

The Application and Value of the Social Quality Approach for the Scientific Substantiation of Social Work

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Abstract

In the Netherlands there is a growing awareness of the significance and potential of the social quality approach (SQA) for social work: its practice, its research, and the education of social workers. With this article we aim to encourage social workers, educational professionals, social work agencies, and researchers to delve into the SQA, to apply it through social quality-based interventions and practices, and to use it as a theoretical basis for research into social work and the education of social workers. This article describes “the social” as the core concept of the SQA and how it relates to social work, the SQA architecture, the current applications of the SQA in social work practice in the Netherlands, and the value and potential of the SQA for social work practice, education, and research.

Keywords: literature study, online survey, professional development, scientific substantiation, social quality approach, social work

In our increasingly multilayered and complex societies, the work of social workers has equally become more complex. The discipline needs scientific foundation to further substantiate and develop the approaches applied by social work professionals in interaction with clients, client systems, and communities. It is assumed that the social quality approach (SQA) can provide considerable scientific underpinning of the profession and its development. Universities, Universities of Applied Sciences and the Movisie knowledge institute have made initial efforts in this regard (Wolf 2016; Verharen 2017; Alderliesten et al. 2022).

The Dutch National Social Work Knowledge and Research Agenda (NSWKRA), published in 2020, acknowledges the SQA to a certain extent as a relevant and valuable architecture or framework for the further development of the social work profession (Hooghiemstra and Van Pelt 2020). Recently, the SQA has also been adopted as the foundation for social work education in the Netherlands, as outlined in the new national curriculum document for the bachelor’s degree in social work (Buising, 2025).



The current awareness of the significance and potential of the SQA for the scientific underpinning of social work motivated us to write this article. With this article we aim to encourage social workers, educational professionals, social work agencies, and researchers to delve into the SQA, to apply it in practice, education, and research, and to use it for the scientific foundation of social work. Conversely, in time, social work could contribute to a reflection on the SQA and help further develop this.

We start this article by explaining the specific meaning of “the social” in the SQ perspective in relation to social work. We then depict the essentials of the social quality analytical framework, with its three sets of factors, and briefly describe the other frameworks of the SQA. We then present and reflect on the results of our literature review and survey into the extent to which and the ways in which the SQA is already applied in social work in the Netherlands. This article ends by exploring and describing the value and potential of the SQA for social work practice, education, and research.

The Significance of “the Social”

The SQA was developed in the 1990s by researchers and policymakers working in a wide range of disciplines. It was developed in response to the dominant techno-economic discourse prevailing in Europe that approached societal issues and expressed a country’s welfare in terms of economic standards (Beck et al. 1997). The SQA was presented as a scientific foundation from which to turn toward an alternative discourse, based on the concept of “social quality” (SQ). From its beginnings, the International Association on Social Quality (IASQ) has been working to further develop the theory, methodology, and policy application of the SQA. An example is the relatively recent addition and elaboration of the eco-factors (see below). The *International Journal of Social Quality*, with its focus on the interpretation of SQ, is a leading forum for exchanges between scientists, policymakers, and practitioners from the fields of social policy, economics, sociology, law, philosophy, and health sciences.

In the new SQ discourse “the social” became a fundamental concept that would underpin the new thinking about “humans” and their “societies.” SQ is formally defined in its Basic Principles as “the extent to which people are able to participate in the dynamics of soci(et)al relationships under conditions that enhance their well-being, capacity and individual potential” (IASQ 2024), acknowledging that this allows people to influence the conditions of their own existence (Wolf and Jonker 2020). This acknowledgement points to a reciprocal relationship..

This all comes together in the ontological concept of “the social.” Both “the social” and the adjective “social” in the SQA refer to the dialectic between processes of self-realization and the formation of collective identities (Van Der Maesen & Walker, 2012). This means that individual people and societies, shaping each other, are in continuous (dialectical) interaction. Individuals and societies both evolve in this

interaction. From this perspective humans are basically seen as “social beings.” For social workers “the social” is highly relevant and constitutes the core of their mission and practical work. It is all about the dialectics between individuals and their environment, which influence the social quality of their daily life. The environment here is broadly understood and includes the informal living conditions of individuals and their communities, as well as the formal environment of systems, institutions, and organizations. To achieve a good quality of people’s daily lives, investments in this societal environment as well as in people’s capacity to act are required. The latter allows them to contribute to an environment in which it is good to live together. It also reveals that their problems never stand on their own but always emerge from the interactions between individuals and their environment (Verharen 2017).

The Social Quality Architecture

The analytical framework of social quality offers insights into the factors and processes that play a role in people falling through society’s cracks. It provides analytical entry points for policymakers and practitioners to understand and work toward achieving a good quality of people’s daily lives. Their self-actualization is rooted primarily in the dialectics of diverse relationships and networks, within and between which tensions and opportunities may arise.

Figure 1, on a horizontal and vertical axis, presents the basic architecture of two dimensions that sustain a constitutive tension for human existence: (1) vertical: the processes and changes in society and individuals’ biographical development; and (2) horizontal: dialectics within and between systems, institutions, and organizations (the system world) and families, groups, and communities (the life world). Within this framework of dialectics and processes, SQ is determined by three categories of factors (Van der Maesen and Walker 2012; Wolf and Jonker 2020). These three categories of factors are in continuous reciprocal interaction. Below we describe the factors in positive terms, in relation to improvement. The categories of factors can also be described in terms of risk factors for social exclusion—the opposite of social quality—and shed light on problems and obstacles hindering the quality of peoples’ daily lives.

Conditional (objective) factors refer to the conditions and resources in society that influence the circumstances of people’s daily lives. These may strengthen their social quality and also enable them to influence relationships and networks to develop new contexts for their self-actualization and social contribution (structures and collective identities). The four conditional factors are: socioeconomic security, social cohesion, social inclusion, and social empowerment.

Constitutional (subjective) factors refer to people’s ability to develop into active, competent actors, to create a good quality of life for themselves and their loved ones, as well as new perspectives for living together (agency). The four constitutional

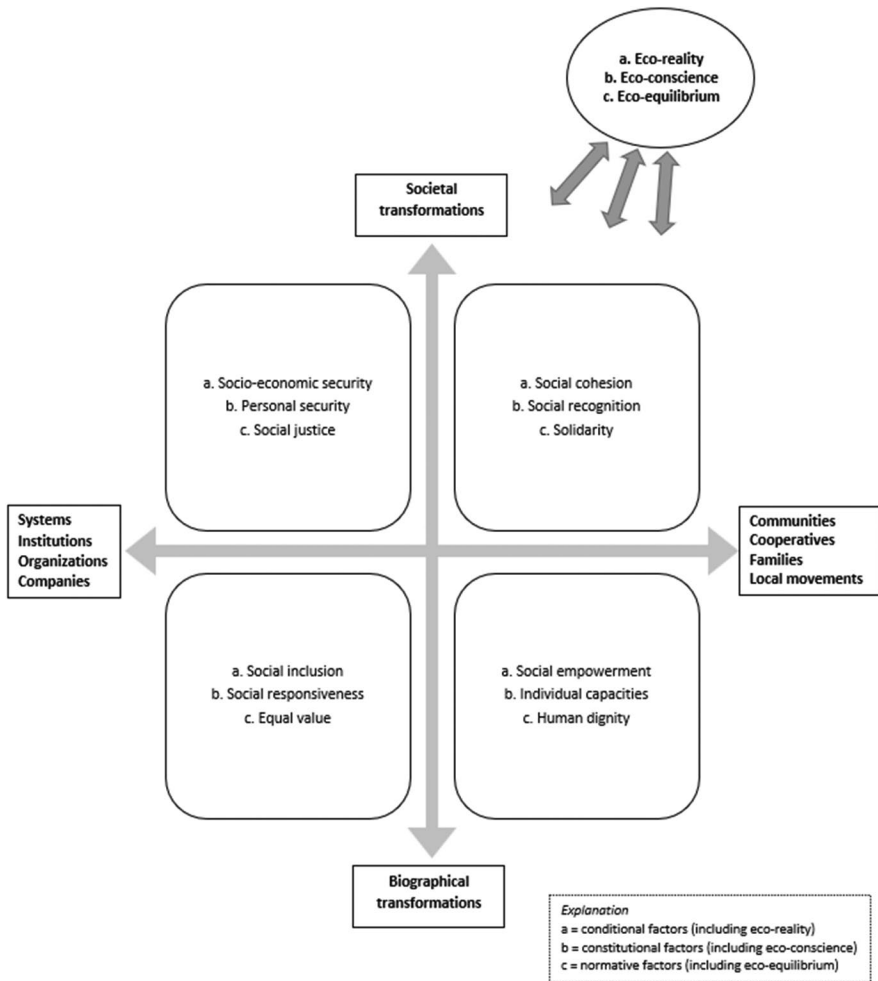


Figure 1. Analytical framework of social quality (based on IASQ 2020).

factors are: personal security, social recognition, social responsiveness, and individual capacities.

Normative factors refer to the ethical leads that influence the interaction between the conditional and constitutional factors as assessed and (re)valued in a given context and time. The four normative factors are: social justice, solidarity, equal value, and human dignity. Based on these values, it can, in other words, be determined how society is doing at various levels and in different relationships and practices, and in which direction the conditional and constitutional factors should be strengthened.

More recently, eco-factors, expressing relationships of humans with their physical environment, have been added to the existing factors. This is based on the understanding that strengthening and defending SQ is very much related to the development of sustainability, a state of dynamic equilibrium between human actors and a resilient ecosystem. At the same time, the societal perspective is indispensable to sustainability thinking, and the SQA builds on this perspective (IASQ 2020). Eco-factors have been assigned to each of the three categories. “Eco-reality” has been added to the conditional factors, being the ecological reality in which people live and its influence on the other four conditional factors. “Eco-awareness” has been assigned to the constitutional factors, referring to people’s eco-conscience and its influence on the four other constitutional factors. “Eco-equilibrium” comes under the normative factors and refers to people’s behavioral leads in dealing with the physical environment and its influence on the four other normative factors.

The SQA can be viewed as a meta-theory for achieving a good understanding and solid underpinning of all types of factors and conditions, involving a range of theories and various types of knowledge development. This is why its developers prefer to discuss it in terms of an “approach.” An exploration of the three categories of SQ factors is needed to determine its current applicability in social work and its future development. Both the conditional and constitutional factors are necessary for people to be able to participate in society as full citizens and to develop their potential.

We start with the *conditional factors*. For people to be able to participate in social, economic, and cultural life and in community development, four conditional factors must be met (Wolf 2016; Verharen 2017; Wolf and Jonker 2020):

- Socioeconomic security. This refers to a minimum level of subsistence security. As a society, we try to ensure this through laws and regulations, for example the legislation on work and income, housing, healthcare, and education.
- Social cohesion. This refers to a supportive living environment and community with positive, reciprocal connections.
- Social inclusion. This refers to the recognition of citizenship and access to basic rights, institutions, and care.
- Social empowerment. This is the availability of opportunities and resources for people for self-development, competence development, and self-determination.

These conditional factors influence and are visible in the four *constitutional factors*:

- Personal security. This is about the extent to which people have the material and intangible resources to live a good life. These include sufficient and predictable income, a good, safe, and affordable place to live, and assurance of healthcare and educational opportunities.

- Social recognition. This refers to the extent to which people can establish and experience meaningful, reciprocal, positive relationships and develop connections with others based on shared values and identities. In particular, it refers to people's capacity to create and participate in relationships for the purpose of encounters in which they truly see and hear each other, respect each other, and are able to reciprocate.
- Social responsiveness. This concerns the extent to which people are and can be integrated in society. It refers to their ability to use their basic social rights as citizens, and the degree to which they are involved in society.
- Individual capacities. These are mainly about people's ability to be themselves, to make their own choices, and to develop themselves, partly by achieving self-chosen goals.

Normative factors provide benchmarks when evaluating policies or practices, and, on the basis of this reflection, they give insight into the directions and actions needed to strengthen the conditional and constitutional factors:

- Social justice. A person's security is determined by social justice. It is only fair that every person can count on sufficient living income and has a safe and healthy place to live.
- Solidarity: Social recognition presupposes solidarity. Connections between people arise from solidarity and it is these connections that determine solidarity.
- Equal value. This is a specific characteristic of social relations between actors underpinned by social responsiveness. It is grounded in the awareness of differences between people. When providing access to rights, institutions, and (health)care, the human measure must form the starting point. It means consciously making a difference when ensuring a good quality of daily life for each human being.
- Human dignity. Giving space to individual capacities forms the basis for human dignity. This starts by understanding that every person matters, and that everyone must be given the opportunities to become and be who they want and are able to be.

Over the last few years the IASQ has deepened social quality theory, its methodology, and its policy application by distinguishing two other frameworks, in addition to the analytical framework (IASQ 2024). The procedural framework pertains to societal dimensions (sociopolitical/legal, socioeconomic/financial, sociocultural/well-being, and socioenvironmental/ecological) and the policy framework consists of primary thematic fields (communication/technology, welfare, humanization of urbanization, and overall sustainability).

Applications of the SQA in Social Work Practice

In this section, we address the question of to what extent and how the SQA at present is applied in social work practice. In terms of methodology, (1) a literature study and (2) an online survey were conducted to gather the information we sought.

Literature Study

Methodology

We applied the search terms “Social Quality,” AND “Social Work” and “Sociale Kwaliteit” AND “Sociaal Werk” in Google Scholar to titles and abstracts of English and Dutch-language peer-reviewed academic articles published between January 2000 and October 2023. In addition, we specifically searched five journals that mainly publish research articles on social work practices: the *International Journal of Social Quality*; the *British Journal of Social Work*; the *European Journal of Social Work*; the *Journal of Social Intervention: Theory and Practice*; and *Community Development*. We also screened the resulting articles’ references to detect other relevant articles.

The search yielded fifty-two articles to which we applied two inclusion criteria for the final selection. The article had to include (1) the SQA and (2) the application of this approach in social work. Five researchers each assessed 8–12 articles. Where doubts arose on whether both criteria were met (three articles), a second researcher assessed the article. In cases of no consensus (one article), a third researcher’s assessment was decisive.

- Two of the fifty-two articles met both criteria (Kurian and Uchiyama 2012; Verharen, Van Pelt, et al. 2023).
- In thirty articles, although SQ was mentioned as a concept, it was not further elaborated in terms of the SQA.
- In twenty articles, no application of SQ in social work was mentioned; these articles were theoretical or conceptual or only referred to the potential of the approach for social work. In ten of these, the SQA was applied to develop indicators or a measurement tool for measuring SQ (or both).

Results: Two Articles

Shaping Community-Based Elderly Care. In their article, Kurian and Uchiyama (2012) describe six case studies of the application of the social quality approach in community-based elderly care, three in Japan and three in the Netherlands. To select the cases, “priority was given to improving the quality of the participation of the elderly in their communities and thereby empowering them to be involved actively in the ageing process” (ibid.: 75). Each case is described briefly in the article and illustrates a different “community-based care model” for the elderly. The authors describe the six cases using the SQA’s four conditional and constitutional factors. They discuss the

role of formal and informal care, awareness of rights, and societal self-actualization. They note that for each case different professionals play a role alongside volunteers and the elderly themselves. In four cases, the role of social workers or welfare professionals in conjunction with the elderly is explicitly mentioned: investigating their needs, organizing appropriate activities, activating them, and strengthening their network, always in cooperation with others in both informal and formal relationships. The article concludes that the social quality approach architecture is important in analyzing and further shaping community-based models in elderly care.

A Tool for Multilevel Interventions. Verharen, Van Pelt, et al. (2023) investigated whether analyzing practice situations using the conditional and normative social quality factors supports social workers when determining entry points for interventions at different levels: micro- (individual, household, family), meso- (neighborhood, district, group, community) or macro- (policy, organization, society). From a study with and among six teams of social workers, they designed and tested a social quality approach tool consisting of a set of cards and a discussion guide.

Using the tool, as a team, the social workers engage in a three-phase discussion on a practice situation. In the first phase, they use cards detailing the conditional and normative social quality factors, answering questions to help them specify these factors for the practice situation at hand. For example, for the conditional factor social inclusion, they discuss the role played by social inclusion. The card provides examples such as: ability to connect with groups; not excluding anyone; understanding and being understood; important info in multiple languages; and access to help and services. Based on their answers, the social workers then formulate goals for their actions in that specific situation. In the second phase, using the model of the deciding professional (Spierts et al. 2017), they discuss what factors they take into account when determining those goals. In the final phase, they choose which interventions to use at the appropriate levels, matching the goals set in the first phase.

The study concludes that the conditional and normative factors help social workers analyze practice situations and determine interventions and levels of action. Mainly at a meso- and macro-level, the social workers were able to view other options and make other intervention proposals than those that they would routinely have chosen. The authors did not investigate whether more interventions were actually implemented at these levels. The tool also provides social workers with the language and guidance needed for justifying actions, making their choices more explicit. The tool is available on the HAN University of Applied Sciences research group Strengthening Social Quality website (HAN n.d.).

Online Survey

Methodology

We sent the online survey on 8 March 2023 to professors and project leaders of the Dutch Association of Workplaces in the Social Domain (AWSO). We selected these

respondents as the AWSO's 2023–2026 umbrella program—"A Social Basis for SQ"—is primarily about the applications of the SQA in social work. We sent the selected respondents a detailed email asking them to provide examples of projects and research in which SQ is applied, including the following information: project title, brief summary, central question and objective, application or relation to SQ, and any available reports or products. We repeated our survey on 22 March 2023 after presenting the survey at a national meeting of the AWSO. This resulted in two practices that fulfilled the criteria: Pathways to Empowerment (Wolf 2016) and Network Centre De Opstap (Holtrop and Tuinstra 2022).

Results: Two Cases

Pathways to Empowerment ("Krachtwerk"). Pathways to Empowerment (PTE) is a person-centered intervention, theoretically grounded in the analytical framework of SQ, that has been described in detail in the *International Journal of Social Quality* (Wolf and Jonker 2020). PTE is recognized as being a "well-substantiated" working methodology and as such has been included in the database of Effective Social Interventions (Wolf and Jonker 2021). The general aim of PTE is to improve the quality of the daily lives of persons who experience loss of control in their lives by focusing on their strengths and stimulating their personal agency, participation in society, and self-direction in life. The main task of professionals is to help create the conditions in which growth and recovery are likely to occur. The analytical framework of SQ has been practically effectuated for what is needed to help people recover and to improve the quality of their daily lives, while considering the conditional factors of their influencing "system world." Based on the constitutional factors of the SQ approach, PTE distinguishes four forms of recovery: being able to be yourself and take control of your own life (personal recovery); participating through sufficient security of existence (functional recovery); belonging through positive connections with others (social recovery); and being seen and treated as a citizen (societal recovery). These factors and forms of recovery form the foundation for a compass ("the Strengths Compass," in Dutch "het Krachtkompas") that guides clients in (re)gaining insights into their own strengths and resources, and their wishes for the future (Van Tol et al. 2024).

Since its availability in 2016, PTE has been taught to professionals at universities of applied sciences. In the Netherlands and Belgium PTE is currently applied in more than eighty organizations in various sectors, mainly by social workers (Wolf and Jonker 2021). Clients of social neighborhood teams in a medium-sized municipality report that as a result of PTE support, they are more resilient, are more self-aware, have positive connections with other people, and have better access to resources and institutions. This is mainly because they see that the professionals are there for them, listening to them, taking them seriously, focusing on their strengths, encouraging and stimulating them, working on natural resources, and providing tailored support. What matters most are effective mechanisms like building trust and reciprocity in

the relationship, encouraging self-confidence and self-empowerment, fostering social trust, awareness and use of available resources, and providing support and mediation in connections with others and institutions (Van Tol et al. 2023).

“Network Center De Opstap” (The Step-Up Network Center). Opening in 2020 in Sint Jacobiparochie (Friesland, a province in the north of the Netherlands), Network Center De Opstap welcomes village residents and locals four days a week. It is the initiative of a social worker whose core vision was that the center should be a place “where people are able to participate and belong.” Together with stakeholders, researchers from the social quality research group at NHL Stenden used a design-oriented research process to visualize the meaning of the center for both participants and network partners (NHL Stenden n.d.). The findings were viewed and interpreted using the conditional factors of social quality. Some example findings are:

- De Opstap is a place that gets people out of their beds and to leave their homes, when previously they would have mainly stayed at home. It provides structure to their day, their week, and their lives (socioeconomic security).
- Residents feel welcome in De Opstap, and they experience no or only a low threshold to enter and participate in, for example, the living room, the vegetable garden, or the kitchen. They are seen and heard in what they can do and need (social inclusion).
- In De Opstap, people—young and old—get to know each other and create social networks. De Opstap is embedded in the village and locality’s social infrastructure; it is a place of reciprocity, with many partners (social cohesion).
- In De Opstap, people have room to develop themselves and (re)discover their talents; they can decide where, when, and what they participate in (social empowerment).

The survey shows that—thanks to De Opstap—SQ in the village is continuously being built. Network Center De Opstap establishes links between residents, caretakers, local entrepreneurs, educational institutes, and local government. The conditional factors provide a structure that, when viewed from different perspectives, makes the value of the meeting place visible, helping identify what is needed to further develop De Opstap, and who can help in that process.

Reflections on the Application of SQ in Social Work

Our research shows that the application of the SQA in social work is still in its infancy: we only found four applications, two through the literature review and two through the online survey. In other words, the practical use of the SQA in the social work profession needs further research, development, and implementation. One possible explanation for its low application is that the SQA was initially developed to compare

citizens' levels of well-being between countries and to give policymakers insights into what is needed to bring that level up to one consistent with the values of SQ. In the first twelve years since its introduction, the main focus has been at a national (macro-) level and on policy, and much less on implementation practices and what working with SQ requires from professionals (the local level and action). The two articles and the two applications we report on show that the SQ framework is valuable for the further substantiation and development of social work and the education and methodological support of professionals. In the Netherlands, PTE was the first practical application of the SQA, and was rated "well-substantiated" by the Advisory Committee of the Database of Effective Social Interventions, as previously mentioned, providing professionals with scientifically based instructions for actions and tools for supporting people in various stages of recovery, in light of the conditional factors in the system world, which also impacts the outcomes. The experiences of this process led to reflection on the SQA and suggestions for adjustment (Wolf and Jonker 2020). The design-oriented research conducted by HAN (on "Social Work at All Levels") demonstrates that approaching their work through the conditional and normative factors of social quality helps social workers make informed choices in diverse practice situations and provides them with points of leverage for subsequent actions. The Dutch (Frisian) project "De Opstap" shows that the SQA provides a "lens" to look at social work practice and make its value visible from many different perspectives. Research on the application of the SQA in community-based elderly care in Japan and the Netherlands shows its value when used by social workers to analyse and develop community-based models in elderly care.

The Value and Potential of the SQA for Social Work

Social Quality and Practice

The SQA is clearly consistent with a set of values that have been taken up in the international definition of social work. It fits well with social work in terms of its focus and aspirations (Verharen, Van Pelt, et al. 2023; Wilken 2023). The SQA has great value and potential for the substantiation and development of social work. SQ can be distinguished from other theories and approaches, because it conceives the concept of "the social" as the ontological core and point of departure in its thinking about human existence, understanding "the social" in terms of the dialectics of processes of self-realization and the formation of collective identities. This point of departure, that is, that humans are "social beings," is needed more than ever, in particular with regard to today's dominant discourse of individualism, bureaucracy, and technocracy (e.g., regarding AI). It seems that the more complex society and its institutions become, the less we see and approach people as "social beings." Social workers are in a position to give counterbalance to the prevailing individualistic discourse. The adoption of "the

social” in social work, in the sense of the SQA, calls on them and will enable them to do so. After all, in “social” work supportive interventions should aim at both the strengthening of the capacities of individuals and changing and adapting their “social” environment, which equally plays a part in the emergence of their problems and resilience. The emergence of problems and finding opportunities is never just a matter of individuals. Influences and processes from the environment always play constitutive roles. For social work professionals “the social” as understood in the SQA is highly relevant and recognizable, as is shown, among other things, by the wide adoption of Pathways to Empowerment (Krachtwerk). The power of the SQA is that, in addition to this basic (ontological) notion, the environment has been elaborated in the analytical framework with a wide range of factors that can be assessed. Social workers—together with the people they work for—can thus offer a wide and in-depth picture of people’s problems and opportunities. They can interpret people’s subjective stories and experiences, objectively analyze resources and obstacles in their societal environment, perceive and understand the connections and relationships between factors at the differing societal levels, and explain to clients how these dialectics may have a harmful impact on their everyday lives and well-being. The normative factors can be brought to bear to evaluate whether justice is being done according to fundamental ethical principles. The SQA enables social workers—in continuous cooperation with people—to take the right direction in understanding and dealing with their life situation. Based on the values of “social justice,” “equality,” “solidarity,” and “human dignity,” the SQA offers, in other words, insights into what needs to be achieved in order to live a good and dignified life, including for those who have fallen behind in our modern societies.

In sum, the SQA provides social workers with a framework within which they can:

- More precisely articulate the preferred outcomes of their interventions.
- Scientifically substantiate and legitimize the actions to achieve these outcomes.
- Make a comprehensive assessment of situations and analyze these situations from multiple perspectives and levels.
- Find entry points for their actions on individual, group, community, and societal levels.
- Contribute to the further development or design of interventions, in light of the three sets of factors.
- Critically assess, evaluate, and improve their daily work.
- Increase the visibility and recognition of their work, including by contributing to the further development of the SQA.

Social Quality and Education

As already mentioned, the SQA has been adopted in the new Dutch national curriculum document for the bachelor’s degree in social work. It offers educational programs

a strong starting point for emphasizing the social dimension within social work. Using the analytical framework, students can learn to consistently approach issues in the lives of individuals, groups, communities, and society from a social quality perspective, and to derive their interventions from this concept. This can help prevent education from placing an overly narrow focus on supporting individuals and their networks. Social work has the responsibility not only to promote change at the individual level, but also at the level of groups, communities, and society as a whole. In doing so, students also learn to contribute this distinct perspective to interprofessional collaboration (Verharen, Kolner, and Sprinkhuizen 2023).

Social Quality and Research

The NSWKRA is built around four pillars: (1) promoting social cohesion; (2) promoting inclusion; (3) strengthening ordinary lives; and (4) giving citizens a voice. The clustering of all the collected material into these four pillars for the research agenda, including information from the consultation with professionals and experts in the field, was achieved bottom-up, without the use of a theoretical framework.

Four Pillars of the NSWKRA (2020)

1. Promoting social cohesion focuses on polarization and radicalization, recommending research into the actions of social workers and the effectiveness of interventions in this area.
2. Promoting inclusion is explicitly related to people with mild intellectual disabilities and those with mental health problems and associated issues. Research should inform integrated approaches to achieve better societal connections, thereby overcoming the perceived gap between the system world and the living world that clients and social workers have to deal with. It is also recommended to develop more generally applicable knowledge on the process of moral deliberation.
3. Strengthening ordinary lives puts everyday life at the center, with the observation that little research has been conducted on everyday life in relation to social work, something that is required for a greater understanding of the interfaces and differences between individual and collective social work. It also calls for more knowledge about effective network-oriented work and network-strengthening approaches.
4. Giving citizens a voice focuses on promoting the interplay between formal and informal stakeholders, with an eye to citizens' diversity of roles and experiential knowledge. Research is recommended into politicizing practices and the collaboration of social workers with civic initiatives and lived-experience experts regarding citizen's participation and influence.

The pillars of the NSWKRA, in one way or another, implicitly relate to the constitutional, conditional, and normative factors of the SQA. These factors are not clearly identified, defined, or deployed in a systematic way in many research approaches. The same holds true for a thorough elaboration of an underlying ontology such as “the social,” which is also missing in the research agenda of social work. The NSWKRA only explicitly relates SQ to the third pillar mentioned here. However, in our view, “promoting social cohesion” and “promoting inclusion” (the first and second pillars) are elaborated aspects of the SQA. “Social recognition” and “social responsiveness” are well-elaborated underpinnings of the fourth pillar, “giving citizens a voice.” We consider both the ontological core of “the social” and the three sets of factors to be relevant, valuable, and applicable to all four pillars deployed in the NSWKRA, and to future research in social work.

The SQA analytical framework can serve as a helpful starting point for data collection and analysis. The sets of conditional, constitutional, and normative factors help to broadly explore and interpret how people are enabled or hindered to fully participate in society. In addition, if the SQA is used as a starting point for research it will also be much easier to compare and relate the results of various studies on social work.

Conclusion

The SQA offers a solid theoretical foundation for social work. The concept of “the social” within the SQA offers an opportunity to recalibrate and renew “the social” of social work so that the dialectics of processes of self-realization and the formation of collective identities form the core of social workers’ daily practice.

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