

# The challenge of superdiversity for the identity of the social work profession: Experiences of social workers in ‘De Sloep’ in Ghent, Belgium

**Bea Van Robaey**

Karel de Grote University College, Belgium

**Hans van Ewijk**

University of Humanistic Studies, The Netherlands

**Danielle Dierckx**

University of Antwerp, Belgium

## Abstract

This article examines the challenges that superdiversity and complexity pose for social workers. Taking an ethnographic approach, we focus on the ‘knowledge-in-action’ of social workers in a small service organization in Belgium in order to access their experiences of being professionals in superdiverse contexts. The reflections of the social workers reveal the prominence of three inter-related issues: the social vulnerability of clients, the tensions that arise in coping with differences between personal and professional frameworks and identities, and the discontinuity that challenges the professional self-confidence of social workers. The findings raise important questions for the professional identity of social work.

## Keywords

Ethnography, professionalism, reflexivity, social work, superdiversity

## Introduction

In recent decades, the field of social work has been faced with increasing ethno-cultural diversity in many European states. Some authors have even referred to the concept of superdiversity, as

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### Corresponding author:

Bea Van Robaey, Department of Social Work, Karel de Grote University College, Brusselstraat 23, 2018 Antwerpen, Belgium.

Email: [Bea.vanrobaeys@kdg.be](mailto:Bea.vanrobaeys@kdg.be)

introduced by Vertovec (2006). Addressing the changing nature of global migration and the ‘diversification of diversity’, the term expresses a dynamic, multiple and broad understanding of migration-driven diversity in contemporary society. Superdiversity is one of the processes that are contributing to the rapid increase in structural complexity in contemporary societies.

Which challenges does superdiversity pose to social workers, and how do they cope with these challenges? In what way can the concept of superdiversity help to explain current social work practice and the professional identity of social work? In this article, we explore these issues by reporting on a study of one social work organization in Ghent, Belgium.

The relevance of diversity is clear. The concept has become central to the thinking of the social work community, as reflected in the new formulation of the international definition of social work (2014). Diversity has been categorized as one of the central principles of social work:

Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and *respect for diversities* are central to social work. [...]. (Emphasis added)

The theoretical literature on approaches to diversity in social work is abundant. As convincingly argued by Boccagni (2014), however, ‘the empirically based knowledge of this issue lags remarkably behind’ (p. 6). How do social workers and clients negotiate differences in everyday practice? How do social workers perceive and understand diversity and superdiversity? How do they respond to the increasing diversity in the client population and to new forms of social exclusion (Khan and Dominelli, 2000: 106)?

This article addresses this empirical gap by presenting results from an ethnographic study conducted in one social work organization in Ghent, Belgium, exploring the experiences of social workers with diversity and superdiversity in social work practice. We also add to the theoretical understanding of the domain of intercultural social work by reflecting on the utility of the concept of superdiversity for understanding the experiences of contemporary social workers. We argue that the experiences of social workers in contexts of superdiversity pose challenges in debates concerning the professional identity of social work.

In the first section of the article, we elaborate on the understanding of diversity in the field of social work by looking at the main theoretical approaches to diversity in the social work literature and by reviewing the scarce empirical literature on the construct of diversity in social work practice. We then sketch the changing context within which social workers must cope with diversity. The third section outlines the methodology of the study and introduces the social work organization within which we conducted our study. We then present our results, based on the oral narratives of the social workers. In the concluding section of the article, we raise a number of questions concerning the professional identity of social work, based on the results of this study. We argue that the concept of superdiversity can be useful for conceptualizing the nature of professional social work in contemporary society.

## **Towards an understanding of diversity in social work**

Since the 1960s, the social work literature has highlighted the importance of recognizing ethnicity, cultural differences and the reality of racism in the lives of social work clients. As observed by Payne (2005: 375), this area of theory emerged from growing concerns about ethnic conflicts in Western societies, as one of the outcomes of the increasing impact of migration processes on societies around the world. In the years that followed, various approaches emerged with regard to social

work practice with migrants and refugees, including those centring on colour-blindness, cultural sensitivity, anti-oppression, human rights and citizenship, and critical social work (Sundar et al., 2012; Valtonen, 2008).

A considerable amount of the literature has been published on the ethnic-cultural sensitivity approach, as well as on the anti-discrimination and anti-oppressive approaches. In the ethnic and cultural sensitivity approach (Devore and Schlesinger, 1999), the primary issue is diversity (including cultural diversity) while in the anti-racist and anti-oppressive approaches (Dalrymple and Burke, 1995; Dominelli, 2002; Thompson, 2012), focus on social division is the main issue. The main theoretical premise of these latter approaches is that 'differences' lead to social divisions, which can feed into processes of oppression. From this perspective, power is a crucial concept, and the fight against inequality, discrimination and marginalization is regarded as a central objective of social work. For example, Thompson (2012) argues that social workers should recognize multiple forms of oppression and that all forms of oppression are harmful. Promoting a holistic approach to discrimination, Thompson developed the widely adopted 'Personal, Cultural and Structural' (PCS) model. With regard to anti-oppressive social work, Dominelli (2002) stresses that all levels of social work practice should be understood as interdependent and interconnected. Recapitulating the views of Dalrymple and Burke (1995) and of Danso (2007), Morgaine and Capous-Desyllas (2015) set out five key concepts of anti-oppressive practice: engaging in critical self-reflection, assessing participants' experience of oppression, empowering participants, working in partnership and maintaining minimal intervention.

In contrast, the ethnic-cultural sensitivity approach regards cultural diversity – and not power – as the main issue. The basic idea is that 'social work must be mindful of the effect of ethnic group membership on the problems people experience' (Schlesinger and Devore, 1995: 29). Practitioners are expected to deliver services that are appropriate and responsive to the cultural concerns of diverse groups of service users (Sundar et al., 2012). In addition to this approach, the cultural competence movement developed, giving rise to various conceptualizations of cultural competence and a proliferation of definitions and models of cultural competence (Betancourt et al., 2002; Lum, 2011; Pinderhughes, 1989). In general terms, the cultural competence paradigm holds that practitioners should demonstrate self-awareness, knowledge and skill related to the cultural background, ethnicity and race of their clients.

Current authors often criticize the anti-oppressive and cultural sensitivity approaches to social work for the lack of strong evidence linking these approaches to positive outcomes for clients (Johnson and Munch, 2009; Roer-Strier, 2005; Sundar et al., 2012; Vega and Lopez, 2001). In the meantime, the anti-oppressive and the cultural sensitivity and competence approaches have grown more similar to each other. As argued by Roer-Strier (2005) and by Laird (2008), developing culturally sensitive social work practice alongside anti-oppressive approaches is likely to enhance effectiveness in social work practice. Parrott (2009) discusses criteria for combining cultural dialogue and anti-oppressive working methods. Garran and Werkmeister Rozas (2013) advocate an enhanced view of cultural competence by 'highlighting the important contributions that an analysis of power and privilege offer' (p. 99). They link the idea of intersectionality – defined as 'the reality that we simultaneously occupy both oppressed and privileged positions and that these positions intersect in complex ways' (Sensoy and DiAngelo, 2012: 15) – to the conceptual realm of cultural competence.

The unidimensional focus on 'ethnicity' or 'culture' is increasingly giving way to multidimensional notions of diversity. Ethnicity and culture are too often understood as static and fixed. As discussed by Chau (2011), the diversity-based approach emphasizes 'the fluid nature of culture, the diversity in cultural groups and the impact of inegalitarian and racist power relations on their life' (p. 21). Additionally, Boccagni (2014) argues that 'focusing on diversity sheds light on the linkage

between ethnicity and other variables potentially associated with social exclusion or disadvantage, such as class, age, gender, sexual identity, disability and legal status' (p. 3). The concept further helps to strip down the idea of 'culturally neutral social workers' and 'culturally different others', thus helping to establish a more relational understanding of cultural competence (Lum, 2011).

In contrast to the elaborated theoretical understandings of diversity, the body of empirically based knowledge on this issue is relatively small. How do these extensive theoretical frames contribute to the positive outcomes of social work relationships? More generally, how does diversity influence the interactions between social workers and clients? How is it perceived and understood by social workers and clients? According to early research by Bulcaen and Blommaert (1999), client categorizations based on culture influence the decision-making processes of professionals. Once a client has been categorized as a member of a given 'culture', typical action scenarios are proposed. In a study of social work encounters with immigrant families in Finland, Anis (2005) observes that 'culture' is used in three different ways. First, social workers and clients use 'culture' to explain normality (and thus what is to be marked as different). Second, social workers use culture as a methodological tool in creating a dialogue with clients. Third, culture is used as both an indication and an explanation of difficulties that can emerge in interactions with clients. Studies by Van der Haar (2007) and by Van Robaeyns and Driessens (2011) on the ways in which social workers perceive their interactions with clients with a migration background further indicate that social workers often experience such encounters with 'cultural others' as problematic. In these situations, the category of culture is used for both the description and the explanation of difficulties experienced in the relationship-building process (e.g. difficulties associated with language or differences in norms and values), as well as for understanding the problems of clients. For example, in a study by Van Robaeyns and Driessens (2011), culture figures prominently in the stories of social workers as the all-determining factor explaining the poverty of their clients. In contrast, in their study on the understandings of cultural competence by practitioners, Harrison and Turner (2011) report that 'the participants demonstrated an understanding of the complex, indeterminate nature of culture and the problems associated with operationalising it as a competence. [...] Fears were also expressed that cultural competence could promote "othering" and reinforce existing inequalities' (p. 346).

## New complexities

The introduction of the term 'superdiversity' by Vertovec (2006, 2007) ushered in a new phase in the recognition and understanding of the increasing complexity of our societies and social life. According to Vertovec (2014), the term was introduced 'to address the changing nature of global migration that, over the past thirty years or so, has brought with it a transformative "diversification of diversity"'. Vertovec further argues that, in addition to 'movements of people reflecting more ethnicities, languages and countries of origin', such diversification has occurred with respect to 'a multiplication of significant variables that affect where, how and with whom people live' (Vertovec, 2007). In explaining the term, Vertovec (2007) mentions

differential legal statuses and their concomitant conditions, divergent labour market experiences, discrete configurations of gender and age, patterns of spatial distribution, and mixed local area responses by service providers and residents. The dynamic interaction of these variables is what is meant by 'super-diversity'.

Additionally, Boccagni (2014) argues that superdiversity 'calls for moving beyond the identity politics waged in the name of diversity, while recognizing the importance of individual trajectories (rather than cross-sectional categorizations) of migration, labour market participation and legal statuses' (p. 4). Moreover, superdiversity 'stands for an emerging lens on the impingements of

accelerated societal diversification processes, particularly salient in large urban areas, for social work theory and practice' (Boccagni, 2014: 4). Hence, the focus of superdiversity is on the complexities resulting from underlying concurrent processes of societal differentiation.

Vertovec explains the impact of the concept (superdiversity has been used by a wide variety of scholars from an array of disciplines) by referring to the intensive effort that many social scientists have devoted to searching for language that could allow the adequate description and discussion of the processes that are making societies 'increasingly complex, composite, layered and unequal' (Sigona, 2014). The challenges posed by the description of complexity (in terms of the large number of relationships between the variables involved) are compounded by the necessity of describing it in complex ways, as 'the outcome of a way of looking at the world' (Eriksen, 2007).

Social complexity and superdiversity present important challenges to the field of social work, as they induce higher rates of social vulnerability (van Ewijk, 2014). As stressed by van Ewijk (2014), it is important to note that social vulnerability emerges in the interaction between person and context. Individuals do not have attributes that 'make' them vulnerable; vulnerability emerges 'in' complexity (p. 13). As the complexity of a society increases, the risk of 'falling out' increases as well. Superdiversity is thus related to processes of poverty and social exclusion, as suggested by research on relationships between poverty and migration (Van Robaeys et al., 2007).

As one of the pioneers in researching the impact of superdiversity on social work practice, Phillimore identified two key barriers to effective welfare delivery in superdiverse areas: novelty and newness. Novelty pertains to 'the arrival of small numbers of migrants from many places that do not share a common approach to health-care provision'. Professionals reported feeling overwhelmed, confused and powerless when confronted with the combination of this novelty with other factors contributing to complexity (Phillimore, 2014: 11). Newness refers to the fact that social work agencies are designed to support fixed rather than mobile populations. It has become apparent that 'in such situations, professionals did not have opportunities to develop the knowledge through experience that emerged through sustained contact with larger established minority populations' (Phillimore, 2014: 12).

In the following sections, we contribute to the empirical knowledge based on diversity and social work by presenting results of our study on the experiences of being a social professional in superdiverse contexts.

## Methodology

We regard social work both as a profession and as a form of 'problem setting' (Schön, 1983). Social work's claim as a profession is to combine in a professional role both social transformation and individual improvement through interpersonal relationships (Payne, 2008: 21). Problem-setting is one of the central competencies of professional social workers. Social work consists of 'the act of using practitioner perceptual capacities to gather – seeing, hearing, thinking, and feeling – the contextual data relevant to a client's situation' (Floersch et al., 2014: 4). The ways in which practitioners use theory is important in this regard. Without theory, practitioners 'would be inclined to make a fatal and incorrect assumption: facts speak for themselves' (Floersch et al., 2014: 3). The professional knowledge that practitioners use in order to manage the *in vivo*, contextual and open-systems reality of social work practice is composed of several different kinds of knowledge and theories. As a whole, it is characterized by hybridity, combining knowledge of empirical research with other types of knowledge (e.g. legislation, policies and procedures of organizations, theoretical perspectives and ethical considerations; Gredig and Marsh, 2010). In addition to bringing together various areas of knowledge, the hybridity of professional knowledge resides in the connection between various layers of knowledge. Professional knowledge includes explicit

knowledge, as well as tacit knowledge, practice wisdom or situated knowledge (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995; Polanyi, 1966).

The data analysed in the context of this article are part of an ethnographic study on the 'knowledge-in-action' (Schön, 1983) of the social workers of 'De Sloep' in Ghent, Belgium (p. 54). The main author of this article has been studying the phenomenon of poverty among people with a migration background in Belgium in order to understand poverty in relation to ethnic-cultural and other forms of diversity. The purpose of the ethnographic study in De Sloep was to study the 'theory generated in practice' with regard to the relationship between poverty and diversity (or superdiversity). The benefits of understanding these practical theories are clear: in contrast to technical-rational knowledge (produced by science), which helps to reveal the general, 'knowledge-in-action' is used 'to particularize, to bring the theory face-to-face with reality' (Floersch, 2004: 170). We argue that social work research is uniquely suited to helping uncover these practical theories.

We adopted an ethnographic approach in order to investigate the knowledge-in-action of the social workers of De Sloep. The activity-dependence of knowledge-in-action calls for a methodology that would allow the study of practice in process. We followed the social workers of De Sloep throughout an entire year (January 2013–December 2013), using a variety of methods to 'access the experiences' (Fook, 2002), as well as the knowledge-in-action residing in these experiences. We observed client meetings and team meetings, interviewed the members of the team, conducted a focus group with clients and collected oral narratives of specific practice events. We held several reflective interviews with five of the seven professional social workers. With each of these social workers we discussed one of their cases, thereby exploring their oral narratives concerning specific cases across the period of one year. This allowed us to follow developments in the client cases, as well as in the reflections, emotions and feelings of the social workers with regard to these cases. Reflexivity was also an important element of the study. Data transcripts were discussed with practitioners, and these discussions subsequently became data for studying the 'knowledge-in-action' of the social workers involved.

We used thematic analysis to interpret the materials collected with regard to the experiences of the social workers of De Sloep. Thematic analysis 'involves analysing the material for recurrent patterns that emerge, and that broadly fit the experiences being analysed' (Fook, 2002: 90). As researchers, we had an impact on the results, as the lens through which we framed the data became an integral part of the way in which the material was constructed (Fook, 2002: 91). We identified several emerging issues, to which we return when discussing the results.

In this article, we focus on the experiences of the social workers of De Sloep with regard to being a professional in superdiverse contexts. This was one of the central issues that emerged when analysing the data. As researchers, we entered the field with a conceptualization of superdiversity in terms of the impact of 'a lot of ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversity' on social work practice. During our fieldwork, it became clear that, for the social workers themselves, the idea of vulnerability, linked with the complexity and changes in the lives of their 'superdiverse' clients, played a much more central role in their 'knowledge-in-action' theories.

In order to contextualize the results presented in the next section, we provide a brief sketch of the social work organization De Sloep. Founded in 1996, De Sloep is a non-profit, independent and pluralistic social work organization that adopts a preventive perspective in working with issues concerning family and parenting. The target group consists of disadvantaged families with children aged 0–6 years, as well as families who are expecting children. The organization operates in a disadvantaged neighbourhood of Ghent that is characterized by a large proportion of families in poverty and immigrant families. As a Consultation Office for Child and Family, De Sloep provides preventive follow-up services relating to the health and development of children aged 0–3 years. As a Prenatal Support Service, it provides advice and support on practical, health

and psychological issues during pregnancy. De Sloep strives to be an 'open house for all parents'. Families have access to support and advice on demand, based on any question or any story. The key principles of the organization are as follows: (1) a focus on the neighbourhood, (2) an explicit choice for approachability, (3) engagement in the delivery of 'integrated services', (3) a search for balance between professionalized and socialized care and aid, (4) investment in current knowledge and permanent innovation and (5) the fight against poverty (particularly child poverty). The families are supported through individual and family counselling, group meetings and practical support. In 2015, 10 professionals and 40 volunteers worked together to provide support to 1250 families.

The client population of De Sloep reflects the superdiverse nature of various contemporary European cities. For example, the registration files of the clients who visited De Sloep in 2012 reveal that clients had originated from 34 countries, with large groups from Turkey (19.5%), Bulgaria (14.3%), Albania or Kosovo (11.7%), Slovakia (11%) and Ghana (6.6%). Smaller groups had roots in Morocco, Jordan, Syria, Chechnya, Afghanistan, Algeria, Angola, Bosnia, Burundi, Ecuador, Ethiopia, Gambia, India, Iraq, Russia, Senegal and other countries from around the world. The complexity of the cultural and ethnic diversity of the client population was further increased by differences in legal status, gender, age, education and housing conditions. The diversity of the clients also raised many issues relating to settlement and integration, in addition to the many other welfare-related questions.

## Results

How do the social workers of De Sloep experience working in these conditions of superdiversity and social complexity? How do their experiences define their professional identities as social workers? The findings from the thematic analysis reveal the prominence of three inter-related issues in the reflections of the social workers: the social vulnerability of the clients, tensions arising in coping with differences between personal and professional frameworks and identities, and how discontinuity in the relationships with their superdiverse clientele challenges their professional competences. After considering these three issues that emerged as recurrent patterns in the data, we discuss an aspect that emerged as a non-issue in the data: ethno-cultural diversity.

### *Social vulnerability*

Social vulnerability is a central theme in the oral narratives of the social workers of De Sloep. Factors associated with this vulnerability include the plurality of legal statuses for people with a migration background. These differences in status are the result of policies intended to constrain migration patterns, and they play an important role in the diversification of poverty. There are significant differences among the residence statuses of people of Belgian nationality, asylum seekers, refugees and European Union citizens. Undocumented people are very limited in the rights that they can claim. The differentiation between citizens according to the residence status promotes societal inequality and increases the risk of poverty. The social workers of De Sloep are confronted with the outcomes of these complexities on a daily basis. As observed by one of the team members,

There is a large group, and this group is growing. We don't have answers for their questions, even though they are asking the same questions as other people are. There is no solution, because they are not eligible for the social services and support relevant to their questions. This is a tricky thing, I think.

The complexity of the situations of the clients is reflected in the following excerpts from the much more extensive case descriptions provided by the social workers:

The three sons have no income and no passports. It takes six months in order to solve that problem. The whole family needed a Slovakian passport. [...] The father works as a day labourer. [...] Medical problems: the two girls, aged 6 and 7, wet their beds every night. Teeth, all rotten teeth, their children. [...] They live in a squatter dwelling.

Those children don't have any basic rights: no food, no shelter, no roof, no clothes. Tina is five years old, she wears sandals. Last week, it was cold! They were waiting in the park for five hours, until the night shelter opened. Do you think that's normal? I don't. I am emphasizing that they should go to school, so that at least they can learn something. Yes, it's about basic needs, medical care, housing ...

When I look at Angela K., a Ghanaian woman and single mother with absolutely no education ... She also has psychological problems, and probably a low IQ ... She's a very sweet woman, I can see her strengths, ... But in this society? It's fighting a losing battle ...

### *Tensions between professional and personal identities*

The experience of working with people in distress and difficulties stay with the social workers. The social workers see the effects of exclusion on the lives of their clients, and they report a strong sense of responsibility. At the same time, they often feel frustrated because they are unable to find feasible solutions for the problems of clients who are living at the margins of society:

And that's another thing that's also really frustrating, these people ... they are really standing at the edge ... You don't know what to do. We want a solution, the clients give you a responsibility, but actually ... sometimes there is no solution. Maybe it is pessimistic to say so, but what I want to say is that, unfortunately, it is society that doesn't want to make place for the people who come to us for help.

The complex and sometimes hopeless situations of clients invoke strong feelings of powerlessness. As described by one of the practitioners,

Interviewer: In the professional role that you take up, what do you find most difficult?

Respondent: That you are not able to open doors for some people. That the only way to support them would be to work miracles, and that I can't do that. That's the most frustrating. Sometimes, I really don't know what to do anymore. You'd dearly love to help them, but you simply can't.

Confronted with the vulnerability of the clients, the social workers of De Sloep feel obliged to act as 'human beings'. From a professional perspective, they know that there is little they can do to support their clients in specific situations. From a human perspective, however, there are always possibilities. One of the staff members puts it sharply:

My biggest fear – I'll start with that – is that one of our clients is going to die. Because ... there are a lot of things that we could possibly do as fellow creatures. Things we don't do and, often, that's even on my instruction. It's I who say, 'We don't do that, it's not a part of our mission. If you really want to do it, it's at your own risk, do it in your free time'. But this means also that I, like the system, put people out in the cold. And then I think, 'Oh, my God'.

The other option is 'saving' people [rescuer syndrome]. I don't want us to do that. Every single one of us is tempted by it at some time. But I don't want to do that, because it doesn't help. I don't believe in it and, what's worse, it taps the last drop of 'the professional' out of us. It's dreadful. It kills everybody. I don't



believe that someone can handle this without dropping out. I don't want that, I don't want us to do that. When there is almost nothing you can do as a professional, it's evidently really tempting to give in. This makes me angry with the system!

It is a thorny issue, and the social workers are constantly weighing the organizational, professional and personal perspectives against each other:

And the target group we work with ... [...] They live on the edge and [...] it puts you at the edge as well. It's difficult for me, they ask you things, you have to make difficult choices because, from a human point of view, you understand them, but when you think from the point of view of the organization or from a professional perspective, you wonder if it is the right thing to do? Should I go along with this?

Feelings of responsibility are likely to accumulate at the intersection of their personal and professional identities. As explained by another member of the team,

I: Is it the responsibility that blocks you?

R: Yes, yes, it blocks me. It's their life, and they don't understand the things that are going on, and they have asked me, 'understand it with us'. And I feel, 'Shit, I'm here alone, they don't understand it, and I must ...

I: And it's heavy stuff?

R: I have to turn things upside down in order to make things better. But actually, that's not my responsibility, is it? I shouldn't be turning things over. But still, there's that feeling: I'm their social worker, and if I want to support this family, I have to stop the bad things that are happening. This is what makes it so difficult. Yes, always.

We also observed several forms of assistance at the organizational level that are characterized by this ambivalence between professional and personal help. De Sloep runs a second-hand shop and attracts sponsors in order to have the means to buy diapers for the most vulnerable families. The social workers have ambiguous feelings towards these forms of assistance. They mention the simultaneously desirable and non-desirable aspects:

We have all learned that ... and we all believe that charity does not help. You should work towards structural changes. But for these people, you need charity, here and now. That's what's so painful: we don't want to do charity, but we do it anyway, because we want to support the people.

### *The challenge of discontinuity*

A third issue in the reflections of the professionals of De Sloep concerns how they should cope with the unpredictability of the events occurring in the life course of their clients. In some cases, families receive daily support for several weeks before disappearing all of a sudden. Some eventually come back, while others do not. Social workers find it difficult to work methodically under these conditions:

And then it's over. Like that. We have a plan. And then it stops. I find it so difficult: you can't make progress in your head. Because you know: the whole plan will have to change. If you wait with these papers, it will be harder to ... Things don't wait, but the people do.

The social workers mentioned struggling to find ways of coping with this unpredictability. It occasionally hampers their professional self-confidence. Because they have no easy way of explaining how they work, they sometimes feel inferior to social professionals who can rely on specific and well-researched methods:

It seems like everything goes ahead without me being onboard the train. Sometimes I am on the platform where the train goes by. But the train just goes on ahead. That's a bit like how I'm feeling.

At those times, it isn't funny. Then I think, 'How can it be that I'm not informed about that?' All of these things are happening, and I don't know about it.

When reflecting on their professional experiences, however, the social workers link their experiences to the complexity of the lives of their clients:

I think that there is a clear link between how we organise our social work and the complexity of life. It is connected and it should become clear. Sometimes, it looks as if we are working in an overly complex manner. Not methodically enough. But this is why: the complexity of living in poverty.

### *Ethno-cultural diversity: A non-issue*

While analysing the field notes and the written oral narratives of the social workers, it became clear that it was only on the initiative of the fieldwork-researcher, as co-constructor of the reflective dialogues concerning their daily practice, that social workers talked about the impact of the 'diversity of nationalities, ethnicities and cultures' on the practice of social work.

For the researchers, one of the reasons for choosing De Sloep as a field site had been the diversity of the organization's client population. One possible explanation for why they did not discuss diversity was that they possessed the competences needed in order to cope with such diversity.

The individual social workers and the organization as a whole clearly demonstrated their cultural competences and their diversity-based approach in many ways. For example, this is evident upon reading the mission statement of De Sloep, in which 'families' – a central concept – are defined as follows:

We consider families in all of their diversity: the standard family with a mother and a father, the single-parent family, the step-family, family members who temporarily live apart from their parents or children because they live in different countries ... These families are also diverse in their languages, customs and traditions, manners, religions, chances and opportunities, and socio-economic positions. De Sloep respects the individuality of each family.

Diversity is not merely something that the organization mentions in its mission statement. It is embedded within De Sloep in many ways and in very practical terms. It is evident upon entering the offices of De Sloep: the canvases on the wall depicting mothers with children represent the ethnic-cultural diversity of the client population. Families are treated with respect and approached from a strength-based perspective. Diversity is seen as 'the norm' and as 'normal', and interventions are always subjected to a 'diversity check', as illustrated in the following quotation:

We establish a link quickly. We don't need to think, 'Shall we engage an interpreter?' We don't forget things like that. We check to see who speaks Dutch. This one doesn't ... We think about that, it's normal. Our leaflets: of course they are available in different languages. Like that ... it's logical, isn't it?

Although cultural knowledge is considered important, it is always used in a pragmatic manner. Everyone in the team is expected to be curious about the clients' regions of origin, as it is a topic to discuss with them. For example, although they do not assume that they should act in any 'specific' way with Albanian clients, they have a substantial amount of knowledge concerning Albania and the struggle in the Balkans.

Coping with diversity has become part of the organizational practice model of De Sloep in an almost 'tacit manner'. One of the social workers reflected on this in the following way:

It's not that we don't do anything with it [culture]. But we call it 'the box of tricks'. We don't see this box of tricks as any complex methodical way of acting. The box of tricks is just this: you learn some words from the different languages, you explore how the specific group of your concern functions here [in the city]. You don't think, 'Ghanaians are like this or like that', but 'the Ghanaian community in Ghent functions like that'. You check the do's and the don'ts and some other culture-related things –for example if they define hierarchical relationships according to age differences. But that's just knowledge, you can use that, and it's necessary and it improves your results. But it's a box of tricks. Maybe, this whole is what is called cultural sensitivity ...

For this team, coping with diversity is not an issue. It has become part of their tacit knowledge, and they 'perform' this diverse-sensitivity on a daily basis, in an almost unconscious manner. Coping with the vulnerability of their clients, however, is a major issue.

## Discussion and conclusion

Our results demonstrate the complexities and challenges facing social workers who are working in conditions of social vulnerability and superdiversity. The experiences of social workers in superdiverse contexts (in this case, De Sloep) raise important questions for the identity of professional social work. Our findings also suggest that the concept of superdiversity is helpful in understanding tensions that social workers currently face in practice. The meanings behind the concept correspond to the experiences and realities of social professionals working in superdiverse contexts. As superdiversity is a global and transnational phenomenon, accelerated societal diversification processes have created conditions of urban 'superdiversity' across the globe (Vertovec, 2015). In this respect, our case study is of interest for social workers worldwide, despite the contextualities of our social work practices.

Our findings confirm the importance of anti-oppressive and ethnic-cultural frames for professional social work. The narratives of the social workers of De Sloep concerning their problem-setting activities reveal the analytical structuring of many of their experiences in terms of these frameworks. The social workers demonstrate their understanding of the dynamics of oppression, they appreciate their clients as whole human beings and they work with them to address their problems holistically (Dominelli, 2012). They recognize the importance of the social and cultural positioning of their clients and how it relates to the contexts, problems, experiences and identities of their clients. In many ways, the social workers of De Sloep also demonstrate self-awareness, knowledge and skills related to the cultural background, ethnicity and race of their clients. They are professionals in 'avoiding othering' (Dominelli, 2012; Lister, 2004; Sundar et al., 2012).

The guiding principles of anti-oppressive and/or ethnic-cultural and diversity-sensitive social work fail to explain or address an important part of the challenges experienced by the social workers of De Sloep. The concept of superdiversity can make a contribution in this regard, as it has the potential to inform practitioners about important characteristics of contemporary urban working contexts. It could help to explain the background of the disadvantages experienced by the clients of De Sloep by conceptually uniting 'multiple simultaneously relevant aspects of differentiation caused by novel migration patterns and policy responses to those patterns' (Meissner, 2014: 4). The social workers of De Sloep are confronted with the outcomes of the interactions of migration, social exclusion and legal statuses on a daily basis.

Superdiversity is an important frame of reference for understanding the life circumstances of an increasing group of social work clients. It is also helpful for interpreting the recurrent reflections

of social workers on being a 'professional' within these contexts. The social workers of De Sloep struggle to find ways to cope with the unpredictability of their work, questioning the form that methodical working could take within these complex contexts. Their experiences clearly correspond to an observation of Blommaert (2013): 'This is superdiversity. It is driven by three keywords: mobility, complexity and unpredictability' (p. 6). Linking their experiences with the theoretical understandings of superdiversity proved to be an important learning experience for the social workers involved in the study.

The central theme in the oral narratives of the social workers concerns the social vulnerability of clients and how to respond professionally to this challenge. These findings have important consequences for the broader domain of professional social work, as well as for ongoing debates about the identity of social work. Upon critical examination of the results, we could even ask whether social work is useful at all in such difficult and seemingly hopeless situations. We propose that social work is of great importance in these situations of contextual vulnerability and superdiversity, provided that we redefine the outcomes that can be expected.

Our ideas fit within the vision of contextual transformational social work, which is based on the premise that societies and communities are subject to continuing transformations (van Ewijk, 2010: 2) and that social work should be redirected towards this framework. We regard superdiversity as one of the important processes that influence these transformations. In this vision, one of the core tasks of social work is to support people in their social functioning. In contexts of superdiversity and social complexity, the vulnerability of clients is not an issue that can be easily solved. We advance a perspective that acknowledges that not everything can be healed and that the acceptance of uncertainty, problem-setting and flexibility are important competencies in professional social work. Social work should assign central importance to liveability and humanity, and it should focus on 'changing situations, improving contexts, strengthening relationships' (van Ewijk, 2010: 70).

The characteristic that makes social workers 'professionals' in these contexts is their ability to manage complexity and to 'muddle through'. Schön (1983) characterizes a 'professional' in the following terms: 'There are those who choose the swampy lowlands. They deliberately involve themselves in messy but crucial important problems and, when asked to describe their methods of inquiry, they speak of experience, trial and error, intuition, and muddling through' (p. 42). We are convinced that social work research can contribute in many ways to supporting these tacit dimensions of the professionalism of social workers.

The findings also reveal a strong emotional component to social work in these contexts of poverty, complexity and superdiversity. As evidenced in their reflections, one of the most difficult things for the social workers of De Sloep involves coping effectively with the emotional elements involved. The ethical tensions emerging in their daily work also constitute pressing issues in their reflexive practices. This is consistent with findings reported by Jönsson (2014) and by Ottosdottir and Evans (2014), which also demonstrate the difficulties and ethical dilemmas in social work practices with undocumented migrants in Sweden and in the southeastern region of England.

The findings of our study are limited in their particular focus on the experiences and observations of professionals. An important complement would be to integrate analyses of the experiences of clients. For example, how do they evaluate the outcomes of the approach and the practices of De Sloep? It is essential to determine whether they experience the approach of De Sloep as supportive of their social functioning. Another relevant question concerns the organizational learning mechanisms at work in De Sloep. The social workers (even those who are younger and relatively inexperienced) exhibit an extraordinary ability to manage the diversity among their clients. They demonstrate competence in empathic acting, in seeing and acknowledging the vulnerability of their

clients and in practical acting. It would be interesting to identify the organizational elements that support such reflexive professionalism in the social workers of De Sloep. More generally, further research on the issue of how to act professionally in such contexts of complexity, diversity and precariousness around the globe is crucial to the future of the social work profession. Research on emotional and ethical issues in social work practice is imperative in this regard, as these issues are essential to practitioners who must act and decide on difficult problems under heavy time pressure within complex, superdiverse contexts.

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### Author biographies

**Bea Van Robaeys** is a researcher at the Centre of Expertise in Strengths-Based Social work, a PhD Student in Social Work at the University Of Antwerp and a lecturer in Social Work at the Karel de Grote University College, Antwerp. Her research interests include poverty, superdiversity, Social Work practice and ethnographic and qualitative research methods.

**Hans van Ewijk** is Em. Professor in Social Policy and Social Work at the University of Humanistic Studies and Utrecht University of Applied Sciences. He has been a Visiting Professor at Tartu University since 2006, he was previously President of ICSW Europe and former Chair Ensact.

**Danielle Dierckx** is a doctor in Political and Social Sciences and Director of the Policy Research Center on Poverty and Social Exclusion (VLAS) (2012-2015). She is research leader at the Research Center on Inequality, Poverty, Social Exclusion and the City (OASes) and lecturer in Social Work (course 'Urban Intervention Strategies') in the Faculty of Political and Social Sciences of the University of Antwerp (Belgium).