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## Securitisation or "a part of the palette"?

A qualitative study of professional implications for Swedish social  
workers encountering violent extremism

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## Abstract

Violent extremism is widely acknowledged as a threat to contemporary societies. This problem, and how it can be counteracted, has been given increased attention. In several countries, including Sweden, welfare professions, such as social workers, are given a role in the work against it. This article aims at investigating whether social work's encounter with violent extremism has a potential to complicate and challenge social workers' views on the role and purpose of social work, and how this would manifest. Through semi-structured interviews with Swedish social workers, the possible influences of the partly security-oriented work against violent extremism, on the typically care and support oriented social work profession, are explored. The main findings are that the social workers interviewed are not influenced by the work against violent extremism in such a way that their views of their profession are substantially affected. Instead, the social workers mainly seem to approach violent extremism in accordance with conventional views on the nature of social work, rather than in line with the securitisation of this profession identified in earlier research.

**Keywords:** Social work, violent extremism, profession, ethos, jurisdiction, securitisation

## Introduction

Managing the risk of ideologically motivated violence, protecting citizens from its dangers and – at the same time – facilitating civic rights and freedoms, stands out as a considerable challenge characterising contemporary society (Loader & Walker 2007). Recently, this has been given attention, for example, in connection to attacks in London, Paris and Utøya. Various measures have been taken by states to protect their citizens from this kind of violent events, as well as to counteract and prevent them. Among the concepts coined in relation to these endeavours is “violent extremism” (which, for the remainder of this article (except in quotes), will be abbreviated as “VE”). It refers to ideologically and/or religiously motivated anti-social activities against existing democratic institutions. Another, closely related, concept is “radicalisation”, the process by which people become motivated and committed to engage in VE. In 2014, the Swedish government appointed a national coordinator of the work against VE (Dir. 2014: 103). The role of this coordinator is to create guidelines for the preventive work carried out in Sweden, and to facilitate their implementation in all municipalities in the country.

On a municipal level, among the actors concerned by the work against VE, still being in its initial phase, are both welfare professions such as teachers and social workers as well as the police. The objective is that these actors should develop heightened awareness of, knowledge about and tools to prevent radicalisation of people. Critics (see e.g. Herz 2016) argue that practitioners within social work and pedagogy are given roles as “terror fighters” which are neither compatible with their competence or their role in society. Others – for example The national board of health and welfare in Sweden – rather emphasises that social work *has* a role in preventing radicalisation into VE, but that this role remains mainly within the professional boundaries and resources with which it is normally associated (Socialstyrelsen 2016). Thus, different views exist regarding the involvement of local actors in the work against VE, and to what extent it creates new conditions under which their work is carried out. This article departs from the potential tension addressed above, concerning the role in counteracting VE assigned to social work. Does it mean a securitisation of social work

(McKendrick & Finch 2016); a development where social work, at the expense of its conventional purpose, becomes a tool in the security oriented work undertaken in order to protect society from VE? Or does it, rather, mean social work as usual where VE is just another “part of the palette” (as one interviewee participating in this study put it) of social problems usually faced by social workers?

The article focuses on the impact encounters with the issue of VE might have on the way social workers view their professional roles and the work they perform. One question pertains to how social workers perceive their role in society’s work against VE, the general purposes of social work, and their role in relation to other professions in connection to the work against VE. Should social work – apart from what social workers typically regard as the objectives and meaning of their jobs, conceptualised as the social work *ethos* – involve protecting society from potentially dangerous individuals who run the risk of being radicalised into VE? An additional question is whether it does affect relations to clients. Moreover, do social workers think that the work against VE can be dealt with using the knowledge and other resources utilised when confronting the social problems with which they usually work – constituting their professional *jurisdiction* – or do they have to confront new types of challenges?

Scientifically, the relevance of these topics lies in the lack of earlier research pertaining to the professional implications of the work against VE for the social work profession and, especially, the way these implications are perceived by social workers. In a broader sense, it is interesting also in relation to the ongoing development of the work against VE, especially its consequences for practitioners working on a municipal level.

Conducting the study in Sweden is suitable given that the scarce amount of research hitherto conducted on the issue in question has taken place mainly in a British context. Situating the study in Sweden contributes to broadening the perspective on social work and VE. There are differences in the configurations of welfare states – circumstances shaping the conditions for social work (Hasenfeld 2010) – between the aforementioned countries (see e.g. Esping-Andersen 1990). Still, together with several other countries, they share the challenges posed by violent extremism, and to some extent also the way social work is assigned a role in confronting these. Thus, the results of this study might be relevant also outside the Swedish context.

## **Purpose and research questions**

Through studying social workers’ perceptions of the emergence of preventive work against violent extremism (VE) in social work – conceptualised as a consequence of an overarching societal trend – I intend to investigate potential implications of this trend for social work practitioners, in terms of the way they perceive the professional conditions under which their work is performed.

In an attempt to further concretise the aim of this article, I have formulated the following research questions:

1. How do social workers view their role in society’s work against VE in relation to what they see as the general purposes of social work?

2. How do social workers – in relation to the work against VE – view their role in relation to other professions?
3. How do social workers view the demands associated with the work against VE in relation to their professional resources?
4. How do social workers view their relations to clients in connection to encounters with VE?

## **Background**

In 2014, the Swedish government appointed a “national coordinator for protecting democracy against violent extremism” (Dir. 2014:103). This is an authority working on basis of objectives stated in governmental directives. These objectives are, generally, coordinating, strengthening and supporting the work against VE carried out in Sweden. This means an overarching responsibility to develop and implement the Swedish national strategy for the work against VE, as well as promoting and supporting cooperation between its national and local instances; the state, the regions and municipalities of Sweden, as well as other actors – for instance civil society groups and organisations – taking part in the work. The role of the coordinator also involves the development of knowledge, resources and expertise supporting the work against VE as well as of ways to support local level prevention of radicalisation of citizens, support to people who have been active in extremist contexts but wants to withdraw from these and to people being close to someone who is partaking in VE or in danger of becoming radicalised (Dir. 2014: 103; Dir. 2015: 27; Dir. 2015: 86; Dir. 2016: 43).

Swedish authorities define VE as activity with the ultimate goal of, by violent means, achieving “undemocratic” societal change (Säkerhetspolisen 2010; Säkerhetspolisen och Brottsförebyggande rådet 2009). Three main categories of violent extremist groups and elements in contemporary Sweden are identified; the “autonomous environment” (commonly known as “extreme left” extremism), the “white-power environment” (commonly also referred to as “extreme right” extremism), and the “violent islamist extremist environment” (Regeringskansliet, Justitiedepartementet 2014, Säkerhetspolisen och Brottsförebyggande rådet 2009; Säkerhetspolisen 2010). Radicalisation is understood as “the process through which a person or group start to embrace violence for political or ideological purposes.” (Socialstyrelsen 2016: 8).

The Swedish state regards VE as a threat to the Swedish society, its stability, democratic system, institutions as well as individual citizens. The radicalisation of people is seen as a problem potentially leading to the risk of terrorist attacks affecting the Swedish as well as other societies (SOU 2016: 92). The national strategy against VE is implemented in order to “protect democracy against violent extremism” (Dir. 2014:103). This strategy involves cooperation between national and local actors and the regional and municipal level is assigned an important role. Among other things, the municipalities are seen as the level where the possibilities of preventing radicalisation are the greatest. Schools, the social services and police are put forward as important actors in this regard, since these – especially schools – are actors in contact with youths and young adults, the group among which radicalisation is most common. These actors are thought to need knowledge and certain working methods in relation to VE and radicalisation to be able to tackle this problem. Cooperation and

communication between municipal actors is put forward as important, and national as well as local guidelines for the work against VE contains strategies for this (SOU 2016: 92).

Regarding social work, The national board of health and welfare is responsible for supporting the work against VE carried out within the municipal social services, where a large proportion of Swedish social work is carried out. It states that the issue of radicalisation and VE is a relatively new social problem that needs to be addressed within social work, but that it can be dealt with mainly within existing organisational and legal frames of social work and conventional patterns of collaboration with other local actors. Still, it is put forward that a new awareness of radicalisation and VE is needed along with some new working methods. The role assigned to social work involves, partly, paying attention to the social conditions in municipalities, potential extremist activities and working with individuals and groups of young people in preventing radicalisation. This includes collaboration and joint strategies with, for example, schools, the police and civil society organisations. Social workers are expected to prevent radicalisation through guiding and supportive dialogues with young people that they meet through their practice in cases where these are perceived as being involved in VE or in danger of becoming so in the future. These preventive measures should also be taken through offering more specific services such as, for example, special advice and support, a specially appointed “contact person” or placement in a certain home for care and treatment (Socialstyrelsen 2016).

In the fall of 2015, The national board of health and welfare sent a survey to all municipalities of Sweden. 218 of the 316 recipients answered the survey. Among these, 11 % stated that the social services in the municipality in question had been in contact with youths or young adults in some way involved in, or perceived as in danger of becoming involved in, VE. Contact with these people had occurred in most sections of the social services.

## Previous research

Preventive work against VE has not been extensively researched. More attention has been given to the phenomenon of VE per se and the mechanisms causing people to engage in such activities. Still, some studies of preventive work against VE within the welfare sector have been conducted and are summarised below.

A recent Swedish study based on survey material (Johansson & Arvidson 2016) investigated views, within the social services, police, schools and among municipal politicians, on people occurring in violent extremist contexts. The main conclusions were that differences in views on people in danger of becoming radicalised tend to affect the kind of preventive measures being advocated. The results also indicated some general differences between different occupational groups regarding the views under study.

In a Danish study (Finne Jakobsen & Jensen 2011), social workers and other practitioners involved in preventive work against radicalisation were interviewed. Findings indicated that practitioners’ understandings of the concept of “radicalisation” is important in preventive work in the sense that it, to a large extent, determines the way practitioners relate to their impressions from encounters with young people, as well as the way they consider preventive strategies in relation to youths that are seen as being at risk of becoming radicalised. The professional identity of respondents also appeared as important in this regard.

In a review of written material – consisting of guidelines and educational material directed towards practitioners in the areas of social work and pedagogic occupations in Sweden in their preventive work against radicalisation and VE – Herz (2016) criticises this material, claiming that it is built upon false or insufficiently informed conceptualisations of “radicalisation” and people becoming “radicalised”. He also claims that it results from a “discourse of security politics” (ibid.: 3) that is incompatible with social- and pedagogic work, and that it should, instead, rest on the idea that preventive work is best carried out within the conventional frames of these professions.

In a number of British studies, implications for social work of counter-radicalisation and “the war on terror” initiated in the early 2000s are investigated and discussed (Guru 2010, 2012b, 2012a; McKendrick & Finch 2016; Stanley & Guru 2015). In essence, these authors present arguments similar to those of Herz (2016) regarding recent developments of social work. They find that guidelines for social work for the prevention of radicalisation – influenced by contemporary policy developments – point to an increasing securitisation of social work. They also claim that these developments pose a threat to social work values, and that it can make social workers preoccupied with risks of their clients becoming radicalised and becoming potential terrorists, which hampers their abilities to engage in their work and relations to clients in an open-minded way based on trust- and respectful relationships. A point which is also stressed is a need for criticism and reflection among social workers with regard to discourse accompanied by “the war on terror” and endeavours to prevent radicalisation, which – according to the authors – is put forward by the media as well as the state and contribute to the stigmatisation of certain groups of people (e.g. Muslims).

Research similar to that cited above has also been conducted in the area of pedagogy. Conclusions have been parallel to those regarding social work; counter-radicalisation is identified as a challenge to the teaching profession and the role of schools in society (Coppock 2014; Davies 2016; Leeman & Wardekker 2013; Mattsson, Hammarén, & Odenbring 2016).

My study differs from the research cited above with regard to its topic. Contrary to Johansson & Arvidson (2016), and Finne Jakobsen and Jensen (2011), my primary focus is not on the way practitioners relate to preventing radicalisation and VE per se, but rather on how the emergence of these issues in social work might affect practitioners’ views on their work and the premises of their profession. Still, these studies draw some attention to the roles of professional factors in preventive work, pointing to a relevance of these factors, which is a basic assumption in the research problems formulated in this article. Research cited above indicates that the work against VE means potential challenges to social work as a practice and profession. What I intend to do, though, is studying if and, if so, how these potential changes of the nature of social work is perceived by social workers, rather than the way they might be anticipated in written guidelines or general social work discourse.

## Theoretical perspectives

### **Social work as a profession**

Theorising on professions has contributed with many definitions of this term (see e.g. A. D. Abbott 1988; Brante 2014; Evetts 1999; Freidson 2001). Common features among these are

that professions consist of certain occupational groups that – on the basis of some type of higher education through which formally accepted knowledge and skills are acquired – carry out specific and demarcated occupational tasks.

In a Swedish as well as in an international context, what is supposed to be labelled as “social work” and “social workers”, as well as what degree of professionalisation that has been attributed to them, has been discussed, debated and dependent upon historical contexts (see e.g. Börjeson & Börjeson 2015; Meeuwisse et al. 2016; Wingfors 2004). Still, the Swedish social workers interviewed are, in accordance with what has been said above, regarded as representing a profession.

Professions are societal institutions and, as such, formed in relation to and dependent upon social and political trends (Brante 2014). Thus, the work against VE is seen as a trend which potentially has implications for the social work profession. The implications investigated here do not pertain to all possible aspects of it, but concentrates on some of them through using the concepts of *professional ethos* and *jurisdiction* which are presented below.

### *The professional ethos*

Among the defining features of a profession is what some authors has called *professional ethos* (Stiller 2000). According to Stiller (2000: 7) “The *ethos* of a profession [...] is composed of the distinguishing characteristics, sentiments and beliefs of that profession that guide the behaviour of practitioners.”. She speaks of “core values, norms and beliefs” (ibid.), an “essence” (Stiller 2000: 8), constituting a collective professional identity that permeates the way practitioners of a certain profession carry out their job and – in the case of human service professions – relate to clients. She also claims the *professional ethos* is passed on through education and professional socialisation, and that it is somewhat stable over time but also changeable since it “...is formed and reformed over time due to multiple influences related to social, cultural and historical events, societal changes and the social construction of meaning by individuals who make up the field as they interact with their peers, clients, other professionals and the general public.” (ibid.).

For the sake of clarity, regarding the relation between professional ethics (which will not be further dealt with in this article) – usually thought of as formalised ethical principles existing in written form – and *professional ethos*, I do consider these as related but not as the same thing. Although professional ethics is a common characteristic of professions (A. D. Abbott 1983), it is here seen as not being synonymous with the discursive and not necessarily formalised nature of *professional ethos* as developed above, but rather, to some extent, as a formal materialisation of it (A. A. Abbott 1988).

In the case of social work, its *professional ethos* can be seen as consisting of the focus on care and support towards people in need based on trust- and respectful relationships between practitioners and clients, which is often associated with and seen as basic foundations of contemporary social work (P. Abbott & Meerabeau 1998; Banks 2012; Meeuwisse et al. 2016). In other words, the *professional ethos* of social work is typically pictured as a combination of an orientation towards offering care and welfare for disadvantaged people in a just way and, as P. Abbott and Meerabeau (1998: ix) puts it, to do so in a way that is “... profoundly ‘client-centred’, with a strong commitment to respect the individual, to be ‘non-judgmental’, to ‘start where the individual is at’ and to allow ‘client determination’”.

Social work is also thought to mean an ubiquitous inherent conflict between the above mentioned values, and demands that need to be put on clients resulting from the control functions being part of social work (Banks 2012), since it is an institution partly having a disciplinary function in the sense that it to some extent tries to make clients conform to normatively desirable ways of living. This entails, among other things, a balance inherent in social work between establishing functional and trustful relationships with clients and respecting their integrity, while at the same time being ready to make demands on them and, if needed, pass information on to the police or initiate investigations that in extreme cases might lead to measures taken against the will of clients (Reamer 2013: 95-113).

One question raised in this article is whether social work's encounter with VE has a potential to exacerbate the above-mentioned conflict through a securitisation of social work and, as a result, challenge the social work *ethos* through a shift from caring about to controlling clients (Hardy 2015). In line with this tension is also the conflict inherent in work against VE between protecting an individual from the harm he or she might cause to him or herself by engaging in VE, and protecting society from the harm that the individual might cause to society by doing so (Mattsson, Lebedinski Arfvidson, & Johansson 2016), with its potential challenge to the social work *ethos* being a shift in social workers' perception of their role from the former to the latter.

### *The professional jurisdiction*

Theorising on professions has also yielded conceptualisations of professions as actors with self-interests pertaining to, for instance, endeavours to achieve public recognition, status, monopolies on the performance of certain tasks, areas of services and problems, clearly defined and sometimes increased. A. D. Abbott (1988) introduced the concept of *jurisdictions* to understand these issues. It stipulates that professions strive for control over a certain area of tasks and/or problems where they can establish a domain, a *jurisdiction*, within which they work and do so with recognition from the state as well as the general public. Except for carving out such a niche, professions also have, or try to achieve, a monopoly-like right to that niche, meaning that they are the only profession having the right to carry out a certain type of tasks within a specific area and the only profession that is trusted to do so. At the same time as professions aspire the establishment of *jurisdictions*, these endeavours have limitations since if the scope of a *jurisdiction* becomes too broad, it is hard to uphold. It is assumed that the knowledge base specific to a certain profession – enabling it to create a *jurisdiction* – is limited and cannot encompass too broad a *jurisdiction*. If this happens, the recognition of a profession, and its claims for a certain *jurisdiction*, will be weakened which also, then, goes for the profession as a whole.

My use of the concept of *jurisdictions* does not pertain to in-depth analysis of the conflictual dynamics – competition between different professions for jurisdictional domains – implied by the term in question. Rather, I draw on the basic features of it, the notion of professions having interests and ideas regarding what they regard as their task in comparison to other professions and what is not, and – following (Brante 2014) – assume that relations between professions can be characterised not only by competition but also by collaboration. To this I add A. D. Abbotts (1995) notion that social work is characterised by connections



across professional boundaries in the sense that social workers often – as a part of their work – coordinate services to individuals provided by various professional groups.

Moreover, it can be assumed that – broadly speaking – the *jurisdiction* of social work is (certain types of) social problems (cf. Brante 2013: 109). According to Loseke (2003) “social problems” are socially constructed, context dependent and defined differently by different actors depending on their interests in relation to the definition of a given problem. It can be assumed that VE – if seen as a “social problem” – could be surrounded by different views and understandings among different actors involved in the preventive work against it. For instance, social workers, and other actors with whom they are supposed to cooperate in this preventive work, might look differently upon it. More specifically, and in relation to the research questions outlined in this article, a question is whether and to what extent social workers think that preventing VE should fall within their *jurisdiction*, and what their role should be in relation to this work compared to, for example, teachers and the police.

### **Social work in risk society**

The notion of *risk society* (Beck 1992) implicates that a central feature of contemporary society is the *risks* with which it is connected. Threats such as nuclear power accidents, climate change and terrorism are always present and – apart from forming our views on life and society – also affects politics and knowledge production in the sense that these institutions become increasingly focused on identifying, anticipating and managing various types of *risks*.

The rise of *risk society* has implications for several societal institutions, among them social work (Hardy 2015; Webb 2006). The idea is that social work is increasingly preoccupied with *risk*, and that this is characterised by a view on social problems as *risks* which can affect people and therefore need to be assessed, managed and prevented by social workers. Furthermore, individuals can also be regarded as constituting *risks* in the sense that some social work clients might be prone to criminal and violent behaviour which has harmful effects on society or individuals. In that sense, people can be bearers of *risk* that need to be anticipated and prevented by social workers.

According to this line of reasoning, the objective for social workers to identify individuals being at risk of becoming radicalised and drawn into VE appears as a heightened focus on *risk* and *risk* prevention in society at large but also, more specifically, in social work, potentially taking the form of the aforementioned securitisation of this institution.

Summarising the theoretical points of departures for this article, the concept of *professional ethos* is applied in understanding how social workers view their role in society’s work against VE and their relation to clients in connection to this work. *Jurisdiction* is used in analysing how they view their role in relation to other professions in countering VE, and the demands associated with this work in relation to their professional resources. Thus, *professional ethos* pertains to the meaning-making which social workers engage in when carrying out their work and confronting their work tasks, while *jurisdiction* concerns their ideas about what they should, should not, can, and cannot, do in relation to other professions and given the knowledge and other resources connected to their profession.

Studying social workers perceptions of the work against VE carried out within social work follows the logic that the representatives of a profession are the actors of which it consist (cf.

Molander & Terum 2013: 24). In this case, this means that the emergence of the work against VE within social work – one macro phenomenon resulting from another (*risk society*) – and its potential implications for this profession, would be discerned in the ways these are perceived by social workers (a micro level phenomenon).

## Method and material

The empirical material on which this article is based consists of semi-structured interviews with Swedish social workers. Among the advantages of semi-structured interviews is their flexibility and scope for respondents to develop their views in a dynamic way without being limited to – for example – pre-formulated survey questions (Marshall & Rossman 2016). Given that existing research on social work and VE mainly has been conducted on written material, and the resulting need for studying the perspectives of social workers, the flexibility and explorative openness inherent in semi-structured interviewing is deemed to be well suited (cf. Marshall & Rossman 2016: 100-102).

The process of recruiting interviewees began through reading policy documents, reports and written guidelines for the work against VE in Sweden. This way, some initial knowledge was gained about the occurrence of VE in Swedish municipalities and within social work. Two larger Swedish cities were chosen for the recruitment of interviewees. Apart from convenience factors, these cities were chosen based on their relatively prominent positions among Swedish municipalities regarding the occurrence of and work against VE. Through contact by phone, E-mail and in the form of explorative face to face interviews with people having coordinating roles in relation to the work against VE, and managers of various social work units, potential research participants, in the form of front line social workers, were identified. These were then contacted by E-mail.

The sampling of interviewees has been subject to a somewhat limited accessibility pertaining to heavy workloads and busy schedules for many social workers. Furthermore, encounters with VE within social work are, at present, something experienced by far from every Swedish social worker, decreasing the number of potential participants in a study on this issue. The two factors mentioned above have limited the number of research participants interviewed to six.

Among the six social workers interviewed, two work as field secretaries, carrying out outreach preventive and relational work with youths in public environments. Two are social secretaries having supporting and counselling roles in relation to the prevention of criminal activity (not involving VE) and VE. Two work as social secretaries with public authority roles within social service units specialised on social assistance and children and youths respectively. Respondents' experiences of encounters with VE in their work varied from one reporting no such experience, to another according to whom such experiences occurred on a weekly basis.

For all research participants, encounters with VE consist of cases, within the context of their work tasks, where youths or adults express sympathies with and support for violent extremist movements and/or joining violent extremist activities (examples given by interviewees pertained to people going abroad to join ISIS or returning home from such activities). For field secretaries, such cases take place in their outreach work with youths in

public spaces. For the social secretaries with supporting and counselling roles, they take place through supportive and change oriented dialogues, initiated by the municipality, with youths or adults involved in VE or, which is more common, through contact with friends, relatives or other people initiating contact on basis of worries that a certain person is involved in VE or becoming radicalised. Regarding the two social secretaries with public authority roles, encounters with VE is initiated through clients taking contact in order to apply for social assistance, or through contacts with young people regarding whom the social services has initiated investigations because of especially troublesome and destructive conditions for upbringing and/or destructive behaviour.

The strengths and weaknesses of the empirical material gathered can be discussed in terms of the transferability (Lincoln & Guba 1985) it yields to the results of the study, or the extent to which it could be argued that the results are relevant to the social work profession as a whole or Swedish social workers (cf. Kvale & Brinkmann 2014: 312). The number of respondents is relatively small, which is a limitation in this regard. Still, the six interviewees show some variation regarding the areas of social work within which they work, as well as to their experience of VE. The strength in the material lies in that it, regardless of these differences, contains general patterns salient in all interviews.

The interviews were relatively loosely structured with the help of an interview guide constructed with regard to the themes in the research questions. Two of the six research participants wanted to see the interview guide before interviews with them were conducted. Therefore, it was sent to them by E-mail twelve days before the interviews took place. From a methodological point of view, it could be suggested that this proceeding might have a negative impact on the accounts made by the research participants in question, in the sense that these could be “distorted” by thoughts of what “ideal” answers to questions would be, occurring when looking at the guide beforehand. On the other hand, it might as well be argued that seeing the interview guide in advance made it possible for the interviewees to make statements on complex questions being more thought through, and thus closer to how they “really” perceive things, rather than spontaneous “less contemplated” answers. No clear effects of the two research participants seeing the interview guide in advance was observed during the research process.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed in their entirety. During the process of transcription, notes were made on potential analytical themes occurring in the interviews, so called analytical memos (Marshall & Rossman 2016). This was followed by a more focused process of analysis where the data, through reading interview transcriptions, was coded in accordance with themes partly anticipated given the conceptual framework and the research questions constructed before the interviews were conducted, but also themes occurring with point of departure in the data. Thus, the analytic and interpretative process could be described as abductive (Alvesson & Sköldberg 2009).

### **Ethical considerations**

The study has been conducted in accordance with the ethical principles presented by the Swedish research council (Vetenskapsrådet 2002). Apart from participating in the interviews being voluntary, the research participants were – when contacted by E-mail before the interviews as well as in connection to their carrying through – informed about the purpose of

the study, their confidentiality and how it was going to be ensured. They were also asked for their consent regarding the recording of the interviews, the use of quotes from interview accounts and informed about the anonymising of any quotes that would later be used in this article.

No ethical issues pertaining to the purpose of the study, the subjects discussed and the questions asked in the interviews have been observed during the study or the writing of this article.

## Results and analysis

In this section, the empirical results of this study will be presented and analysed in accordance with the research questions outlined earlier. In the subsequent section, some final conclusions are drawn and discussed.

For the sake of confidentiality, the interviewees quoted below have been given fictional names.

### **The social workers' role in society's work against VE and the purposes of social work**

Firstly, the question is whether the conventional view on the purposes of social work, associated with the social work *ethos* (Stiller 2000), might be challenged when social work encounters VE. For instance, are there any signs of – as implied by earlier research (Herz, 2016; Guru 2010, 2012b, 2012a; McKendrick & Finch 2016; Stanley & Guru 2015) – a clash between the objectives of caring for and supporting people in need, central to social workers' ideas of what they do, and that of countering VE and identifying individuals involved in, or in danger of becoming involved in, such activity? If such a clash can be discerned, how does it materialise in relation to the meaning making – being part of the social work *ethos* – that social workers engage in regarding the societal function of the work they perform?

#### *Care before control*

The social workers interviewed turned out to have ideas about the central purposes of social work being in accordance with the conventional social work *ethos*:

**Greta, social secretary:** Work with disadvantaged people, where the goal is a better life. Working with social problems, simply.

**Jenny, social secretary:** I try to think customer oriented. [...] help to help oneself.

**Fredrik, field secretary:** Bring about change regarding something that may be more negative, and turn it into something better. There should exist an immanent will to make a difference and make it better. [...] That it develops from something very negative to something less negative.

The same goes when it comes to the role in society's work against VE that social workers think that they have:

**Cecilia, social secretary:** [...] social workers should be able to talk to those who... Those who are drawn to violent extremism. Have treatment dialogues...supporting dialogues, and try to help people not to become violently extremist.

**Jenny, social secretary:** Here, the role is, I guess, to be perceptive, maybe motivational and try to brake it off through offering something better in life. Try to make the scale tip in another direction.

In the quotes shown above, support to people being drawn towards VE, in order to influence them to make other choices, is put forward as an important role for social workers.

At the same time, research participants also acknowledged a duty, although it is not a primary focus, to pay attention to certain information that they might come across when meeting people drawn to VE, if this information indicates that a person might have plans for or be engaged in activities causing danger to others. One interviewee said that, as a social worker, one should:

**Cecilia, social secretary:** [...] pay attention to tendencies towards violent extremism and be able to talk to people [clients] about it. And also be able to take the right contact if... If you need to contact the police, you should do that.

It is implied that social workers, apart from preventing individuals from the harm they might cause to themselves engaging in VE, resonating with the social work *ethos*, also should be ready to contact the police when needed, something that might be done in order to protect society from the individual and the harm he or she might cause not only to him or herself, but also to society in a broader sense. The latter actualises the notion of control functions being part of social work (Banks 2012), but also that of social work in *risk society*, where individuals can be regarded as bearers of risk that society need to be protected from (Hardy 2015; Webb 2006), where control functions can be seen as becoming more salient. From the data at hand it is difficult to judge, though, whether the quote above is an expression of something beyond the usual control functions of social work; whether it is a sign of increasing control as a result of a securitisation of a social work emerging as a tool for protecting society from extremists.

### *Caring for the individual before protecting society*

It seems as although social workers do feel a responsibility for, for instance, contacting the police on the basis of indications that a person might be capable of something dangerous, they still do not see this as a central task. Rather, as shown above, the contact with individuals is put forward as the primary focus, while protecting society from the effects of VE is seen as a possible “bonus” resulting from this:

**Fredrik, field secretary:** Well, it starts in the contact with an individual [...] [but] that individual is a part of a larger context too.

**Cecilia, social secretary:** [...] the day I protect a person from going to war in Syria, and through contacting the police I have protected both society and the person. So then I've killed two birds with one stone.

Potential conflicts between the care oriented aspect of protecting people against involving themselves with VE, and the more security oriented aspect aiming at protecting society (Mattsson, Lebedinski Arfvidson, et al. 2016) can be seen as further actualised in cases regarding VE where social workers cooperate with the police or, indirectly, pass certain information on to the Swedish security service (Säpo). Such cases are not mentioned by all

research participants, but among the two mentioning such indirect collaboration one reflects further on this. These reflections can be interpreted as establishing a boundary between her work and the security oriented work performed by Säpo, indicating that – following what has been said above – even if initiatives are taken to pass certain information on, for the sake of security, this is not seen as a central task for a social worker:

**Cecilia, social secretary:** They [the police] have contact with Säpo [...] but we don't have that ourselves. We don't want to... We don't need to have that either. The police have to do that, and they do. So that it...is done right. [...] so we talk to them about these issues if it's needed [...] if...suspicion that they [clients] would commit a crime, that has to do with this [VE], is strong. [...] and then they contact Säpo. And then it [the information] goes via our police officers. So *they* get to do the sorting [of information].

While talking about the contact with the police, and indirect contact with Säpo, it is emphasised that these kinds of contacts are taken “if it's needed” and never directly between social workers and Säpo, but instead with the local police as an intermediary, who are seen as responsible for what information reaches Säpo. It is also made clear that such direct contact is not seen as motivated or even appropriate, indicating that this is not something that social workers want to do and should not do. This can be seen as a way in which the social worker tries to construct clear borders around the social work *ethos*, emphasising that caring for individuals is what social workers do, while security and intelligence is not. Even when these aspects appear in an issue which is encountered by social workers, social workers are not the ones responsible for them.

From what has been said above, it appears that facing VE in their work do not displace the social worker's role as supporting troubled individuals towards a better life inherent in the social work *ethos*, for the benefit of a securitised role where protecting society from potential terrorists becomes a new focus. Still – from the perspective of social work in *risk society* – a duty to pay attention to and maybe report information regarding clients identified by respondents in relation to VE, appears as a possible slipping of the social work *ethos* towards one being more risk aware and securitised.

## **Relations to other professions**

### *Social work and VE – a small role but a big responsibility*

Even though the focus above has been devoted to social worker's perceived role in the work against VE in relation to the objectives of social work, their role in relation to other professions has also been touched upon through addressing social workers' direct or indirect collaboration with the police and Säpo. Below, ideas about relations between social workers and other professions in relation to the issue of VE is further dealt with. As mentioned earlier the concept of *jurisdiction* (A. D. Abbott 1988) implies that there is competition between different professions regarding areas of work where they try to uphold or enlarge their right and recognition to work with a specific area of issues, problems or questions. It has also been pointed out (Brante 2014) that relations between professions can be characterised by cooperation, and that social workers often have a role characterised by coordination between different professions (A. D. Abbott 1995). Judging from the interviews presented in this article, when it comes to VE, the latter seems to be the case. The social workers do not talk

much about competition, but rather about cooperation with other professions, in relation to VE.

The social workers interviewed think that they should work with VE; that this work has a place within the social work *ethos* and social work *jurisdiction*. But none of them think that social work should have a monopoly on working with this. Collaboration with other actors, has been emphasised. Thus, the role of social workers is described as important, but not dominating:

**Jenny, social secretary:** In a way, we have a very small role. [...] At the same time, we get a very big responsibility, because many times we're the ones that the client meets the most. They're in need of money, they come here often. We can offer a lot that makes the focus move somewhere else in their lives.

Exactly what is meant by “a very small role” and “a very big responsibility” is not self-evident. One interpretation can be made through reconnecting to the boundaries drawn between the tasks of social workers and those of the police and Säpo. This interpretation stipulates that in the work against VE (a criminalised activity), social work is assigned a marginal role since its primary objective is not security and counteracting criminality. Still, frequent encounters with people being less socio-economically well off (a group among which people involved in VE is thought to be found) still gives social workers recurrent opportunities to make “the focus move somewhere else in their lives” than on VE, which means a “big responsibility”. Thus, VE is assigned a marginal but still important place in the social work *jurisdiction*, while it implicitly is given a more prominent role in the *jurisdictions* of other professions (e.g. the police and Säpo).

Another feature of the views on social work and other professions in connection to VE put forward by respondents is a characterisation of social workers as having a coordinating role. Some interviewees describe the role of a social worker as to a large extent consisting of various contacts with other professions, agencies and instances:

**Cecilia, social secretary:** [...] depending on what happens [...] I take different contacts. It's my job to take all the contacts needed and make sure that a person gets help.

**Emma, social secretary:** Well [...] collecting information from different professions, what their opinion is and what they...and so on.

## **Professional resources and demands**

In this section, attention is drawn to potential challenges perceived by social workers in relation to VE, as well as to how they think that these can be confronted in the light of the professional resources they hold; the knowledge and other resources that qualify them for working with the issues belonging to their *jurisdiction*.

### *VE - “A part of the palette”, but still different*

In the material, a slightly ambivalent view on VE as a problem faced within social work has been discerned. On the one hand the social workers point to some aspects of this issue being different from other social problems that they face, and at the same time similarities with other types of issues are identified. The same seem to be the case regarding whether, and to

what extent, VE can be dealt with given the knowledge and resources social workers have at their disposal when carrying out their work.

Respondents tend to talk about VE as a problem different from other social problems, but also pointing to similarities with other issues:

**Cecilia, social secretary:** [...] essentially, I don't think that entering a violent extremist movement is *that* different from other problems that I work with. I mean, when people make a mess of their lives.

Here, it is implied that “essentially” the issue of people entering violent extremist movements is not very different from other cases where people acting in self destructive ways, indicating that although VE has features that make it somewhat different from other problems, basically it has a lot in common with them. Another social worker makes a similar statement regarding VE and other problems suffered by some young people faced by the social worker in question:

**Greta, social secretary:** [...] I meet youths who...well...yes...are involved in criminality or poverty or prostitution or trafficking or...ahm...well...domestic violence or homelessness, well, you know...all these different...honour-related violence... [...] It [VE]'s one thing among others, so to speak. Something that I'm being mindful about, but not something that I expect or presume... [...] I try to face every client in a neutral way...where they are.

VE is here described as one of many social problems that young people might struggle with. Something that the social worker has in the back of her mind, but is important to not put too much emphasis on in relation to other social problems, for instance, when meeting clients.

Apart from the critical accounts regarding the idea of VE as a social problem being fundamentally different from others, some social workers also point to some ways in which it is actually perceived as different, especially with regard to the demands it poses on social workers:

**Jenny, social secretary:** Well, it poses demands on us as an organisation that are a little bit higher when it comes to cooperating...it does. And...to think new. To think outside the box. Ahm... That's the biggest change. [...] I might have a case that's equally demanding, that is about something else [than VE], but then it's so routinised, there are routines and everything [...] so then you sort of automatically know what to do. Here [regarding VE], you need to think twice before doing something. And it's not that routinised, it's not that very common. [...] So it takes some more time, it takes some more thinking, it takes some more cooperation.

The expression “us as an organisation” indicates that the organisation as a whole meets challenges in the form of cooperating, thinking “new” and “outside the box” in relation to VE. More common issues are put forward as somewhat less complicated, since working with them are associated with well-established routines, decreasing the need to “think twice” before adequate measures are taken.

Another respondent, working with children and young people and the exertion of public authority in relation to this group – an area of social work being quite heavily dependent upon social legislation – points to difficulties with applying Swedish law (The care of young



persons act, LVU) when taking care of children or young people assessed as being in danger due to violent extremist activities, and doing so against their and/or their parents will:

**Emma, social secretary:** [...] the LVU legislation, sometimes it can be hard to indicate maybe...a socially destructive behaviour [a prerequisite in LVU] [...] in connection to VE. [...] I mean these [violent extremist] opinions and how they can cause harm to the young person. [...] Well, there are other issues too where it can be hard, sometimes, to find concrete circumstances [prerequisites] [...] but maybe it [VE] is a bit more difficult.

This can be seen as a case where a central resource, in this case social legislation, disposed by a social worker risk being insufficient when the issue of VE is to be faced.

Furthermore, VE is also seen as a problem of which it might be hard to judge the relevance in cases where clients have several problems that they need assistance with:

**Jenny, social secretary:** [...] a person who has been down in the caliphate...and been through quite difficult things [...] have come back and tries to make a life here...now has a rent debt and his electricity turned off. [...] Is it [the violent extremist activities that the person has been involved in] relevant? [...] How should we relate to this rent debt and the information we have? [...] should we treat this person as anyone else who has a rent debt? How should we think?

What is described here is a difficulty with judging how to deal with the fact that a person has been in the ISIS caliphate – something that is likely to have a generally negative influence on him – given that he comes to the social services not because of this, but because he tries to start a new life, but have some problems doing so, taking the form of a rent debt. Whether the assumed violent extremist activity should be taken into account, when figuring out how to best support this man, is put forward as a difficult question.

### *Dealing with VE – to a certain limit*

A next step, then, is asking the question whether social workers think that they – given the resources and the knowledge they have at their disposal when carrying out their work, that qualifies them for their *jurisdiction* – is enough to deal with VE. And if it is, in what way is it used?

Throughout the material, social workers in different ways imply that they, to some extent, lack knowledge in relation to VE:

**Jan: field secretary:** [...] regarding islamist extremism...then we're *not* educated to manage that. What we do is that we direct them [youths] to people who *are*. [...] The right-wing extremism then... There are exit programs, there are other people better suited to work with that. [...] We can pick them up [...] We can try to reach them, we can try to make them go to the instances where they *can* get the help they need. So, there we haven't...maybe we *shouldn't* have that education either. Because then we lose the *broad* focus in our work, then it becomes very narrow, very specific. How would that affect our work with *all* youths?

Here, a field secretary says that he thinks that he and his colleagues do not themselves have the specific knowledge required to counteract VE among young people, but that they can notice, and try to get contact with, youths being in danger getting drawn in to VE. And once relations to these youths have been established, they can offer help and guidance with getting in contact with people and instances where there is more specific help to get. It is also put

forward that maybe field secretaries should not have this kind of specific knowledge in relation to VE, because it might impede them in carrying out the more general work with young people being their specialty.

How, then, do social workers relate to the issue of VE, given that they, to some extent, lack the specific knowledge that is thought to be needed to fully deal with the problem? One way has been shown above, where VE, when exceeding the knowledge held by the field secretaries, is passed over to other professionals being specially educated for this issue. Another scenario found in the material is one where a social worker can still deal with VE when it is encountered, but when help can be found among colleagues, being other social workers or other people working within the same organisation:

**Greta, social secretary:** All social workers can't work with all issues, we have different specialties. [...] if I...meet a person [...] who's homeless, then that isn't within the frames of my assignment, but then I will refer that person to a social worker who works with..housing. [...] The same goes for VE. If something comes up, and I feel that it isn't something I can work with myself...eh...that my resources and my knowledge isn't enough, then I turn to other people that are responsible. [...] So there is a system built up for this.

Here, one respondent says that – comparing VE to other social problems – there is usually, somewhere in the organisation, a social worker or other person more suited to deal with it, if the social worker initially facing the problem feels unequipped to work further with it. Apart from the possibility to pass the issue on to someone else, some respondents also perceive that they, when facing VE, can ask for help:

**Emma, social secretary:** There are those who have more [...] specific knowledge about this [VE]. I turn to them [...] if I need help regarding..such a subject [VE].

Some respondents also claim that they as social workers have a responsibility to, at least to some extent, be updated on how the phenomena of VE develops:

**Emma, social secretary:** Well, it is also quite a lot about one needing to take responsibility for it [keeping "à jour" on VE] oneself. [...] to keep updated on what's happening and follow...in the media what's happening..

**Jan, field secretary:** [...] I think it's important to keep updated on what's going on in different [violent extremist and youth] groups.

One respondent also expressed a view on encounters with VE within social work as something positive:

**Jenny, social secretary:** It also makes the job more exiting. I think it's good that there is a span, so to speak. When it comes to what type of cases and people one meets. [...] One becomes better...when we face difficult cases. That's the way it is. Just like a surgeon. Surgeons don't want the most difficult case at their table, but that's the case...or that patient, that will make the surgeon better. That's the way it is, right.

It is put forward that facing VE – which might be complicated – makes social workers more competent, since it is the most difficult cases that gives the best opportunities for learning.

In the section above, it has been made clear that social workers think that they, to a certain extent, are equipped to face VE given their knowledge and resources. They have also pointed to limitations in their abilities to deal with this problem, which can be solved by passing it on to other professionals or people within their organisation. Seen through the concept of *jurisdiction*, it seems that they regard VE to be part of the social work *jurisdiction* to the extent that their knowledge is sufficient to face it. When it becomes too complicated, others are seen as more suitable, indicating that here, social workers see a limit to their *jurisdiction* in the sense that keep claiming to have the competence necessary beyond this limit would risk a weakening of their *jurisdiction*.

## Relations to clients

### *Relations as usual*

Earlier in this article, the question has been raised whether encounters with VE affects social workers in their relation building with clients, a central feature of social work. Earlier research has expressed worries that having work with VE and identifying people drawn towards such activities as a task, would hamper the possibilities for social workers to be open minded and nuanced when meeting clients and establish good and trustful relations. Among the dangers, it is argued, is a risk of increasing suspiciousness towards clients (Herz 2016; Guru 2010, 2012b, 2012a; McKendrick & Finch 2016; Stanley & Guru 2015).

In this article, one question is if social workers, given that VE is now a part of their work, might experience problems with facing clients in accordance with the openness associated with the social work *ethos*, or whether the emergence of VE leaves this aspect of the *ethos* unchanged.

Judging from the accounts given by the respondents, it seems that experiences of encounters with VE and the general awareness of this issue do not affect client relations. One aspect of this is the balance inherent in social work between establishing functional and trustful relationships with clients, and at the same time being ready to make demands on them and, if needed, pass information on to the police or initiate investigations that in extreme cases might lead to measures taken against the will of clients (Banks 2012; Reamer 2013: 95-113). This is not seen as especially problematic in relation to VE:

**Emma, social secretary:** Well, we're open with worries that we might have and... have a talk about it at the same time as we establish a relationship around what...that person [the client] thinks and so on. When confronting a young person with worries or so, whatever it is, [...] it can often be hard for them and...they disagree and have different explanation for it. [...] But I haven't [...] been thinking [...] that differently in those cases [regarding VE] compared to others, really.

What is described is a situation where the social worker has identified a problematic circumstance which is discussed with the client, who might disagree with the social worker who still tries to establish a functional relationship with the client. This scenario is not perceived as very different in cases pertaining to VE, compared to when other problems occur.

Another aspect of relations with clients relevant in relation to the earlier research and theory drawn on in this article is the integrity of clients (Reamer 2013: 95-113). Does the awareness of VE, in accordance with what has been said above, make it more difficult to consider the integrity of clients when, for instance, bringing up difficult subjects in

conversations, or can this aspect of the relational work done by social workers take place within the conventional boundaries of the social work *ethos*? Here, as was the case with the relational balance described above, respondents generally do not find paying attention to the integrity of clients more complicated in relation to VE than other problems. One social worker claims that he finds the integrity of clients important, for instance, when deciding how to approach extreme opinions or beliefs among youths:

**Jan, field secretary:** You have the right to be as radical as you want, or as *liberal* as you want when it comes to certain things. But [...] You're not allowed to use drugs. That's illegal. *That* we must work further with. But you're allowed to *think* that drugs are good. And you're allowed to think that [...] If you're not a Christian, you're an idiot. But you don't have the right to express it, you don't have the right to attack another person because of that. And that balance is very important.

A field secretary talks about the way he faces youths in his work. He emphasises that he sees it as important to respect beliefs expressed by youths, even ones that can appear as extreme or radical, as long as they are not acted upon in a way that hurt others. This is exemplified by the difference between thinking that using drugs is good, an opinion that has to be respected, and using drugs, something to “work further with”. The same is said regarding the difference between thinking that people who are not Christians are idiots, and attacking people on the basis of that opinion. Using these two examples can be seen as a way of expressing that issues of integrity is not more or less complicated regarding issues relating to drugs than extremism.

In essence, the social workers interviewed do not seem to think that the issue of VE makes relations to clients more complicated. In other words, the social work *ethos* does not seem to be challenged in this regard.

## Concluding discussion

In the outset of this article, the question was raised whether social work's encounter with VE might mean new conditions for this profession through challenging the views, held by social workers, of the role and purpose of social work. For the respondents interviewed here, this does not seem to be the case. In semi-structured interviews conducted with six Swedish social workers, interviewees give a picture of how they – within their social work practice – find a place for the encounter with VE to some degree faced by contemporary social work.

Making use of the concept of *professional ethos* – of which social work's role and purpose, and the way social workers relate and should relate to clients, are two parts – what has been said above gives the impression that VE is met within the conventional social work *ethos* instead of altering it.

Moreover, the research participants typically find that VE – to the extent they have faced it in their work – can be dealt with within their professional boundaries, their knowledge and experience. Although they all, to a varying degree, perceive VE as a relatively new social problem and something relatively novel to the practice of social work – meaning new challenges and demands – they find that, so far, it can be taken care of in a functional way. Although they see limitations to their knowledge and their skills in relation to VE – pertaining to their education and working experience – they think that, when these limitations is

actualised, there is help and guidance to get from colleagues, people “higher up” in the organisation and/or from other professions.

Through the lens of the notion of *professional jurisdiction*, the issue of VE seem to be a social problem which social workers look upon as part of their, but not only their, *jurisdiction*. They acknowledge that they have a role in counteracting it, but see themselves as one of several actors taking part in this work, and find part of their roles to consist of collaborating with other professions in counteractive work as well as passing clients on to the instances where they can get the help and support being most adequate in every specific case.

Earlier research (Guru 2010, 2012b, 2012a; McKendrick & Finch 2016; Stanley & Guru 2015) stipulates that giving social work a role in relation to VE means a securitisation of this profession. The idea that social workers are given a role as terror fighters, more compatible with security politics than social work, is not confirmed by the empirical material gathered. Instead, social workers – although considering that what they do might contribute to counteracting VE – tend to see their roles more as supporting and empowering troubled and disadvantaged individuals than identifying potential terrorists.

The fear – put forward by the authors cited above – that the task given to social workers in relation to the counteracting of VE, might impede the possibilities of building relations with clients, is not given support by the data. Instead, social workers find themselves able to relate to clients in a nuanced way and in relation to conventional social work practices. In spite of the attention as a societal threat given to VE in contemporary debate, and the role assigned to social workers in connection to this issue, they claim to keep being open and non-judgemental when meeting and interacting with clients. Overall, they claim that VE is not that different from other social problems when it comes to interactions with clients.

It might be noted, once again, though, that the number of respondents in this study is small which sets obvious limits to the transferability of the results. Given this circumstance, and the qualitative nature of the research undertaken, its contribution lies not in an ultimate answer to what the impacts of the work against VE is for social work; whether it means securitisation or social work as usual. Rather, what has been investigated is the potential of social works encounter with VE to affect some of the central aspects of the way social workers perceive their work. As indicated above, given the data at hand, this potential appears to be limited.

But some questions can be raised regarding this conclusion. From the “securitisation-perspective” it could be argued that the incorporation of VE into the social work *ethos* and *jurisdiction* shown in the interviews referred to above, is a result of social workers not being critical enough towards the “discourse of security politics” (Herz 2016: 3) associated with the work against VE. It could be suggested that the relatively unproblematic picture of social workers encounters with VE found in the interviews might be affected by interests among social workers to successfully incorporate VE into their *jurisdiction*. These interests could originate from endeavours towards an enhanced status of the social work profession, making social workers prone to construct VE in a certain way that downplays possible conflicts pertaining to the social work *ethos* arising when social work encounters this problem. On the other hand, the results presented in this article might as well be used for claiming that the warnings of a securitisation of social work simply are exaggerated. Since the data presented here do not suffice for taking a stand regarding these issues, they can be seen instead as critical reflections that might be further addressed in future research.

The same goes for the question of whether conducting this study in contexts other than the two relatively large Swedish cities – equipped with relatively large social work organisations – where the interviews were conducted, would have yielded different results. Given their prominent positions among Swedish municipalities regarding the occurrence of and work against VE, research in other contexts might nuance, for instance, the pictures of support in relation to VE that according to the interviewees of this study can be found within their organisation and among other professions. It is possible that in smaller municipalities, the occurrence of VE, as well as knowledge about, experience of and resources facilitating the handling of this issue, is more limited than in larger municipalities. This could mean that in smaller municipalities, social workers perceive less of the above-mentioned support, which might make them view working with VE as more problematic.

Even though this study has limitations, it has initiated the filling of the gap existing when it comes to empirical research on the professional implications for social work encountering VE, as perceived by social workers themselves, the actors constituting social work as a profession (cf. Molander & Terum 2013: 24). A pattern has been identified regarding the way social workers deal with VE. The ones interviewed in this study typically find that it can be approached in ways similar to how other social problems are faced. Whether this strategy occurs also outside the specific context of this study, along with further investigations of its nature, are objectives of future research.

Moreover, it might, once again, be noted that VE can be seen as a relatively new social problem, which spreading and character are dependent upon social and political developments. Following the notion of social work in a *risk society* (Hardy 2015; Webb 2006), the same goes for the role assigned to social work in relation to the issue in question. If VE is a risk inherent in contemporary society, this also means that the endeavours to counteract it is dependent upon social and political factors. Thus, it follows that its influence on and implications for social work, in the long run, is a future question for society at large as well as for future research.

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