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# The Nature of Social Work Research by Dutch Universities of Applied Sciences : An Overview

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## THE NATURE OF SOCIAL WORK RESEARCH BY DUTCH UNIVERSITIES OF APPLIED SCIENCES: AN OVERVIEW

## **ABSTRACT**

The knowledge base for Social Work is strengthening. Underpinning of Social Work deriving from scientific research is necessary given the growing complexity of the work and its context. How this research should be conducted and to what type of outcomes it must lead, is part of an ongoing debate. In the Netherlands, practice-based research at Universities of Applied Sciences (UAS) is a relative new approach. Social Work research groups at UAS assert to conduct practice-based research in order to contribute to knowledge and support the objectives of Social Work. The current study was carried out to obtain insight into the characteristics of this research approach. A sample of publications was analysed in terms of knowledge purpose, methodology, and level and type of participation.

Results show a strong focus on producing descriptive knowledge and to a lesser extent on control knowledge, using primarily qualitative research methods, and with limited direct participation by stakeholders. In order to practice more what they preach the research can strengthen by doing more empirical research, by diversifying the research in terms of design and methods and increasing the level of participation of stakeholders.

## **Keywords**

Social work research, practice-based research, social work theory, body of knowledge

## **SAMENVATTING**

Het kennisfundament voor Sociaal Werk wordt steviger. Deze versterking op basis van wetenschappelijk onderzoek is nodig gezien de toenemende complexiteit van het werk en van de context waarin gewerkt wordt. Over hoe dit onderzoek uitgevoerd moet worden en tot welk type uitkomsten het zou moeten leiden, lopen de opvattingen uiteen. In Nederland is praktijkgericht onderzoek een relatief nieuwe loot in dit debat. Lectoraten aan hogescholen staan voor praktijkgericht onderzoek waarmee wordt bijgedragen aan onderbouwing en aan de doelen van sociaal werk. De studie beschreven in dit artikel is uitgevoerd om inzicht te krijgen in de kenmerken van dit onderzoek. Een steekproef van publicaties over onderzoek door lectoraten is geanalyseerd in termen van kennisdoelen, methodologie en de mate en type van participatie.

De resultaten tonen een sterke focus op beschrijvende kennis en in mindere mate op veranderingsgerichte kennis, een voorkeur voor kwalitatieve methoden en een beperkte directe participatie van stakeholders. Om meer te doen waar ze voor staan, kan toekomstig onderzoek van de lectoraten versterkt worden met meer empirisch onderzoek, een grotere variatie in gebruikte designs en methoden, en met het vergroten van de participatie van stakeholders.

### **Trefwoorden**

Sociaal werk onderzoek, praktijkgericht onderzoek, sociaal werk theorie, kennisbasis

### **INTRODUCTION**

The knowledge base of Social Work is strengthening. The call for this foundation can be traced back to 1915, when Porter Lee, the first chair of the New York School of Philanthropy, stated that Social Work could only claim professional standing when it bases itself upon scientific knowledge (Fraser, Taylor, Jackson, & O'Jack, 1991). In the Netherlands it was Marie Kamphuis who first and foremost advocated scientific underpinning of Social Work (Canon Sociaal Werk, n.d.; Van der Zwet, 2018). These calls are reflected in the current global definition of Social Work:

'Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to Social Work. Underpinned by theories of Social Work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, Social Work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing.' (International Federation of Social Workers, 2014)

As Social Work matures the demand to prove its usefulness and the need for robust knowledge is becoming even more pressing (Potting, Sniekers, Lamers, & Reverda, 2010; Taylor & Sharland, 2015). In contemporary knowledge societies, scientific research has been emphasised as a key component for accountable service provision (Gray, Sharland, Heinsch, & Schubert, 2014). How this scientific research should be conducted and to what type of outcomes it must lead is part of an ongoing debate (Hothersall, 2019). Questions are raised whether the more traditional linear research approaches serve Social Work practice best. A relative new approach is practice-based research, in which questions derived from practice are central, and supporting, improving and

transforming practice is aimed. In the Netherlands research groups at universities of applied sciences (UAS) have been conducting practice-based research contributing to professionalization and scientific underpinning of Social Work since 2001 (Metz, 2017).

The study presented in this article, is part of a larger study into practice-based Social Work research (SWR) by Dutch UAS. The purpose is to gain insight in the chosen research strategies. How are they practicing what they preach in order to contribute to Social Work practice and its objectives, and with scientific rigor? The current study therefore addresses the following question: What are the methodological approaches disclosed in publications of SWR groups at Dutch UAS?

When it comes to identifying characteristics of its scientific approach, the customary praxis in Social Work is to investigate SWR through an analysis of its output in peer-reviewed journals. Taber and Shapiro published a study with this aim as far back as 1965; a content analysis of articles published between 1920 and 1965. Similar studies conducted so far are limited as they predominantly reflect the state of SWR in the USA and the UK (e.g., Barusch, Gringeri, & George, 2011; Fraser et al., 1991; Holosko, 2010; Jobling, Shaw, Jang, Czarnieckie, & Ramatowski, 2017; Kreisberg & Marsh, 2016; Rubin & Parrish, 2007; Shaw & Lunt, 2018; Shaw, Ramatowski, & Ruckdeschel, 2013). This study analyses for the first time, as we know, the characteristics of SWR by Dutch UAS as reported in peer-reviewed and in practice related, professional journals and reports.

### **Social Work in the Netherlands and the Knowledge Base**

Social Work in the Netherlands builds upon a long tradition of giving support to people who are in vulnerable positions and of contributing to a resilient community. Similar to many other Western-European countries, Dutch Social Work started out as an act of charity by churches and by citizens who were strongly motivated by religious intentions. It developed from this voluntary support into a form in which Social Work became the responsibility held by the government within the so-called welfare state. Currently the Netherlands counts approximately 80,000 professional Social Workers (Sociaal Werk Nederland, 2018).

The field of Social Work is often broadly referred to as care and welfare, which represents an extensive domain. This domain evolved from social casework, social pedagogy, community work and community development (Van Ewijk, 2014) and is frequently depicted as a tree with many branches. The trunk is the main core of qualifications and competences, with many professions and functions as its branches (Sectorraad HSAO, 2008). The branches themselves can be interpreted

as having different levels: the individual Social Worker, Social Work organizations and Social Work policies. Social Work serves the full spectrum of society: People of all ages with a variety of life questions, vulnerabilities and challenges.

The Dutch welfare state is currently in transition towards what is known as the participation society. In the discussions that led up to this new policy and practice, it was stated that Social Work is adept at reinventing itself over and over again, and not by learning from experience acquired elsewhere or by referring to research data (Van Yperen, 2014). The Health Council of the Netherlands stated in the report 'Social Work on Solid Ground' (2014) that the field is in need of a stronger knowledge base. Decision making in practice and in policy should be more theory driven and evidence based. In order to improve a high-grade Social Work profession to be able to go beyond doing good, the Council recommended installing a proper system of built-in knowledge production, knowledge sharing, and knowledge implementation (Gezondheidsraad, 2014; Vereniging Hogescholen, 2014, 2015).

By a piggyback approach (Brekke, 2012) translating research and science from other disciplines into Social Work, a good deal has already been incorporated in Social Work. However, the field can extend this. The current transformation paves the way for developing strategies for new practices through and supported by research. The transformation provides the space for researching and theorizing contextual realities and open processes (Van Ewijk, 2009). SWR deals with problems that occur in practice, problems which need to be transformed into scientific questions and studied according to scientific standards (Raeymaeckers, Driessens, & Tirions, 2016; Sommerfeld, 2014). It resembles Mode 2 research (Gibbons et al., 1994) which is fully embedded, connected and in interaction with society and communities. It is an approach in which several levels of knowledge are brought together and intersect (Van Regenmortel & Schalk, 2015), integrating multidisciplinary knowledge in a transdisciplinary way, along with knowledge produced in the field of practice (Sommerfeld, 2014).

### **Social Work Education and Social Work Research at Dutch Universities of Applied Sciences**

The Dutch higher educational system is a binary system with 14 research universities on the one hand and 36 universities of applied sciences on the other. Each type of university has its own research orientation with a corresponding mission and focus. The UAS focus primarily on professional education and on research with a strong orientation towards professional practices

(EP-Nuffic, 2015). Dutch Social Work education is a bit of an odd man out compared to most other Dutch disciplines, since it has no distinct academic foothold in research universities. Of the 36 Dutch UAS, 19 offer Social Work education, of which 10 at both BA and MA degrees.

Research at Dutch UAS was legally assigned by the government in 1986 (Van Gageldonk, 2017) and funded by the government from 2001 onwards (De Jonge, 2016). Since then all UAS have established *lectoraten* (research groups). These groups conduct practice-based research in close partnership with the professional field, and each UAS is free in choosing the focus of their research.

On average a research group consists of a professor with a 0.6 fulltime-equivalent appointment (fte), six lecturers/researchers with a total of 1.75 fte and an additional 0.6 fte of PhD students (De Jonge, 2016). The first SWR group was established in 2002 (Holsbrink-Engels, 2012) and since then the amount of research groups has increased rapidly. Of the nineteen UAS with Social Work education, all but one have research groups on Social Work or related themes.

UAS define their research explicitly as practice-based research, defined as scientific research that has its roots in practical everyday life problems and that contributes to practice by means of generating actionable knowledge and developing practical solutions, methods and instruments (Andriessen, 2014). As a result, researchers at UAS have to deal with methodological choices in their research that emanate from complying to both scientific rigor and practical relevance (Schön, 1983; Shaw & Norton, 2007). In a survey (De Jonge, 2016) researchers at UAS express a strong interest in contributing to practice. Asked what their main motive was for choosing their research topic 'developing solutions for practice' was stated as the most important motive, while 'publishing in scientific journals' was considered the least important. The same study showed that working with practice partners is seen as very important.

Most Social Work research groups work in dedicated networks of regional partners; Werkplaatsen Sociaal Domein (learning communities). Together with municipalities and practice partners, these communities provide learning infrastructures in order to jointly develop answers to regional questions that are arising from the aforementioned transformation. This infrastructure allows for research and the development of solutions, as well as the facilitation of the coordination of knowledge implementation and knowledge transfer. The output of research groups is diverse, ranging from articles in peer-reviewed journals to reports and brochures designed to inform Social Work professionals.



## METHODS

### Sample

In order to answer our research question: What are the methodological characteristics of SWR at Dutch UAS, we analyse the output of Social Work research groups. To determine the total amount of relevant output, research groups in the field of Social Work at the eighteen UAS were asked to provide a list of publications issued between January 2010 and May 2016. Seventeen of the eighteen UAS responded, resulting in a list of 1569 publications. This list was screened for duplicates and for items that do not pertain to research, such as newspaper columns. This resulted in a list of 1177 documents published in professional and scientific journals, and in-house publications. A stratified random sample strategy was used to create a sample of 311 publications with the seventeen UAS as the strata. Not all included publications could be fully coded for their methodological characteristics. A publication was classified as non-codable when closer inspection revealed that it could not be attributed to a SWR-project; if it was an edited book containing more than one article or if it did not contain any methodological information at all. Of the 311 publications included, 196 (63%) contained adequate methodological details to fully encode (see Figure 1).

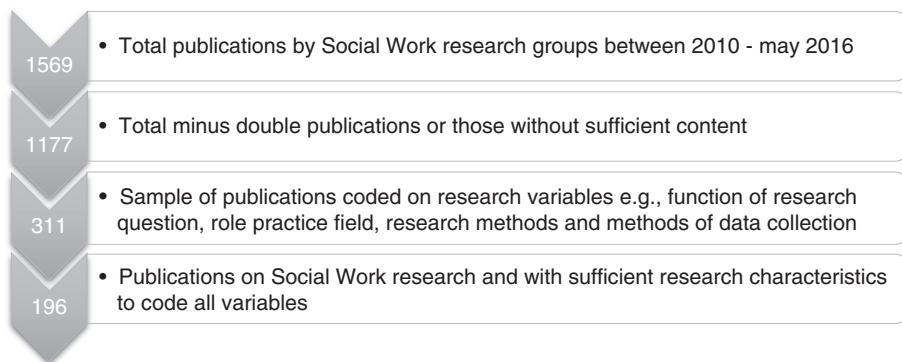


Figure 1: Sampling of included publications.

### Analytic Domains and Variables

The coding followed a protocol containing definitions and instructions for each variable. This protocol was adapted from earlier studies by Andriessen et al. (2015) and Andriessen and Butter

(2016). The publications were coded by two researchers to increase reliability. To determine the interrater reliability and to test the protocol a sample of twenty publications was taken and coded by the two coders. This resulted in small amendments to the definitions and instructions. During coding every tenth publication was coded by both coders to check for reliability. The coded variables are summarized in Table 1.

Three primary domains are distinguished: knowledge purpose, participation, and methodology. Many factors influence the utilization of research in practice (Heinsch, Gray, & Sharland, 2016); the type of knowledge generated, as can be identified by the knowledge purpose; and the relationships and interactions between researchers and users of research; participation. The methodology is relevant in relation to the claim that the research conducted at Dutch UAS is scholarly research adhering to scientific standards.

### **Knowledge purpose**

The ambition of Dutch UAS is to contribute to practice through research. Within the field of Social Work there has been a longstanding debate about which type of knowledge is needed. Some stress the importance of knowledge concerning interventions and their effectiveness (Rosen, Proctor, & Staudt, 1999) while others hold the position that conceptual knowledge is more important than instrumental knowledge (Holosko, 2010; Marsh & Reed, 2016). The categorization by Rosen et al. (1999) is helpful in this regard, as it distinguishes three purposes of knowledge a) descriptive knowledge: describing characteristics of phenomena; b) explanatory knowledge: describing how factors influence or are influenced by phenomena; and c) control knowledge: describing how phenomena can be changed or maintain their desired course. These three categories are itemized in this study using the typology by Oost and Markenhof (2012). They categorize research questions according to their function. Descriptive knowledge can be derived from three research functions (1) to define phenomena, (2) to describe single phenomena or (3) to compare different phenomena. Explanatory knowledge comes from research questions whose function is (4) to explain. Control knowledge comes from research questions whose function is (5) to evaluate existing solutions or, (6) to design new solutions. The latter category is especially relevant for practice-based research where it is often the goal to come up with new and innovative solutions for field problems. This typology is more precise than that by Rosen et al. (1999) and can be used to place knowledge purposes in hierarchical order. Starting from top to bottom, designing a solution for a problem (to design) requires knowledge about the causes of the problem (to explain) and an evaluation of the situation (to evaluate). These in turn require clear definitions

**Table 1: Variables covering the key domains knowledge purpose, participation and methodology.**

Topic	Variable
General	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• University of Applied Science + name of research group</li> <li>• Year</li> <li>• Type of journal: scientific, professional/specialist</li> </ul>
Subject	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Subject of the publication</li> <li>• Type of object (physical, social, medical, human artefact)</li> </ul>
Involvement other actors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Type of actor (research group within UAS, research group other UAS, research university, company, non-profit organization, funding agency)</li> <li>• Role of practice (1st initiative, financing, client, assessor of results, co-researcher, <i>other</i>)</li> <li>• International partner</li> </ul>
Research question	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Function of question; to describe, to compare, to evaluate, to define, to explain, to design (Oost and Markenhof, 2002)</li> </ul>
Research design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Type of research design (experimental [type], cross sectional, longitudinal, case study, comparative case study) (Bryman, 2012)</li> <li>• The use of variables as an indication of the amount of pre-structuring taking place in the design (Butter, 2011) (none, not operationalised, operationalised qualitatively, operationalised quantitatively)</li> <li>• The literal phrasing of the design by the author</li> <li>• Whether and how the researcher intervenes in reality (none, in vivo, in vitro)</li> <li>• The role of the researcher in the intervention</li> <li>• The type of participation of the research subjects (none, co-researcher, co-designer of interventions)</li> <li>• Participation of the researcher in the field</li> </ul>

**Table 1:** Continued

Topic	Variable
Data collection methods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Type of method (literature study, technical measurements, other pre-validated measurements, interviews, questionnaires, content-analysis, meta-analysis, existing data, participant observation, non-participant observation, group interview, document analysis, <i>other</i>)</li> </ul>
Research outcome	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ambition to generalize (no generalization, generalization through argumentation, generalization through statistical inference)</li> </ul>

(to define) of concepts used as well as comparisons (to compare) between descriptions (to describe) of situations. In each publication we examined the main research question and determined its research function. Many reported on projects with multiple questions. If so, we scored multiple answers and identified its 'highest' function based on this hierarchy.

A second characteristic related to knowledge utilization is the extent to which research aims to produce results that have a broader validity than the subject under study. To map this out, we coded whether the publications draw generalized conclusions and whether those generalizations were based on analytic generalization (Shaw & Gould, 2001) or on statistical generalization.

## Participation

In recent years knowledge utilization has increasingly been seen as dependent upon the relationships and interactions between researchers and users of research findings (Heinsch et al., 2016; Spaapen & Van Drooge, 2011). Together with the shift in the knowledge utilization debate -from the content of research to the research process - came an increased interest in the various ways in which stakeholders engage in research. The underlying contention is that research in which there is more interaction between researchers and actors in the field, will have a greater impact on practice (Heinsch et al., 2016). Actors in the field can be divided into organizational actors and individual actors such as professionals and service users. For this study we looked at the type of organizational actors involved in the research, and their role in the process. Lastly, we looked at the role of individual actors. Traditionally individual actors do not have a direct role in scientific research and only act as research 'objects'. However, participatory research with service-user involvement

as well as practitioner-led research (Shaw & Lunt, 2018) in which professionals have an active and substantive role, is becoming more popular.

## **Methodology**

The research methodology disclosed in the publications was coded by looking at four characteristics. The first is the overall research design. For this we used the typology of Bryman (2012) who distinguishes cross-section design, single case study design, comparative case study design, longitudinal design and experimental design. The latter can be subdivided into natural experiments without a control group, quasi-experiments in which a control group was used but no randomization was applied, and true experiments. Although Shaw et al. (2013) found in their study that it was more difficult to identify research designs in qualitative studies, we did not experience any difficulties in categorizing more qualitative types of research using this classification.

The second characteristic we identified was the methods used. To avoid overlap with research designs, we strictly looked at data collection methods. As such, these categories are not conclusive in determining whether the research is qualitative or quantitative in nature. For example, questionnaires can produce both qualitative and quantitative data. The nature of the data shed light on an underlying issue, namely the extent to which researchers used structuring representations (Butter, 2011) in order to gather data, and whether these representations were operationalized using numeric values.

In all research some degree of structuring takes place. However, the moment at which researchers begins to impose a structure onto the data differs significantly between research traditions. This third characteristic was coded by (1) looking at the use of variables in research questions, conclusions or methods, (2) by determining whether those variables were explicitly operationalized before data collection and (3) whether operationalization made use of numeric data.

A fourth characteristic of research methodology is whether the researchers remain passive observers or whether they intervene in the context being studied. One motivation to intervene is to conduct some form of natural, quasi or controlled experiment. In that case, the purpose of the intervention is solely to gain knowledge. However, another motive for intervening in practice-based research can be to help improve local practice during research. In this case, intervening takes place to help design or even implement a solution with the dual purpose of improving practice and generating knowledge.

## RESULTS

### General Characteristics

Nearly 80% of the 196 research based articles was published in specialist and professional journals or reports and 20% in scientific peer reviewed journals. The association between codability and type of publication was significant,  $\chi^2 (2, N=311) = 6.71, p=0.01$ . Scientific publications were more fully codable than publications in professional journals. The topics addressed in the publications hardly had a common denominator. Topics ranged from micro-level issues to macro-level developments. The following examples illustrate the breadth of the field studied: Social Work in international perspective; Mapping out the upbringing of new community teams; Social conventions in the participation society. The research also addressed various target groups, e.g., collaboration between youth care and education in prevention, coaching homeless people to cope with tight budgets, exploring 'the sense of home' of older residents through photography, the social network of forensic psychiatric patients with a personality disorder, housing difficulties for youth with intellectual disabilities, or diagnostics and refugees and immigrants. These examples of SWR reflect the same comprehensive variety that is seen in Social Work itself.

### Knowledge Purpose

In 58% of the publications studied, the knowledge purpose was descriptive. In more than half of the 196 encoded articles, the function of the main question was to describe, often taking the form of qualitative descriptions. In some publications the function was to compare (3%) or to define (2%). 28% of the publications addressed control purposes; 17% had as function to design and 11% the function to evaluate. In 11% of the publications the knowledge purpose was explanatory, with a main research question that investigated relationships between variables. There is a significant difference between the knowledge purpose reported in scientific publications versus popular publications,  $\chi^2 (2, N=188) = 12.19, p<0.01$ . The scientific publications were more descriptive and explanatory and less control oriented.

### Methodology

The publications reported a variety of research designs. The most commonly used design was the single case study with 27% followed by the longitudinal design (25%) and cross-section design (18%). A less common design was the comparative case study design (17%) and the experimental

design was hardly reported (6%). The publications that did report experimental designs involved two quasi-experiments in which a control group was used but no randomization was applied, and eleven natural experiments without a control group.

The data used was primarily qualitative in nature. In 16% variables were explicitly operationalised and in 4% this operationalization used quantitative data.

Analysis of the data gathering methods used confirm the qualitative nature. A literature review was only coded if this was the primary data-gathering method, which was the case in 47%. The second most used method was the open or semi-structured interview (42%), followed by questionnaires (21%), focus groups (15%) and conferences (13%). Less used were documents, observations and existing databases. In addition, a plethora of more specialised forms of data gathering was reported including several forms of self-reporting (diaries, writing biographies, photo-elicitation), Q-methodology (Jedleoo & Van Staa, 2009), participatory observation and meta-analysis.

In 7% of the publications some type of deliberate intervention is reported. In most cases the intervention was intended to facilitate practitioners in designing solutions for local problems, and in half of the cases it also involved helping to implement these solutions in practice. In 6% a participative research method was reported. In these cases, the researcher was performing a similar task as the practitioners under study while conducting the research.

A last aspect is the way designs were geared towards producing more general results – research results that were broader in scope than the context directly under study. In 88% of the publications, conclusions are drawn that have implications and applications that go beyond the local context. Most of these generalizations were based on logical reasoning and 1% on statistical generalization.

## **Participation**

We also looked at the reported research participation of practice partners at an institutional and an individual level. In 55% involvement of practice partners in research was reported. Of this reported amount practice partners had a commissioning role in 22%. In 21% practice partners had a role as co-researcher, while 14% reported that practice partners were the initiators of the research project and in 6% practice partners were reported as financiers of the research. Scientific publications report significantly less involvement of practice partners compared with popular publications,  $\chi^2$

(2, N=196) = 14.30,  $p < 0.01$ . In addition to practice partners other involved parties were reported including other research groups within the same UAS conducting the study (4%) or at other UAS (12%), NGO's (28%), funding agencies (3%) or at other research universities or research institutes (32%). An international partner was reported in nearly 7%.

At an individual level, we looked at the extent to which professionals or service users were subject of study and if they were involved in the research. 12% of the publications reported some form of involvement. 8% mention that the subjects were conducting part of the research themselves, while 5% reported involvement in designing solutions and 4% note that they were involved implementing solutions. And lastly 5% of the publications reported student involvement.

## **DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

The results from this analysis of publications on practice-based SWR by Dutch UAS contribute to the understanding of SWR methodology in a number of ways. Firstly, findings show that researchers whose primary goal is to contribute to practice tended to publish more in popular journals and reports than in scientific journals. These types of publications differed significantly in two ways: the scientific publications addressed more descriptive and explanatory purposes and less control purposes. They also reported less involvement of practice partners. The first finding is difficult to explain. The second finding might be the result of the stricter format of scientific papers in which there is less room to describe a research project in detail. We can safely conclude however that within the Dutch context, only looking at peer reviewed scientific papers does not yield a comprehensive overview of SWR and its methodology.

Secondly, the study sheds light on the realization of scientific rigor and practical relevance in SWR. For if SWR has the stated aim to support the mission and purpose of Social Work and hence to contribute towards a change in social systems, then this is a pressing dilemma for the field in terms of research design. The case of the Netherlands provides insight into a situation in which researchers work in a setting where their primary assignment is to conduct research that is of direct relevance to practice and education. The findings show that this orientation towards relevance leads to qualitative research that results in publications that are mostly based on single case studies and longitudinal designs, and which primarily use qualitative data. One reason for this might be that qualitative research involves 'immersion in situations of everyday life' whereby the particular is viewed in a holistic way (Shaw & Gould, 2001). Moreover qualitative SWR connects with Social Work values (Gilgun & Abrams, 2002). The results from our study show that verbal methods



for data-gathering were dominant, which is in line with the findings of Shaw et al. (2013) who analysed 237 articles in the dedicated journal *Qualitative Social Work*, as well as with the findings of Bradbury-Jones et al. (2017) who studied relevant qualitative articles in six scientific journals.

Thirdly, orientation towards relevance also leads to research in which practice partners are more often involved in various roles, thus strengthening the relation aspects of the research (Gringeri, Barusch, & Cambron, 2013). However, in Dutch UAS this does not often lead to actually doing co-research with professionals and service users in the field. Action research, defined as research in which local stakeholders themselves conduct the research, was reported in only 8% of the publications. The research reported in the output of our study is more often academic-partnership research rather than practice-partnership research (Shaw & Lunt, 2018). Given the change objective of Social Work research, a higher level of participation was to be expected and by using corresponding research methods.

Lastly, the findings suggest that the practical orientation also leads to a different knowledge purpose. Table 2 shows the findings on knowledge purpose of publications from current and other studies. It appears that Dutch UAS have a stronger focus on descriptive knowledge and also strong but to a lesser extent to control oriented knowledge. Their orientation towards relevance for practice seems to lead to a tendency to describe local practices and to support professionals by evaluating and developing solutions.

This study has a number of limitations. For one it does not provide insight into the quality of the research. There are many opinions surrounding the question of what constitutes good

**Table 2: Knowledge purpose in current and other studies.**

Knowledge purpose	US (Rosen et al., 1999) N=863	International (Marsh & Reed, 2016) N=51	Europe (Kreisberg & Marsh, 2016) N=11	US (Kreisberg & Marsh, 2016) N=40	NLD – UAS Scientific Publications N=42	NLD – UAS Professional Publications N=147
Descriptive	36%	33%	64%	25%	78%	55%
Explanatory	49%	45%	27%	50%	15%	10%
Control oriented	15%	22%	9%	25%	7%	35%

quality research (Shaw & Norton, 2007) and the qualitative research community often holds different positions compared to the quantitative research community. We deliberately chose not to assess publications in terms of rigor. Therefore, we cannot provide indications as to whether the orientation towards relevance of Social Work researchers at Dutch UAS leads to qualitative research with less scientific rigor. Furthermore, in interpreting the findings of this review it should be taken into consideration that the publications included in our sample do not necessarily coincide with a complete research project and may therefore not be completely representative of that study. Additionally, a publication written for a lay public may not contain all methodological information, though it may in fact have been based on scientifically rigorous methods. Also some research projects may have resulted in more than one publication or in none at all within the chosen period between 2010 and 2016.

The findings of this study enable us to create an outline of the nature of SWR. These findings need to be further discussed considering the limitations of the study. For future study, it would be of interest to gain more insight in the motives of Social Work researchers that underlie the choices made during the research process. How do researchers go about developing their research proposals, such as setting the agenda, or whether to involve practice, professionals, service-users or education? And how does this impact the research design? In what way are their decisions influenced by paradigmatic considerations and conflicting desideration's (Gringeri et al., 2013), or by practical and local circumstances (Shaw & Norton, 2007)? McGrath (1982) points towards a 'three horned dilemma' in social research, as it is never possible to optimize the generalizability, the precision and the realism of any given research study. In practice-based research, this translates into a dilemma between optimizing for scientific rigor (generalizability and precision) and practical relevance (realism). Little is known about how practice-based Social Work researchers handle this dilemma.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study expands upon the current development of Social Work research conducted by UAS in the Netherlands. This is a relatively young research tradition. The approach shows a strong focus on descriptive knowledge and to a lesser extent control knowledge, using primarily qualitative methods with limited direct participation of professionals and service-users. When it comes to practicing their preach, serving Social Work practice through research, may benefit from further strengthening the standard of SWR by UAS. This may include conducting more empirical research, by diversifying the designs and methods used, and making more use of the strengths of

quantitative research in mixed-methods designs. Furthermore, although practice-based research does not necessarily coincide with participatory research, aiming for a higher level of participation of stakeholders from practice, policy and education as partners in research is a logical choice to better serve the Social Work purposes.

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