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Different Welfare System—Same Values? How Social Work Educators in Norway, Chile and Argentina Comprehend Core Social Work and Social Policy Issues

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Abstract: During 2013 and 2014, five focus-group interviews were conducted in Norway, Chile and Argentina in order to understand better how professors at social work programs understand professional issues and controversial social policy issues in their countries. In the focus groups, the participants were asked to reflect upon a vignette which was a fictitious discussion about professional issues and dilemmas in social work practices. Three themes were deployed in the vignette. *The first* related to different attitudes with respect to how social problems in society should be approached and treated (with a special focus on the relationship between the public, private and civil sectors in solving welfare problems). *The second* was about social work dilemmas in the contested space between universal equality values and local freedom values/discretion embedded in local self-determination. *The third* focused on welfare states' principles distinguishing welfare benefits and services and how public welfare policies should be designed. The three countries are very different with respect to variables affecting welfare policies and social work practices. The most profound difference is likely that Chile (and to a lesser degree Argentina) since the dictatorship is highly influenced by neo-liberal policies advocating small public involvement in social policy, whereas Norway is a typical social-democratic welfare state. This fact, however, does not affect the reflections and apprehensions of the issues in a substantial way. The professional attitudes of the professors are surprisingly equal in spite of their different backgrounds.

Keywords: social work; social policy; professional comprehensions; focus-group interviews; Argentina; Chile; Norway

1. Introduction

The paper takes as its point of departure some key issues very much debated within a public and academic audience in the Nordic countries. The issues are controversial among politicians as well as scholars working with welfare topics, social work and local democracy. The issues relate to three themes and contested issues and questions:

- What are the relationships between the public, private and civil sectors in solving social problems in society?
- Given a public responsibility, what level of professional, political and administrative decision making should have the prerogative and discretion to decide the policy?
- What is the best principle for designing the deliverance of welfare benefits and services (the selectivity or universality principle)?

The apprehension of these issues is of course not developed and presented in a vacuum. The attitudes to and conceptions of these themes will have some contingencies. At least two main factors will probably affect the attitudes and conceptions. Firstly, belonging to a profession and teaching in the same main subject (social work and social policy) will presumably reveal resembled reflections. Secondly, it is likely that the comprehension of the issues will be affected by the societal circumstances, such as cultural traditions, national policies, economic situations and welfare regimes. The study will not, however, treat these factors as independent variables affecting the conceptions, but use the societal circumstances as a backdrop to understand the attitudes and reflections of the professors.

This paper will focus on how professors of social work and social policy in different contexts reflect upon and conceive different issues related to the degree of public involvement in social problems, the degree of political decentralization and the degree of selectivity/universality in welfare deliverance. Five focus-group interviews have been conducted: two in Norway, two in Chile and one in Argentina. The paper will present and analyze their discussion and reflections about the issues.

The research has been done as a part of a Marie Curie-funded project called "Supporting families with complex needs", a European Union-funded "international research staff exchange scheme". The project gave me the opportunity to visit universities in these three countries and due to the professional contact I had with professors teaching social work and social policy, I succeeded in conducting the focus-group interviews. In the interviews, the family focus is not predominant, but family is a central aspect of several of the themes as, for example, regarding the role of the public, private and civil sectors, and in how public welfare policies should be designed. The main focus is reflections about the themes mentioned above and the following paragraph will elaborate more on those accordingly.

2. Some Controversial and Contested Issues

2.1. A Comprehensive Welfare State

Figure 1 is useful for outlining some of the issues concerning how welfare problems and challenges are addressed in contemporary societies. The triangle represents collective welfare problems in society and shows the degree of involvement from, and reliance on, the public sector (the state), the private sector (the market) and the civil sector (families and NGOs) in solving welfare issues. The relative

importance of the sectors varies between countries and many controversial themes arise. There are at least three important issues: How big should the sectors be (white fields)? What are the challenges when three sectors have to collaborate in the "grey" zones (grey fields)? What happens with the issues in which none of the sectors are involved (black fields)? These three issues are universal and significant in social work discourses and social policy discussions worldwide. To some degree, they will make a framework for the discussions in the focus groups.
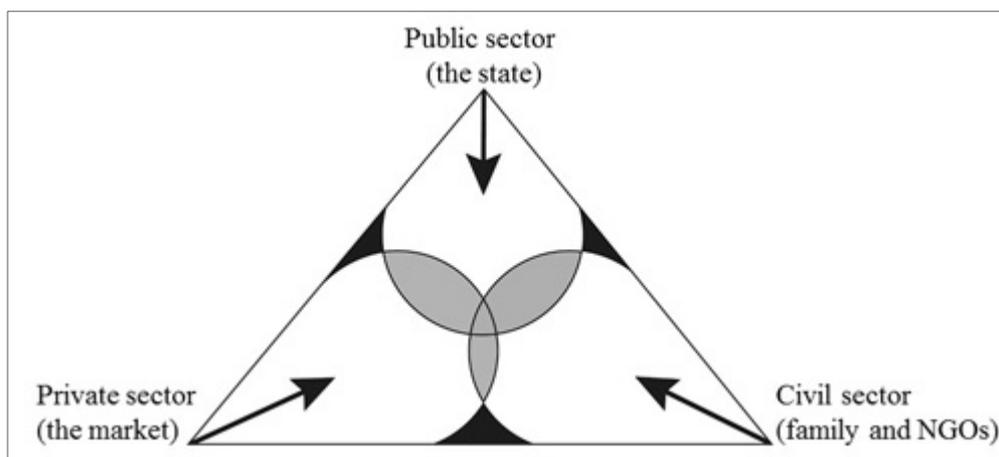
Figure 1. The welfare triangle.

All the Nordic countries are decentralized unitary states characterized by a universalist, egalitarian and public system of services very typical for a social democratic welfare state [1–3]. Thus, a feature of the Nordic welfare model is both universalism and local autonomy. According to Hilson [4], the Nordic welfare state has been successful because the model is consensual and compromise-driven, social-democratic in outlook and able to combine a comprehensive and redistributive welfare state with a successful capitalist economy. To understand these features, it is important to realize the strong influence from *Keynesianism,* emphasizing that the state must use money to stimulate the economy. Social policy and redistribution through social policy measures and lowering of income differences are regarded as factors important to guaranteeing smooth economic growth. Thus, "the social" and "the economic" are integral and inseparable parts of the same development.

However, the Keynesian influence has been challenged over the last few decades. According to neo-liberal thinking and traditional economic theory, scholars advocating this paradigm would assert that: welfare states will not be successful economies because high taxes are detrimental to work and investment incentives; large public sectors create inefficiencies; benefit systems create dependencies which depress private initiative; and welfare states will not be sustainable in the long run. Neo-liberal economic dogmas argue that equality and redistribution are often obstacles to economic growth. We must choose between growth and equality. We must downsize the public sector and get the high tax level down. The message has been that in order to be competitive, the Western countries—especially those with high welfare expenditures and "big" welfare states—must reduce their social security to enhance growth and meet the challenges caused by globalization.

In many Western countries, including the Nordic countries, the so-called New Public Management with its influence from neo-liberal thinking has had an impact on public administration and welfare

policy. Privatization strategies and more focus on devolution/decentralization have received a lot of attention in the public debate and professional discourses. The universal principle for deliverance of welfare is questioned, more focus is given to cooperation between the public and civil sectors, and such a slogan as "from welfare state to welfare society" is frequently used to advocate less public involvement in welfare problems.

Some challenges for the traditional welfare state are also due to *postmodern* tendencies in which a comprehensive welfare state is no longer looked upon as a grand narrative. Relativism, fragmentation, differentiation, subjectivism, individualism and ambivalence are more typical features in contemporary societies than common and joint knowledge, understanding and values characterizing the traditional welfare state [5]. Some sociologists argue that we are living in an era of *reflexive modernity* in which the influences of tradition, class, religion and family are no longer as strong as they once were [6]. People have to choose from a variety of lifestyles in order to develop their own self-identity.

According to this postmodern development, the core value seems to be self-realization, and thus universal moral criteria may be weakened. The question is how this individualism affects the conditions of solidarity. Ideological and political changes in post-industrial capitalism, in contemporary Scandinavia as elsewhere, will most likely have some impact on the structure and function of the Nordic welfare state and to some extent be affected by postmodern individualism and neo-liberal economic trends.

In spite of these influences from neo-liberalism and deeper societal trends, the Nordic welfare model seems to be robust with a strong commitment to ideals of equality, social justice, social security, solidarity and social integration. The degree of trust among citizens has been, and still is, very high [1]. This fact may explain that most inhabitants regard government and public authorities as the solution to a problem and not the problem itself, as is the case in some neo-liberal countries. There seems, however, to be a growing interest for more collaboration between the public, civil and private sectors in solving welfare problems in society. How big the "grey zones" should be between the sectors in approaching and solving welfare problems is controversial—politically as well as professionally.

2.2. How Much Discretion to Local Government

The local and county authorities have a long tradition as local democratic agencies in most of the Nordic countries. Local governments are supposed to be democratic bodies as well as service bodies and executors of nationally decided policies. These roles may be antagonistic. A dilemma arises when the outcome of local elections gives a democratic mandate to local politicians to make different priorities than the national government. Sometimes the challenge will be to accommodate values of national equality to values of local freedom. To establish a well-functioning working division between levels of decision making is difficult and controversial, but is nevertheless a much-debated issue in the Nordic countries.

During the last few decades, local government, especially in Norway, has experienced reduced discretion in political decision making, welfare policies included [7]. According to recent policy documents [8,9], these changes have gone too far and national politicians intimate a "re-capture" of local

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[1] It should be noted, however, that in the last election to parliament in Sweden (14 September 2014) a far-right populist party gained 12.9% of votes, and in addition to a very restrictive immigration policy, the party strongly asserted a mistrust towards public authorities and politicians in general. Also in Norway, we find a political party in government that traditionally has been very critical of public authorities.

decision-making power. For social workers, issues related to how changes in local discretion are impacting central social work values and professionalism in social work practice are of special importance. How much discretion should be given to local decision makers in the name of local democracy? How much difference should be accepted in the name of diversity?

Within social work discourses, these questions must be related to core professional values like social justice, equality, diversity and human rights as well as commitment, empowerment and responsiveness. Concurrently, it is possible to argue that good social work must be contextual [10] and professional discretion at the local level is a necessary prerequisite to success. Thus, current discourses related to the controversial relationship between the central and local levels of decision making and how it might affect democratic ideals and professional social work *as well as* users of welfare services are some of the most interesting issues in contemporary social work discourses in the Nordic countries and elsewhere.

2.3. From Welfare to Workfare

In addition to a discussion about how comprehensive the welfare state should be, there seem to be increasing controversies about important eligibility principles and concepts such as universality/selectivity, stigmatization, decommodification and citizenship rights.

Universal benefits and services are benefits available to everyone as a right, or at least to whole categories of people (like "the elderly" or "children"). Everyone is eligible based on their democratic rights as citizens, and thus all citizens are endowed with similar rights, irrespective of class or market position [11]. Therefore, there are few stigmatization problems related to this eligibility principle. However, there are some justice objections to universalism. The argument is that wealthy people do not need the same amount of benefits and they can afford to pay for the services themselves. In this respect, universal benefits are unfair and a waste of money. In Norway, this is a growing debate mostly related to child benefits, which are universal.

Selective benefits and services are reserved for people in need. Thus, means-tested poor relief or social assistance is given to those in the most need. Targeted groups are offered a safety net of a last resort. Benefits are often intentionally restricted and associated with stigma, designed to make people motivated to participate in the labor market. Selectivity is often presented as being more efficient: less money is spent to better effect. There are problems with selective services, however. Because recipients have to be identified, the services can be administratively complex and expensive to run, and selective services sometimes fail to reach people in need. Finally, the main objection is the stigmatization problem. Because it is not regarded to be a matter of right but a kind of charity, many people feel ashamed of receiving, or people regard it as shameful to receive benefits based on the selectivity principle.

This is why the *decommodification* principle has been so important in Nordic welfare states. Decommodification [1] as a concept comes from the idea that in a market economy citizens (and their labor) are commodified. Given that labor is a citizen's primary commodity in the market, decommodification refers to activities and efforts (generally by the government) that reduce citizens' reliance on the market (and their labor) for their well-being. Decommodification occurs when a service is rendered as a matter of right and when a person can maintain a livelihood without reliance on the market. It refers to the degree to which individuals, or families, can uphold a socially acceptable standard of living independently of market participation.

The decommodification concept must also be related to a discussion about citizenship rights and what this implies. T. H. Marshall has distinguished three types of rights associated with the growth of citizenship [12]: *Civil Rights* which refer to the rights of the individual in law, like freedom of speech and religion, the right to own property, the right to equal justice before the law *etc*.; *Political Rights* which, for example, refer to rights to participate in elections and democratic actions; and *Social Rights* which refer to the freedom or the right of every individual to enjoy a certain minimum standard of economic welfare and security. In most societies, social rights have been the last to develop. This is because the achievement of civil rights and political rights is the basis upon which social rights have been fought for, and none of these rights can be taken for granted.

Welfare policies building on the principles and concepts mentioned in this paragraph are under scrutiny and there seems to be a growing understanding that the authorities should have more focus on getting people to work and not to rely upon generous public welfare, hence the slogan "from welfare to workfare" [13] even though in the Norwegian context it is more a matter of the so-called work-line strategy in welfare policies. This seems to imply increasing acceptance of inequality among a growing number of people, more use of selective instead of universal principles in welfare policy, more use of user charges in welfare services, more use of private insurance in addition to public funding, the receipt of benefits more in accordance with one's contribution than individual need, and stronger emphasis on workfare and benefits more linked to contribution in the working life.

2.4. Some Important Differences between the Countries

The apprehension of these controversial and contested issues will presumably have some contingencies. Features of the nation's welfare regime, economic situation and cultural traditions are examples of factors that may explain the attitudes and understandings. Accordingly, a study that defines some background factors as independent variables explaining professional opinions would of course be interesting. The methodological design used in this study does not admit to such an approach. This is a qualitative study exploring how some professors in social policy and social work from three different countries comprehend issues relevant to social work discourses, and a definite determination of the relationship between independent and dependent variables is not possible. However, as a backdrop to understanding and reflecting upon differences in attitudes and approaches, some statistics would be of interest.

Norway is a typical social-democratic welfare state [1] with a large public sector. The public sector is the main provider of welfare services and benefits, and the provision is comprehensive, universal and redistributive with a high degree of social equality. Municipalities have a heavy responsibility for a great deal of services; approximately three-quarters of local governments' expenses are related to welfare issues (education and kindergartens included).

The categorization of Latin America's welfare regimes has been done in different ways (see for instance [14–17]). Aspalter [15] has in addition to Esping-Andersen's three welfare-state regimes [1] (social-democratic, Christian-democratic and liberal) identified one East Asian and one new ideal-typical welfare regime in Latin America. The last type includes Argentina and Chile and he names the regime "the anti-welfare conservative welfare regime" in which a high degree of stratification and small and means-tested social assistance programs are typical features. Thus, Aspalter's "anti-welfare conservative

welfare regime", typical for Argentina and Chile [2], contrasts in many important ways the social-democratic welfare regimes that are typical in the Scandinavian countries.

A major theme in the focus-groups interviews has been how social and welfare problems in society should be addressed and solved. Are the problems mainly a responsibility and duty for the public sector (the state), the civil sector (family and NGOs) or the private sector (market)? What are the relationships between the sectors in approaching and tackling the problems? The attitudes to this main issue will probably be affected by some features of the three countries, respectively. Many statistics could be presented as showing core differences. I have chosen to use government consumption, unemployment, the poverty rate, an index for inequality in the countries and GDP per capita as a kind of backdrop in order to understand the differences. Table 1 is based on statistics from *The World Factbook* [18].

Table 1. Some indicators of the economic situation in Argentina, Chile and Norway.

Country	Government Consumption [3] (2013)	Poverty Rate [4]	Unemployment Rate (2013)	Gini Index [5]	GDP per capita [6] (US dollars) (2013)
Argentina	18	30 (2010)	7.5	45.8 (2009)	18,600
Chile	12	15.1 (2009)	6.0	52.1 (2009)	19,100
Norway	21.6	7.7 (2011)	3.6	25.0 (2008)	55,400

The table shows clearly that Norway has the biggest public sector, the fewest poor people, the lowest unemployment rate, the lowest degree of economic inequality and by far the largest economy per capita. Besides, the welfare sector's segment of the public sector in Norway is substantial [19]. The participants in the focus groups are highly aware of the differences between the countries that are revealed in the table, and their reflections should be understood with these figures as a backdrop. I will not, however, treat these differences as independent variables explaining differences in attitudes and reflections.

3. Method of Analyses

As mentioned in the introduction, the apprehension of these issues is not developed and presented in a vacuum and, accordingly, it is interesting to learn more about how professors in social work and social policy from different countries conceive and reflect upon these issues. Their opinions, values and reflections about the themes will most likely affect the public debate and discourses within the profession

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[2] It is important to note that both Argentina and Chile are influenced by neo-liberal ideology but, due to influence from unions and social movements, the impact of neo-liberalism has been lesser in Argentina than in Chile.

[3] Percentage contribution of government consumption to GDP. It consists of government expenditures on goods and services. These figures exclude government transfer payments, such as interest on debt, unemployment, and social security, since such payments are not made in exchange for goods and services supplied.

[4] National estimates of the percentage of the population falling below the poverty line are based on surveys of sub-groups, with the results weighted by the number of people in each group. Definitions of poverty vary considerably among nations. In Norway, for instance, we are using a relative definition where households earning less than 60% of medium income is defined as poor.

[5] This index measures the degree of inequality in the distribution of family income in a country. Low numbers mean little inequalities in the country.

[6] The value of goods produced per person in a country.

and practice of social work. Therefore, we conducted five focus-group interviews. It turned out to be rather difficult and time consuming to gather sufficient participants at a time that was convenient for all. Some of the groups were small, but this fact does not seem to have had any negative impact on the discussions and reflections disposed. All the participants had positions as lecturers and professors in social work programs, and most of them had been working as social workers in the field. All the interviews lasted approximately two hours. The first group consisted of four professors at the University of Nordland and was conducted in February 2013. The second interview was with three professors at Pontificia Universidad Catolica de Chile in Santiago, conducted in March 2013. The third group consisted of five educators from different social work programs at many universities in Santiago and the interview was conducted in April 2013. The next focus-group interview was done in November 2013 with four professors at the University of Stavanger, and the last interview was with four educators at Universidad National de Cordoba in Argentina, conducted in February 2014 [7].

The starting point of the interviews was a *vignette* that all the participants were asked to read before the interviews. The vignette was a fictitious discussion concerning professional issues and dilemmas in social work practices between social workers from a local social welfare office, a local politician, a bureaucrat from the local government and a voluntary, non-professional person working in a local NGO. In the vignette, the discussion was followed up by some related questions [8].

Three themes were deployed in the vignette. *The first* relates to different attitudes with respect to how social problems in society should be approached and treated (with a special focus on the relationship between the public, private and civil sectors in solving welfare problems). Examples of questions following the fictitious talk were: Should clients ask their families for help before asking public agencies? Do you expect voluntary organizations to play a more dominant role in delivering welfare services in the future? What are the main pro and con arguments for public responsibility for welfare issues and problems in society?

The second theme was about social work dilemmas in the contested space between universal values and local diversity values, and how to approach possible conflicts between national decision making and the values of local freedom and discretion embedded in local self-determination. Examples of questions asked were: Is the separation of work between central and local level of decision making a contested issue? How much difference and inequality should be accepted in the name of local self-governance and cultural diversity? Is the use of media and whistle-blowing an accepted strategy to change local decision-making approaches?

The third theme focused on the principles underlying welfare benefits and services, and how public welfare policies should be designed. Examples of questions following the talk were: Are the universality principle and the selectivity principle contested in contemporary discourses in your country? Is there a stigmatization problem related to specific benefits and services? Is the growth of welfare expenditure

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[7] This specific sample of focus-group members was chosen because they were all related to the international social work network program funded by the Marie Curie exchange scheme and thus had an interest in the study. Since the study is not aiming to identify independent variables explaining variations in comprehensions, I regard the sample as adequate.

[8] Vignettes as well as focus-group interviews have been more and more common in social science research [20–22]. A vignette can be a fictitious construction of a scenario upon which participants in focus groups will reflect and discuss.

regarded as a problem that needs to be addressed by politicians, and do we see a change "from welfare to workfare"?

As previously mentioned, these three themes and fictitious talks, together with some follow-up questions, were sent to the participants in the focus groups beforehand. We asked them to read the talks and reflect upon the themes and the questions before the interview started. When the focus-group interviews started, the participants had hopefully already reflected upon the themes presented in the vignette. We were not looking for unanimous opinions; disagreement about professional attitudes was interesting. The crucial point, accordingly, was to reveal some typical reflections and attitudes about the issues described in the vignette.

All the interviews were typewritten, transcribed and translated into English. I myself had a role as a moderator, but since my Spanish is not adequate I had (in the Spanish-speaking interviews) to rely upon help from a co-moderator who spoke Spanish and English. Those co-moderators were also participants in the focus group. The transcriptions consist of approximately 150 pages, and a summary was needed [9]. The analyses are based on those summaries. When reading these transcripts, we realized that there are some translations that appear unclear. This could have been avoided if the researcher (main moderator) had more competence in Spanish and thus guided the informants towards relevant themes in the vignette. In addition, we realized that some reflections in the interviews would have benefited from adequate follow-up questions. We believe, however, that the quality of the interviews is not seriously reduced.

The following is a review and summary of the main reflections and conceptions that were revealed in the interviews. The transcripts were read several times to ensure that the summaries reflect the informants' views in a proper way. Only reflections that are related to the vignette and subsequent questions are presented. I use some quotations (in italic) from the transcripts in order to illustrate the reflections and opinions. Therefore to identify who said what is not particularly interesting. Where the participants have different opinions will be apparent from the text. The summary will be organized according to the themes in the vignette.

4. Findings Based on a Summary of the Focus-Group Discussions

4.1. Theme 1: The Relationship between the Public, Private and Civil Sectors in Resolving Welfare Issues

All five groups assert that social problems mostly have societal causes; accordingly, all groups agree that, in principle, the public sector should be the main provider of services and benefits in society. The Norwegian groups especially agree that elected politicians and public agencies need to take the main responsibility even though more collaboration with actors from the civil sector will be more compelling in the future. They emphasize that to receive help is a matter of right, and public responsibility will enhance social rights as important citizen rights. They argue that there is a kind of reciprocity involved in public welfare. Citizens pay taxes and expect something back from the state when in need of help or support. Another argument mentioned is a democratic one. A good democracy is built upon involvement, commitment and participation, and public responsibility for welfare will enhance and probably facilitate citizenship in society.

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[9] Because of the magnitude of data, only some of the reflections will be further elaborated. The material, however, will be available for analyses.

The causes of social problems were a theme in the Chilean groups as well, and they seemed to agree that individual problems mostly have societal causes. They do not believe in an individualistic conceptualization of human beings but assert that sometimes it is hard to decide how to approach a social problem, and *it is really difficult to distinguish based on structural constitution, and it is really difficult to distinguish what is your responsibility and what isn't* [23]. They argue that a protective and benevolent state that facilitates solutions is necessary. They also assert *that when we activate individual solutions we do it not because we trust that it is the best solution, but rather because it is the fastest way to come to a solution* [23].

The Norwegians stress that it is important for the educational programs to keep a macro-perspective in their teaching, though they are not sure that this understanding will survive in the educational systems. One Norwegian group referred to the fact that many professors in social work and social policy obtained their education in the radical decade of the 1970s, a decade in which macro-level explanations, structure and political consciousness were important elements in the ontological understanding of how society works. To understand problems as *social* problems was a fundament most social work teaching was built upon. They wondered if these understandings and values acquired in the 1970s and early 1980s would prevail. Will the contemporary trend towards more individualization affect the way educators are looking upon social problems and their causes? Thus far, the predominant comprehension among scholars in social work is that most problems must be related to characteristics within the society and, accordingly, the public authorities must take on major responsibility. If the focus in public discourses shifts from the society to the individual, with more focus on poor morals and bad choices, then this will certainly affect the teaching.

One of the Chilean groups had a great deal of reflections about what is characterizing the Chilean way of regarding the relationship between the individual and society. They commented that the saying "each person is the architect of his own fortune" is engrained in all of us *and this has to do with the logic of individual capital that was changed in two or three generations to be the way of resolving public problems, in that you resolve them privately* [24]. Therefore it is "difficult to be poor". *The logic of individual capital lacks the vision of solidarity* [24]. Many people do not care about people in need if they are not affected themselves. The logic is residual assistance; poverty and equality gaps are tolerated. They seem to be very critical to contemporary features of Chilean society and one participant put it like this:

> The logic produces and the society produces inequality. Not only produces, but tolerates and hides. The collective solidarity is not installed, it's lost. The system is built upon individual insurance, no collective solidarity or societal responsibility. Individuality is the maximum expression. Privatization has been contrived as an icon of modernity, but it is really the icon of the neo-liberal model. For most people it is hard to imagine other systems, but for many Europeans it is hard to understand the degree of privatization that is characterizing the Chilean society [24].

The issue about conditionality seems to be much debated in all three countries and is built upon a kind of a contract between the state and the citizen. In the Norwegian context, however, there seems to be a rights-based focus emphasizing that the state is obliged to help if the citizen for some reason is not able to manage alone. In Chile, there seems to be more focus on the individual's responsibility, and one of the groups talked about the social protection system as being built upon two pillars, one aid pillar

and one contribution pillar. They say that the system pivots between a universal logic of wellbeing led by demand and a subsidy logic. There are many conditional transfers and the system of social welfare is based on conditionality. *It is likely that the system in the future will be less universal and less based on rights* [24].

The focus group from Argentina asserted that liberal reformism and social Catholicism at the beginning of 20th century shape two strong traditions that have always disputed sense, meanings and orientations of social work and society. These two traditions have had a big impact on the professional debate and they still rule the Argentinean debate. They argue that the degree of public responsibility is much debated in contemporary Argentina, and it is a public and social debate and not only regarded as a subject for academics. They say that the debate about social policies in Argentina breaks through many sectors of the population such as businessmen, union representatives, mass media, the Catholic Church, *etc.* They are also concerned about the influence of neo-liberalism and the privatization trend that started in the 1990s. Many good programs have been introduced but at the same time there exist a poor adjustment with real practice. There seems to be a divorce between what the law proposes and reality.

The two groups from Chile were particularly very skeptical as to how realistic it will be to give more responsibility to the public sector in resolving welfare problems in contemporary Latin-American countries. One of the groups maintained that *the state is a benefactor, small, residual and focusing on the very poor. Present Chile is heavily influenced by neo-liberalism affecting public policy and political decision making* [24]. Moreover, this will affect how professionals work. The system is based on an idea of conditionality, and people in need must meet a series of requirements before getting help.

The focus-group participants in Chile and Argentina claim that the divide between public and private responsibility in addressing welfare problems has historical reasons and weak public involvement is due to the neo-liberal influence in Latin-America in the 1980s and 1990s. Latin-America has a family-based residual system where resources in the family must be used before help can be expected from the state. The discussions in these groups indicate, however, that this system is not supported by the educators. In a Norwegian, situation most benefits are regarded to be a matter of right for the individual regardless of how rich the individual's family might be. Nevertheless, also in a Norwegian context, it will be relevant to involve resources in the network and the family if the individual agrees. With respect to the use of NGOs in resolving welfare issues, the participants in the focus groups are not very clear. In Argentina, the influence of the Catholic Church has been substantial but also very controversial. That is also the case in Chile, whereby here the participants talked about a system of transfer, not a system of collaboration between the public and civil sectors. Generally, the Norwegians are very skeptical of using market mechanisms in welfare policies. They differentiate between idealistic and non-profit organizations on one hand and for-profit NGOs on the other. The first, they maintain, may contribute substantially to solving social problems, but for-profit organizations are not appreciated as providers of welfare services.

All the groups are in favor of using civil sector organizations in a working collaboration with public agencies. At the same time, they are skeptical of the commercialization of the services. The Norwegian groups particularly emphasize that it is important to differentiate between ideal and non-profit organizations on the one side and commercial for-profit organizations on the other. Both the Chilean groups maintain that civil organizations and citizens groups (together with social workers) have an important role to play in visualizing social problems in society because *we are living in a society that silences serious problems. There is a lot of collaboration but it is probably more right to talk about a model of transfer, not a model*

of collaboration [24]. Accordingly, they are critical of the outsourcing trend. This trend is an issue discussed in both Norwegian groups as well. They are critical of the profit part of it, but they welcome more collaboration between public and civil sectors. At the same time, they agree that the dominant attitude and conceptions among contemporary politicians and in general public in the future probably will be that social problems are a collective and public responsibility even though some trends towards downsizing public responsibility are visible.

Attitudes towards family-based welfare reveal the biggest differences between the focus groups, and the differences correspond to nationality. The participants in the focus group from Norway are very clear that to ask the family of a client to resolve the client's problem is not appropriate. They all maintain that we have passed the time when the state and social workers could expect family members to solve the client's problem. Relying on families should not be among the *principles we are building social work and our welfare system on* [25]. To get help is a matter of right and the family's income is not relevant. They are, however, positive to collaborating with family resources and the network around the client in order to find appropriate solutions for the problem, but they emphasize strongly that this does not release the state from having the main responsibility.

The focus groups from Chile and Argentina are correspondingly clear that if a client has a rich family and the client needs some economic support, it will not be expected that public authorities should help. One of the groups from Chile elaborated more on this issue and explained that in Chile clients must rely on *individual and familiar resources, labelling, blaming and holding responsible*. This has something to do with the fact *that in our countries there is a more familiar resolution to problems versus in Europe where there is a resolution demanded from the State* [23]. They argue that it is necessary to use the family in resolving the problems and assert that Chilean social workers *consider the family as a means of support*. All the focus groups argued that it is relevant to include the family situation and the network around the client when the social workers have to review the possibilities and give an assessment of what can be done.

The groups from Argentina and Chile were critical of the way the authorities are approaching the issues, and argued that the policy is not adjusted to the real needs of society. The state seems to ignore the problems, and there is a constant conflict between problems and lack of resources. Furthermore, they argue that sometimes there is a divorce between what the laws say and reality, and there is a lack of political decision and courage to implement the laws. This seems to be the case in Argentina and in Chile. They welcome, however, the debate about how to involve public authorities in welfare issues. The Norwegian participants are proud of public involvement, and argue that the success of the welfare state is the best argument for a strong public engagement also in the future, even though they can see a trend towards more privatization and neo-liberal thinking in a Norwegian context as well. They anticipate, however, that benefits that are too generous may imply a welfare trap that is difficult to avoid, and therefore the work-approach strategy is necessary. Some also indicated that it is not necessarily certain that welfare benefits always meet real needs, and they asked whether the welfare services adequately address the people who really need state assistance. Accordingly, one of the focus groups mentioned an eventual problem related to being too self-satisfied with the welfare system and this can obscure critique and consideration of other welfare perspectives and systems.

The different apprehensions of the situation have much to do with the welfare systems which mirror a well-known and controversial political and social policy discourse: is a comprehensive welfare state

the problem or the solution of the problem? The standpoint is apparently dependent upon preconceptions and can be explained according to historical experiences and of course political and ideological views. Latin-American countries have been under the influence of neo-liberal ideologies, and, according to the interviewed professors, this ideology has had a negative impact on welfare policies. Therefore, they advocate more public responsibility in addressing welfare issues. The Norwegians refer to a well-established and successful welfare state, and prefer a comprehensive welfare state for the future, even though some political trends may indicate a downsizing of public responsibility [10]. This reveals a somewhat paradoxical situation: a small welfare state requests more public responsibility, while a big welfare state focuses a need to downsize the public sector.

4.2. Theme 2: Dilemmas Related to Local Discretion and Decision Making

The vignette invited reflection about latent competence-conflicts and other problematic issues arising from the division of competence between different levels of decision making within the public sector. Equality in service and benefits across local and regional borders is important in social work and social policy. To ensure this value, centralized decision making and service deliverance are sometimes necessary. At the same time, diversity is a value in the profession and local discretion will often be a prerequisite for success. Thus, national *equality*, which is a core social work value, may conflict with values of local *freedom*, which politicians at the local level appreciate very much as do local professionals who want to adjust social work to local conditions and circumstances.

None of the focus groups had issues related to competence-conflicts in "grey-zones" between levels of decision making that has already been mentioned as a very controversial issue. However, all the groups agreed that it should be an issue, and they wanted more discussions by professionals about dilemmas in the contested working division between levels of decision making. Especially in the Norwegian groups, the fact that Norway is a decentralized unitary state could create a lot of controversies between national decisions makers building on national equality values and locally elected politicians adhering to the value of local freedom. Accordingly, a crucial question could be; how much difference can we accept in the name of local self-governance? One of the Norwegian groups agreed that there must be space for professional discretion because local circumstances vary a great deal although, at the same time, it is necessary to avoid too much difference in the quality of services among municipalities and inhabitants. They argued in favor of tailored welfare policies according to local needs and circumstances, and more centralization may counteract this. They seem to conclude that local professional discretion within certain minimum economic standards will be the best arrangement and they recommended more use of professional discretion. The other Norwegian group was more doubtful about local discretion because, as one participant said, *local democracy is advantageous for powerful groups in society* [26].

The Norwegian focus groups spent much time reflecting upon pro and con arguments for local self-governance. One group was particularly skeptical of local autonomy because professional competence is sometimes lacking, especially within the child-protection area. The participants are not sure, however, whether lack of competence is due to local self-governance. One informant put it like this: *The more unclear and diffuse the need for help is, the more uncertain the resources will be. But is*

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[10] The outcome of the parliament election in September 2013 replaced the social-democratic "red-green" government with a conservative "blue-blue" government.

this due to local self-determination? Or due to different attitudes among professionals working without very clear frames? [26]. They assert that if criticism arises in the public debate about how professionals manage their jobs and conduct their duties, they protect each other, and *it is almost impossible to reveal what is really happening* [26]. Differences in the quality of services seem to be caused more by differences in professional competence than political attitudes or the fact of local responsibility.

The focus-group participants realized that there are differences between municipalities, but not necessarily due to conflicting values. One of the Chilean groups affirmed that *in general inequalities are more about the fact that some neighborhoods are rich and some are poor, not so much due to decision making and different values in local government* [24]. During the Pinochet period, many tasks were decentralized, causing many differences in welfare services. Today, they think that *the local demand is to decentralize, but with resources* [24]. One of the participants asked *do we confuse discretion with autonomy?* [23]. They argued that professional discretion is difficult because of lack of autonomy in the decision-making structure. There seems to have been more opportunities to reflect upon issues in a collaborative way in the past. Today the professionals are influenced by ideas of control and hierarchical attitudes, and this hierarchical tendency has been strongly implemented in current social policies. *There is much management control as well as control over social processes* [23]. Professionals spend most of their time filling out paperwork. This is a way of infringing upon autonomy. It takes away autonomy from the professionals, and the focus is placed on control and supervision. Thus, professional discretion is difficult.

They seemed to have had bad experiences in the Pinochet era when a lot of decision making was decentralized, resulting in many differences between the municipalities. They argued, however, that sometimes local decision making is good, but not without resources and some national parameter being necessary. The concepts of discretion and autonomy were problematized, and they argued that professional discretion is useless if formal autonomy is restricted. The Argentinean group talked about the possibility of central politicians using funding as a weapon to pressure local decision making. However, there seems to be less central interference today than earlier and there are some efforts to give more autonomy to local governments. Thus, the state of the art is somewhat confusing: professionals see the advantages of national parameters in social work in order to ensure equality values, and therefore are in favor of some national influence on local priorities, but at the same time they advocate more professional discretion at the local level. Simultaneously, there seems to be more power given to local political decision making. That is probably why some of the groups argue that political connections and knowledge are important if the social work profession is to influence public policy.

Another issue was about differences due to cultural background. The moderator asked if it should be acceptable that parents spank their children, proposing that it is necessary in the upbringing of children. The Norwegian groups answered very clearly in the negative; it is not acceptable to use culture as an excuse for smacking children for the purpose of upbringing because corporal punishment (in Norway) is against the law and therefore illegal. Sometimes it is difficult to know where to draw the line and, as an example, one participant said that *there are groups and religious minorities in Norway who argue very strongly and act accordingly that women should stay home and take care of the children. Is this attitude within or outside the law?* [26]. It is important that social workers learn more about cultural differences in order to do better professional work. However, core social work values and ethical

standards must be at their roots, and they assert that some social workers have not internalized these values and ethics well enough.

The informants from Chile argued that cultural diversities that violate dignity should not be accepted. International human rights are important for social workers to attend to, but it is not always easy to decide where to draw the line between acceptable differences and unacceptable attitudes and actions. The children's right to education is important even if it violates cultural norms. The informants had a discussion about individual rights and rights according to cultural norms and concluded that there are situations where this issue is difficult (as an example they mentioned the circumcision of children), but they seemed to conclude that as a general rule the social worker must stick to human rights and that violation of these rights is not acceptable. Even though the international convention on human rights is based on a Western culture, everyone including the social workers should be trained to ensure the rights of people. In the focus group from Argentina this issue was not much discussed. The participants seemed to agree that because Argentina is a quite homogeneous society with few cultural differences there are few problems with cultural differences violating core social work values. The public school system ensures *a whole of general shared norms in this country* [27]. But some aboriginal groups claim that the transmission of their culture and rights could be better provided for.

Altogether, the issue about how much difference in social policy is acceptable in the name of local self-governance and cultural diversity brought about a lot of discussion. Professional reflections are necessary and the issue should be talked about, discussed and problematized. As one interviewee said: *we need deliberation and discussion all the time, but some values are so important that they are protected by law. Besides the professional "code of ethics" should be normative* [27]. This code emphasizes that some values are universal and independent of context. It seems hard to draw a clear line but some parameters are necessary, as for example, concluding that it is unacceptable that diversity should violate a person's dignity. The focus groups in Chile and Norway emphasized strongly that the international convention of human rights is very important to use as a guideline even if it violates cultural norms like the circumcision of girls. The Argentinean focus group did not see the difference/diversity issue as a big problem because the country is quite homogeneous.

The need for whistle-blowing has received a lot of attention in the media. However, in spite of (or maybe because of) that, many social workers seem to be afraid of doing so. The Norwegian groups argue that some social workers are afraid of being "frozen out" if they go to media or the public with criticism. The worker may get a reputation as a whistle-blower and trouble-maker and therefore whistle-blowing is probably too infrequent at the local level. Workers are afraid of losing their jobs or of being "frozen-out" and people think *is it worth it*? [25]. Besides, there seems to be a strong demand for loyalty from their employers.

The Norwegian groups argue that sometimes blowing the whistle is necessary, but one must first use the proper channels for changing the policies. They argued that local professionals should involve central authorities to a greater degree even though this is seldom done. The participants argued that as a part of social workers' mandate, they should inform politicians and decision makers about the state of things. If people with power to change current practice do not have relevant information and knowledge, it will be hard to influence the necessary changes:

> If you do not succeed with your point of view and you think it is a matter of great importance, you should try to involve a higher level of decision making. It can also be a possibility to involve the labor union (which in Norway is a professional union, as well). If there are important issues at stake, and you feel the local decisions violate your social work identity, it will be okay to involve the media [25].

The participants in one group discussed how important it is to teach students about values, and that there are crossroads where the students have to ask themselves if it will be right to continue in the job. It is important to give the students confidence with regard to social work values and to show that professional social workers belong to a professional community. The other Norwegian group maintained that whistle-blowing is accepted and legitimate, but that the professionals seldom do it. When the moderator asked about the frequency of whistle-blowing by the professionals, they argued that it should be a duty for professionals to inform politicians and speak out about things that are wrong or do not work well. They claimed that the professionals do speak up about it, but in a very hidden way. The professionals should speak loudly and publicly, but it seems to be very difficult. If they do, whistle-blowers will have many problems. One participant put it like this:

> There are many closed systems and fringe benefits that one will not achieve if you are known as a whistler. There is a lack of transparency and a lot of things happen behind closed doors [26].

Whistle-blowing and the use of media in order to focus disagreement and concerns about how local authorities treat welfare issues seem not to be very relevant in the Chilean and Argentinean contexts. One reason could be that the degree of decentralized decision-making is higher in the Scandinavian countries. Furthermore, participating in a public debate about social policy issues does not seem to be very common. One group from Chile said that *we* (the social workers) *aren't participating in public policy, we aren't participating in the debate, we aren't lobbying and we aren't supporting with evidence* [24]. The other Chilean group asserted that this lack of engagement is a problem and therefore *we need social workers with a political view who can influence the policy* [23]. The focus group from Argentina said that social workers can *involve the professional association and he/she can try to influence public opinion by writing in newspapers* [27]. They also emphasized that there is *a culture of protest among us but we are not always successful with our claims* [27]. This slight difference between Chile and Argentina in the culture of protest is interesting and may indicate some important differences between Chile and Argentina with respect to political awakening. Unfortunately, the focus groups did not elaborate on this difference.

4.3. Theme 3: Appropriate Principles in Regard to the Delivery of Welfare Benefits and Services

The third theme was about which principles should be used when the state determines who is entitled to welfare services and benefits. Both Norwegian groups lean towards the universal principle, meaning that all who meet certain criteria will get support (for instance, retirement pension and child allowance) regardless of how rich they may be. They argue that universalism will reduce the problem with stigmatization, which is important. Using universal principles will enhance a conception that welfare support is regarded as a matter of right benefitting everyone and not just a few as a charitable gift from the state. Accordingly, stigmatization in contemporary Norway is probably not very common but *if*

stigmatization happens, we need to work against it [25]. However, there are contemporary political trends that advocate more selectivity and means-testing.

The Norwegian groups argue that the attitudes with respect to the use of principles are dependent on political opinions. *If you have a liberalistic or conservative attitude, you will probably be in favor of using the selectivity principle while social-democratic parties are more inclined to prefer universalism* [25]. One participant saw the development in a historical light. He argued that in the beginning of the welfare state in Norway, when universalism was initially introduced, *many people were poor and there were very few rich. Now few are poor but many more are rich. We are therefore living in a different landscape and what are the implications for the principles we use?* [25]. Thus, this fact may have an impact on what kind of principles that have support in public opinion. In earlier times, more people would benefit from solidarity attitudes but today relatively few people are poor, and therefore solidarity values may lose popular support. Solidarity will change from "solidarity between equals" towards "solidarity with the other", and the question will be how this will affect the attitudes to the principles on which we base the welfare system.

The *moderator* wanted to have the participants' opinion about a growing understanding that the welfare state is too comprehensive and generous, creating conditions in which some people are not motivated to find work. All the Norwegians (as mentioned earlier) are adherents of a comprehensive welfare state built on universalism, but they agreed that it is not certain that welfare benefits always meet the real needs, and they asked, does the welfare state adequately address the people who really need support from the state? They agreed, however, that currently there is more focus on work-approach strategies and the slogan "from welfare to workfare", partly because of a change in political attitudes associated with the change of government. One group talked about the welfare trap, and therefore argued strongly that the government is responsible for facilitating work opportunities instead of welfare benefits, thus supporting the "workfare" policy. Without being explicit, they argued that the work approach implies a "contract" between the individual and the society, where the state is obliged to help if help is needed (cash benefits or help to facilitate the possibility of work). This is not new. What is new is a stronger emphasis on the work approach in order to escape the welfare trap. The participants doubt that there is a lot of misuse. One said that *my impression is that there are very few who really try to misuse the system* [26]. They argue that the recipients first option is all the time to get some work and work for the money Because our self-respect is related to being able to contribute in society. This feeling is important and it is important that social workers do not approach welfare users by saying that you are lazy and not capable of working in the ordinary labor market. They assert that the work approach is important in spite of the fact that the welfare state has not well facilitated work for all especially for handicapped people. They agree, however, that over the last few decades there has been an increase of focus on the work-approach strategy and the slogan "work must pay".

One Chilean group emphasized that "stigmatization" and "deserving" are concepts that are closely related to each other. They can be seen from at least two perspectives. From the perspective of deserving: *To deserve it you must show that you are poor, demonstrate that you have been violated in your rights* [23]. Another perspective is to see victimizations as a strategy to achieve benefits and services:

> So they have to victimize themselves, and this grabs my attention, because I feel that there
> is a stigma, certainly, but this stigma functions for their benefit. It makes me really mad when

people say, "There are the poor, they are accustomed to being dealt handouts" and that this is their strategy [23].

All the informants from Chile agreed that universalism as a fundamental feature with the Chilean welfare system seems to be very rare. Means-testing based on the selectivity principle is much more usual than universalism where categorical and "objective" criteria (without discretionary power from different kinds of gatekeepers) determine who are entitled to services and cash benefits. Thus they argue that the saying *poor policies for the poor* [23] describes very well the situation in Chile. When it comes to the Argentinean situation, the focus group argued that in social policy the authorities are use a combination of principles and *we are constantly debating the boundaries of the universal and selectivity principles* [27]. They say that because the selectivity principle in the 1990s *was promoted through programs oriented exclusively to the poor sector, it has a rather bad connotation* [27]. Therefore, there is a discussion about the principle among professionals as well as politicians.

The focus groups from Chile underscored that the welfare system is built upon two pillars, one aid pillar and one contribution pillar. They argued in favor of universal principles because it will reduce the stigmatization problem, but there seems to be a tendency towards more use of the selectivity principle, and there is constant tension between these pillars. They claimed that the expression "each person is the architect of his own fortune" is well established in society and they asserted that the whole system is based on an idea of conditionality where people in need must meet a series of requirements before getting help. Poverty is accepted and equality gaps are tolerated. Thus they argued that the influence from neo-liberalism in the last two generations has made solidarity values difficult to uphold. The rights-based perspective seems to have a difficult future.

5. Conclusions

There are substantial differences in the traditions, cultures, policies, economies and welfare systems of Argentina, Chile and Norway. The welfare systems in the two Latin-American countries are family-based and residual, while Norway has a universal and egalitarian system with comprehensive state responsibility for welfare services and benefits. The main finding is that these well-known differences do not seem to have a substantial impact on educators' apprehensions of important issues in social work and social policy, even though the degree of attention to the issues varies. This indicates that being an educator in the same field has an impact on the apprehensions regardless of differing contexts. This does not imply that professional social work is not contextual. "Good" social work practices must always consider the context and environment in which they operate. The point here is that belonging to a profession and teaching in a social work program seems to have a profound impact on the educators' apprehensions regardless of national differences.

The structural differences are, however, associated with some important disparities regarding reflections about future developments. The participants from Argentina and Chile expect a decrease in neo-liberal influence and more public responsibility for welfare problems, whereas the Norwegians, due to political trends, anticipate a reforming of the welfare model with more collaboration from civil sector actors. All the participants in the groups agree that welfare problems mostly have societal causes, and that the public sector should accordingly assume the main responsibility in addressing the issues. The Norwegian groups, however, expect more use of fees and the selectivity principle in welfare deliverance,

even though they disagree with such a development. All groups agree that some forms of conditionality are apparent and that there are conditions connected to receiving help from the welfare state. In Norway, the so-called work-approach strategy is prevalent in order to ensure that "work must pay". This strategy presupposes that jobs are available, which is not always the case.

Another difference relates to levels of decision making. Norway has a decentralized structure for decision making, which may bring competence conflicts between the levels of decision-makers; this is not as obvious in a centralized structure as in Argentina and Chile. In the Norwegian context, democratic as well as instrumental arguments are used to justify local decision making in social policy and social work. Transparency, accountability, relevance and adequacy in the service deliverance of welfare policies are supposed to be better when local decision makers and professionals have substantial influence on policy formation and implementation. However, one of the Norwegian groups doubted this understanding when they asserted that "local democracy is advantageous for powerful groups in society". They doubted the value of local discretion and therefore asked for more national direction in local policy and priorities. Besides, local discretion and decision making may promote many difficult dilemmas between conflicting values in social work practices. Two of these dilemmas concern the questions: (1) How much inequality between individuals and municipalities can we accept in the name of local self-governance? (2) How much difference can we accept in the name of cultural diversity? This is an important debate and reflects the controversy between the "universal" (human rights values) and the "particular" (recognizing diversity) in social work education and social work practices.

All the groups refer to human rights and the code of ethics for social workers as important guidelines when conflicts arise. The more decentralized the system is, the more obvious the dilemma will be. Accordingly, it makes sense when whistle-blowing is more frequently discussed in the Norwegian context. Both groups, however, call for more use of whistle-blowing if the quality of welfare falls below certain standards or if cultural differences indicate violation of human rights values. The problem seems to be that social workers will experience problems if they blow the whistle, as both Norwegian groups indicated. The professors in the focus groups regard this to be a substantial problem.

6. Limitations

This study is not a quantitative study analyzing variables affecting professional comprehensions of core social work and social policy issues. The empirical data does not allow for such analyses. However, the fact that professional attitudes and apprehensions are surprisingly equal indicate that the profession has internalized some values and comprehensions that trumps different national backgrounds and circumstances. This findings needs to be corroborated by more quantitative research.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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