

## Prison Social Work and the Risk Security System: Insights from Swiss Correctional Facilities

*Julia Emprechtinger, HES-SO Valais-Wallis*

*Marina Richter, HES-SO Valais-Wallis*

**Abstract:** Social work's role in managing the risk of recidivism is increasing in the Swiss penal system. With data from a qualitative study in two Swiss correctional facilities collected during 2019-2020, this article shows that prison social work has a triple role encompassing voluntary social assistance, tasks in relation to the execution of a sentence, and – in the focus of this article – relatively new tasks in line with the risk-minimizing reasoning in prisoner rehabilitative work. The risk-oriented approach, however, is conceptualized under the definitional power of forensic psychology, which assigns social work a subordinate, executing role. While issues of motivating involuntary clients to offence-centred work are intensely discussed in social workers' reasoning regarding the risk-oriented work, critically questioning social work's role in the tension between care and control is less evident in the data. We argue that to strengthen the profession's positioning in the risk-minimizing set of tasks of carceral institutions, a broader interdisciplinary discourse within it is necessary which requires a clear and convincing statement of social work on its possible theoretical and methodical contribution in individual case work as well as on the level of the system as a whole.

**Keywords:** prison social work; risk security regime; prison; professional positioning; care & control

### 1 Introduction

Social work's role in managing the risk of recidivism is increasing in the Swiss penal system. Beside their role of providing voluntary social assistance<sup>1</sup> – in the sense of social support – to the prisoners and contribute to their rehabilitation in terms of preparing with them their release from prison, they always played a part in the securitization and sanctioning of the prisoners. Recent developments in the light of risk avoidance, however, reinforce social work's involvement in treating recidivism risk of detainees. In consequence, the well-known ambivalence of care and control undergoes an important shift towards a controlling mission. While this shift only concerns a certain group of high-risk prisoners – mainly those sentenced for violent and sexual offences – the related tasks seem to gain in relation much importance in the daily routines and work arrangements of social workers. We argue that this paradigmatic change in the execution of a sentence, as based on actuarial risk assessment and evidence-based forensic diagnosis and intervention, challenges social workers' professional identity and self-presentation in the specific field of prison social work.

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<sup>1</sup> In the Swiss context, social assistance means non-monetary support comprising any professional help e.g. with administrative issues, with social relationships in the family and close friends, personal well-being or worries with prison life.

This article sheds some light on these developments in social work in two Swiss prisons and investigates the question of how practitioners perceive the ongoing changes and deal with the associated challenges.

We will first briefly outline social work's historical and current position in prisons before discussing underlying theoretical considerations on social work practice in this specific field. In particular, the dualism of care and control is noteworthy, as well as debates about social work and the risk paradigm. Subsequently, the specific risk-oriented approach in the Swiss penal system will be shortly presented. The article's core is the presentation of empirical data from an exploratory research project in two Swiss penal institutions collected during 2019-2020 that will be followed by final conclusions about how risk assessment affects prison social work and the strategies adopted by the professionals.

## 2 Social work practice in correctional settings

Correctional settings have a long tradition in social work. Since its beginnings, detainees and people accused of offences constitute a target group of professional social work (for the pioneer period in the late 19th century in the U.S. e.g. Reamer, 2004; Maschi & Killian, 2011). In Germany, the social work perspective entered the criminal justice system in 1912 with the foundation of the first juvenile correctional facility (Borchert, 2016, p. 34). In France, a legal reform in 1912 led to creating social services in the context of juvenile courts (Faugeron & Le Boulaire, 1988). Since then, a rise of social work in adult and juvenile prisons is observed all over Western Europe (e.g. Cellini, 2016 for the case of Italy; Svensson, 2003 for Sweden).

To our knowledge, only little literature exists about Switzerland's beginnings and history of professional social work inside the prison walls. At the national level, today's prison social work's mission is framed by the Swiss Criminal Code at two points: First, law *'guarantees the provision of social assistance'* to each prisoner that *'may be claimed voluntarily.'* The federalist Swiss system leaves the cantons responsible to provide this legal right (Art. 96, Swiss Criminal Code). Second, a general aim of the execution of a sentence is to *'encourage an improvement in the social behaviour of the prison inmates, and in particular their ability to live their lives without offending again'* (Art. 75, paragraph 1, Swiss Criminal Code). Although this element concerns the whole prison staff, it constitutes an important foundation of social work's mission towards rehabilitating prisoners. Hence, according to the Swiss Criminal Code, social work's role is defined as a voluntary support for and on demand of the prisoners. However, it is also embedded in the normative institutional reasoning of risk-oriented execution of sanctions which is an objective not necessarily shared by prisoners. We will later return to this dualism as a constitutive element of social work, and specifically for social work professionals in criminal justice.

In numbers, nearly 20% of the employees in Swiss prisons have a 'social mission.'<sup>2</sup> Statistics show that there are a total of 788 full-time equivalents of professionals in the category 'social work/education' out of the 4,467 full-time equivalents of employees in total (Bundesamt für Statistik, 2020). Even if we do not have detailed numbers of social workers in a narrow sense, we can state that social work professionals have their specific place in the carceral system.

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<sup>2</sup> The Federal Statistical Office does not show separately social work professionals in a narrow sense, but has a category named "social work/education" that includes not only social workers, but also teachers, work instructors, or pastors, among others. In other words, all staff except security agents, medical professions and management/administration.

However, their roles vary in the different correctional settings. For instance, juvenile correctional institutions emphasize their educational character, and thus have an important number of staff with a socio-educational background (e.g. to see in Frauenfelder et al., 2018). Prisons for adults – like the ones we studied – have rather small social work units that are organized according to a service logic, meaning a(n) (internal) service that can be solicited when needed, but that is separate from the areas of living, working or leisure. Some few correctional facilities for adults know a system of living units where social workers are integrated in the daily routines of prison life rather than constituting a centralized social service unit (for more details see Richter et al., forthcoming).

## 2.1 The dualism of care and control

Prisons constitute a particular context for social work professionals with the challenge of ‘walking a fine line between advocating for the individual client and fitting in well enough with the system so that one is allowed to continue in the system,’ as Young (2015, p. 107) puts it in a nutshell. The balance of care and control – inherent to most fields of social work – is profoundly challenged here. As *total institutions* (Goffman, 1961), prisons have full control – at least physical – over prisoners (Richter & Emprechtinger, 2021) and through that, they have an important impact on realizing professional care. Elements of control, on the system level for the institution’s functioning and on the individual level for a prisoner’s progressive release from prison, overlap and permeate supportive social assistance as an element of care. A comprehensive understanding of care, however, situates the term not only on the individual level, but englobes the system level as well. For social work in criminal justice this means that its caring role not only concerns individual case work but is also seen on an institutional level or even on a societal level to promote e.g. structural change of problematic or hindering elements for social reintegration (Kawamura-Reindl & Schneider, 2015).

Focusing on social work in carceral settings, we see that the relation of care and control in forensic social work depends on trends in criminal policy and society in general. With the turn to control (Garland, 2001), risk avoidance and treatment became a guiding principle in criminal justice in many countries. Actuarial risk assessments and risk-oriented intervention plans based on forensic psychologic evidence, such as the risk-need-responsivity model of Andrews and Bonta (2010) that aims to reduce and manage the risk of recidivism, entered the penal system and re-oriented social work practice in this field. Alternatively, other forensic psychological approaches under the desistance paradigm (Maruna, 2001) or the Good Lives Model (e.g. Ward, 2002) gained importance in criminal justice. As in German-speaking Switzerland, where we did our fieldwork, the risk-oriented approach is prevailing, we will briefly touch on this perspective and its consequences for social work practice.

## 2.2 Social work in the prism of risk and managerialism

An emphasis on risk pushes social work away from inclusive, emancipatory approaches towards exclusionary, controlling practices which do not necessarily cohere with traditional values. Social work has been transformed from a profession with a commitment to enhancing individual well-being to one concerned to prevent harm. (Hardy, 2017, p. 395)

Preventing harm goes hand in hand with focusing on risks and their possible consequences. Bauwens and Roose identified such a shift for the practice of Belgian probation work that ‘targets criminogenic needs rather than the offenders’ individual and social needs’ (2017, p. 641). Therefore, social work practice has to control, avoid, and manage risks. Castel criticises that in such a logic, the individual becomes a ‘combinatory of *factors*, factors of risk’ (Castel,

1991, p. 281 as cited in Hardy, 2015, p. 77). Risk-assessment tools critically discussed under the keyword *actuarialism* (e.g. Webb, 2009; Hardy, 2017) then reduce the social work profession to ‘ends-oriented practices that are configured by a form of political arithmetic based on risk insurance and juridical responsibility’ (Webb, 2009, p. 223).

To contrast the rise and predominance of risk-oriented approaches with its feared consequences for social workers’ professional autonomy, recently several German scholars recollected and emphasized social work methods and values in forensic social work (Cornel et al., 2018; Ghanem, 2018). For Switzerland, Sommerfeld argued for strengthening the objective of reintegration in criminal justice social work and for using the risk-assessment advantages as a tool within it, but to resist risk-orientation as the leading paradigm since it impedes social work’s potential and values (Sommerfeld, 2010).

### 3 The risk-oriented approach in the Swiss-German judicial system

Before presenting the data, we will briefly outline the institutional context of the risk-oriented approach. After a pilot project that started about thirteen years ago, German-speaking Switzerland has now integrally implemented the concept of the *risk-oriented approach to executing penal sanctions* (ROS).<sup>3</sup> This approach is inscribed in a global enforcement of risk-reduction and a trend towards evidence-based practice (‘what works’) with detainees (as described by Hardy, 2015, for the probation service in England). At the heart of ROS is the risk-need-responsivity (RNR) model developed by Andrews and Bonta (2010) that puts three principles forward: the *risk principle*, the *need principle*, and the *responsivity principle*. The risk principle states that the higher the risk of recidivism, the more intense intervention is needed, as Mayer (2014), one of the main authors of ROS, writes in reference to Andrews and Bonta. The need principle means that intervention is focused on the criminogenic needs that impact the risk of recidivism. Finally, the responsivity principle relates to choosing the method for the best impact and client engagement.

ROS is conceptualized as process and divided into four steps. The *first step* is an automatized algorithm-based risk-assessment tool that analyses a detainee’s risk of recidivism in combination with the seriousness of the offence. The individual analysis of a case based on actuarial data results in a categorization of ‘A’ (no need for further assessment), ‘B’ (need to assess risk of recidivism of general delinquency), or ‘C’ (need to assess risk of recidivism for violence or sexual offences). Based on this categorization, in a *second step*, a specialized forensic-psychological assessment service (FPAS) conducts a profound risk-assessment based on documents available about the detainee and the offence in the corresponding cases. The assessment thereby takes into account two different levels of risk factors and identifies needs of change for each of them. Based on scientific literature, the first one englobes factors that lie in the person (e.g. character, behaviour, pro-criminal attitude, addictions, mental health issues), the second one concerns environmental factors (social relations, family, work, leisure, financial situation, housing). This analysis is done without direct contact with the convicted person. In the *third step*, the coordinator in charge at the executive authority<sup>4</sup> transfers the risk-assessment results into a summarizing file that serves as a guideline for the individual

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<sup>3</sup> The programme was developed and is hosted by the Office of Corrections and Rehabilitation of the canton of Zurich, which offers training and support. See [www.rosnet.ch](http://www.rosnet.ch)

<sup>4</sup> The executive authority is the deciding administrative authority on the cantonal level charged with the supervision and execution of judicial ordered sentences. This is not necessarily the cantonal administration of the prison in case, but where the sentence was given by a cantonal judge.

sentence management plan, which is established by the prison social worker in charge. If there are differing views on the case, certain parameters might be negotiated between the social worker and the coordinator. While elements concerning the environmental factors can be adapted by the executing institution and the executive authority alone, changes concerning the level of the detainee's personality needs to be consulted with the FPAS. Finally, the *fourth step* concerns the execution of the sentence. It comprises standardized reporting of the executing institution about realized interventions to the attention of the executive authority who evaluates the reports and, if necessary, consults the FPAS.

In summary, ROS is a systematic and evidence-based process of managing detainees with high risk of violent or sexual recidivism. Scientific knowledge from forensic psychology is thereby the guiding orientation, as can be seen in the foundational work by Andrews and Bonta (2010). Our critical perspective, outlined briefly in the theoretical mapping above, draws particularly attention to the inextricable dualism of care and control in prison social work practice and the impact that a risk-oriented alignment in criminal justice, such as ROS, has on it. By doing so, attention needs to be paid not only to the identified challenges, but as well to strategies of the professionals to deal with these challenges and integrate them in their professional practice.

#### **4 Materials and methods**

This exploratory research project is interested in social work's current challenges in correctional settings with regard to the rising focus on risk reduction. We seek to better understand social workers' balancing between professional ethics and values on the one hand and the loyalty to the prison organisation and its inherent logics that impose an important number of constraints on social work practice.

To capture the "practice(s)" of social work in real situations, we started with half-day shadowings of in total eight practitioners in two prisons. The technique of shadowing is a type of observation, that consists of following a person as a shadow. While the observer remains in principle a shadow, there are gaps, walks, breaks etc. where shorter or longer exchanges are possible between the social worker and us who followed (Czarniawska, 2012, 2014; McDonald & Simpson, 2014). The method is often used in organizational studies or institutional ethnographies (Gilliat-Ray, 2011), as it provides insights into everyday actions and interactions during the working hours of a person. These observations were followed by seven interviews including all the shadowed social workers<sup>5</sup> to deepen the insights from the 'shadowings'. In particular, the interviews also provided the opportunity to reflect together with the social workers on the interactions and activities we had observed previously. Data consist of field notes of the shadowings and summaries of the interviews from the recorded audio files. Due to our exploratory approach, we analysed data inductively by identifying core issues of prison social work and putting them in relation to each other. Data were in a first step analysed separately for each prison and confronted comparatively in a second step.

Sample strategies were partly – for the choice of the prisons – in our hands, partly we depended on what the head of the social service respectively our gate-keeper organized and scheduled for our stay. On the institutional level, we chose two prisons that represent, for Switzerland, rather large spaces with 200 and more prisoners. Prisons in Switzerland range from 5 to almost 400 places and the average amounts 74 places per prison in 2020. Compared

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<sup>5</sup> One interview was done with two social workers at once upon their request.

to other countries like the UK or the USA, Switzerland has a rather low incarceration rate of 80 per 100'000 inhabitants in 2020 (Bundesamt für Statistik, 2020). Both studied prisons offer places for general sanctions, high-security sections, pre-trial areas as well as space for people with therapeutic measures. They are situated in different cantons in the German speaking part of Switzerland which allows for a certain variety regarding the legal and historical context, as the execution of sanctions depends on the cantonal legislation and politics. Regarding ROS, we chose one prison with solid experience with this approach and one prison that only recently integrated ROS in its processes. This difference was to allow for insightful data in the interplay of social work practice and risk-oriented approaches to the execution of sentences.

Regarding the practitioners we shadowed and interviewed, we had no influence on their sampling. Our gate-keepers organized our stay in accordance with their colleagues and communicated us our “programme” roughly some time before each stay in the field. We signed a non-disclosure agreement and informed the social workers via their supervisors beforehand about our research interest. The consent of the prisoners was gained in verbal form by the respective social workers when entering the social workers’ office. We were presented as observing primarily the social worker, not the prisoner and prisoners were asked their consent in front of us.

The sample of the eight social workers is presented here regarding three dimensions: a) we include equal number of male and female professionals in our study; b) we include all levels of professional experience ranging from ‘freshmen’ with less than one year experience to professionals with almost 15-years’ experience in prison social work; c) as the carceral setting – even the social service section – had recruited for long time along the criteria of professional experience without specification in which domain, practitioners in the social service comprise professionals with and without specific social work training. We, hence, include in our sample practitioners with specific training in a social work programme as well as university trainings close to social work in a ‘neighbouring’ discipline. We also include practitioners with professional training in social pedagogy as well as practitioners with no specific social work training at all.

The small sample and the relatively short time in the field clearly present some limitations to our study. We only got insights from a certain number of the respective social work teams without knowing the sampling strategies on our research partners’ side who didn’t give us any leeway to choose the persons we shadowed and interviewed. At the same time, a four-hours stay in the field is a very limited time to overview the entire picture. Additionally, as outlined above, cantonal competence for the penal institutions leads to a very diverse landscape all over Switzerland that can hardly be sketched throughout such a small-scale study. We are, however, convinced that these first explorations gave us fruitful insights to comprehend at a basic level challenges and perspectives of social workers in the Swiss penal system, hardly explored until now.<sup>6</sup> The relative similarity of the two correctional facilities concerning several structural elements (prison for adult men with a central social service) with variation in one main variable regarding the experience with ROS allowed for a specific promising focus on this aspect. While the sample is small, we nevertheless have been able to record similar data in following research projects that support the findings presented here.

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<sup>6</sup> Subsequent to the here presented project, the authors continue exploring tasks, roles and identities of prison social work in an ongoing four-years research project (funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation)

## 5 Results

As carceral systems are strongly embedded in their national context of criminal justice and social policy, the results section starts with an empirical description of what we observed as social work's profile in the studied prisons. This empirical introduction into the specific Swiss context should allow readers to contextualize the subsequent core of the article which treats social workers' positioning in the specific dualism of care and control under the relatively new risk paradigm. We will also dedicate some considerations to the new player, the forensic-psychological assessment service, and its impact on social work practice and autonomy.

### 5.1 The triple role of social work

With some minor differences, the social work practitioners in both institutions are responsible for a similar set of tasks. These may be divided in three subgroups: first, social assistance on a voluntary basis; second, tasks in line with the execution of a sentence; and third, tasks in the context of preventing recidivism.

The *internal social service* offers support on the prisoner's demand. It is based on the prisoner's right to have access to social assistance during incarceration (Art. 96, Swiss Criminal Code). This service can be seen in the dimension of care and is built on the voluntary engagement of the person in need. Every prisoner has a social worker who is responsible for and available to him. Support can be of an administrative nature or for emotional well-being. Related tasks are various, depend on the prisoner's needs (social worker 7) and may even comprise mediating activities between prisoners and other prison staff (social worker 1) in the case of conflict, misunderstanding, or supporting the prisoner to express his needs. This service orientation seems to include the risk to be seen as 'the secretary of people' which social workers try to reject clearly (social worker 6). Thus, an important principle is to help prisoners to help themselves with administrative paperwork as far as possible. In this care perspective, the prisoner controls the frequency of contact as well as the issues discussed.

Secondly, social workers have *certain tasks concerning the execution of the sentence*. This includes social assessment followed by establishing a comprehensive file about the prisoner, and in a second step, writing the individual sentence management plan in cooperation with the executive authority. During the prisoner's time in prison, social workers are reporting on demand to the executive authority to provide information for decisions on easing the regime for the deprivation of liberty, especially release on temporary licence, parole, or the transfer to an open institution. Generally, these reports include information about the prisoner's behaviour in prison concerning dimensions such as living, working, spare time, and visits, as well as a concluding evaluation and a legal prognosis. Reports are generally established with the participation of other prison staff and coordinated with the prison management. Finally, social workers support the prisoners for their release or their transfer to an open institution. These tasks, related to the execution of the sentence, represent both caring and control elements and include an important part of managerial paperwork. We noticed the importance of writing about the prisoner and evaluating him.

Finally, implementing the risk-oriented regime, ROS intensified the controlling dimension of prison social work. The programme introduced a set of tasks with a *risk-minimizing reasoning* for detainees who are imprisoned for violent and sexual offences with a high recidivism risk (mainly labelled as ROS C; see above). Of particular interest here is that a third party identifies the issues that should be treated by the social worker and with the prisoner to reduce the risk of recidivism. These "needs" are elaborated on the basis of a forensic-psychological

paper-based risk assessment. Thus, the professional–client relationship in prison social work is characterized by a double jeopardy. On the one hand there is the challenge of the prisoner’s (mostly) involuntary engagement, on the other hand the social workers are themselves limited in their discretion and autonomy by the definitional power of a third party.

A social worker generally wears all three hats (resp. the first two if ROS is not applicable, i.e. for ROS label A) for the same prisoner and has to manage them in the relational practice despite their potential conflictual logics. The first mission of voluntary social assistance is quite unpredictable and might sometimes become quite intensive on exhaustive demand of the prisoner while others hardly ever use this service. The second set of tasks concerning the sentence management is rather equal for most prisoners but has gained in size and importance since several years as reports are demanded to be more detailed and specific. In order to respond to both roles, they appear to adopt a “neutral” role intermediating between the needs for support and empathy of the prisoner and the task to report comprehensively on detainees in view of important decisions on the sentence. In their words, this means the attempt to not gloss over actual behaviour of the prisoner but equally to not harm him intentionally. ROS, however, only concerns part of the prisoners, but is quite exhaustive in time and personal engagement in the sense of professionally challenging. We observed mixed feelings for it, depending on experience and institutional support for doing this challenging work.

## **5.2 Risk-reduction in the dualism of care and control**

As we have seen in the previous chapter, social workers are confronted with different meanings and aims of their social work role in the interprofessional context of a prison. In this section, we will discuss the question of how social workers manage to deal with these different expectations or even make use of the interrelation. This seems particularly interesting when the risk-reduction task has to be fulfilled as well. As we have already pointed out this last one is the one clearly characterized by the prisoner’s (mostly) involuntary engagement. Even though there is no direct negative consequence like harder sanctions if a detainee does not cooperate, it may massively reduce the chances for parole and other relaxations of the execution of the sentence.

On a general level, we could observe with the prison that has only recently introduced ROS, that the implementation of a new paradigm in social work’s profile creates – not surprisingly – some tension. Social workers showed mixed opinions towards the changes for practice coming along with ROS. While one social worker stresses the positive impact of a clearer and more structured case work, since there is (top down) unified understanding within the criminal justice system (social worker 6), another practitioner emphasizes the important changes on the relational level with the prisoner: ‘With this explicit work on the offence, it changes a lot, nothing is neutral anymore.’ (social worker 7). For him, the obligation to set up an involuntary engagement with the prisoner to talk about the offence he is sentenced for, produces discomfort. This resistance is nourished by the feeling of losing ‘neutrality’ that is connected to the primarily ‘caring role’ up to then. The discomfort in this case might be explained with two points: (1) the practitioner worked in a section where the main focus of social work is social assistance, and not the managing tasks for the execution of the sentence, due to prisoners’ profiles with a large number of short sentences. So the controlling character of work was relatively small before ROS. (2) At that moment of transition, the institution did not offer any tools or instruments to do the offence-centred work. In combination with a background without specific training in social work, this practitioner seems to lack points of reference (methods, ethics, tool kits etc.) for engaging with the new role and the more



strongly impacting ambivalence of care and control. This observation came out clearly in comparison with the second prison in our study with solid experience with ROS. Both on a methodical level with various instruments and tool kits provided by the institution and on the reflective level of social workers' sense-making of potential tensions between their caring role as social assistance service and their appearance as executive agents of the risk-minimizing mission of the sanctioning system.

Three elements emerge from the data that are identified as having important consequences for practice and for realizing the social work mandate under the ambivalent condition of being a helpful hand in custody and exercising, at the same time, tasks in relation with the risk controlling mission:

1. As indicated above, the order for working with the detainee on forensically defined risks and resources comes from outside the social worker–client relationship. Consequently, social workers must be *active in establishing the relationship* and introducing the imposed mission. Therefore, professionals are concerned with proving to the prisoner 'that they are not a threat for their integrity' as a social worker highlights (social worker 2). He continues to describe his practice with his concerns about the crucial question of 'How can I get him on board?'

The engagement work starts not only with the FPAS assessment report available weeks or even months after a detainee enters the prison, but already with his entrance, where social workers start to create a professional relationship. One social worker points out the importance of preparing the prisoner for the risk assessment report that will be the basis on which they have to work together (social worker 3). It is an active positioning of the social worker as the person who is there to support and to help to digest the judgements and reasoning of the FPAS. The strategy seems to distance the social workers from 'them', the FPAS, and to actively create an alliance with the prisoner.

2. As a coercive setting is not a fruitful soil in which to root relational work on difficult moments in a detainee's past, social workers are challenged to *create a voluntary basis*. They do this by verbally creating a distance to the controlling executive authority and the FPAS. By this, the social workers attempt to shift from a coercive setting that the prisoners suspect they are a part of, to a setting on a (more) voluntary basis. As the setting remains coercive, the voluntariness is limited, and prisoners are rather "voluntold" to participate. One strategy to minimize the coercive character is to take the position as a neutral agent in the correctional setting. This could be observed with several social workers in mainly two elements: (a) Using the key word *transparency*. Social workers emphasize on clearly and openly informing prisoners about the executive authority's orders and the consequences of the prisoner's participation or non-participation in this programme. Clear role communication, an important element in working with involuntary clients (Trotter, 2006), is a crucial element. In consequence, the detainee can decide whether to cooperate. (b) A less explicitly emerging strategy is a certain type of *partiality* for the prisoners. At several points, social workers emphasize their non-judging attitude related to their non-decisional position. This means they neither judge nor decide on prisoners' sentences and releases, but they say to offer help to do retrospective reflection on the offence, and in consequence, increase the chances for parole or temporary release.

The positioning as a *neutral person* is challenged by the obligation to report to the executive authority on the offence-centred relational work. This potential conflictual double role is faced with a mix of diminution ('I'm *only* reporting') and an emphasis on the obligation put on them from the part of the executive authority ('I *have* to do this.').

3. The third element concerns the challenge of *being perceived as a credible professional* for an (in)voluntary engagement in the coercive context. Interview data suggest a great emphasis on gaining confidence, that the prisoner sees the social worker as 'well-disposed towards him,' and as not 'trying to play a mean trick on him' (social worker 2). Support under the social service label helps to create the image of a caring person and to facilitate the involuntary engagement under the sign of risk reduction.

As emerges in this listing, the forensic-psychological assessment service plays an important role in the risk-reduction approach and – depending on the perspective – supports or patronizes social work practice. Given the hegemonic power of FPAS, we will now take a closer look at the relation of the different players.

### **5.3 A new player changing the power balance**

Although offence-centred work was already done before the introduction of ROS due to the 2007 Criminal Code reform, ROS put the risk-oriented approach to the fore with its structured and systematic application. Actuarial assessment tools and targeted intervention on risk factors have become paramount in the execution of sentences in German-speaking Switzerland. Furthermore, the implementation accelerated and intensified the conceptual development of the offence-centred working tools for social workers that had gradually started before, as one social worker explained during the shadowing.

As outlined above, ROS introduced the FPAS in the criminal justice system. With this, the former dyad of the executive authority and the executing penal institution was then complemented by the forensic perspective into a triad. The psychological perspective has gained a defining role in identifying and assessing violent and sexual offenders as well as in planning and evaluating the execution of their sentences. Our data suggest that ROS and thus the FPAS brought into play a scientific 'truth' that is hardly negotiable for the prison social workers who must execute related tasks according to the FPAS.

The social workers talked about this new player in an impersonal way, using the name of the organisation to relate to it. It seems that the social workers perceive FPAS as a faceless, impersonal authority that only transmits instructions via the executive authority without entering in a dialog with the front-line professionals in the prisons. While the executive authority, respectively the case manager in charge, appears as a 'real' person with whom the social workers can negotiate goals set for the prisoners, the FPAS is an intangible, while very powerful player for them.

In sum, ROS unifies practice and is aimed at assuring a certain quality in the work with detainees according to a specific trend in forensic psychology. At the same time, ROS results in a shift in the power relations of who defines the detainee's needs and problems to be treated.

#### 5.4 Social work practice in a forensic-psychological frame: adjustment and resistance

Even though it might seem that social work, to a certain degree, is nonautonomous in the risk-oriented work and has to act under the orders of forensic psychology, practitioners in the interviews also show an important agency in influencing the intervention orders they receive from the executive authority. Social workers' reasons for discussing the intervention orders with the executive authority follow two different strands: on the one hand, the rejection and thus correction in the sentence management plan is argued by whether social workers are rightly addressed by tasks: 'Social work has to be assigned where it makes sense. If social work is assigned for every task, it doesn't make any sense' (social worker 1). On the other hand, needing to check, and if necessary to correct, a sentence management plan is driven by the risk of an accident: 'As long as nothing happens, nobody looks at the documents. But if something happens outside the prison [after release], then everybody looks what social work should have done. That's why it is important to check' (social worker 3). There seems to be an important fear of being held accountable for future released prisoners' offences, which (partly) explains the emphasis on correct and precise sentence management plans, and subsequently the related reports.

If we analyse professional practice with Abbott's triad of *diagnosis* (problem definition), *intervention* (defining solution strategies), and *inference* (Abbott, 1988), our data show evidence that under the forensic-psychological paradigm of risk-orientation, social work loses autonomy and discretion. Even if some social workers criticize ROS to 'totally emphasize on the problem' and demonstrate an independent professional vision regarding the problem definition by stating 'I do have a concept for the case even without the FPAS' (social worker 2), they have to admit that in the end their analysis does not have the same weight as that of the FPAS (social worker 4). Some social workers recently introduced in this regime seem to be more willing to subordinate under the FPAS's problem definition and not to counter it: 'If ROS is saying that he has a narcissistic personality, and he says he doesn't, then there is simply nothing to negotiate' (social worker 5).

Regarding intervention, forensic psychologists are identifying the issues that should be worked on and the aims that should be reached, but they do not predict the methods or instruments to apply. The two examined prisons show quite different intervention modes, which can be partly explained by the difference in experience with working with ROS. While the prison with only little experience with ROS shows individual and not systematized handling, the experienced prison relies on a systematic and structured toolbox of methods of both psychological and social work provenience.

#### 6 Conclusion

Our argument has clarified that the risk-oriented approach to executing sanctions (ROS) induces a shift for social work towards an activity as agents of an institutional control logic. This logic implies the attempt to control and to impact on risk factors with persons incarcerated for violent or sexual offences. Even if the identified risk factors touch issues that are in the core of social work such as housing, education/work or social relationships, they are not negotiated by the social workers themselves with the detainees but imposed by someone else. Additionally, they constitute a control parameter.

The interviewed social workers in the prison with little experience with the risk programme clearly perceived a shift to more controlling tasks with the obligation of working with prisoners on an involuntary basis. Administrative tasks such as social assessment, reporting, or managing demands for temporary release seem to have been less obvious for them as

involuntary relational work. Evaluating someone regarding parole eligibility might be less pressing on their self-perception as a voluntary offer and support for prisoners than persuading someone to intense relational work reflecting the committed offence.

Working with involuntary clients requires a specific toolbox of ethical and legal considerations, and particularly methods to promote the client's engagement (Rooney, 2009; Trotter, 2009). The social workers in the ROS-experienced prison present several important elements from literature as accurate role clarification and a certain flexibility for the clients' needs and questions. However, in general the clear definition of problems and needs from a third, and moreover intangible, actor that limits both the client and social worker in their flexibility and discretion raises important questions. The division of diagnosis and intervention might position the social worker as a 'neutral' person, as a quasi-counterpart to the deciding and sanctioning authority. Non-judging social work professionals might have easier access to detainees and be successful in establishing a relation that allows for relational work that still meets the political aim of risk prevention.

However, we should not forget that prison social work as such is part of the sanctioning system and contributes to and reproduces the institutional logic of the risk-oriented approach in the carceral setting. As ROS decreases social work's discretion in defining the issues to be addressed in the relational offence-centred work with prisoners, this point merits particular interest. For this part of their tasks, professionals are executing the orders of forensic psychology with only little leeway for their own diagnosis and intervention planning.

At the same time, the strategies to minimize social work's contribution to the sentences' punitive character as an actor who is 'only reporting, but not deciding' veils social work's power as a decision-forming actor through the close interaction with the prisoner. During our field work, we have received clues that would indicate this double role of care and control is less reflected in a critical and sensitive manner than questions around motivating involuntary clients in coercive settings.

To conclude, we state that social work is not fully recognized in its professionalism regarding the risk-oriented work. Profession-specific methods and theoretical frameworks are subordinated to forensic psychology that disposes of the definitional power for all involved professions. Hence, social work is rather in an executing role of concepts, values, and instruments that are not its own. In this sense we second the argument of Sommerfeld et al. (2009) for the case of parole work under the risk security regime and emphasize in the closing remarks the importance to embed social work in an interdisciplinary discourse and joint approach to define and execute rehabilitative measures so to strengthen its role in the Swiss penal system. That in turn requires a clear and convincing positioning of social work knowledge, tools, and values. In a comprehensive understanding of care (and control) this should then not be limited to individual case work, but include the institutional and system level, as it has always been social work's endeavour.

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**Author's Address:**

Julia Emprechtinger  
HES-SO Valais-Wallis, School of Social work  
route de la plaine 2, CH-3960 Sierre  
[julia.emprechtinger@hevs.ch](mailto:julia.emprechtinger@hevs.ch)

**Author's Address:**

Prof. Dr. Marina Richter  
HES-SO Valais-Wallis, School of Social work  
route de la plaine 2, CH-3960 Sierre  
[marina.richter@hevs.ch](mailto:marina.richter@hevs.ch)