehrere unverständliche Worte (oder sagen wir?) vermuteter Wortlaut / alternativ vermuteter Wortlaut
Interaktion	Sprechunterstützung: Zuhörersignale z. B. Unterbrechung durch die Sprecher:in (I: mhm) bei kurzen Unterbrechungen oder kurzem gleichzeitigem Sprechen durch andere Sprecher:nnen oder die Interviewerin wird dies im laufenden Text eingefügt.
Satzzeichen	Satzzeichen zeigen die Intonation an und werden nicht grammatikalisch gesetzt.

Source adapted from Fuß & Karbach, 2019

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12. Academic Integrity Statement

Academic Integrity Statement

Eidesstattliche Versicherung

Auner, Carolin

Name, Vorname
Last name, first name

Ich versichere, dass ich die an der Fakultät für Psychologie und Pädagogik der Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München zur Dissertation eingereichte Arbeit mit dem Titel:
I assert that the thesis I submitted to the Faculty of Psychology and Pedagogy of the Ludwig-Maximilian-Universität-München under the title:

How do Social Work Students Navigate Professional Practice Situations?

Exploring Student Strategies, Challenges and Influential Factors

A Grounded Theory Study

selbst verfasst, alle Teile eigenständig formuliert und keine fremden Textteile übernommen habe, die nicht als solche gekennzeichnet sind. Kein Abschnitt der Doktorarbeit wurde von einer anderen Person formuliert, und bei der Abfassung wurden keine anderen als die in der Abhandlung aufgeführten Hilfsmittel benutzt.
is written by myself, I have formulated all parts independently and I have not taken any texts components of others without indicating them. No formulation has been made by someone else and I have not used any sources other than indicated in the thesis.

Ich erkläre, dass ich an keiner anderen Stelle einen Antrag auf Zulassung zur Promotion gestellt oder bereits einen Doktortitel auf der Grundlage des vorgelegten Studienabschlusses erworben und mich auch nicht einer Doktorprüfung erfolglos unterzogen habe.
I assert I have not applied anywhere else for a doctoral degree nor have I obtained a doctor title on the basis of my present studies or failed a doctoral examination.

München, 15.05.2023

Ort, Datum
Place, Date

Auner, Carolin

Unterschrift Doktorandin
Signature of the doctoral candidate