



Motivations to become a master in social work: a typology of students

Bart Bozek, Peter Raeymaeckers & Pieter Spooren

To cite this article: Bart Bozek, Peter Raeymaeckers & Pieter Spooren (2017) Motivations to become a master in social work: a typology of students, *European Journal of Social Work*, 20:3, 409-421, DOI: [10.1080/13691457.2017.1283587](https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2017.1283587)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2017.1283587>



Published online: 06 Feb 2017.



[Submit your article to this journal](#)



Article views: 74



[View related articles](#)



[View Crossmark data](#)



Motivations to become a master in social work: a typology of students

De motivaties van studenten in de master sociaal werk: een typologie

Bart Bozek, Peter Raeymaeckers and Pieter Spooren

Department of Sociology, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Antwerp, Antwerp, Belgium

ABSTRACT

In the field of social work education, many studies address students' motivations to become social workers. Most of these studies focus on bachelor's students in social work and confirm that altruistic and expressive motivations underlie students' decisions to enter the social work profession. However, few studies focus on students earning a Master in Social Work (MSW). The purpose of this paper is to explore why students want to earn a master's degree in social work. An online questionnaire was developed, and the results of six focus group discussions were used. The sample includes 116 graduates from the past 8 years and current students from the MSW programme at the University of Antwerp. We use exploratory factor analysis and identify two types of motivation. In line with earlier studies, we find that the first type is an expressive motivation. These students want to learn more about poverty and social justice and are motivated to improve the life conditions of vulnerable target groups. The second type is an instrumental motivation. These students are oriented towards the development of their professional careers.

ABSTRACT

Binnen het domein van sociaal werk onderwijs zijn er veel studies die de motivaties van studenten sociaal werk analyseren. De meeste daarvan richten zich op studenten uit de Bachelor Sociaal Werk (BASW). Deze studie heeft als doel een beeld te krijgen van de motivaties van studenten in de Master Sociaal Werk. We ontwikkelden hiervoor een online-vragenlijst en we organiseerden zes focusgroepen. De populatie bestaat uit 116 alumni van de voorbije acht jaar en uit studenten van het huidige masterprogramma Sociaal Werk (MSW) aan de Universiteit Antwerpen. Op basis van een exploratieve factoranalyse onderscheiden we expressieve en instrumenteel gemotiveerde studenten. Studenten met een expressieve motivatie willen zich verdiepen in thema's zoals armoede en sociale rechtvaardigheid. Zij zijn gemotiveerd om de levensomstandigheden van kwetsbare doelgroepen te verbeteren. Studenten met een instrumentele motivatie zijn gericht op de ontwikkeling van hun professionele carrière.

KEYWORDS

Social work education; factor analysis; student typology and motivations

SLEUTELWOORDEN

Sociaal werk educatie; factoranalyse; expressieve en instrumentele motivatie

Introduction

There is a range of literature analysing students' motivations for entering the social work profession (Buchanan & Basham, 2009; Hackett, Kuronen, Matthies, & Kresal, 2003; Stevens et al., 2010; Williamson, 1996; Wilson & McCrystal, 2007). Insights produced by this field of research are considered very important to the further development of social work education. A student's motivation has a major impact on his or her learning, application of professional knowledge, values and skills. Motivation can create specific opportunities as well as barriers during the learning process (Christie & Kruk, 1998). A sound understanding of social workers' motivations is therefore essential to better aligning educational programmes with students' wishes and needs (Buchanan & Basham, 2009). Furthermore, insights into the motivations of social work students will also contribute to the development of the social work profession. The underlying reasons why students aspire to a career in social work will have repercussions on the quality and nature of the profession (Stevens et al., 2010).

In most studies on this topic, the theoretical distinction between expressively and instrumentally motivated students is central. Most empirical evidence confirms that intrinsic reasons, such as altruistic helping behaviour, and external motivations (in terms of career planning) are important reasons for students' aspiring to become social workers (Buchanan & Basham, 2009; Hackett et al., 2003).

However, we found that most scholars addressing this issue focus on students earning bachelor's degrees in social work. Few studies investigate the reasons why students want to enrol in master's programmes in social work. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to explore why students want to earn their master's degrees in social work. An online questionnaire was developed, and the results of six focus group discussions were used in our analysis. Our sample includes 116 graduates from the past 8 years and current students in a Master in Social Work (MSW) programme.

We contribute to the literature on the motivations of MSW students in two ways. First, our aim is to go beyond a descriptive level of analysis and to use more advanced statistical techniques to develop a more fine-grained picture of the diverse motivations of MSW students. Most studies on the motivations of master's in social work students use descriptive analysis (i.e. univariate analysis or summary descriptions of single variables). However, these studies are unable to analyse the complex reasons why students want to earn a master's in social work. We follow the research of Christie and Kruk (1998) and Stevens et al. (2010), who emphasize that any statistical analysis of this topic should take into account the complex web of reasons that could underlie a student's decision to enter a master's programme in social work. In the literature, a student's motivation is often defined as a multifaceted and multidimensional construct (Boekaerts & Nenniger, 1999). In the present study, we conduct a factor analysis to construct a typology of motivations – using data on a variety of items – to provide more insight into the different reasons underlying the decision to enter a master's programme in social work.

In addition, we found that each study on the motivations of master's students in social work used a different questionnaire. A common questionnaire could improve our ability to compare students' motivations across different European countries. Therefore, we combine several existing questionnaires that are used in the international literature and integrate them into a single survey. By doing so, our aim is not only to improve insight into the motivation of master's students in social work but also to contribute to the development of a common European research agenda on the motivations and aspirations of students pursuing a master's in social work.

Why study social work?

Studies of students' motivations often rely on theories that explain motivation based on cognitive evaluations of individuals in the context of different types of goals (Breen & Lindsay, 2002; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Authors such as Breen and Lindsay (2002) distinguish between autonomous and heteronomous goals. Autonomous goals are associated with expressive motivation. This motivation is linked to people's innate tendencies to explore novelty and to interact effectively with the

environment (Ryan & Deci, 2000). When people are expressively motivated, they are internally motivated to learn and to develop the specific skills necessary to become a skilled professional. Heteronomous goals are associated with instrumental motivation; they are judged externally and refer to, for example, financial advantages and rewards in terms of career prospects (Anderson & Green, 2006). This distinction between expressive and instrumental motivations has been widely adopted in the field of social work education.

A vast body of empirical research finds that the majority of social work students are expressively motivated (Buchanan & Basham, 2009; Hackett et al., 2003; Stevens et al., 2010; Williamson, 1996; Wilson & McCrystal, 2007). These studies show that social work students are highly motivated to 'help people' and that values of 'social justice' underlie their choice to become social workers (Stevens et al., 2010). Other studies show that expressive and instrumental reasons (such as career advantages) may co-exist. For example, Christie and Kruk (1998) conclude that students study social work to develop a 'meaningful career' and to make a significant contribution to 'society's well-being'. Stevens et al. (2010) identify students who aim to help individuals improve the quality of their own lives and students who want to pursue 'interesting and stimulating work'. Furthermore, Stevens et al. (2010) also argue that some students show a complex mix of altruistic, career and personal fulfilment motivations. This work demonstrates that reasons for choosing a particular type of education should not be reduced to one single type of motivation. Any analysis should take into account the complex web of different instrumental and expressive reasons for becoming a social worker.

Why study for a master in social work?

Only recently have scholars in the field of social work education begun to explore the reasons why students want to earn an MSW. These studies often draw on research into the motivations of students earning bachelor's degrees in social work and begin from the distinction between expressive and intrinsic motivations.

A survey by Hackett et al. (2003) in several European countries revealed a number of clear reasons why students enter MSW programmes. Their survey was administered to MSW students at universities in the United Kingdom, Finland, Slovenia and Germany. Overall, students had clear motivations for earning a master's degree in social work. The vast majority of students stated that helping people was their primary motivation. The importance of this expressive type of motivation was confirmed in a study by Wilson and McCrystal (2007). They examined the motivations and aspirations of MSW students at the Irish Queen's University of Belfast. This longitudinal study made use of a questionnaire that was distributed at the beginning and end of the MSW programme. In addition, at the end of the course, a group interview was held with eight MSW students. The primary motivation of the students was determined to be the development of professional skills to help socially disadvantaged people. This reflects the traditional, altruistic vision of the mission of social work, along with a dedication to helping others. Another remarkable finding was that 54% of the surveyed students indicated they had already experienced one or more traumatic life experiences. Still, this does not suggest that students choose an MSW because of personal problems. Furthermore, aspirations of a management position were more present among male than female students. They expected managerial positions to be accompanied by higher wages.

Research on students' motivations to study for an MSW has also been conducted in the United States. A comparative study by Buchanan and Basham (2009) examined the differences between the goals and aspirations of MSW students and Master in Business Administration (MBA) students. An online survey was administered to students at an undisclosed university in the southwestern United States. The results showed that social work students had entered their master's programme to gain more knowledge, whereas the motives of MBA students were more focused on career opportunities. Moreover, acquiring additional knowledge was not a significant motivation for the MBA students.

In addition to Europe and the United States, there has been research into the aspirations of students in China (People's Republic of China) studying for bachelor's and master's degrees in social

work. A survey by Sha, Wong, Lou, Pearson, and Gu (2012) studied the aspirations and career prospects of social work students at seven colleges and universities in Beijing and Shanghai. Students in the master's programme aspired to be university teachers, which is a prestigious profession in China. In terms of graduation level, differences in aspirations were noticeable. Students who were pursuing an MSW degree from a prestigious university seemed to look beyond social work jobs in developing their careers. A quarter of the students were considering further study.

The main theme running through European research is that students primarily choose an MSW to help people and to fight for social justice. These ideals may be seen as expressive elements of motivation and in line with the traditional mission of social work. The above-mentioned findings on the motivations of MSW students are often based on descriptive analyses. These analyses are unable to take into account the complex web of different reasons that may co-exist. These studies also use a variety of questionnaires and surveys. In the next paragraph, we elaborate on the method used in this paper to contribute to research on the motivations of master's students of social work. We perform exploratory factor analysis on a variety of items, each referring to a different category of reason to enter a master's programme in social work.

Methodology

Our research design can be divided into two distinct phases. In the first qualitative phase, we organized focus groups for both graduates and current MSW students. In a second quantitative phase, we constructed an online survey and distributed it among all graduates and all current MSW students of the University of Antwerp. This methodology can be seen as a mixed-methods research design, in which we combined both qualitative and quantitative data and analysis (Small, 2011). Before elaborating on our research design we discuss our case study: the MSW at the University of Antwerp.

The case study

We conducted our study at the University of Antwerp in Flanders (the Dutch speaking part of Belgium). The University of Antwerp is one of three universities in Flanders that offers an MSW programme. The MSW at Flemish universities is an academic course focusing on scientific research skills, social work theory and knowledge of and insights into the broad social processes out of which social problems originate. In Flanders, students are allowed to enter a master's programme in social work with a bachelor's degree in social work. An MSW course is not mandatory for Bachelor in Social Work graduates. A master's course in social work consists of two years. The first year is a bridging or preparatory trajectory. The bridging or preparatory programme is accessible to students with a variety of bachelor's degrees (in social work, nursing, early childhood education, remedial education, family studies or public safety). The main goal of this preparatory trajectory is to prepare students to conduct scientific research in social work practice. The second year provides in-depth knowledge on social work theory, social work practice and social problems. In this second year, students also have to write a master's thesis.

Qualitative analysis

During the first qualitative phase of the study, we organized focus group discussions. These qualitative data were used for two purposes: first, to generate extra questions for the questionnaire and second, to interpret the quantitative results. Initially, all students were contacted via email. We used a topic list to structure the conversation among the participants. In [Table 1](#), we provide an overview of the focus groups.

The response rate was particularly high in the focus group for the current master's programme and low in the focus group for students who had graduated in 2006–2007 (in which the first cohort of

Table 1. Focus groups.

Graduation year	<i>N</i>
2006–2007	1
2008–2009	2
2010–2011	3
2012–2013	6
2013–2014	2
2014–2015 (bridging)	2
2014–2015 (master)	8

students obtained their degree). The latter session could not continue as a focus group (as only one graduate participated) and was therefore conducted as a semi-structured interview.

The focus groups and the semi-structured interview were digitally recorded. Notes were taken during the sessions, and afterwards the focus groups and the interview were transcribed verbatim. We analysed the notes and the transcript to generate extra questions for the survey. These additional questions addressed issues agreed upon by the participants in the focus groups as being important motivational factors in their choice of an MSW. The results of the focus groups were also used to interpret the results of the factor analysis. On the basis of this analysis, we constructed a typology of students. Items from the factor analysis served as a basis for the typology, but we added more content by illustrating the items with quotations from the focus groups.

Quantitative analysis

Survey construction

At the start of the online survey, students were asked to provide background data as well as information about their previous studies and work experiences. We also constructed a scale to measure the motivations of MSW students. We used a combination of existing questionnaires and new questions generated through focus group discussion. The first source for our questionnaire was the study of Hackett et al. (2003). We copied seven items, with all but one question addressing the motivations influencing a student's decision to pursue an MSW. We translated the items into Dutch. We did not include the question 'I don't know why I chose to study an MSW' because we did not believe this question would provide meaningful information on the motivation of students in a master's programme. The next source for our survey was the study of Wilson and McCrystal (2007). All but two questions on factors influencing a student's decision to pursue an MSW were copied and translated into Dutch. In total, we copied five items. We did not include the questions 'I wanted to pursue an MSW since social work is the most direct route to private practice' and 'I wanted to pursue an MSW since I desire to prepare myself for private practice' because these questions are not highly relevant to the Flemish social work setting. In Flanders, social workers almost never set up their own practices to provide social work services. The notes and transcript from the focus groups formed the basis for an additional set of six questions about motivation. These six items each address a specific aspect of motivation that had been brought to our attention by the participants in each focus group. Two of these six questions reference being motivated to study social work theory and wanting to get a broader view of society as a whole. The other four questions concerned motivations for career advancement. All questions were scored on a five-point scale ranging from 'not important at all' to 'very important'. The questionnaires are included in the [Appendix](#).

Recruitment

The student's administration office at the University of Antwerp provided us with a list of all recently graduated and current MSW students dating back to the start of the master's programme in the 2006–2007 academic year. All students were invited by email to take part in the online

survey. Students enrolled in the current master's programme were also contacted personally. In addition, the link to the online questionnaire was posted in two Facebook groups (www.facebook.com) that were frequented by both graduates and students. The link was posted together with a short introductory text. We used Facebook to recruit participants as it allowed us to reach the student population more easily. This method of recruitment was very efficient in reaching the current and younger segment of the student population.

Sample

The online survey was completed by 116 students, producing a response rate of 34%. The total potential number of participants for the online survey was 341. Our response rate is rather low when compared to similar studies (Hackett et al., 2003; Wilson & McCrystal, 2007), which had response rates ranging from 63% to 96%. However, these studies were conducted with a population of current students, easily reachable at their respective universities. These previous samples did not include graduates, who are more difficult to reach. The lowest response rates occurred among alumni from the earliest graduation years. This part of the population was difficult to contact and recruit to take part in the focus groups as well as in the online survey.

A total of 85 female students (73.3%) and 31 male students (26.7%) took part in the survey (Table 2). The students had either Belgian (92.2%) or Dutch (7.8%) nationality. The majority of the participants (64.9%, 76 students) had obtained a Bachelor in Social Work before enrolling in the MSW programme. Another 19 students (16.2%) had graduated with a Bachelor of Applied Psychology. A Bachelor of Remedial Education had been obtained by 10 students (8.5%), and a Bachelor of Nursing had been obtained by four students (3.4%). Three students (2.5%) had a Dutch bachelor's degree in social work and social services. Another three students (2.5%) had graduated with a Bachelor of Sociology. Finally, there was one student (0.9%) with an undergraduate degree in psychology and one student (0.9%) with a bachelor's degree in communication sciences.

After completing their bachelor's degrees, 75 students (64.7%) had immediately enrolled in the MSW programme. Another 37 students (31.9%) had worked at jobs between obtaining their bachelor's degree and starting the MSW. Only four students (3.4%) had enrolled in a different course before entering the MSW. These courses included medicine, Master in Sociology, a specific teacher preparation programme and social work and social policy.

Table 2. Characteristics of survey respondents ($N = 116$).

Background characteristics	<i>N</i>	%
Gender	116	100
Female	85	73.3
Male	31	26.7
Nationality	116	100
Belgian	107	92.2
Dutch	9	7.8
Bachelor's degree	116	100
Social work	76	64.9
Applied psychology	19	16.2
Remedial education	10	8.5
Nursing	4	3.4
Social work and social services	3	2.5
Sociology	3	2.5
Psychology	1	0.9
Communication Sciences	1	0.9
After completing the bachelor's degree	116	100
Immediate enrolment in the master's programme	75	64.7
First a job, enrolment in the master's programme afterwards	37	31.9
First enrolment in another program, enrolment in the master's program afterwards	4	3.4

Data analysis

The results of the online survey were analysed using the software Statistical Package for Social Sciences (IBM SPSS version 22.0). We used exploratory factor analysis to analyse the items in our questionnaire measuring students' motives to enter the social work programme. This method allowed us to detect and define a relatively small number of factors (i.e. types of motivations to enter the programme in social work) that serve as satisfactory substitutes for a much larger number of survey items, based on the intercorrelations among these items (Comrey & Lee, 2013). More specifically, factor analysis enabled us to determine whether these items could be grouped into a small number of factors (i.e. 'types of motivations'). A major advantage of this statistical technique for our research is that the large number of scores on the 18 items in the questionnaire could be simplified and reduced. In the next section, we report on the results of this technique. We also interpret the results of the factor analysis using the analysis of the focus groups.

Results

Factor analysis

The items were submitted to exploratory factor analysis (EFA) using principal axis factoring and a varimax rotation, with the additional requirement that factor loadings should be higher than 0.40 (Field, 2009). The analysis was performed on the 18 items that examined students' motivations to study for an MSW. The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin measure revealed that the sample was adequate (KMO = 0.719) (Field, 2009). The Bartlett test for sphericity was significant ($\chi^2 = 737,980$, $df = 153$, $p < .001$), which suggests that the correlations among the different items were large enough for EFA (Field, 2009). After extraction, six factors remained, with four factors exhibiting eigenvalues above the Kaiser criterion. Together, these four factors explained 48.02% of the variance.

The selection of factors was based on the Kaiser criterion, the scree plot and the number of items loaded on one factor. According to the Kaiser criterion, four factors could be selected as their eigenvalues are greater than 1. However, when examining the scree plot, the first two factors – the number of factors situated in the plot before the point of inflection – are eligible for selection (Figure 1). According to Field (2009) and Floyd and Widaman (1995), one should not rely on the Kaiser criterion alone when determining the number of factors to retain, as this criterion tends to overestimate the number of factors. Moreover, it is argued that the scree plot is, in many circumstances, a better tool for this decision. This study followed this directive. The scree plot was decisive in the selection of only two factors. The remaining items in this two-factor model are presented in Table 3, listed in order of the strength of factor loadings.

After rotation, both factors explained a cumulative 35.58% of the variance of the items in the questionnaire. The first factor accounted for 23.04% of the explained variance in the items and the second factor for 12.54%. The items from the factor 'expressive motivation' showed high internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = 0.85), while the factor 'instrumental motivation' shows a lower, but still acceptable internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = 0.66).

When interpreting the content of the items within the factors, we found them to represent two clearly distinct motivational factors. The items that cluster on the first factor indicate that this factor is a representation of an expressive motivation. The term 'expressive motivation' was first described by Williamson (1996) and indicates a motivation driven by altruism and idealism. The items that cluster on the other factor indicate that it represents an 'instrumental motivation'. An instrumentally oriented motivation is a motivation in which additional career opportunities play an important role (Williamson, 1996).

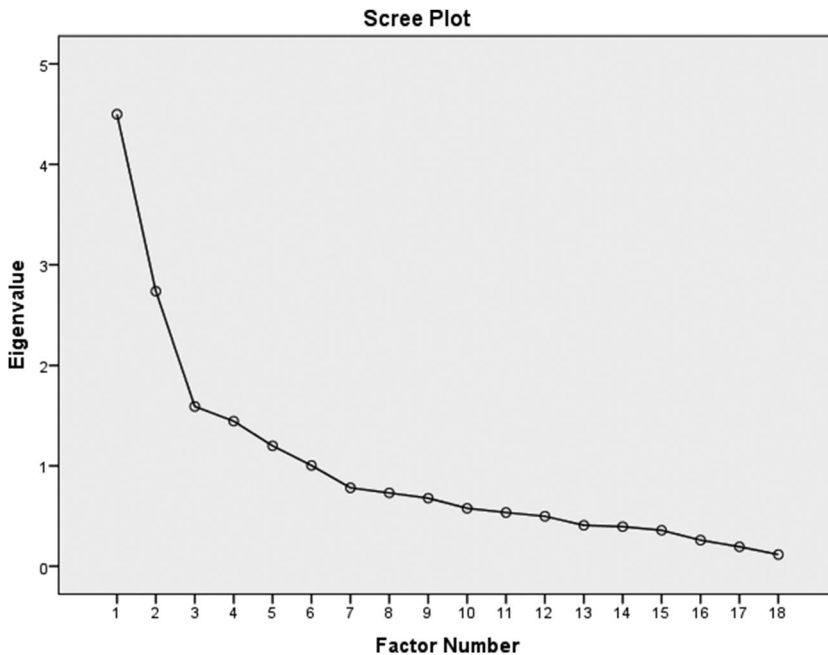


Figure 1. Scree plot of the PFA on motivations to study an MSW ($N = 109$).

Factor scores in the population

Subsequently, we analysed the extent to which students combined different types of motivations. For each of the two factors, we calculated a score for every student on a 20-point scale (ranging from 0 to 20). Table 4 shows that, on average, students have higher instrumental motivation scores ($M = 14.954$, $SD = 3.632$, median = 15) than expressive motivation scores ($M = 12.522$, $SD = 4.448$, median = 13). The range of both factors is 20. There is no statistically significant correlation between the two factors ($r = -0.57$, $p > .05$). However, the correlation is strongly negative, suggesting that the higher a student in our sample scores on one factor, the lower he will score on the other factor. Table 4 also provides an overview of how students score on the motivational factors. The distribution of the score categories was based on the number of response options (5) in the questionnaire.

Our findings clearly show that MSW students at the University of Antwerp have higher scores on instrumental motivation than expressive motivation. This contrasts with the findings of the

Table 3. Summary of results from the EFA analysis with two factors retained ($N = 109$).

Item	Component	
	Expressive	Instrumental
I wanted to help other people fight discrimination	0.852	-0.083
I wanted to help people	0.852	0.001
Because of social work's commitment to disadvantaged populations	0.684	0.054
I wanted to enhance my potential for serving disadvantaged populations	0.654	0.147
Because an MSW is consistent with my political or ideological beliefs	0.424	-0.154
I wanted more possibilities for career advancement	0.049	0.756
I wanted to earn more	-0.163	0.626
Because the MSW is a logical extension of my undergraduate degree	-0.220	0.517
I wanted to find a job which combines social work practice and social policy	0.198	0.445
Eigenvalue	4.147	2.257
Explained variance (%)	23.039	12.539
Cronbach's alpha	0.847	0.664

Note: Items were translated from Dutch.

Table 4. Distribution of scores for both motivational factors ($N = 109$).

Score	Expressive (%)	Instrumental (%)
High score (>15/20)	24.8	47.7
Medium score (>10–15/20)	49.5	43.1
Low score (0–10/20)	25.7	9.2
Total	100.0	100.0

international literature about motivations to enrol in bachelor's programmes in social work, where helping people is the primary motivation (Hackett et al., 2003; Wilson & McCrystal, 2007). According to these results, we could hypothesize that master's students are more instrumentally motivated than bachelor's students. These students choose to enrol in a master's programme in social work to improve their career prospects in the field of social work. However, we emphasize that our analysis does not allow us to test this hypothesis. In the conclusion of the article we will elaborate on this issue. In the paragraphs below, we elaborate on the typology of motivations to study for an MSW by using the results of the focus groups.

A typology of students

The expressively motivated student. The expressively motivated student opts for an MSW because he or she wants to help people. By pursuing an MSW, the student strives to help people in their struggles against discrimination. The student sees social work's mission of helping people who have limited life opportunities as a core motivation to study for an MSW.

I really wanted to help people. After graduation I was keen on finding a job that is really useful to society. I was thinking: helping people is something very useful. (Elise¹, 23 years old, graduated in 2014)

The expressively motivated student wants to increase his ability to help people who have limited opportunities.

I believe, if you want to be a true social worker, you need to have a motivation to change certain structures in society. I wanted to learn how to effectively deal with social problems. (Liam, 24, student in the bridging programme)

You're not going to earn a lot of money in a social service job. You need to have a different motivation, you need to have an ideological motivation. I started my MSW from the perspective to take on some of the many challenges within society. (Seppe, 28, graduated in 2012)

These students opt for an MSW because the course is an extension of their political or ideological beliefs.

For me the MSW remains an ideological choice because if you do the programme, you can start thinking along at a higher level about how to solve certain problems. (Karolien, 25 years old, student in the master's year)

This type contrasts with the instrumentally motivated type, where students opt for a master's degree to improve their career prospects.

The instrumentally motivated student. The instrumentally motivated student chooses an MSW to have a greater variety of career opportunities.

Well, there appeared to be an MSW, so I decided to give it a try. A university degree is an important asset on the labour market. Next to that, my parents were very much in favour of me doing this programme. (Lotte, 27, graduated in 2012)

Our society is based on hierarchical structures. If you want a job, it doesn't matter which degree, you just need to have one. The same goes for the master's, it doesn't matter which master's, you just need to have it to gain access to certain jobs. (Elena, 22, student in the bridging programme)

Jobs at the master's level are potentially better paid and thus can be considered an important consideration for students with an instrumental motivation.

You require a bachelor's degree to find a job, you require a master's degree to find a better job, with a higher wage. (Emma, 25, student in the bridging programme)

Instrumentally motivated students see themselves as taking positions at the intersection of social practice and policy. In addition, instrumentally motivated students see the MSW as a logical continuation of their Bachelor in Social Work.

For me, the MSW was a logical extension of my bachelor's degree. I could have chosen a totally different master's programme but that would have meant starting from scratch. Through the MSW I could deepen my knowledge of social work and do something I really liked. The choice was obvious. (Laura, 28, graduated in 2010)

Instrumentally motivated students have a distinctly different set of motivations for earning the MSW than expressively motivated students. Expressively motivated students explicitly choose the MSW programme for its content. In addition, the mission of social work to help people who have limited opportunities is very important to their motivation. Instrumentally motivated students are motivated by the advantage of holding a master's degree in the labour market. They also seek a logical structure to their studies in the sense of choosing a master's degree that is an extension of the skills and knowledge already acquired during their bachelor's degree.

Discussion and conclusion

This study contributes to the literature by unravelling the complex motivations of students who want to earn a master's degree in social work. Researchers have used many approaches to mapping students' reasons for earning a bachelor's degree in social work (Buchanan & Basham, 2009; Hackett et al., 2003; Stevens et al., 2010; Williamson, 1996). The latter studies have found that a complex combination of instrumental and expressive reasons underlies the reasons that students pursue degrees in social work (Stevens et al., 2010; Williamson, 1996). In this article, we examined the motivations of students enrolled in the MSW at the University of Antwerp. We considered a student's motivation to be a very complex and multifaceted phenomenon (Boekaerts & Nenniger, 1999; Christie & Kruk, 1998). We must therefore consider that a complex combination of different reasons underlies the decision to become an MSW. Our survey was based on questionnaires used in other studies in this field (Hackett et al., 2003; Wilson & McCrystal, 2007) and on the results of the focus groups. We used exploratory factor analysis to examine the extent to which a typology of motivations can be constructed out of the different items we used to measure the motivations of our respondents.

The results show that there are two main types of motivations for attaining an MSW degree: an expressive motivation and an instrumental motivation. Based on this finding, a typology of students was constructed. These findings confirm the results of earlier work on the motivations of bachelor's students in social work (Buchanan & Basham, 2009; Hackett et al., 2003; Stevens et al., 2010). Expressively motivated students explicitly choose the MSW programme for its content. The traditional mission of social work to help vulnerable target groups and to fight for social justice is very important to these students' motivation. Instrumentally motivated students want to acquire a master's degree because of the advantage it provides in the labour market. As a secondary reason, they want a master's degree that forms a logical extension of their bachelor's degree. We emphasize that this research is one of the first empirical studies on the motivations of MSW students that uses factor analysis to explore different types of motivations.

There are, however, a number of limitations to this study. First, an interesting result of our analysis is that it seems to confirm the findings of studies focusing on the motivations of bachelor's students in social work. A large body of work also shows that students pursue bachelor's degrees in social work for both expressive and instrumental reasons (Buchanan & Basham, 2009; Hackett et al., 2003; Stevens et al., 2010; Williamson, 1996). However, most of the master's students in our sample were instrumentally oriented, which contradicts studies of bachelor's students showing that most are expressively oriented (Stevens et al., 2010). Therefore, we could hypothesize that master's students are more instrumentally oriented than bachelor's students in social work. These students consider a master's

degree to be an important asset on the labour market. They want to improve their career prospects and earn higher wages. Our study was, however, too limited to compare bachelor's and master's students. We therefore suggest that future studies develop a questionnaire that could be used to measure the motivations of both bachelor's and master's students. This will enhance comparisons between the two groups. We also recommend that future efforts focus on the reasons why some bachelor's students choose not to enter a master's programme in social work. This analysis will shed more light on which students want to earn a master's degree and which students do not.

Furthermore, we do not have any evidence on the influence of individual students' demographic and socio-economic attributes on their motivation to become MSW. Further research should follow the example of Stevens et al. (2010), who, using a multivariate regression analysis, determined the effect of different students' individual characteristics on the type of motivation to enter a bachelor's programme in social work. In addition, we could compare the motivation of students with a bachelor's degree in social work with the motivation of students who graduated from other bachelor's programmes (nursing, psychology, etc.).

The number of respondents who completed our survey was, however, too limited to conduct such an analysis.

Finally, we believe that further research could expand this study to include students from other European universities offering MSW programmes. Evidence could be gathered to determine whether the importance of instrumental motivation in the choice to become an MSW is a finding that can be transferred to other universities in European countries. The questionnaire that was developed for this study could be used in other universities offering a master's programme in social work. We encourage other scholars in the field to explore the complex motivations of master's students and to contribute to an enhanced European comparison of the results.

Note

1. The names of the students in this paper are fictional to ensure their anonymity.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

Barť Bozek is Junior Researcher, Herman Deleeck centre for social policy at the University of Antwerp. He holds a bachelor's degree in applied psychology and a master's degree in social work.

Peter Raeymaeckers (Ph.D.) is assistant professor in the Master in Social Work programme at the University of Antwerp and is affiliated with the Center on Inequality, Poverty, Social Exclusion and the City (OASeS). His main topics of interest are social work research, social work education, human service organizations and organizational networks. He received a Ph.D. on networks among human service organizations.

Pieter Spooren (Ph.D.) holds master's degrees in Educational Sciences and Quantitative Analysis in the Social Sciences and a Ph.D. in Social Sciences. He is affiliated as an educational advisor at the Faculty of Social Sciences from the University of Antwerp (Belgium). His particular activities are educational innovation and evaluation of the educational process and of educators. His main research interests focus on students' evaluation of teaching (SET), in particular their use and validity, and the transition between secondary and higher education.

References

- Anderson, P., & Green, P. (2006, February 15). [L]earning for employability: Lessons for HE? Paper given at the Social Diversity and Difference: Influence on Participation, Learning and Teaching in HE Seminar series. Seminar 5 Employment. University of Wolverhampton, Science Park.
- Boekaerts, M., & Nenniger, P. (1999). Introduction. *European Journal of Psychology of Education*, 14(1), 3–9.

- Breen, R., & Lindsay, R. (2002). Different disciplines require different motivations for student success. *Research in Higher Education, 43*(6), 693–725.
- Buchanan, F. R., & Basham, R. E. (2009). A survey comparison of career motivations of social work and business students. *Journal of Social Work Education, 45*(2), 187–208.
- Christie, A., & Kruk, E. (1998). Choosing to become a social worker: Motives, incentives, concerns and disincentives. *Social Work Education, 17*(1), 21–34.
- Comrey, A. L., & Lee, H. B. (2013). *A first course in factor analysis*. New York, NY: Psychology Press.
- Field, A. P. (2009). *Discovering statistics using SPSS: And sex and drugs and rock 'n' roll* (3rd ed.). London: Sage.
- Floyd, F. L., & Widaman, K. F. (1995). Factor analysis in the development and refinement of clinical assessment instruments. *Psychological Assessment, 7*(3), 286–299.
- Hackett, S., Kuronen, M., Matthies, A.-L., & Kresal, B. (2003). The motivation, professional development and identity of social work students in four European countries. *European Journal of Social Work, 6*(2), 163–178.
- Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000). Intrinsic and extrinsic motivations: Classic definitions and new directions. *Contemporary Educational Psychology, 25*(1), 54–67.
- Sha, W., Wong, Y.-C., Lou, V. W. Q., Pearson, V., & Gu, D.-H. (2012). Career preferences of social work Students in Beijing and Shanghai. *Social Work Education, 31*(1), 4–21.
- Small, M. L. (2011). How to conduct a mixed methods study: Recent trends in a rapidly growing literature. *Annual Review of Sociology, 37*(1), 57–86.
- Stevens, M., Sharpe, E., Moriarty, J., Manthorpe, J., Hussein, S., Orme, J., ... & Crisp, B. R. (2010). Helping others or a rewarding career? Investigating student motivations to train as social workers in England. *Journal of Social Work, 12*(1), 16–36. doi:10.1177/1468017310380085
- Williamson, D. A. (1996). *Job satisfaction in social sciences*. New York, NY: Garland.
- Wilson, G., & McCrystal, P. (2007). Motivations and career aspirations of MSW Students in Northern Ireland. *Social Work Education, 26*(1), 35–52.

Appendix. Questionnaire

A.1. Questions taken from Wilson and McCrystal (2007)

I wanted to study for an MSW because:

- I have a desire to enhance my potential for serving disadvantaged populations
 - I have a desire to enhance my skills as a social worker
 - The occupational versatility of a social work degree
 - Social Work's commitment to disadvantaged populations
 - The MSW is a logical extension of my undergraduate studies
-

A.2. Questions taken from Hackett et al. (2003)

I wanted to study for an MSW because:

- I wanted to help people
 - I wanted to help people overcome discrimination
 - Because of personal experiences I have had in my life
 - I wanted a stable job
 - Because it is consistent with my political or ideological beliefs
 - I had a good personal experience with a social worker previously
 - I didn't know what else to choose
-

A.3. Questions generated through focus group discussion

I wanted to study for an MSW because:

- I wanted to learn specific social work theory
 - I wanted a broader view of society
 - I wanted more career opportunities
 - I would be able to earn more
 - I did not yet want to take on a job
-