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**UNDERSTANDING IDENTITY OF SOCIAL WORK: COMPARING LITHUANIA AND  
FINLAND IN ACADEMIC CONTEXT**

The aim of this presentation is to compare the contextualised understandings of social work identity in Lithuania and Finland. Social work is still non-established discipline of which identity is constantly emerging in various academic arenas. Social work as a profession is present and established in Lithuania for more than 10 years and the academic education of social workers is also present for a decade, the public discourse on what are the professional as well as scientific boundaries of social work is far from settled. Differently from Finnish context, academic education of social worker in Lithuania is limited to master's degree. In both countries social work has gone from poor relief to certain specialised professional practices of welfare and social care and support. Also quite similarly in both countries the two major practice areas of social work are problem solving (probably inherited from poor relief) and preventive practices.

Presentation tries to reveal understanding of identity grounded on comparison two studies accomplished by International Social Work Identity (SWI) (Lithuanian - Vytautas Magnus University and Finnish - University of Lapland) research group. It has investigated the social work identity as phenomena (Gudliauskaitė-Godvadė et al., 2008; Gudliauskaitė-Godvadė et al., 2009a, 2009b) and as representations (Perttula et al., 2008; Väänänen et al., 2009). Social work identity as phenomena was studied by exploring how Lithuanian and Finnish doctoral students of social work understand and define social work phenomena. Such comparison provides useful insights on the understanding of social work identity in general and the understandings of social work identity in both countries in particular. The research were done using very similar methodological framework in order not only to be able to describe the understanding of social work identity in Lithuania (see Gudliauskaitė-Godvadė et al., 2008) and Finland (see Gudliauskaitė-Godvadė, et al. 2009) separately but also to compare the understanding in both countries. The research involved groups of social work PhD students from Lithuania accepted at the University of Lapland in Finland from 2002 and persons who have earned the doctoral degree of social work from 1994 to 2005 at any university in Finland describing their understanding of social work identity through answering a structured questionnaire consisting of five

open questions - What are social phenomena?, What are psychological phenomena?, What are societal phenomena?, What are social work phenomena?, How should social work phenomena be studied scientifically? In both research a modified qualitative content analysis was used as a method for analysis of data. More detailed methodological descriptions of each of the research are provided in the articles (see Gudliauskaitė-Godvadė et al., 2008 (study 1) and Gudliauskaitė-Godvadė et al., 2009a (study 2).

Comparison of Lithuanian and Finnish understanding of social work identity communicates with Karvinen-Niinikoski et al. (2007) opinion that social work consists of theory-research-practice triangle. Both countries strongly emphasize practical side of social work identity: social work identity is understood as being grounded in pragmatism. Both countries emphasize “problematic nature” of social work – strong relation to concrete and specific life social problems. Likewise both countries respondents emphasize social work identity as being “help” profession: understanding and tackling variety of challenging or even problematic situations. Social work is very strongly understood as related to ‘solving problems’.

Finnish understanding is more expanded about theoretical aspects of the social work phenomena. Understanding of both countries emphasizes and describes wide variety of interactions at the centre of social work, however Finnish understanding emphasizes the key role of stratification in interactions. Social work is understood as activity and science focused on the multiple nature of social organisation and social problems.

Still more important difference in understanding of social work identity appears with Finnish emphasis on social work identity as being theoretical, having an object and researchable phenomena, whereas Lithuanian understanding does not emphasize social work phenomena as an object for scientific study.

The understanding of both countries indicated variety of specific research objects relevant to social work investigation, which range from individual everyday life and subjective experiences to social inequality and social problems, needs for certain help and investigation of social work practice. The difference concerning Finnish understanding is that it widely described social work itself as the object of social work investigation; and emphasized the importance to place ethics in the center of social work research. It is significant difference related to describing approaches relevant to social work research. In Lithuanian case it was generally stated that social work research should be grounded on theories. In Finnish case it was emphasized how important it is to construct research framework within social work perspective (theoretical or practical point of view) and investigate including multiple levels (micro, mezzo and macro). And only in Finnish case was indicated outcome of social work research that concerned new knowledge production for social work and related to application this new knowledge for the purpose of sustainable development.

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