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# Master's-level social work students' definitions of intersectionality in relation to social work practice in Finland

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines the essays of 14 Master's-level social work students on intersectionality. Thematic analysis was employed to examine students' understandings of how intersectionality can be applied in social work. The results show that students approached intersectionality as a tool in four distinctive ways: to understand service users' experiences and their everyday lives, to self-reflect as a professional, to reflect upon issues of power in social work practice, and to understand the functioning of societal structures. Students also mentioned limitations to the intersectional approach, such as its lack of specificity and difficulty in applying intersectionality in practice when working with service users. The results indicate that intersectionality is a useful concept in social work education, providing students with important critical perspectives concerning power relations, normalization, and categorization relevant to social work practice. Yet, there is a danger that intersectionality is employed only with respect to service users, limited to positions of disadvantage, and used as a tool to distinguish between 'us' and 'them'. The complexity of intersectionality requires specific guidelines for coursework assignments and the opportunity for students to discuss and reflect upon their learning outcomes.

## KEYWORDS

Intersectionality; teaching; Master's-level social work students; Finland

## Introduction

This article examines the usefulness of *intersectionality* in social work education by analysing course essays from Master's-level social work students. In short, intersectionality refers to the simultaneous and sometimes contradictory effects of various social categories such as gender, class, race, age, and ability (Anthias 2012; Davis 2008; Crenshaw 1989; Kara 2016). It can be considered important for social work education for many reasons. Firstly, it strives to capture the complexity of human life and simultaneously directs focus towards societal and individual factors. Thus, it can support social workers in understanding individuals' lives and social phenomena in multifaceted ways (Collins 2000, 18). Secondly, intersectionality may challenge institutions, group boundaries, and constructions that maintain power and privilege. In this way, it can function as a mechanism for social change (Andersen and Hill Collins 2004, p. xi). Thirdly, intersectionality can provide tools for critical self-reflection and create an understanding of how social work practices uphold relationships based on dominance and oppression (Mattsson 2014, 8).

Social work and intersectionality have been approached from various perspectives. Studies focusing on social workers' own positions within different social categories have brought to the fore self-reflection and self-awareness of social workers' own background (e.g. Crawford 2012;

Davis and Gentlewarrior 2015). The importance of acknowledging one's position inside social categories often relates to the use of power by social workers. Research on social work practices from an intersectional perspective has critically examined the pursuit of normalization (e.g. Sawyer 2012) and simplified representations of service users (e.g. Hoppstadius 2020). Studies focusing on service users' identities have brought forward the complexity of intersections across social categories (e.g. Frišaufová 2014; Valkonen and Wallenius-Korkalo 2016). Studies approaching intersectionality from a theoretical perspective have discussed, for example, the application of intersectionality in multicultural social work (Fong 2005; Garran and Werkmeister Rozas 2013) or, more generally, in order to critically reflect upon privileges as well as disadvantages (Pease 2015).

In this article, we aim to examine the practical usefulness and implications of an intersectional approach to social work according to Master's-level students. Our data consist of essays from 14 Master's-level social work students, the analysis of which is interesting for several reasons. Firstly, it helps us to determine whether the aims of the course were achieved and whether students processed the intended content on intersectionality. This analysis will also help us to further develop our teaching in the future. Secondly, our students, future social workers, will exert some power during their encounters with service users. Thus, it is important to understand in which ways they comprehend intersectionality.

Thirdly, examining student essays is interesting because the course assignment included analytically expanding upon intersectionality, primarily through presenting their own interpretations of it and building well-grounded argumentation for those interpretations. This means that in the essay students were encouraged to think thoroughly and critically about their own views on this specific subject.

In addition, it is important to note that intersectionality has been referred to as a 'travelling concept' given its various meanings in different contexts (Knapp 2005, 250). Intersectionality represents a 'buzzword' because of its lack of specificity given that it is not always clear what an intersectional approach means in specific contexts and research settings (Davis 2008, 75; also McCall 2005, 1771). In this study, we attempt to address this critique by further examining how intersectionality can be defined within and applied to the Finnish social work context.

We begin by examining the different definitions of intersectionality and discussing its application to social work education and the Finnish context. Then, we discuss different ways of teaching intersectionality within the social work and other relevant disciplines. We continue by presenting the implementation of our study and describe our data and methods. Finally, we present and discuss our results.

## **Intersectionality in the Finnish context**

Debates on intersectionality derive from American Black and Chicana Feminist thought, and it first appeared as an academic term in the late 1980s in an article by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) in reference to how law responds to issues of both gender and racial discrimination. Carabado and her coauthors (2013, p. 303) later described intersectionality as 'a method and a disposition, a heuristic and analytical tool'. Defining intersectionality as a tool can be seen as of particular interest in the context of social work.

For instance, Garneau (2018, 322) highlights that local contexts greatly affect how social categories are specifically defined and their workings, as well as which categories are perceived as most defining in people's lives. As such, a universal understanding of the principles of intersectionality is not necessarily needed or even possible to obtain. The Nordic countries, including Finland, are known as welfare states, characterized by the universal provision of public services irrespective of a person's class position or economic resources, free education and health care as well as a number of social benefits and services all financed through taxation (Esping-Andersen 1990). Finland, like other Nordic countries, has also been lauded as a forerunner of gender equality (European Institute for Gender Equality 2019). Despite the historic existence of minorities in

Finland, diversity issues have become a topic of policy-level discussions only during the last 30 years given the country's gradually increasing immigration (e.g. Saukkonen 2013). In general, issues related to equality were not approached through the lens of intersectionality in political and policy-making arenas until June 2020, when intersectionality became a core concept in the Finnish government's equality programme for 2020–2023 (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health 2021). This caused quite a stir in the media and within different political parties, and the meanings and definitions of the term briefly emerged as topical news in Finland (e.g. Haikala 2020; Parkkonen 2020; Räsänen 2020).

## Teaching intersectionality

Research on intersectionality and social work education relies on various approaches. Almeida et al. (2019) and Jani et al. (2011) have approached social work education from a historical perspective, highlighting its connections to colonialism. In doing so, they presented intersectionality as an alternative framework capable of opening up discussions on power, privilege, and oppression. Other studies concentrated on the experiences of social work students, revealing different forms of oppression within social work education (e.g. Crawford 2012; Rasheem and Brunson 2018). In addition, various methods of teaching intersectionality, such as using film (Lee and Priester 2014), intergroup dialogue (Nadan, Weinberg-Kurnik, and Ben-Ari 2015) and group assignments as well as self-reflection (Robinson et al. 2016) have been discussed.

As outlined here, studies on teaching intersectionality exist within social work, although a gap in the literature remains related to how social work students interpret intersectionality. Few studies from other disciplines have approached this specific topic as well. For instance, a study conducted by Brinkman and Donohue (2020) found that most Master's-level students in psychological counselling focused primarily on applying intersectionality to clients instead of understanding how intersectionality influenced clinicians themselves. Therefore, they recommend that teaching intersectionality should promote students' critical self-reflection in ways that embed the practitioners' own location along axes of gender, sexual orientation, class, race, age, and ability.

Furthermore, Gardner and McKinzie's (2020) study among undergraduate sociology students found that students grasped intersectionality as a useful tool for understanding how people experience overlapping forms of inequality and privilege. They employed vignettes to provide concrete 'real-life' examples of the material consequences of intersectionality on people's everyday lives. Students were asked to write about what intersectionality means prior to and after vignette assignment as a means to 'pretest' and 'posttest' students' conceptualizations. The pre-test showed that, while students had previously been trained on intersectionality, most stated that they could not define it. The post-test demonstrated that the vignette enabled students to define intersectionality more precisely by enabling them to specify various elements of oppression, identify more nuanced forms of discrimination, and provide concrete examples of intersectional inequality. In addition, students reported an improved confidence in their ability to explain intersectionality in a more complex way to other students, as extending beyond conventional forms of discrimination, including sexism and racism, and also referring to more nuanced interpretations including cultural, political, and geographical considerations. The vignette exercise, therefore, was able to assist students' ability to identify variations in the ways people experience overlapping opportunities and constraints to accessing social resources.

## Study implementation

Our data consist of essays written by 14 students who attended to voluntary Master's-level social work course. We asked students to provide their written permission to use their essays as research data, to which they all agreed. From these essays, our data consist of 162 pages of text in total. The

course was held at the University of Helsinki in the spring of 2020, and lasted for six weeks. According to the original plan, the course would have included five contact lectures and one meeting in order to engage in reflective discussions. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, however, one face-to-face lecture and one online lecture were held, and other lectures were replaced with additional readings. We did not collect specific demographic background information from the students. All of the students spoke and wrote fluent Finnish. None of them discussed migrant background during the course or in their essays. In the essays, some students reflected on their own background mainly in terms of gender and social class position.

We must note that this was a Master's-level course. Thus, we assumed that students possessed some previous knowledge of oppression, equality, and power differentials in social work, such that this course would provide more nuanced information and deepen students' knowledge over these issues. Yet, 12 of 14 students wrote at some point in their essays that they were not at all familiar with discussions around intersectionality prior to this course.

The course aimed to address different manifestations of intersectionality in social and healthcare services and assist students in broadening their understanding of power differentials in society. The course literature included scholarly articles and doctoral dissertations in which intersectionality was approached and employed from varying perspectives. The texts discussed issues such as intersectionality's conceptual history and basic principles, the workings of intersecting social hierarchical categories in everyday life, and the uses and usefulness of intersectionality in social work practice. To complete the course, students were required to submit a 10-page essay, in which they were asked to include the following sections: an introduction including a description of their previous knowledge of the concept, background and history of the concept, examples of manifestations of intersectionality in everyday life, reflections upon the application of that concept to social work practice, a discussion, and a reflection of their own learning process during the course.

Our research question is as follows:

- *How do students view the application of intersectionality in social work?*

In our analysis, we concentrated on those parts of the essays in which students did not cite the course literature directly, but rather reflected upon the meanings and applications of intersectionality in social work practice using their own words. Our analytical approach relies on a qualitative thematic analysis (e.g. Clarke and Braun 2017). After reading the data, we continued our analysis through several steps. The first author created an initial coding chart, in which she separated the data quotes in which students wrote about the application of intersectionality. Next, the first and second authors examined these quotes, and tackled the similarities and differences they identified, creating a revised coding chart intended to more explicitly classify these quotes along thematic categories that capture working with clients, self-reflection, the use of power, and societal structures, all of which emerged from the data.

During the third stage of the analysis, all authors discussed the preliminary results from our analysis and the extent to which the thematic categories we identified related to the data as a whole. According to our results, students discussed four different ways in which intersectionality can be *applied as a tool* to social work: *to understand service users' experiences and everyday lives*, *to self-reflect as a professional*, *to reflect on issues of power in social work practice*, and *to understand the functioning of societal structures*. In what follows, we present our results in further detail. In order to illustrate our interpretations, we use sample quotes from the data, which we have translated from Finnish to English. Quotes that were picked from the data represent general findings. All students described applicability of intersectionality in a similar way, some elaborated it more than others, but the thematic categories were present in all essays.

## Results

### *Tool to understand service users' experiences and everyday lives*

In their essays, students most often framed intersectionality as a service user-related issue, describing it as a useful tool for understanding how social categories play out in service users' experiences and everyday lives. In this context, intersectionality was viewed as the interplay between different social categories leading to the accumulation of multiple disadvantages and oppression:

The analysis of intersectionality is very important in social work because it makes it possible to recognize oppressive power relations that produce inequality and to highlight the positions of service users. (Essay 14)

Students described how, in addition to oppression from the outside, social categories often lead to the internalization of stigmatized identities. Descriptions regarding how individuals' lives are influenced by social categories were presented as deterministic. While privilege was introduced and applied in the reading materials for the course, only one student explicitly addressed this issue and criticized the way studies applying an intersectional approach often solely focus on marginalized categories:

I have also previously wondered about this: if all social categories are intersectional, then why don't we study more general intersections, instead of the marginal ones, and look at their effects on individuals and communities? (Essay 9)

Applying intersectionality in social work was perceived as useful in the essays, especially when considering the service users' positions and situations. Students opined that intersectionality could support social work practitioners in their work with service users through better '*understanding*', '*acknowledging*', and '*recognizing*' these positions and situations, along with '*scratching below the surface*'. This entailed a more robust comprehension of the ways in which categorization is realized in practice and the intersections across various categories.

The course reading materials addressed themes such as poverty, migration, ethnicity, gender, substance misuse, disability, and religion, and students could choose between different themes for a more in-depth discussion in their essays. Again, they generally addressed and reflected upon these themes as primarily influencing or positioning service users within specific situations. Students also at times emphasized a detached position as a practitioner and a unidirectional relationship between the service user and the practitioner.

Many social work service users are affected by poverty, and, as a social worker, I need a lot of information and knowledge about the effects of poverty in the service users' everyday lives and the ways in which they can be helped. (Essay 1)

I think that as social workers we should try to look at the life of the service user from different angles, together with them, and examining it against social structures and the social and historical contexts. But we should also understand that people are not victims of their social categories, choices, and histories, and we as social workers should not look at their situations from that perspective. It is important to remember that, even in very challenging circumstances, people have different moments of agency, and social work should be there to lift those moments more to the fore. (Essay 10)

The second extract here presents the intersectional view as a way to connect the service users' situations to their societal contexts. In addition, this extract critically addresses the themes of limiting agency and victimization, both of which were also discussed in the course materials. Simultaneously, this extract applies intersectionality only to positions of disadvantage and, more precisely, only to the disadvantaged positions of service users, thereby distinguishing between 'them the service users' and 'us the social workers'.

This course was organized in the spring 2020, and some students connected their essays to the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown. Students wrote about the challenges the pandemic brought to some Finnish families, such as increased unemployment, diminished incomes, and risks related to staying at home with one's family, particularly in situations of substance misuse, mental



health-related problems, or intimate partner violence. In addition, students combined the Covid-19 pandemic with increasing inequality and the intersections between social class and health.

In Finland, as elsewhere, socioeconomic differences can be seen in the disparate effects of the coronavirus. People who occupy a lower social class status generally exhibit a lower health status, which also means that they are more prone to illnesses in general, increasing their risks related to Covid-19. Clearly, people also belonging to these groups enjoy fewer possibilities of working remotely and in this way are unable to regulate their risk of being infected. (Essay 9)

Despite of the excitement among students regarding the intersectional approach as offering new perspectives to social work, three students reported that they had struggled in their attempts to understand intersectionality or think of ways it could be applied to social work practice.

I noticed, however, that I was struggling with the whole concept [intersectionality]. I understood it on a theoretical level, I think, but I was not able to grasp it in a practical sense. (Essay 14)

Students emphasized that intersectionality was *'not possible to use in practice together with service users'* because of its complexity. Some students mentioned that understanding how oppressive categories may intersect analytically does not actually provide any concrete means of approaching social work intervention in order to achieve social change and increase equality in practice. Some students also thought that social workers could potentially employ intersectionality to examine service users' lives without engaging in direct dialogue with them.

### **Tool for professional self-reflection**

Although service user-related issues predominated in the student essays, many students also described intersectionality as a tool for professional self-reflection, which included recognizing social workers' own locations. This is an important characterization, since students leaned on the premise that self-reflection serves as the basis for anti-oppressive practices.

Intersectionality can be used as a tool for self-reflection because it assists upon recognizing one's own privileges and listening to other people's experiences. Recognizing one's own privileges is the first step when we try to recognize and dismantle inequality and build a world where every experience and voice has an equal opportunity to be heard. (Essay 1)

In this example, the student describes how understanding one's own privileges can help to deconstruct inequality and take into account different perspectives during encounters with particular service users, as well as perhaps on a more structural level. Yet, power and privilege are distributed in this quotation in a rather one-dimensional manner, in that the social worker carries these over to the service user. In addition, considering the social workers' own position solely reflects their privilege.

In general, students presented intersectionality as a *'tool to examine oneself from time to time'*, which could allow for an understanding of the formation of one's own attitudes and values and their impact during encounters with service users. Students reflected upon their own backgrounds and argued that social work students originate from privileged positions in comparison to the service users with whom they work.

During my studies, I have often thought about how privileged social work students are. We can come from very different backgrounds, but we still have sufficient cognitive skills and financial resources to study. While Finnish society has put a lot of effort into making it possible for everyone to study, it is not at all that simple. Many young people need emotional support and guidance from family or someone close to them during their studies. Although attempts have been made to equalize economic factors, it is not possible for everyone to receive equal support from their close ones. Either you have it or you do not. (Essay 8)

Students highlighted that, since social workers occupy a position of power in relation to service users, they can *'become dangerous'* if they categorize themselves as *'the norm'* or *'normal'* and service users as *'deviants'*. According to the students, not acknowledging one's own privileges as a social



work practitioner can lead to a limited view of service users' situations and to social workers being unable to provide the assistance and support service users need. This also affirms service users' possible stigmatization. While students recognized the importance of self-reflection, most wrote about its importance only on a general level without providing any concrete examples. Only three students reflected upon their personal backgrounds and the intersections across various disadvantages and advantages therein. Course readings included several articles about self-reflection, including an article based on a social work student's reflective account of self-identified differences and his own position (Crawford 2012). Many students mentioned this specific article in their essays. Yet, the article provided inspiration to specifically reflect upon one's own background for only a few students. Some students also mentioned that, although social workers can have some privilege, they should not be viewed as *'all being alike'*, since this would also *'oppose the idea of intersectionality'*. Students also highlighted that it is important that the values, principles, and practices constructing the social work profession are viewed critically. One student wondered whether social work as a profession requires adopting or rejecting some preconceived attitudes and values.

I was left wondering whether there are opinions, attitudes, and values unsuitable or unacceptable to a social work student or social worker. I think it is essential to recognize the variety of social workers and be able to discuss this reflectively, critically, and respectfully. (Essay 9)

In general, students attached the intersectional approach to the core values of social work, defined as the objection of injustice and discrimination and the recognition of individuals' differences and uniqueness. Acknowledging and questioning one's own understanding of social categories within which service users and social workers are positioned alongside practical consequences were portrayed as the primary benefits of intersectionality.

### ***Tool for reflecting on issues of power within social work practice***

Students described how intersectionality can be used as a tool to reflect upon different elements of professional practices. They stressed that, in order to reduce inequality, it is crucial to understand that oppression is not only produced on a structural level, but also through everyday interactions.

It is important to understand that structural power and oppression are not to be tackled "somewhere else", but that they are part of people's unconscious thoughts and emotions and become visible in thoughts, actions, and emotions in everyday life. It is important for us social workers to be aware of the possibility of unconsciously upholding and repeating many different power structures in our work through our thoughts and actions. (Essay 10)

Power is an essential component of social work, and students had readings from, for example, Sawyer (2012, pp. 156–158) and Mattsson (2014, 9), both of whom criticize social work by stating that social workers who are in privileged positions themselves evaluate service users in relation to norms established from privileged positions. Social work can thus be interpreted as a normalizing process targeted at changing service users' situations or behaviours in order for them to be defined as 'normal'. Students confirmed the notion that social work requires constant critical awareness in order not to strengthen social hierarchies through normalization. Students attached this awareness specifically to child welfare and protective services and more generally to working with families.

Social workers have the power to define families. Client documentation is full of these descriptions and definitions of the child and of parenthood. (Essay 8)

Students described social work as an institution that attempts to promote norms for example for parenthood and family life through various practices, such as family assessments and client documentation. This creates boundaries between social workers and service users, reproducing the notion that social workers as professionals represent the universal 'norm' and service users lie beyond this norm and become undesired. Students described the intersectional perspective as a tool

to be employed in order to examine their own attitudes as practitioners exercising power in various ways.

In the essays, normalization was also attached to social workers' power to define 'the good service user' who needs and deserves help and support since they act in a specific way.

Social workers have strong assumptions regarding what or who constitutes a good service user: someone who does what has been agreed upon and demonstrates responsibility. When a person does not fit into this definition, help and support can be withdrawn. When a service user does not come to meetings or does not attend to matters that have been agreed upon, meetings are no longer offered and the responsibility for making contact is left to the service user. (Essay 8)

In this example, the absence of an intersectional perspective associates with a narrow view of the service users' situation, and the service user who does not behave according to a prescribed manner can, therefore, remain without support.

Several students also attached normalization to the victimization of the service user and highlighted that, by victimizing service users, social workers dismiss service users' agency and stigmatize them, thereby representing a manifestation of power. Issues of power were strongly visible in the course readings, and were also discussed during lectures at the beginning of the course. Some students discussed power issues presented by the lecturer and in the course materials, adding to them more practical perspectives.

Power consists of different components, whereby power is based on legislation and based on an expert position. These relate to, for example, the power positions between service users and practitioners and to the guidance, control, and persuasion [present in social work encounters]. To this, we can add institutional power referring to the external and physical settings of the encounters and the institutional task of social work. (Essay 7)

In our interpretation, the readings on intersectionality provoked and supported a discussion in the essays on power as embedded within social work, even though not all discussions were straightforwardly related to intersectionality. Some students suggested that during social work encounters service users and practitioners assume different roles, according to which practitioners provide knowledge and services and evaluate and make decisions, while service users serve as recipients. In the extract above, power asymmetry is seen to emerge in everyday encounters and interactions, as well as in the physical environment through, for example, the office space in social service agencies.

### ***Tool for understanding social structures***

Students highlighted the relevance of an intersectional perspective on social work given that it reveals the meaning and consequences of social structures in individuals' lives, presenting issues defined as social problems within a broader context rather than the responsibility of the individual. Social work primarily targets working with individuals and families, which can, according to the students, lead to dismissing social structures.

I think that often times in social work there is this dominant way of thinking and speaking, whereby the problems service users face are viewed through their individual qualities. This dismisses structural inequalities. (Essay 6)

Students described intersectionality as helping them to understand how inequality is produced and maintained within society. This is possible because the focus shifts from the individual to the interconnections between individual subjects and social structures. In their essays, a structural understanding of social problems was described as important since structures were primarily viewed as limiting individual agency.

Many students also described how norms and institutions are created by the majority and groups of people in privileged positions, leading to increasing inequality. This issue relates to social work and social services in general, because services and practices thought of as universal may often

become rather locally and historically constructed as good practices, reflecting the needs and realities of only the majority population (e.g. Keskinen 2012). Often these understandings include a perception of the uniformity of the population as an aim and norm in society, thereby silencing other perspectives. This perception was discussed during the first lecture using a recent study (Heino, Kara, and Lillrank 2022), which prompted students to reflect upon the practices of the Finnish welfare state.

The course material has opened my eyes to see how strongly Finnish society is run by the Finnish-speaking population in privileged positions. This creates a problematic starting point, where social security for people in the most vulnerable situations is designed by individuals operating at the top of society and the services targeted to the immigrant populations are designed by Finnish-speaking non-migrants. (Essay 11)

Many students highlighted that social work and social services are divided according to different service user groups. Students brought up concrete examples about situations in which categorization can harm service users. For instance, this might occur when service users with substance misuse problems or with migrant backgrounds are guided to standardized and narrow services, leading to situations in which service users are approached only through one, often stereotypical, perspective.

Other students defended categorization within social work. According to these views, the deconstruction of categorizations would grant too much responsibility to individual social workers, pressuring them 'to do the right thing without concrete guidelines'. The Finnish context was described as particularly challenging in this regard, given the deficit of qualified social workers in many municipalities and the current workload of qualified social workers. Thus, social workers are busy with their basic tasks, and do not have sufficient time to introduce themselves to new theoretical approaches, such as intersectionality.

By contrast, the intersectional approach was described as supporting social work values, including 'the aim to reduce inequality' and 'the pursuit of social justice', and, as such, impossible to dismiss, as indicated in the extract below. Yet, this harnessing of intersectionality for 'social justice battle' is, interestingly enough, again coupled with creating a dichotomy, where 'we professionals' were described as a unified group encountering 'people as individuals' rather than grouped as a monolithic 'them'.

The eradication of inequality and the pursuit of justice strongly falls under the purview of the ethical competence of social work and we professionals need to be able to encounter people as individuals instead of seeing them as representatives of a certain group. (Essay 3)

Several students also mentioned the concept of representation in the discussion about intersectionality, attaching it to the construction of norms at different levels of society – that is, public discussions, media discourses, and teaching, all influencing what is considered 'normal' in social work.

We cannot forget the concept of representation when discussing intersectionality and its effects on people's everyday lives. In this context, I understand representation as a concept that defines the possibility of people belonging to different minorities to see other people similar to themselves, for example, in the media, teaching positions, and images presented in school textbooks. I have thought a lot about the identity we in Finnish society construct, for example, of young people with immigrant backgrounds who belong to other social categories, such as being homosexual or disabled. (Essay 10)

The diversity of representations in various everyday life contexts or the media, and the subsequent definitions of 'normality' are described in this extract as creating certain expectations and pressures regarding how one should look, behave, and live. Yet, also in this example, oppositional binaries of us versus them are formed between 'we in Finnish society' and 'young people with *immigrant* backgrounds' who, additionally, 'belong to *other* social categories'.

Critically thinking about social structures through intersectionality was considered important to social work, such that social workers could work towards understanding how structures frame

individuals' everyday lives as well as social work itself. This extends to how social work represents part of those structures. Such an understanding was presented as the first step in changing oppressive structures by means of structural social work.

It is important for social workers to participate in public discussions on social work and its goals and the current possibilities social work has to achieve these goals . . . The idea of critical accountability challenges social workers to take a stance when it comes to social injustices affecting service users' lives and bringing forward the institutional preconditions of their work. This would be in accordance with social work ethics. Of course, there are many structural problems social workers are unable to solve. (Essay 12)

As this extract shows, regardless of the possibilities students recognized in using an intersectional approach to structural social work, its limitations were also identified. Yet, again, the intersecting social divisions and their consequences were equated with the accumulating injustices service users experienced. As an exception to the focus on the service user, one student was inspired to examine the oppressive structures within the social work agency she worked. She learned that all of the people in management positions in her agency were white, had Finnish-sounding names, and a majority of them were men. The course, therefore, inspired multifaceted reflections, which also reached one's own professional status and work environment.

## Discussion

In this article, we examined how intersectionality can be applied to social work according to Finnish Master's-level social work students. Although some students criticized intersectionality for its lack of specificity, most students attempted to concretely define it. According to the students, intersectionality helped them, firstly, to think about and understand diversity, which they attached, for example, to different cultural backgrounds, gender, class, and understandings and practices of parenthood. According to the students, from the perspective of practical social work, the intersectional lens can assist social workers to understand varying values, attitudes, and ways of interacting. Generally, this variety was seen in the service users. The students argued that intersectionality can offer a deeper understanding of, for example, a variety of formulations of good parenthood. According to these views, understanding diversity through intersectionality prevents one-sided, inflexible perspectives and enables well-informed decision-making.

According to our results, students approached the application of intersectionality for social work in four different ways. Firstly, students defined intersectionality as a tool *to understand how social categories and their intersections affect service users' experiences and everyday lives*. Students also attached the intersectional perspective to portray the Covid-19 pandemic and its consequences to increasing inequality. Thus, intersectionality seems useful in addressing topical social issues. In their essays, students primarily described categorization and different categories, but the mutual workings and intersections of these categories received less attention.

One possible concern here is that intersectionality may become reduced to marginalization and the overlapping of disadvantages. This does not advance understanding on the complexity of social categories. Students' references to intersectionality as a way of becoming aware of overlapping disadvantages can be linked to the fact that intersectionality was not familiar to most students, and it was, therefore, difficult to grasp nuanced forms of disadvantages and privileges. It is also possible that this emphasis is linked to social work as a profession, since social work concentrates on working with people often in difficult positions or life situations. Yet this coincides with a more general scholarly discussion concerning intersectionality, in which it has been critiqued as a concept concentrating on disadvantages, and leaving untouched, and subsequently normalizing, privileged positions (e.g. Anthias 2012; Bastia 2014; Pease 2015).

Furthermore, descriptions regarding how individual lives are influenced by social categories were generally presented as deterministic, while 'marginalized' individuals' attempts to dissociate themselves from stigmatizing elements in various ways (e.g. Kara 2016; Tarkiainen 2022) were

absent from most essays. If intersectionality becomes applied only to positions of disadvantage and, more precisely, only to the disadvantaged positions of service users, it can, in fact, serve as a tool to distinguish between ‘them, the service users’ and ‘us, the social workers’.

Secondly, intersectionality was viewed as an important *tool for professional self-reflection* in many essays. This meant examining one’s location as a social worker within social categories and its effect on one’s attitudes and work with service users, which has been viewed as the basis for anti-oppressive practices (Mattsson 2014, 9). However, students primarily recognized the importance of reflection without actually attempting to engage in it. According to Heron (2005, 343), admitting one’s potential privileged position can represent the first step in self-reflection, although it is not sufficient since it does not necessarily lead to a change in power dynamics. On the contrary, at worst, self-reflection can be perceived as a manifestation of critical awareness, bringing comfort and not leading to any recognition of or need to take action in order to undo privileges and disadvantages. This requires encouraging students further in future courses through assignments.

Our results mirror those of Brinkman and Donohue (2020), who emphasized that in teaching intersectionality one should pay specific attention to promoting students’ skills related to the self-reflection of their own positions and backgrounds (also Crawford 2012; Davis and Gentlewarrior 2015). For example, Gardner and McKinzie (2020) used vignettes to provide concrete ‘real-life’ examples of the material consequences of intersectionality as they impact people in their everyday lives. In our data, 10 of 14 students wrote in their feedback that they felt face-to-face teaching and shared reflections would have been beneficial, and these would have potentially supported a deeper discussion of the issues. Critical self-reflection can also be encouraged through subtle reminders, via which it is possible to continually question taken-for-granted assumptions. Importantly, such a self-reflection does not necessarily require the disclosure of students’ own situations and life experiences in classroom discussions, since this should always be approached with due vigilance and discretion.

Thirdly, intersectionality was described as a tool encouraging students *to reflect on issues of power within social work practice*. Power was discussed in terms of normalization which was presented as a general aim of social work. Attempts to normalize were seen to be present in social workers’ attitudes, in documentation practices, and in face-to-face meetings with service users. According to Healy (2000, 39–40) and Sawyer (2012, 163), power within social work institutions and practices often emerges as implicit, while rendering it visible requires reflection (also Bundy-Fazioli, Quijano, and Bubar 2013). However, students’ reflections remained quite general and separate from a specifically intersectional analysis of the interplay between social categories.

Finally, intersectionality emerged as *a tool for understanding societal structures*. Students described intersectionality as assisting them in shifting their focus from individual work with service users to the connections between the agency of individuals and social structures, illustrating how inequality is created and maintained in society. This view comes close to structural social work interested in structural barriers shaping and limiting the possibilities of service users (Mullaly 2007). Students mentioned, for example, that norms and institutions are constructed by the majority and groups of people in privileged positions, thus leading to increasing inequality. Students addressed critical issues and simultaneously defended the categorization of services and standardized solutions and practices, thereby recognizing various underlying complexities within social work.

In addition to their learning experiences, students considered the limitations of intersectionality, such as the lack of specificity and a ‘so what’ element discussed also by Chang and Culp (2002, 490) and Nash (2008, 11). This refers to the inadequacy of understanding how oppressive categories may intersect if analysis cannot provide concrete interventions in order to achieve social change and increase equality.

Intersectionality depicts social categories as intertwined, mutually reinforcing, at times contradictory, and always contextual (e.g. Anthias 2012; Garneau 2018; Kara 2016). Yet this complexity remained lacking in the students’ essays. Students wrote about the power differentials between social workers and service users in a rather one-dimensional and hierarchical manner, generally

presenting social workers as holding power and service users as lacking it. Furthermore, reflections on power focused on the service user–practitioner relationship, and did not, for example, consider social workers’ intersectional locations within multidisciplinary and multiprofessional settings, such as in relation to medical doctors, psychologists, law enforcement officers, and lawyers, or in relation to the general lack of resources within the confines of contemporary neoliberal and managerial welfare state (e.g. Kamali and Jönsson 2018). In order to expand upon and deepen the reflective process of intersectionality and power, group discussions and process writing may be useful as teaching methods.

## Limitations

This study carries several limitations. Although the essay assignment included explicit questions about the students’ learning experiences and their views on the application of intersectionality, the assignment did not perhaps prompt students to apply an intersectional analysis and reflection explicitly on themselves. It is also possible that students viewed it unsuitable or undesirable to write about one’s personal history and experiences in an academic essay. Nevertheless, this study provides interesting insights into the applicability of intersectionality to social work practice as well as perspectives on issues regarding the teaching of intersectionality.

In the future, a learning diary might be more suitable towards the inclusion of more personal and demographic details. It would be also interesting to elaborate upon how practitioners describe the applicability of intersectionality to social work as well as compare those views with students’ perspectives.

## Conclusions

To conclude, students viewed the intersectional framework as possible and plausible to employ as a tool for critical practice in social work contexts. Intersectionality assisted students in questioning several factors deeply embedded within social work practice, such as the use of power, normalization, and categorization. The long-term goal is to employ intersectionality in the social work curriculum on a broader level, so that it serves as a component in most courses, providing a critical approach to various phenomena. It is important to note that this course was primarily organized as a remote, distance learning course. While this form of teaching can be functional for many students, some students reported that they would prefer face-to-face instructions and possibilities for real-time discussion. If face-to-face lectures are not possible, there are other ways students can interact and discuss intersectionality online between themselves or with the instructor.

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