

# **THE FORMATION OF THE PROFESSION AND REPUTATION OF SOCIAL WORK SINCE ESTONIA REGAINED ITS INDEPENDENCE**

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After Estonia regained its independence the welfare level differentiated, and, hence unknown problems arose that had to be solved. “Social repulse appeared, and, as a result, social cohesion decreased, the feeling of inability and disappointment increased and people withdraw from social life” (Estonian Human Development Report 1997). Everyone was fighting for their personal coping and the first “losers” appeared in the struggle for survival. Social policy as a whole was in growing pains, and before the laws were enacted to regulate the social sphere, the content of the problems changed and there were more problems than specialists to solve them. Need for a new profession – social work – emerged. Although Tallinn Pedagogical University has offered higher education in social work since 1991 and Tartu University since 1992, the nature of the profession is not yet fully clear in the society. It is still not clear who is a social worker and what are the functions of social work.

The development of social sphere is connected to skills of a worker and to the values existing in the society, all of which is the basis for the reputation of the profession. The reputation cannot be good as the profession is usually associated with poverty, helpless and asocial people – this is the most common view. The purpose is to study the reasons why the reputation of social work is relatively bad, whether the public opinion is formed by social workers themselves, or whether such picture of social work is construed by the media.

The following objectives were set for the study:

1. to study the return of social work to the Estonian society; and
2. to study the development of the profession, and hence, the formation of its reputation.

## **BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY**

### **Introduction of social work to the Estonian society**

The change of a totalitarian state to a democratic state influenced people’s lives on many levels. “On an individual level it takes clear understanding of new situations, adaption to changes, reidentification of oneself and finding one’s place in new conditions” (Kutsar 1994: 2541). Several so far unknown changes appear in the development phase of a new country, changes that people do not know to be ready or prepared for. In her study about social stress and psychological coping Kutsar brings out the factors influencing people the most: rapid changes in political, economic and social life of the country; change in relationships between people; irrational expectations; old philosophy of life, and the so-called socialist legacy of personal politics (Kutsar 1994).

Decrease in the social coping of the population indicated an obvious need of governmental interference. Social worker<sup>1</sup> is one of the most important restorers or alleviators of people's welfare in a country. Unfortunately it was a period when the jobs in the social sphere were occupied by non-professionals who still keep their positions today. The results of a study conducted at the Tallinn Pedagogical University in 1996-1997 are proof to this fact. The results showed that 24% of all social workers have higher education, and only ca 5% have higher education in social work (N=256) (Tulva 1997). "Social workers without education can affect both themselves and their clients, inability to handle the other side of social work – the relationship between people and the society – is especially painful" (Kotka 1997). Although the majority of today's social workers are without special education, it is difficult for social workers with higher education to find worthy employment in the field, and for that reason they are willing to change their profession which means that a certain percentage of specialists ordered by the state become futile. Economy specialists think that the lack of specialists will be a hindering factor in the development of the Estonian social sphere which is moving towards the European Union. "There will be many problems in the social sphere as the social policy of the EU is beyond Estonia's means. Taking a look at the social protection laws, there is only a small number of enterprises that would not go bankrupt. Expenses on one employer increase (for labour protection), enterprises are not ready to incur those expenses and the state is unable to provide that" (Eamets, Kilemit 1997). This is only a small amount of the problems in social sphere. Consequently, it was expected and necessary to have social workers in the Estonian society.

### **Formation of the profession**

Social workers need academic attainments just as much as doctors, psychologists and other professions who are about helping people. A social worker with higher education is a person that helps to plan social policy; does preventive work and counsels individual clients, families and groups; and regulates the relationships as a whole between individuals and the society. "In order for a profession to be recognised by the society it has to meet certain criteria" (Paavel 1997). Academic education in social work is a condition for the development and quality of social work, but the competence level of social work in Estonia is far from the ideal.

The following is a short overview of the functions of professional social workers which the author describes according to the academic model of social work. A work by Finnish scientists in the magazine *Ammattikasvatuksen aikakausikirja 2/99* gives an idea of the requirements for a professional social worker. The requirements for professional social workers are: ability to respect others a value in itself; ability to continuous self-improvement; ability to analyse new and chaotic situations; ability to decide and act upon relevant situations; ability to solve the contradiction between understanding and acceptability, and ability to balance the goals and intentions (Dal Maso et al. 1999).

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<sup>1</sup> With the term "social worker" the author means someone with higher education in this profession, not someone who practices social work.

In addition to academic education, it is also important to have the ability to analyse and capably solve the upcoming problems, and personal characteristics are also important for working in the social sphere. For example, in their study of top engineers Kelley and Caplan determined the characteristics that are needed for effective working strategies: initiative; creation of a network of experts; self-control; ability to work effectively in a group; talent for leadership, ability to be a subordinate; vast knowledge and experience; ability to express oneself, and control over an organisation as a whole (Kelley, Caplan 1993; Ruohotie 1996). Hence in his/her work a social worker has to be able to change along with the situation as the economic and political environment can change and these changes can be surprisingly rapid.

As for doing social work, the real conditions in Estonia need a lot of room for development. Estonian social work is formal from a client's perspective, there is casualness, and primarily those tasks are fulfilled that cannot be put off any more and that have to be done. A specialist at Rapla County Government believes that solutions to problems do not solely depend on social workers but also on the co-operation between several instances, that is because the co-operation is weak and a very common answer is - it is beyond our competence (Tammar 1997). General lack of interest – the principle that everybody should come to terms with their problems themselves, impedes effective co-operation, and the reason for that might be that the society does not consider social work to be an important factor. But it can also be a more general inability to structure the society. The results of the lack of social work come out with time, so it is difficult to give an adequate evaluation to the present situation.

### **Formation of the reputation**

One considerable drawer of reputation is the media. One can clearly read from the magazines the direction to which the reputation of social work is going. It has to be noted that the content of articles has recognisable influence – only one article with negative content influences the reputation of social work as there are not so many articles on the whole. What influences the formation of the reputation the most are as follows.

#### *1. Public opinion that is based on a direct contact.*

These opinions might be based on the contacts of the clientele for social work with social workers. There is some kind of a snowball effect: one client hears about negative news, forwards it to someone else, and finally it ends up in the press. Price (1992) interprets public opinion in the following way: public opinion is a complex in which media has an inseparable part. Answers to questions that concern a lot of people are formed in the process of communication. According to Price, the problems associated with public opinion are:

- 1) potential casualness which has two sides:
  - a) lack of competence – people in general do not understand the complicated situations and in longer perspectives they judge them wrongfully;
  - b) lack of resources – it takes resources to expand the circle of experts and knowingly spread their knowledge (rising the public spirit through media).

- 2) potential subjectivity to influence, having three aspects:
  - a) tyranny of the majority: people do not listen to the minority, unpopular opinions are not recognised, media can change and influence opinions;
  - b) possibility for manipulations – it means that there are prejudices;
  - c) dominating position of the elite.

These might be some of the reasons that influence the subjective and negative attitude of clients and the general public towards social work. The opinions might be positive or negative, co-operative or working against, certain or uncertain (Suhtekorralduse käsiraamat 1998). If these opinions reach the media it will form the positive or negative attitude towards social workers.

### 2. *The image<sup>2</sup> of social work as constructed through the media.*

“The formation of image is based on the information that reaches a person; what one reads or watches, or on personal experiences” (Suhtekorralduse käsiraamat 1998:5). Media, giving the expectedly objective picture of the situation, has an important role in forming the image. Peeter Vihalemm, a professor at Tartu University, brings out the tasks of media in forming the image:

- 1) publication, transmitting information, also opening the hidden information to the public,
- 2) media as watcher and reflector of the society;
- 3) the concentrator of attention at certain moments;
- 4) reflector and mediator for different opinions (Vihalemm 1999).

Social spheres have been covered according to these principles in the Estonian media as well. However, one cannot see continuity in publishing texts on social issues. “By following the media one can get an overview of which issues are preferred and which not. Hence, media reflects the value systems of the society” (Lauristin 1998).

The author is of opinion that there are certain objective and subjective factors for every profession, and those factors show the maturity of the society, they also indicate which professions are considered popular and which not. The author characterises the subjective factors of social work as follows:

### 1. *The position of social work in the labour market.*

The emphasis in the Estonian labour market is placed on professions that are connected with business (service industry, sale etc.), and that indicates an obvious tendency to specialities centred around economy. The most popular professions are considered to be IT-specialists, architects and lawyers whose wages exceed the Estonian average income several times (EPL 20. 04. 2000). One can conclude from here that good reputation comes with well-paid professions. “In a symbolic environment the representations of economic and social changes are proof to success, wealth and to the triumph of the Western style, they do not recognise poverty, the losers, desperation and bitterness, or they just consider these to be something marginal” (Lauristin, Vihalemm 1998: 908). As a result, prejudices and judgements on the clientele for social work as well as on the representatives of the profession can form quickly in the society. According to Tiia

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<sup>2</sup> Image – vision of something or someone that the public has formed (*[Estonian Orthological Dictionar] (ÕS) 1999*)

Tamme's Master's thesis, 95% of social workers do not consider their income to be sufficient, only 3.3% are more or less satisfied with their income (Tamm 1998). Little attention is paid on human beings, their development and quality of life, so social work is not one of the highly recognised and paid professions. The prestige of a profession in a society depends considerably on how well-paid it is.

### *2. Stress*

Professor C. L. Cooper from the Manchester University, who in 1997 and 1998 studied the stress risks of 200 professions in the Western-European countries, claims that the profession of social worker is one of the professions with highest risk for stress (EPL 10.11.1999). In the evaluation system of up to 10 points the stress of a social worker is 6.0. Other sources also confirm this fact. Studying the motivation of social workers, number one in the list of negative factors of the profession were stress and a lot of mental pressure (Tamm 1998). In the words of Taimi Tulva, it is important that these few social workers would not burn out, and that is why it is important to educate supporting persons (Pajula 1996).

### *3. Competence of workers.*

The majority of the officials today are without higher education in the field. They are the ones that draw the first image of the profession of a social worker. The competition has become much higher on social work in the universities these last past years. In 1999, 16.1 people for a vacancy aspired to study social work in Tartu University, in Tallinn Pedagogical University there were even 32.6 people for a vacancy, that is 489 people applied for 15 vacancies (PM 26. 07. 1999). High competition improves the reputation of social work, although this high competition also caused harsh discussions and contradictory opinions in the media (PM 13. 07. 1999, 15. 07. 1999, 17. 07. 1999).

The subjective factors of social work as a profession are constructed by the media. The ideas of social work that have appeared might not be completely adequate but they are inevitable in the formation process of the image of social work.

## **THE THEORETICAL BASIS AND THE METHOD OF THE STUDY**

The main emphasis of the study is on examining the reputation of social work and social workers in the Estonian media.

The following hypotheses were set for this study:

- according to daily newspapers, the reputation of social work is bad in Estonia
- the reputation of social work in media has not improved during the period of 1994-1999

The method of content analysis (*Inhaltsanalyse* in German) is used to study the reputation of social work. The content analyses is used at least for four different purposes:

- 1) to describe the content of communication;

- 2) to make assertions about media vehicles based on the content of the communication. It is presumed that media vehicles with certain characteristics produce information with certain characteristics;
- 3) to describe or explain some other phenomenon of reality with the help of the content of communication;
- 4) a basis for further studies. For example, for studying dominating values and how those values influence people (Lauk 1995).

The author studied two daily newspapers using the method of content analysis – *Postimees* in 1994 and in 1999, and *Eesti Päevaleht* in 1994 and in 1999. The analysis of two files of newspapers gives a good opportunity for dynamic comparison on how the media has approached social work, and whether its opinions and attitudes have changed (if there are any changes in the last five years).

Keywords in the search for articles are social work, social worker and social counsellor. In order to assure the representation the author put limitations on the direct materials by choosing two more reliable daily newspapers. The direct material is divided into sections according to the column the particular article has been placed to. Data about the content of the texts under analysis was also fixed (the categories). In compiling the content class the nominal scale was used (whether the category exists or not). The main attention was paid on assessments, the range of which was positive, neutral and negative. The attitude of both the social worker and the author were considered separately.

Spread sheet program Microsoft Excel 95 (version 7.0) was used for data analyses.

### **THE REPUTATION OF SOCIAL WORK BASED ON THE MEDIA**

Analysing the texts about social work and social worker that have been published in *Eesti Päevaleht* (EPL) and *Postimees* (PM) in 1994 and 1999, it is clear that social work does not get much attention in the daily newspapers. Though one could notice the increase in public interest in writing about social issues in 1999, the author expected a more thorough and active coverage of these issues. It can be said that no particular journalist neither in PM nor in EPL has specialised in social issues, that applies to articles published both in 1994 and in 1999.

Table 1. Comparative assessments of EPL 1994 and PM 1994

Social worker's attitude to the situation				Author's attitude to the situation		
Assessment	positive	neutral	negative	positive	neutral	negative
EPL 94	2	0	1	2	2	2
PM 94	1	1	1	2	4	1
Sum	3	1	2	4	6	3

Daily newspapers did not cover much social work in 1994 (see Table 1). The dominating genre was article. The column that social work appeared most often as a subject was part

of a section of EPL for women, and the topic was most intensively covered in the 3rd quarter. In PM social issues came mostly up in the column of home information, 90% of those texts were published in the 1st quarter. Neither EPL nor PM published any editorials in 1994. Hence it could be said that articles dominated in 1994, the percentage of news was low which indicates that media did not cover what was going on in the social sphere, or that there was not much sensational or worth writing about. The coverage of social issues by EPL in 1994 were generally positive. Negative articles of the newspaper recognised the fact that the quality of social work was the way it was. By and large, the criticism by the authors was not adequate, the role of social work was seen different from its academic nature. PM had predominantly neutral coverage of social work in 1994, the paper described what was happening and where. The attitude of social workers to the situations was stable.

The fact that social work did not get much space in these newspapers in 1994 definitely indicates that it was not considered important to write about social issues as there was definitely more going on in the social sphere than those 11 articles covered. The articles in PM and EPL were long (that is, more than a quarter of a page).

Based on the daily newspapers it could be said that in 1994 specialists wrote very little about social work, there was only one person related to the profession. Articles on social workers and the profession that were written without assessment were published in PM in most cases; nor were there any discussions nor responses to negative issues. The writings covered certain situations and events whereas the problems that social workers experienced in their work were not brought up, and social workers were mainly women.

Table 2. Comparative assessments of EPL 1999 and PM 1999

Assessment	Social worker's attitude to the situation			Author's attitude to the situation		
	positive	neutral	negative	positive	neutral	negative
<b>EPL 99</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>PM 99</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Sum</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>7</b>

In 1999, EPL and PM covered social issues equally, 52 writings altogether. Compared to 1994 the most important change is the increase in the amount of texts published. The coverage is still low, considering that social work became an issue (in small amounts) in Estonia in 1991, and eight years later only a bit more than 50 writings a year are published in the two Estonian largest newspapers altogether. It could be concluded from this that social matters are not considered important. There was no editorials in EPL, whereas three editorials were published in PM (see Figure 1). There are more writings by specialists, social work professionals and students have expressed their ideas in PM on five occasions, and hence they considerably influenced the positivity level. However, the texts with the most negative content are also published in PM. Neutral writings dominate by far in both daily newspapers. The writings about social work were long both in EPL

(69%) and PM (54%), most were written in the II and III quarter, and the prevailing genre was news. Based on the daily newspapers of 1999 the coverages of social issues were predominantly neutral (see Table 2).

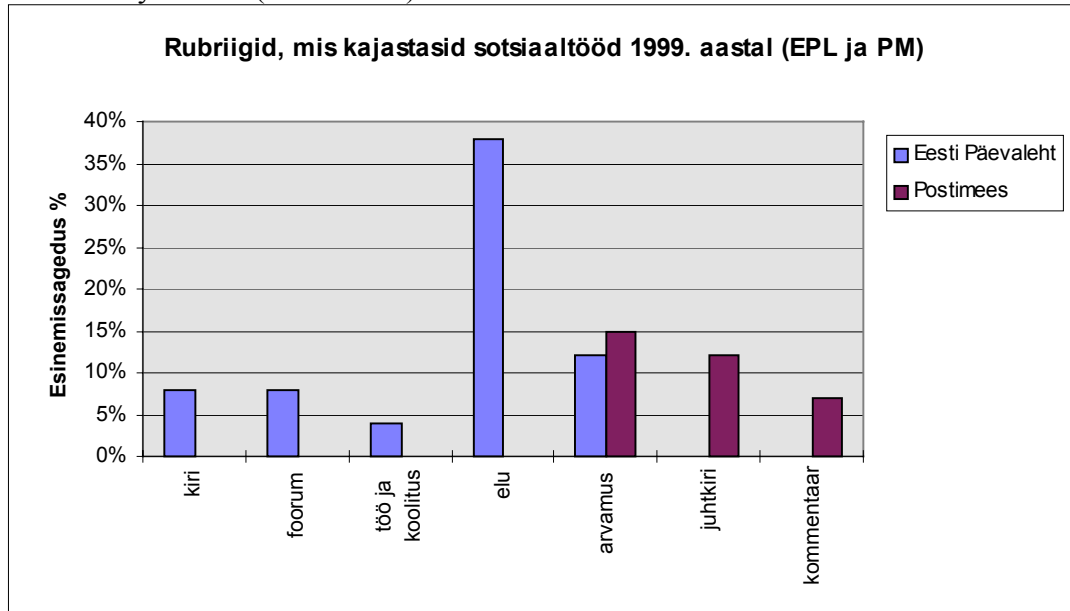


Figure 1.

EPL did have discussions on the problems of social workers in 1999, concerning insufficient legislation, poverty and children on streets. Social workers faced the problem of how and if these problems could be solved. Low wages and lack of cooperation between different groups were also mentioned as problems. It also happens that someone tries to justify the problematic situation. For instance, a social worker justifies the increase in stealing in the following way: “People at country-side have become poor, so far they had their old supplies but now they have exhausted them,” (EPL 1.09.1999). The following article, “Is changing bedpans in?”, has no better influence on the reputation of social work – the article was written when social work was very popular at the universities in 1999. Negative and inadequate criticism has significantly negative influence on the reputation of social work. Changing bedpans and social work, for the public this fixes a wrong connection between the two.

PM has had a more active role in forming the reputation of social work, but it has not been all positive. Rather harsh discussions have been published in PM. Front-page news and editorials have been mainly negative which indicates clear and actual direction on the attitude scale. In an editorial in PM (13.01.1999), social workers got the following appraisal: “*How is it possible that in a city of Tartu’s size social workers do not know anything about a family that has not paid rent for about three years?*” Here is an example how social workers assess themselves: “*Most normal people would not do social work, you would have to be different in some way*”. Contradictory and harsh opinions were expressed in connection with the competition to get in to the university. In an editorial called “Compassionate high-school graduates” (PM 13. 07. 1999) a journalist is surprised that there is so much competition for social work. “*I wonder how*

*these hundreds of young people, mostly women, picture their lives in four years. Not all of them will get a job at the Ministry of Social Affairs but social workers with higher education will not be taking bread and milk home to the elderly, or medicine from the pharmacy, will they? But maybe these young girls are making sound decisions and are counting on the tight but long-term salaries of civil servants.”* Students studying at Tartu University responded to the editorial and that made the discussion about the popularity of the profession of social worker very harsh.

However, there are also positive examples. A professional gives an adequate overview of social work, the attitude to practicing social workers is criticising and fair: *“One cannot obtain these skills just by working. Further training and ability to evolve are also very important. Although professional social workers and caretakers are being trained for some years already, only a small number of them reaches the official caresystem. So it is too soon to talk about the profession of social workers.”*

Every writing has an influence on public opinion, it makes people think that the content of articles is what social work is all about. There are many examples in our daily newspapers that, by presenting the tasks of a caretaker as the tasks of a social worker, and by identifying those two as well, provide the public with false information about social work as a profession. Hence the importance of the profession is underestimated in the society and that influences the public opinion, and changes the way people understand the nature of the profession.

Considering the trends brought out above one can conclude that the reputation of social work, based on the daily newspapers is bad. One reason for this is that journalists lack information of the actual tasks of the profession as a whole, and, as a result, in 1999 social work is still associated with changing bedpans and taking milk and bread home to the elderly. Such expressions as *social worker could*, *social worker should* were of criticising nature but the criticism was not constructive.

The number of positive articles has decreased more, however, the number of negative writings has also decreased. In PM there has been less change in negative attitudes, the level of positivity has risen more. 19.4 % of the texts published in EPL within these two years are positive, 9.7 % are negative. PM has a positive attitude in 28.1 % of cases, negative in 12.5 % of cases. The discussion in the field of social work concerned the competition for getting in to universities. If in 1994 it was EPL that had more positive coverages then in 1999 it was PM. EPL has become more neutral with these five years, meaning that there is no concrete opinion. That constitutes either a threat or an escape. The neutral position has to turn to either positive or negative attitude.

Considering the results of the content analysis and the hypothesis of the study – the reputation of social work has not improved in the time period of 1994-1999, one can conclude the following:

- 1) the reputation of social work has not changed in the media, the changes have occurred in the attitude of the dailies: in 1994 the leader of the table of positive writings was EPL, in 1999 it was *vice versa*;
- 2) on the whole, comparing 1994 and 1999, the number of positive and negative articles have remained the same;
- 3) media has started to express its neutral attitude to social work and social workers which might show upcoming change for either negative or positive direction;
- 4) the academic model of social work does not match the tasks the media has attached to social work.

A conclusion from this might be that no cardinal changes in the reputation of social work have taken place in 1994-1999. Negative texts indicate the attitude towards social workers based on concrete events. When in 1994 the dominating problem was the actions of **the Social Assistance Board?kas see mitte ümber pole nimetatud?**, or the lack of it, then in 1999 the problems with children on streets and youth receive most of the attention.

The second hypothesis – the reputation of social work is bad – is true.

Negative key words – *changing bedpans; most normal people would not do social work; they will not take bread and milk home to the elderly, will they?; social workers who think that putting kids to school is only parens' concern, should ask themselves if they wanted to meet those kids on a dark street in ten years; low-paid social workers* – support the claim.

Significant conclusions, explaining why the reputation of social workers is so bad in the media:

- 1) The main reason is that only a little is written about social work and social workers. There is no doubt that following the assessments of certain subject or group is important, however, that is not the only criterion. Media is a powerful drawer of the reputation but there has to be consistency. Considering that, a column on social work issues would be good – consistent coverages of what is going on. Lean appearance of professionals in the newspapers shows that different subjects are not included in the discussion of social work issues. Nor has there emerged any groups with different opinions that would have public discussions on the subject. It could be said that in covering social issues there has been no crystallisation nor polarisation. Stories that give little information or are negative prevail. 10 % of the writings include constructive critics.
- 2) The column in which a certain text was published. The newspaper-column a text is published indicates its importance. All editorials have been with negative tendencies, front-page news have also covered social work in unfavourable light.
- 3) It came out from the newspapers that authors lack correct knowledge of the tasks of a professional social worker. The tasks of **?welfare workers/caretakers/hoolekandetöötaja?** and social workers are mixed up, although these professions differ already in education.
- 4) Social workers are not active in writing articles, and they do not rebut false ideas about the profession. Social work students are more active and they have written

on social work issues. As no cardinal changes in the attitude to social work can be noticed, it could be said that practicing social workers have not fulfilled the task of talking publicly about the specialty.

- 5) The fact that in 1999 social work was associated with changing bedpans shows negative attitude and incompetence. The fact that newspapers let these writings to be published is an indication of incompetent attitude of even more people. These attitudes only fix and emphasise the negative ideas and opinions of social work. Although the number of such articles is smaller than the number of positive ones, they dominate the formation of opinions about social workers and the profession as a whole.

Despite the different writings in the media it has to be noted that most of these texts draw false pictures of social work and social workers. It comes out from the articles the role of social workers is to eliminate all kinds of social problems and to literally assist people (visiting the elderly etc.). Media considers social workers to be above the ones who solve problems, not who prevent them. Media has presented the role of a social worker in a too simplified way, social worker being the one who allocates allowances and looks for people in need, and is a sivil servant who follows his/her feelings not the knowledge. The texts include one-sided information about the circumstances and events, the positions of clients and social workers which might considerably change the coverage of the issue are often missing. So the texts might include some information that the press has been (unwillingly) distorted because then people involved are left out which contributes to drawing a false picture of the matter in the public. Consequently, there are many neutral stories, and the negative texts are not adequate.

So the media has drawn such a picture of social workers that does not correspond to the academic model of the profession. Social workers themselves who are indifferent to such inadequate publishings and leave it to the media to give an idea of the profession, have triggered the formation of false ideas.

### **CONCLUSION**

Most of the practicing social workers were and still are without special education in the field, although social workers should have an academic education and should constantly refresh their knowledge. The society is constantly changing and a social worker has to be able to understand the changes and be ready for them. That is why it is important to emphasise the importance of higher education in social work.

Going back to the beginning of 1990s one has to realise that then there was no idea of the social worker's profession. Noone explained to the public what is social work and who is a social worker. Different understandings developed on the basis of the contacts between clientele and social workers. That period laid the foundation for the reputation of social work in Estonia.

Different opinions and experiences were gathered and the media made it open to the public. Both subjective and objective factors influenced the idea of the profession but the picture was drawn mainly by the media. It is possible that the emblems of the

orderlies working at the residential care homes during the Soviet times are fixed in people's minds, and social workers are thought to have taken over their role. Where else would the parallel between social workers and changing bedpans come from? This was still the understanding in 1999, it will be 10 years since social work came to Estonia and the attitude is still slighting, the tasks of social workers and **welfare workers** have been mixed up, and that has contributed to labeling of the profession. The author believes that one of the reasons for bad reputation is that practicing social workers without higher education are unable to give rise to potential discussions. They lack the ability and wish to present concrete and clear opinions. Practicing social workers are unaware or they have been ignorant to acknowledge the reputation of social work, what it is, and if they are able to change anything in the public opinion. The fact that the public opinion has not considerably changed within the five years clearly shows lack of information and low activeness on social workers' part in writing about the field and quality of social work. However, the activeness of social workers is not enough, the state should be more active as well. In the time-period of 1994-1999 neither the Government nor Riigikogu have initiated any development plans for social sphere as a whole (Oole, Kasemets 2000).

In order to stop these current false ideas of social work, both practising social workers, and also students, should write actively about their profession – give light to its main purposes, positions and problems in the society.

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