

RESEARCH GROUP | STRENGTHENING SOCIAL QUALITY

## ***Being there: Working together to strengthen social quality***

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## ***Being there: Working together to strengthen social quality***

Inaugural speech by Dr Lisbeth Verharen, Professor of Strengthening Social Quality

Speech delivered in abbreviated form in acceptance of the post of Professor of Strengthening Social Quality, Research Centre for Social Support and Community Care, at the Faculty of Health and Social Studies of HAN University of Applied Sciences on Thursday 21 September 2017.

*Dedicated to my mother, who taught me  
to recognise the different opportunities  
afforded to different people.*

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## INTRODUCTION

I chose 'Being there' as the title for this speech because it reflects the aims and character of our research group. During this speech, I would like to show you what this means for the choices we make and how we approach our work.

Being There is also the title of a satirical film from 1979 based on a novel of the same name by Jerzy Kosiński. Peter Sellers plays the role of Chance, an illiterate gardener whose employer dies. Standing in the street, he is struck by a car driven by the wife of a wealthy businessman, who takes him to their home to recover. Before long, Chance finds himself being touted as a possible successor to the President of the United States. The unfolding events can be traced back to his mere presence in a particular place at a particular time, and through his simply being himself. What is crucial is how other people interpret this. The film is about humans as social beings; about the social functioning of people, groups and society; and about how together we construct reality, influence one another and make things possible. It is also about how blinkered we can be in our perceptions of other people—how little effort we make to really *see* the other. In the course of this speech, I will introduce you to the primary focus of our research group: humans as social beings.

*Being there* means 'being present': this speech is about the presence of the Research Group for Strengthening Social Quality in the social domain. About 'being present' wherever people's lives are taking place, where social quality is manifested and created. Being there in sincere proximity, as Baart (2001) taught us with his theory of presence. Seeing people in all their strength and vulnerability, such that we can position ourselves in the right place to help. In short, we seek to help everybody take his or her rightful place in society.

I would like to start by outlining the focus of our research group, as well as our aspirations: where do we want to be, and why? The key word here is *social quality*. Next I will turn to the profile of our research group: what characterises us and our work?





## 1. SOCIAL QUALITY: INDIVIDUAL AND ENVIRONMENT

*Social quality* refers to the quality of life of individual people in interaction with the quality of their social environment (Siltaniemi & Kauppinen, 2005; Wolf, 2016; [www.socialquality.org/theory](http://www.socialquality.org/theory)). As the film *Being There* illustrates, we cannot see people as separate from their environment. Who you are, who you could become, what your quality of life is—all these matters are partly determined by your social environment. Conversely, you yourself have influence on the lives and circumstances of the people around you and on the quality of society.

To begin, let us consider the term *environment*. Take a moment to think about your own environment: the town or neighbourhood in which you live. What do you see? The houses, the businesses, the traffic, the trees—these form the *physical environment*. Do you see people too? Who lives in your neighbourhood? Have they lived there for a long time, or did they arrive only recently? Are their respective ways of life characterised by similarity or by difference? Do they have a lot or little contact with one another?

Now let me ask you this: do you also see the numerous informal caregivers, volunteers and healthcare professionals in your neighbourhood? They may not always be visible, but they are there, every day, providing assistance to people. And for good reason: not everyone has the same capacity to deal with everything life throws at them. There are people in vulnerable situations whose quality of life is threatened by physical or psychological issues, loneliness, illiteracy, poverty and more. Do you see them too?

And let us not forget all those people who contribute from a distance to the quality of your environment and the quality of life of the people around you: managers, policymakers, politicians, lawyers, entrepreneurs, researchers. Together we form a society. Together we are working on social quality, and together, we can contribute to improving the quality of life for everyone.

The International Association on Social Quality (IASQ) defines social quality as “the extent to which people are able to participate in social relationships under conditions which enhance their wellbeing, capacity and individual potential.”<sup>1</sup> This definition highlights the interaction between individual and environment.

People’s wellbeing—the ability to flourish as a person—is influenced by their opportunities to participate in social relationships: in informal relationships such as those with family, friends, neighbours and colleagues, and in formal relationships as with teachers, social workers and municipalities. We participate in social relationships at various levels: at the level of the personal network (micro), the community and institutions (meso), and social structures and society at large (macro) (Wolf, 2016).

1 [www.socialquality.org](http://www.socialquality.org), accessed 9 May 2017

### ***Social quality and participation***

Participation is thus an important concept in social quality. You may have noticed that the term *participation* crops up frequently in today's society. In his very first speech as monarch, King Willem-Alexander spoke of our ongoing shift from a welfare state to a 'participatory society'.

This development began in the 20th century and has since permeated all levels of society. Underlying this shift is a range of ideological and economic motives. From an ideological perspective, the emphasis is on the notion that everybody counts, and everybody must therefore have the opportunity to *be able* to participate in society. In this view, people mustn't be excluded from those activities, groups and networks that are important to them; indeed, people *want* to participate, and doing so does them good. We therefore need to work together to make that possible. This view ties in closely with elements of the theory of social quality that stress the importance of participation for people's wellbeing.

From an economic standpoint, participation is emphasised with a view to reducing the costs of healthcare and welfare. People in need of support are encouraged to rely in the first instance on themselves and their families, friends and neighbours. The idea here is that we should all work to generate our own income according to our own abilities, and that we can all participate in the provision of care. In this case, participation means *having* to participate, and places greater responsibility on the individual and their informal relationships. The right to government support kicks in only when people cannot manage things on their own, either individually or collectively. In discourse on the participatory society, these motives are intertwined. Sometimes ideological motives have the upper hand, other times economic ones. Ultimately, it comes down to being both better *and* cheaper (Oude Vrielink, Klok & Kolk, 2014).

Social quality is inextricably linked with the participatory society: a society in which people want to, are permitted to, are enabled and indeed are obliged to participate according to their own abilities. The participatory society relies heavily on the communal: living together, acting together. To facilitate this, the government has transferred many of its activities and responsibilities in the areas of healthcare, youth support, and work and income to the local level. The idea is that local municipalities are closer to their citizens than the federal government, and are better placed to understand the meaning of social quality in the local context and how it can be improved. As such, they are better able to deliver tailored solutions.

In addition to this shifting of responsibilities, a cultural transformation is taking place. A transformation of behaviour: of thinking, feeling and doing things differently. This has implications for everybody. When people need support, they are expected to take personal responsibility, engage in self-management, and rely on their informal relationships before turning to professionals (Oude Vrielink et al., 2014). This places high demands on people's personal abilities and resilience.

A lot of responsibility comes to rest on the shoulders of the individual, in the form of notions such as self-reliance and self-management. Much is expected, too, of social networks and communities—people are expected to help one another. At the same time, there is an awareness that there will always be situations in which people need to be able to fall back on professional support. This cultural transformation has implications for professionals: they have to be more hands-off in some respects, but also more skilled in activating people's own capacities and those of their social networks.

### ***Divergent capacities***

*Personal capacity* is a key word in the participatory society. I share the belief that it is important for people to be seen for who they are and what they are capable of—even if they no longer believe in their own capacities themselves. It is crucial that we identify, draw attention to, appeal to and support people in further developing these capacities. At the same time, we need to remember that these capacities are not evenly distributed among people in the Netherlands, and this affects the opportunities that people have to participate in social relationships.

In 2013, the Netherlands Institute for Social Research (SCP) (Bijl, Boelhouwer, Pommer & Sonck, 2013) warned that the living situations of vulnerable groups are deteriorating, and that disadvantages in income, education, health and employment are increasingly correlated. Our capacities are partly dependent on the resources available to us.

Here I am referring to forms of capital that help people to achieve their life goals or that stand them in good stead in times of hardship. Such capital has a major impact on people's opportunities: on who they are and who they can become (Nussbaum, 2012; Robeyns, 2005; Sen, 2009, 1999). The SCP (Vrooman et al., 2014) distinguishes between different groups in the Netherlands based on their personal, economic, cultural and social capital.

*Personal capital* encompasses a person's distinctive characteristics, and has three components:

- Physical components: physical strength and health (Vrooman et al., 2014);
- Mental components: mental strength and health. So a person's psychological capacities (or psychological capital) to achieve something or maintain something with respect to self-confidence, resilience, self-image and so on (Van Regenmortel, 2009; Vrooman et al., 2014). A recent report by the Netherlands Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR), 'Why knowing what to do is not enough' (2017), emphasises the importance of psychological capital;
- Aesthetic components: the benefits born of things like appearance and attractiveness (Vrooman et al., 2014). I once heard of a municipality in Flanders giving long-term unemployed people an allowance to go to the hairdresser, because looking well-groomed increases one's chances of finding a job.

The SCP defines *economic capital* as material resources: income and financial assets. In our society, these resources are largely determined by matters such as education, professional skills, employment and professional level, which is why the SCP also counts these as economic capital (Vrooman et al., 2014). Many people watched the wonderful documentary series *Schuldig*<sup>2</sup>, which received the 2017 Zilveren Nipkowschijf, a prestigious television award. The series shone a spotlight on people struggling with debt, and increased awareness in the Netherlands that not everyone in our country can make ends meet financially. We were introduced to people such as Ditte, once a member of the jet set in Ibiza, who developed breast cancer, lost her job and income, and went through a painful breakup. She is doing her best to make ends meet, but is plagued by financial stress and problems. People can find themselves living at or below the poverty line for all sorts of reasons. In 2014, 1.2 million Dutch people were classed as poor according to the ‘not-much-but-sufficient’ criterion, and 810,000 people did not have the budget even to meet their basic needs (SCP, 2016). Some 378,000 children (aged between 0 and 17 years) were living in poverty (SER, 2017).

*Cultural capital* consists of a command of language and communication skills, lifestyle (e.g. tastes, preferences and cultural knowledge) and manifestations of symbolic value (reputation, titles and other distinctions) (Vrooman et al., 2014). In this area, too, there are major discrepancies in the Netherlands that affect people’s opportunities. Some 2.5 million people are classed as functionally illiterate (Greef, Segers & Nijhuis, 2017): they have limitations in reading, writing and mathematics that form severe obstacles in everyday life. Consider how we communicate with the government and other organisations. Thanks to digitisation, we increasingly need to apply for services, make appointments and perform other such tasks online. For people with low literacy levels, this is a constant problem—and yet it is precisely these people who more often depend on such provisions. Geuns (2017) calls this the *bureaucratic paradox*: we ask the most of those people with the least developed bureaucratic skills. Literacy is also a precondition for many health-related skills (Fransen, Stronks & Essink-Bot, n.d.). The SCP classifies education under economic capital, but its relationship with cultural capital is clear. A person’s education level not only influences the acquisition of income through work, but also the development of skills that affect people’s opportunities in other areas of life, including health (Rademakers, 2014). In the Netherlands, there are clear health disparities between people with high and low education levels (Vrooman et al., 2014). Income plays a role in this, but so too do the individual’s health skills and cultural environment.

People’s *social capital* arises in their relationships with others (*idem*). These relationships provide opportunities for emotional and material support, advice, information and companionship

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<sup>2</sup> *Schuldig. Wie betaalt de rekening?* [Who’s paying the bill?], 6-part TV documentary series on hope, despair and resilience in a neighbourhood marred by debt, NPO/HUMAN, November-December 2016, [www.human.nl/schuldig](http://www.human.nl/schuldig)

(Wolf, 2016). There are three forms of social capital: *bonding*, *bridging* and *linking*. *Bonding* is characterised by strong bonds between people in relatively homogeneous groups. Relationships with people you can count on when times are tough, but who also count on you. *Bridging* arises in relationships with weaker bonds and more heterogeneous networks. These relationships give you access to other worlds: to knowledge, information and skills that you yourself lack. *Linking* involves relationships with people who hold positions of relative power; people of wealth and influence (Putnam, 2000; Hawkins & Mauer, 2012). The classic example is the person who lands a job purely thanks to their social relationships. But there is also a downside to social capital: groups with close ties can leave members reluctant to venture outside the group, when doing so could enhance their opportunities (Engbersen, 2003). Social relationships have a quantitative side (the number of relationships) and a qualitative aspect (the significance of those relationships). Although there is more to loneliness than just the quantity and quality of relationships, the fact that in 2012 almost 40% of the population aged 19 years and older reported feeling lonely, and more than 8% reported feeling seriously or very seriously lonely, tells us something about differences in social capital.<sup>3</sup>

Personal, economic, cultural and social resources are intertwined, and affect a person's opportunities in life: who they can be and become, and how they view their own capacities.

### ***Vulnerable circumstances***

We all have strengths, but also vulnerabilities. Vulnerability is a part of life, an inherently human characteristic. Anyone can feel vulnerable at any moment—this is something we all live with on a daily basis. In this respect, we are equal. But the circumstances in which people live can also make them vulnerable (Baart, 2013; Van Ewijk, 2014). In this, we are not equal. The totality of an individual's personal, economic, cultural and social capital influences the extent to which they are able to cope with setbacks in life.

Vulnerability arises not merely from a lack of resources, but also from the interaction between those resources, the person and the environment (Van Ewijk, 2014). So a lack of capital does not necessarily equate to vulnerability, but it does influence it.

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<sup>3</sup> [www.volksgezondheidszorg.info/onderwerp/eenzaamheid/cijfers-context/huidige-situatie#node-percentage-volwassenen-dat-zich-eezaam-voelt](http://www.volksgezondheidszorg.info/onderwerp/eenzaamheid/cijfers-context/huidige-situatie#node-percentage-volwassenen-dat-zich-eezaam-voelt), accessed 16 May 2017

The interaction between different sources of capital means that a lack in one area can have a knock-on effect, resulting in a lack in other areas. And some shortages of capital can have consequences that affect many parts of a person's life.

Consider the influence of social capital on the opportunities that are either available or not available to a person. A lack of access to social networks can have implications for a person's access to the labour market, which in turn has consequences for their income, housing and lifestyle choices. To describe this concept, Wolff and De-Shalit (2013) introduced the term *corrosive disadvantages*.

The SCP (Vrooman et al., 2014) has identified two groups in the Netherlands that are faced with a lack of capital in ways that seem to coincide, are perpetually self-reinforcing, and have repercussions for myriad aspects of life. These groups are known as the 'precariat' and 'insecure workers', comprising 15% and 14% of the Dutch population, respectively.

People in the precariat are the most vulnerable. They are left behind in many respects: they have the lowest education levels, and depend more heavily than others on benefits or a meagre pension. They typically rent their homes and have little liquidity. Unlike many highly educated people, they do not get to enjoy the luxury of early retirement. They are unhealthier than others, and more likely to be overweight. They have the smallest social networks, the least luxurious lifestyle, the fewest digital skills and the poorest command of language/English (Vrooman et al., 2014).

Insecure workers have somewhat higher education levels than the precariat. They also have better English and better digital skills. Their vulnerability stems from an insecure labour-market position caused by temporary contracts or unemployment, a low income, the lowest liquidity and, frequently, debts or an underwater mortgage. Compared to other Dutch people, they have the least psychological capital and the greatest doubts about their own attractiveness. In this group, we see flexibilisation of the labour market leading to psychological insecurity, characterised by stress and lack of recognition (Kremer, Went & Knottnerus, 2017).

The SCP's research shows a clear relationship between an individual's capital and their life outcomes. People with higher education levels and higher incomes/greater wealth are healthier and happier, have more social capital and more luxurious lifestyles than others. People with higher personal capital are more likely to have higher incomes, higher education levels, better labour-market opportunities and greater life satisfaction. People differ in the totality of resources available to them, and this has consequences for their opportunities in life. An accumulation of social deprivation means living in vulnerable circumstances and can lead to social exclusion.

The participatory society places a great deal of emphasis on people's personal capacities. It does people good to have others see what they are capable of, to feel that they matter, to feel that they can participate in society and be taken seriously. A lack of recognition of a person's capacities has a major impact on their self-esteem and wellbeing. So too does a failure to recognise the circumstances in which people find themselves. Recognition of the whole person is of the utmost importance (Van Heijst, 2008): recognition of their capacities, but also of the social inequalities that make some people more vulnerable than others (Van Regenmortel, 2009).

### ***Scarcity and self-management***

Personal, economic, cultural and social wealth is no guarantee of quality of life. Yet it does influence it. Diverse forms of capital serve as *protective factors* (Bakker, 1999) that feed into people's opportunities: who they can be and become, and how they can participate in social relationships. Though there are no 'objective' standards for capital, there is a subjective difference between a lot, enough, little and a lack of capital. What is adequate for one person may be experienced as insufficient by another person in other circumstances.

When talking about poverty in the Netherlands, the SCP identifies two important thresholds for economic capital.

- The basic needs budget: this consists of the minimum expenses of an independent household on unavoidable, basic things like food, clothing and housing. In 2014 this was €971 per month for a single person.
- The not-much-but-sufficient budget: this also covers desirable expenses, such as membership of a sports or hobby club or a brief holiday. In 2014 this was €1063 per month for a single person<sup>4</sup>.

When referring to little or a lack of capital, we use the term *scarcity*. Research by Mullainathan and Shafir (2013) has shown how scarcity influences people's behaviour. Their insights contribute to recognition of the difficult circumstances experienced by people living in scarcity. At the same time, it offers starting points for supporting such people, as with the *mobility mentoring* method which is currently being trialled in the Netherlands (Jungman & Wesdorp, 2017; Geuns, 2017).

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<sup>4</sup> [https://digitaal.scp.nl/armoedein kaart2016/waar\\_ligt\\_de\\_armoedegrens/](https://digitaal.scp.nl/armoedein kaart2016/waar_ligt_de_armoedegrens/), accessed 16 May 2017



Scarcity takes possession of thought: the person's attention is consumed by the unmet need. Scarcity is a reality, but also a subjective perception influenced by the culture in which we live. It leads a person to use the scant resources available to them as efficiently as possible. Focusing on one thing, however, inevitably results in neglect of other things. Scarcity leads to tunnel vision: you ignore things that distract from the focus of your preoccupation, and as a result other important things escape your attention. As Mullainathan and Shafir put it, scarcity reduces your bandwidth. Living in conditions of scarcity limits the opportunities available to people, influences their quality of life and hinders their self-management capacities (Brummel, 2017; Geuns, 2017; Wolf, 2016; Wolff & De-Shalit, 2013).

*Self-management* is, alongside personal capacities, another keyword in the discourse on the participatory society. Verkooijen (2006) describes self-management as organising one's life around a personal perception of what constitutes a 'good' life. It is about having control over one's own life: *mastery*, as it is called in the discourse of empowerment (Van Regenmortel, 2011). In some situations and circumstances, self-management is extremely difficult. And it is not helped by simply telling people that they need to do it. This point was aptly made by the social worker Paul in the documentary *Schuldig*. "You have to unburden people," he said. "Self-management is impossible if you feel like you're drowning."

The WRR (2017) speaks of a 'reliance paradox': the emphasis placed on self-reliance, self-management and personal responsibility has the perverse effect of actually reducing people's self-reliance. Similarly, the Committee on the Innovation of Care Professions and Study Programmes (Van Vliet, Grotendorst & Roodbol, 2016) acknowledges that while many people are willing and able to engage in self-management, this is not equally feasible for everyone. The committee cites loneliness, poor literacy and socioeconomic differences as factors that play a role here. Notions of personal capacity and self-management therefore ought to go hand in hand with shared responsibility (Van Regenmortel, 2011).

Improving a person's capacity to engage in self-management calls for the creation of opportunities that enable even the most vulnerable to come into their own. As a society, we need to move beyond 'blame, shame or pity', as Van Regenmortel (2015) put it. In the case of poverty, self-management is not improved by looking for someone to blame. Nor does self-management increase if people are made to feel ashamed of their situation—and it is certainly not helped by pitying people in vulnerable circumstances. What helps is recognising the circumstances of vulnerability and highlighting possible ways out. People are served by the prospect of improving their situation and understanding what they can do themselves and with others. What is needed is a realistic perspective that aligns with their vulnerabilities and capacities (Van Hal, Van Meershoek, Nijhuis & Horstman, 2013; Van Regenmortel, 2015; Wolf, 2016).

This perspective can arise by focusing on what Wolff and De-Shalit (2013) call *fertile functionings*, which can help to rectify disadvantages. Something that may be a *corrosive disadvantage*, such as limited opportunities for building social affiliations, can at the same time be a starting point for rectifying other disadvantages. This is not to say that merely bringing a person into contact with others is, in and of itself, enough. What is important is that these new contacts lead to meaningful exchanges and ultimately contribute to the person's quality of life. Structural constraints, such as legislation and the prevailing social norms, can play a role here. But so too can adaptive preferences, including an individual's deep conviction and/or experience that a sense of belonging, say, or the ability to participate, are only feasible for them to a limited degree (Brummel, 2017; Jansen & Verharen, 2017; Robeyns, 2005). Constraints such as these call for more far-reaching interventions than merely bringing people into contact with one another.

I have drawn attention to the differences in capital between population groups in the Netherlands to remind us that there are people around us who are structurally disadvantaged, and we must not be blind to this fact. Rectifying these disadvantages is not simply a matter of increasing people's capital by means of material or other resources, urging them to self-manage, or focusing on enhancing their skills. It calls for more than that. Besides strengthening the individual's position, we need to change the social, material and cultural environment so as to enhance people's opportunities (Wolff & De-Shalit, 2013). This calls for social quality!

### ***Strengthening social quality***

Our Research Group for Strengthening Social Quality focuses on social quality as a means of rectifying disadvantage, a way of creating realistic prospects for people in vulnerable circumstances. The social quality of a society can be understood by considering four conditions: socioeconomic security, social inclusion, social cohesion and social empowerment (Philips, 2011; Wolf, 2016; [www.socialquality.org/theory/](http://www.socialquality.org/theory/)<sup>5</sup>).

Socioeconomic security focuses on social justice. It means safeguarding people's basic needs through human rights, legislation and provisions.

Social inclusion revolves around equality; countering the mechanisms of exclusion by developing responsive, accessible groups, communities and systems.

Social cohesion draws on the notion of solidarity, and refers to cohesion based on shared norms and values, recognition, respect and reciprocity.

Social empowerment focuses on human dignity expressed in opportunities for self-determination and personal development, supported and enhanced by relationships and structures.

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5 <http://www.socialquality.org/theory/>, accessed 13 May 2017

Social quality		
Condition	Means	Aim
Socioeconomic security	Human rights, legislation and provisions that ensure the essential preconditions of existence for all	Social justice
Social inclusion	Responsive, accessible groups, communities and systems	Equality
Social cohesion	Shared norms and values, recognition, respect, reciprocity	Solidarity
Social empowerment	Opportunities for self-determination, supported and enhanced by relationships and structures	Human dignity

Social quality refers to the quality of communities and societies, which in turn affects an individual's quality of life. Social quality is squeezed if the conditions of socioeconomic security, social inclusion, social cohesion and social empowerment are not, or not adequately, met. This can have consequences such as poverty and loneliness. Enhancing social quality improves the individual's quality of life. It increases their opportunities to participate in social and economic life, under conditions that foster their wellbeing and individual potential (Den Hartog & Smet, 2011).

In her dissertation, Brummel (2017) shows how adaptive preferences, structural constraints and corrosive disadvantages influence social inclusion in a neighbourhood. And how fostering social affiliations (an example of a *fertile functioning*) can enhance social inclusion. Informal parties such as neighbours, volunteers and citizens' initiatives have a key role to play here, as do formal parties such as professionals. With the shift towards a participatory society, major changes are taking place that affect people's quality of life and the social quality of communities and society. We must remain alert to the emergence of conditions that cause or perpetuate vulnerability and that hinder participation and self-management. And we need to find ways of offering opportunities to people in vulnerable situations by strengthening social quality. To this end, we need professionals!

## ***Professional capital***

Economic motives for the shift to a participatory society have led to cutbacks in professional healthcare and welfare services. Without wishing to undermine the value of voluntary work, I am calling for us to recognise the value of professional commitment. Improving the wellbeing of people, communities and society warrants the commitment of *professional capital*, a term coined by Hargreaves and Fullan (2013). By this I mean professionals who have made a vocation of their love of people. Who have developed a deep well of knowledge and insight into the physical, psychological and social functioning of people and their environments, and who are continually developing in this field. Professionals who are able to make sensible, pragmatic decisions in complex circumstances and whose social networks give them access to new knowledge, which helps them to carry out their work optimally. Professionals who are skilled in coaching people, groups, networks and communities in dealing with the physical, psychological and social challenges in life. Who have the knowledge, skills and aptitude that we can expect from professionals, but not necessarily from volunteers (Engbersen & Rensen, 2014; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2013; Peeters, 2016; Trappenburg, 2016; Verharen, 2013, 2016). People who are disadvantaged in terms of personal, cultural, social and economic capital, people in vulnerable circumstances, are precisely those people who should not simply be left to their fate, but instead need to be able to fall back on professional capital.

The Research Group for Strengthening Social Quality focuses on social workers, those professionals who:

- seek to do justice to people in interaction with their environment
- have insight into the social functioning of people and their environments, and use this knowledge to enhance social quality
- identify factors that cause or perpetuate social inequality, and work to bring about changes that foster social justice, equality, human dignity, solidarity and freedom
- work towards self-determination, resilience, social inclusion and social cohesion
- alternate between activating and providing assistance, focusing on individuals and the collective and on the material and immaterial aspects of people's daily lives (IFSW, 2014; Landelijk Opleidingsdocument Sociaal Werk, 2017; Linders & Verharen, 2017; Schilder, 2014; Van Ewijk, 2012, 2014; Verharen, 2010, 2016).

We do not intend to focus exclusively on social work. Social workers are important players, but not the only ones who can enhance social quality. Complex problems call for interaction between citizens, volunteers, policymakers and professionals from different domains, including healthcare, welfare and sport (Jansen, Veldboer & Verharen, 2017; Sennett, 2012; Verharen, 2016).

Partners who together can make a difference for people in vulnerable positions and circumstances. These people deserve a society that invests in high-quality professional support for social quality in local contexts. And this ought to be forthcoming, certainly in a society that places high demands on their own capacities, self-management skills and informal networks. With our practice-based research, we contribute to the training of well-equipped professionals who can help to improve social quality and enhance the professionalism of social work.

### ***Strengthening the social work profession***

This focus on social work puts us in good company. Recent reports by the Foresight Committee on Higher Education in Social and Community Work and the Health Council (*Meer van Waarde*, Verkenningcommissie Hoger Sociaal Agogisch Onderwijs, 2014; *Sociaal Werk op Solide Basis*, Gezondheidsraad, 2014) prompted a rethinking of the position, identity and professionalisation of social work and social studies degree courses. In concrete terms, this has led to the development of a new national degree profile, the formulation of a common body of knowledge, and the establishment of the National Action Programme for the Professionalisation of Welfare and Social Services, which brings together the sector organisation Social Work Netherlands, the professional associations BPSW and BV Jong, the trade unions FNV Zorg & Welzijn and CNV Zorg & Welzijn, the Netherlands Association of Universities of Applied Sciences, the MBO Council and the knowledge institute Movisie.<sup>6</sup>

Research makes an important contribution to the further development of the social work profession. Research is needed on, as Van Ewijk (2012) put it, the question “What is good social work?” Through research, we can analyse the quality of social work by considering:

- What is good from an ethical perspective? (normative dimension)
- What is good practice? (instrumental dimension)
- What is good from a relational perspective? (personal dimension)
- What is good for the continued development of the profession? (collective dimension) (De Jonge, 2016; Van Ewijk, 2012, 2014; Van der Laan, 1990).

Such research is conducted by the many research groups united under the Platform for Social Work Research Groups (formerly the Platform for Healthcare and Wellbeing research groups), the Social Domain collaborative centres, the academic collaborative centres and various national knowledge institutes.

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<sup>6</sup> See [www.professionalisereninwelzijn.nl](http://www.professionalisereninwelzijn.nl), accessed 4 July 2017

Our Research Group for Strengthening Social Quality makes a contribution here too, with a special focus on the role of social workers in enhancing social quality in a rapidly changing social domain.

Several challenges in this area need to be addressed by the social work profession and the associated degree courses: the challenge to identify and draw attention to obstacles to social quality in daily practice and how these obstacles are affected by policy (Spierts, 2017); the challenge to investigate how corrosive disadvantages, structural constraints and adaptive preferences affect people's quality of life and the social quality of communities; the challenge to address such factors by focusing on fertile functionings that enhance socioeconomic security, social inclusion, social cohesion and social empowerment; the challenge to do so in cooperation with citizens, volunteers, 'experience experts' and professionals from other domains; and the challenge to make explicit, substantiate and further develop the role and added value of social work in all these efforts.

## 2. PROFILE OF THE RESEARCH GROUP

So far I have discussed the focus of the research group: what we want to do and achieve. *Being there* for people in vulnerable positions and circumstances. *Being there* where social quality is under threat. *Being there* where formal and informal parties together seek to enhance social quality. *Being there* when it comes to the role of social work in all these efforts, and contributing to the further development of social work.

Now I would like to address *how* we want to do this, what our profile is and what you can expect from us in the coming years. Over the past few months, the members of our research group have come together periodically to formulate explicitly what it is that characterises our approach to research; what we want to be recognised and held accountable for. We can identify four dimensions of quality that dovetail with research into social quality and social work: the academic, practical, ethical and political dimensions (Lorenz, 2017).

The academic dimension concerns choosing a research methodology and committing to the associated scientific principles. The practical dimension refers to the obligation to give all stakeholders a critical voice in the research, and calls for a participatory approach, even if the research is quantitative in nature. The ethical dimension reminds us that ethical considerations need to be weighed up at all stages and in all aspects of a research project. The political dimension derives from the fact that the research ultimately aims to foster responsible social change based on values such as justice, equality, solidarity and human dignity.

From these four dimensions follow a number of characteristics that shape our research profile: a pluralist perspective; narrative research using creative resources; inclusive research; a focus on improvement and innovation; and reference to the theory of social quality, the capability approach and the empowerment paradigm as key sources of inspiration.

### ***Pluralist perspective***

When this research group was established eleven years ago, it was named Local Services from a Client Perspective. We have since refined our focus by zooming in on those local services that are aimed at strengthening social quality—hence the new name. We also dropped ‘client perspective’ from the name. Every name comes with certain associations, and *client* evokes the image of a consumer of commercial products and services, whereas our research group focuses on services provided by informal caregivers, volunteers and professionals (especially social workers). These services are rooted in notions such as compassion, solidarity, reciprocity and professionalism.

Nonetheless, the principle underlying the original use of the term ‘client perspective’ remains crucial. Consistently focusing on the perspective of those people whom social work is intended to serve: people who are balanced on the borderline between strength and vulnerability. Seeking to understand their experiences and needs; their wants and aspirations; what they value and what really matters to them. Gaining insight into their world by engaging in dialogue to explore the facts, values and expressions that are at stake. If we wish to understand how to act, this insider perspective is essential (Van Biene, 2007; Van der Laan, 1990; Leest & Baart, 2016; Van Regenmortel, 2015). At the same time, it is not the only valuable perspective in identifying the starting points for enhancing social quality. Myriad local approaches are under development— approaches that are not ‘neutral’, because the questions are loaded with normativity. This is why different perspectives are important. Social quality is something we need to achieve together. A diversity of voices enables us to better understand what is happening in local contexts, and where the opportunities lie for improvement and innovation. The voices of citizens, volunteers, professionals, organisations, policymakers and funding bodies need to be heard. This calls for a pluralist perspective, as our research group uses when evaluating social interventions.

### ***Narrative and creative***

The point of departure for many of our projects is narrative research. We seek out the stories of people in vulnerable situations to better understand what it means to live in those circumstances; to gain insight into their experiences, lifestyles and the kinds of support that may be of use. For example, we are currently gathering the stories of young adults with mild intellectual disabilities who live independently. By probing their experiences with managing money, we hope to identify what forms of assistance may have added value. Such stories provide us with starting points for enhancing social quality and improving professional services and policy. Although many people in our society are good with language, others find it far from easy to express themselves. This is why we are increasingly turning to creative methods, such as photovoice, raps and graffiti, to gain access to people’s stories.

The social work degree courses at HAN have their roots in the *Kopse Hof* programme<sup>7</sup> (Willemsen, 2008), and as such form a fertile breeding ground for creative research methods. Colleagues abound with well-developed skills in the use of creative resources.

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<sup>7</sup> *De Kopse Hof*, developed in 1956, was a form of training for youth leaders and social workers focused on empowerment. The curriculum incorporates artistic elements such as play, music, dance and expression. *De Kopse Hof* is one of the predecessors of the social work degree course at HAN today.



We work with them to identify suitable methods of communication for giving people in vulnerable circumstances a voice through research.

### ***Inclusive research***

'Experience experts' also feature heavily in our research. As project partners or co-researchers, they help us to ask the right questions and collaborate on developments and evaluations. The experiences of people in vulnerable circumstances are more wide-ranging than those of our experience experts, who are, after all, representatives of a broader group. Nonetheless, they help us to view all elements of our research through a different lens: the questions we ask, the data we gather, the analyses we perform, the conclusions we draw and the products we develop. They contribute the 'insider' perspective: they understand the meaning of life in disadvantaged circumstances and know which policies or social interventions serve the processes of empowerment. Moreover, participating in the project is beneficial for them too. This is both an important side effect of their participation, and an objective in itself. They are asked to share (and thereby get the chance to develop) their expertise, their knowledge and their skills.

All this is demanding for everyone involved. In developing a study design, it raises the question of how inclusive we can really be. We carefully consider all preconditions and possibilities when it comes to jointly formulating the questions, collecting and analysing the data, and interpreting the results. Investing in the relationship is essential (Abma et al., 2014; Hermesen et al., 2017). As Jansen et al. (2017) and Jansen et al. (2015) point out, working on the basis of a partnership is both an art and a skill.

Our focus is, ultimately, on doing solid research that places people centre stage and shines a spotlight on everyone and everything that matters. This gives us a deeper understanding of what social quality is and how it can be enhanced, while at the same time enabling us to build bridges with society.

### ***Improvement and innovation***

With our practice-based research, we seek not only to add to the body of knowledge on social quality, but also to actually enhance social quality in local and regional contexts and improve the quality of life of people in vulnerable situations. We work towards social impact by addressing not only 'what is' but also 'what should be'; not just 'proving' but also 'improving' (Van Regenmortel, Steenssens & Steen, 2016). To this end we prioritise forms of participatory action research (Boog, 2007; Coenen, 2012; Migchelbrink, 2016): a method aimed at effecting changes and improvements in local practices together with stakeholders.

In this way, our research allows us to contribute to contextual knowledge development. This is not to say that such knowledge cannot also be used in other contexts. Through practice-based research in diverse contexts, we work systematically towards knowledge development focused on enhancing social quality. An important advantage of participatory action research is its emancipatory function: the research also enables participants to work on their own personal development. Learning and innovation go hand in hand. In other words, in addition to ‘proving’ and ‘improving’, we also work on ‘strengthening’ our participants (Van Regenmortel, Steenssens & Steen, 2016). As researchers, we adopt the role of ‘critical friend’ (Jansen et al., 2017; Van Regenmortel, Steenssens & Steen, 2016). We consider it our obligation to draw attention to problems and obstacles in the social quality of local and regional contexts. Not for the sake of complaining, but so that we can work together to improve the situation.

We are not single-minded in our choice of research methods: our repertoire also includes appreciative inquiry, design thinking and design-based research. These methods, too, are well-suited to a focus on improvement and innovation of local and regional practices.

### ***Sources of inspiration***

Our research draws, in addition to the theory of social quality, on two other theoretical approaches: the capability approach and the empowerment paradigm. It is beyond the scope of this speech to explain these in detail; instead I will limit myself to a brief description.

The capability approach, as developed by Sen (1999) and Nussbaum (2012), offers a comprehensive conceptual framework for personal development. Like the theory of social quality, this approach is rooted in the interaction between individual and environment: a person’s development takes place in interaction with his/her environment. The capability approach takes an integrated view of personal development and quality of life, and as such aligns with the holistic approach to social work (Jansen & Verharen, 2017). Rather than focusing on people’s functioning (as in the concept of positive health and related approaches; Huber et al., 2011), it advocates a realistic view of people’s opportunities and the influence of personal, environmental and social factors. The focus is on those aspirations that people can bring to fruition on the basis of their actual capabilities in their real-world context. Through our research theme ‘Strengthening Social Quality’, we emphasise the impact of social factors on people’s development and quality of life. The theory of social quality complements the capability approach by helping us to find concrete starting points for investigating the impact of the social environment on personal development (Philips, 2011). Ultimately, the value of the capability approach lies in reminding us what is most important: people’s wellbeing. And wellbeing is, in turn, fostered through social quality.

Social empowerment is a condition for social quality. Empowerment can be described as “(...) a process: the mechanism by which people, organizations and communities gain mastery over their lives” (Rappaport, 1984, p. 3). It revolves around processes of strengthening and connecting individuals, groups, organisations and society (Van Regenmortel, 2011). The addition of ‘social’ to the condition of social empowerment in the theory of social quality draws attention to the importance of supporting social relationships and structures in order to promote empowerment. One cannot empower another person, but the empowerment *process* can be supported or hindered.

For us, empowerment is an important source of inspiration for its focus on strengths while simultaneously acknowledging vulnerability and power(lessness). The paradigm has been operationalised as an action framework for social workers in:

- *Krachtwerk*, focused on the development of people’s strengths (Wolf [2016] linked this to the theory of social quality), and
- *Bind-kracht*, focused specifically on working with people in poverty (Vansevenant, Driessens & Van Regenmortel, 2014).

The empowerment paradigm not only inspires us to direct our research activities towards enhancing the opportunities of people in vulnerable circumstances, but also leads us to focus on specific ways of doing research. By prioritising a participatory approach, we contribute to the empowerment of all participants (lecturers, students, professionals, policymakers, citizens) and align ourselves with the theoretical foundations of empowerment research (Van Regenmortel, Steenssens & Steen, 2016).

These three sources of inspiration—social quality, the capability approach and the empowerment paradigm—form the theoretical basis on which we draw in all our activities.

### Being there

The Research Group for Strengthening Social Quality has the aim of being out there in the field! Being there where people live in vulnerable conditions and where the social quality is under pressure. Being there in the daily practice of professionals, volunteers and citizens. Being there where education and research can and want to work together with the professional field to strengthen social quality and in turn improve the perspectives of people who have been disadvantaged. Being there as a partner in the field of social work to support those who have the important professional task of identifying and addressing factors that influence the emergence and persistence of corrosive disadvantage.

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