

Social Identity and Knowledge Formation

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Abstract: This article examines knowledge formation in social services management as an interpretive and socially embedded process, responding to the growing emphasis on data-informed decision-making aimed at improving service effectiveness. It argues that prevailing discussions tend to focus on data availability and shared information bases, while paying insufficient attention to how knowledge is formed, interpreted, and integrated into managerial decision-making. In particular, managers' cognitive frames, social identities, and organisational norms appear to shape how information needs are recognised and what is regarded as relevant knowledge. In social services, knowledge formation is especially complex due to the field's epistemic diversity, in which experiential, contextual, and research-based forms of knowledge coexist and intersect. Building on this premise, the article conceptualises knowledge formation as a managerial process that is inherently interpretive and socially situated. By applying social identity theory, the study extends existing social work research that has predominantly focused on client–practitioner interaction, shifting attention to managerial sense-making and knowledge practices. The empirical analysis is based on qualitative document analysis of two types of material: (1) national and local documents guiding social work and (2) strategy documents produced by the focal organisations. The analysis identifies identity constructions, normative expectations, and knowledge-related assumptions articulated in these documents, illuminating how managerial interpretations and sense-making are structured in social services management.

Keywords: Knowledge management, Knowledge formation, Social identity theory, Managerial sense-making, Social services

1. Introduction

The role of knowledge in the management of health and social care services has expanded rapidly, and expectations for evidence-based decision-making continue to grow (Hujala and Laihonen, 2021; WHO, 2022; El-Jardali, 2023). Current debates emphasise the need for a shared information base to support data-driven governance (Laihonen and Kokko, 2023), yet considerably less attention has been paid to the processes through which managerial knowledge is produced and to how heterogeneous forms of knowing are integrated into decision-making in practice (Laihonen, Kork and Sinervo, 2023).

Research on social work knowledge has focused primarily on the practitioner–client encounter, examining interaction, documentation, and judgement (Reid, 1981; Pawson et al, 2003; Trevithick, 2008; Leung, 2009). In contrast, much less is known about knowledge formation in social services management, where information needs, interpretations, and priorities vary across professional groups and become embedded in organisational practices and expectations (Laihonen, Kork and Sinervo, 2023). Understanding these processes is increasingly important as managers navigate complex organisational boundaries and reconcile diverse professional viewpoints.

This study conceptualises knowledge formation not only as a technical process of producing and assembling information, but also as a socially embedded and identity-dependent process. Drawing on social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978; Turner et al, 1987), we examine how shared identities shape interpretations of roles, define what counts as relevant or legitimate knowledge, and influence the prioritisation of information in managerial decision-making. In this view, identities function as identity-based resources that structure the meaning and relevance of knowledge in managerial contexts.

This perspective is particularly relevant for social services, where pluralistic knowledge sources—research-based, experiential, and contextual—do not easily translate into the managerial knowledge practices increasingly required in public administration. When professional and organisational identities differ in their assumptions about social work's purpose, values, and legitimate knowledge in social work, identical data may be interpreted in fundamentally different ways. Thus, knowledge formation in social services management must be understood at the intersection of epistemic diversity and identity-based meaning-making.

Empirically, this study analyses strategic, normative, and locally produced documents from two Finnish wellbeing services counties. By applying social identity theory, it identifies identity constructions, normative expectations and knowledge-related assumptions that shape the early construction of managerial knowledge practices in social services.

The study addresses the following research questions:

- Which cultural, organisational, and identity-based factors shape and constrain knowledge formation in social services?
- What assumptions and knowledge-related expectations are produced in the strategic and normative documents guiding the management of social services?

By integrating social identity theory with research on social work knowledge, this study advances knowledge management scholarship by highlighting how identity-based assumptions become embedded in managerial knowledge practices and condition knowledge utilisation. The remainder of the article proceeds as follows: Section 2 outlines the theoretical foundations; Section 3 reviews research on knowledge in social care; Section 4 presents the empirical context and methods; Section 5 reports the findings; and Section 6 concludes.

2. Shared Identity and Knowledge Formation

Social identity refers to the component of self-concept derived from an individual's membership in socially meaningful groups. Rooted in social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978; 1979) and self-categorisation theory (Turner et al, 1987), the concept emphasises that identity becomes salient when group distinctions are perceived as relevant. In such situations, individuals engage in categorisation, identification, and comparison processes through which group boundaries are constructed. Based on contextual cues, such as language, behaviour, or organisational roles, individuals classify themselves and others into social categories. Once a particular category becomes subjectively meaningful, it forms the in-group ("we"), while alternative categories are positioned as out-groups ("others").

Identification with an in-group shapes cognition and behaviour by orienting individuals toward shared norms, values, and expectations (Turner et al., 1987). Through depersonalisation, social information is primarily interpreted from a group member perspective, fostering cohesion and professional socialisation. These shared meanings and norms— a shared identity— emerge through social interaction and structure information processing by shaping what is considered relevant, legitimate, and actionable knowledge. As professional vocabularies and epistemic traditions are collectively reproduced (Haslam, 2004), knowledge formation becomes inherently situated within group-based meaning systems.

From this perspective, shared identity functions as a key determinant of how meaning is assigned to information. Interpretations of concepts such as effectiveness, justice, or client agency are anchored in identity-based assumptions that also define standards of valid or sufficient knowledge. These standards are continually negotiated within the in-group, rendering knowledge selective and context-bound. Consequently, the same information may yield divergent conclusions when interpreted through different professional identities.

In organisational contexts, in-groups and out-groups commonly form around professions, departments, or functional domains. Alongside these, organisations may develop a shared organisational identity (Haslam, Postmes and Ellemers, 2003; Albert and Whetten, 1985), defined as collective beliefs about the organisation's values, purpose, and position. Organisational identity is produced and maintained through linguistic, symbolic, and material practices, such as strategic documents and formal communication. These artefacts shape what knowledge is prioritised, how it circulates, and which decisions are viewed as legitimate. In doing so, organisational identity influences the entire knowledge lifecycle: what information is collected, how it is documented, how it is processed, and to whom it is reported—for example, through strategy documents, recording practices, and managerial monitoring systems.

3. Knowledge and Knowledge Formation in Social Care

The concept of knowledge management is relatively new in social work, although the field has engaged in various forms of information management since at least the 1980s (Leung et al, 2010). Research has primarily focused on knowledge in practice: the professional knowledge base, knowledge formation in client–practitioner encounters, and information systems supporting practice. Far less attention has been paid to knowledge formation within social services management and to the social processes through which knowledge is interpreted and used in organisational decision-making. This shifts the analytical focus towards the nature of knowledge produced in social work and its relevance for knowledge management.

Social work aims to promote individual and community wellbeing and advance social justice at the intersection of personal life situations, institutional structures, and broader societal conditions. Meeting this mandate requires a broad and partially indeterminate knowledge base. Prior research has conceptualised this knowledge

base through frameworks emphasising sources of knowledge (Pawson et al, 2003), forms of knowledge (Reid, 1981; Hudson, 1997; Trevithick, 2008; Gray and Schubert, 2013; Leung, 2009), and arenas of knowledge (Payne, 2001). Across these approaches, social work knowledge is understood as theoretical, practice-based, and contextual.

Theoretical and research-based knowledge provides conceptual tools for explaining social phenomena and structuring practice (Hudson, 1997; Trevithick, 2008). Practical knowledge consists of the experiential and tacit understandings developed in everyday work, particularly in client interactions (Reid, 1981; Trevithick, 2003; Leung, 2009). Contextual knowledge relates to legislative, policy, and organisational frameworks within which social work takes place (Trevithick, 2003; Hudson, 1997). While this helps explain the traditional focus on client-level knowledge formation, knowledge generated in practice is also absorbed into social services management, where its meaning and use vary across professional groups (Hjelmer and Møller, 2016).

A substantial body of research conceptualises knowledge formation as a relational and interpretive process. Leung (2007, 2009) describes knowledge as emerging situationally through interpretation between practitioner and client, while Salovaara (2024) conceptualises case-based knowledge as embedded in documentation, reflective practices, and interactions among practitioners, clients, and networks. These practices generate context-bound knowledge that guides professional judgement and decision-making, highlighting knowledge formation as a practice-embedded process closely tied to professional agency.

Documentation plays a central mediating role by structuring client-specific information within organisational information systems aligned with administrative and technical infrastructures (Høybye-Mortensen and Ejbye-Ernst, 2018). While documented information supports both frontline practice and managerial decision-making, it reflects a technical view of knowledge as an objective and manageable resource (Leung, 2007), which may limit the visibility of relational and contextual dimensions of social work (Parton, 2008).

These insights underpin two broad perspectives on knowledge management in social work: technical and human-oriented (Leung, 2007; Jang, 2013). The technical perspective views knowledge as objective and measurable, emphasising data collection, storage and indicators. The human-oriented perspective understands knowledge as socially constructed, dynamic, and interpretive, emerging through shared professional practices and meaning-making (Leung, 2009).

Leung (2007) argues that social work knowledge emerges at the intersection of explicit and experiential knowledge, which continually reconstitute each other in everyday work and management practices. This complexity is particularly relevant for social services management. Public management often privileges technical knowledge and indicators (Laihonen, Kork and Sinervo, 2023), yet knowledge also gains meaning through interaction among professional interpretations, organisational goals, and political-strategic expectations. In this context, professional and organisational identities further shape what is considered relevant knowledge and which knowledge needs become prioritised in management.

In sum, knowledge formation in social services cannot be understood solely through technical knowledge production or interaction-based meaning-making. Rather, knowledge used in management emerges at the intersection of multiple parallel processes. This article examines these intersections by focusing on how shared social identities shape the relevance and use of knowledge in management practices.

4. Context and Methods of the Empirical Study

4.1 Empirical Context: Finnish Wellbeing Services Counties as Contexts for Social Services Management

This study examines social services management in two Finnish wellbeing services counties: Pirkanmaa (Pirha) and Southwest Finland (Varha), both established in 2023 following a national reorganisation of health and social care responsibilities. Pirha and Varha are Finland's two largest wellbeing services counties, each serving close to half a million residents and employing over 20,000 professionals. Both are responsible for a broad range of statutory health, social, and rescue services and operate in a university hospital environment; Varha additionally functions in a bilingual context.

Following the transfer of responsibilities, both counties are in an early phase of developing governance structures, managerial practices, and knowledge systems. Previously fragmented service systems have had to be harmonised, new strategic frameworks introduced, and knowledge practices established to support decision-making across complex organisational boundaries. National evaluations have highlighted persistent challenges related to service integration, fragmented information bases, and the development of coherent managerial practices, particularly in social services. These conditions make Pirha and Varha analytically relevant

contexts for examining how knowledge formation is shaped during organisational transition in social services management.

4.2 Research Material: Strategic, Normative, and Locally Produced Documents

The empirical material consists of qualitative document data (17 documents, 779 pages in total) collected between January and March 2026 from the official websites of wellbeing services counties, relevant ministries, and national online legal databases. Two primary categories of documents are analysed:

- *National guiding documents*, including legislative, strategic, and normative texts defining the organisation, governance, and knowledge use of social services nationally. These documents outline statutory duties, expectations regarding knowledge-based management, and the principles of the wellbeing services county reform.
- *Regional documents from Pirha and Varha*, such as county-level strategies, social work-specific guidelines, knowledge management strategies, and welfare reports outlining how social services are organised and how knowledge is collected, interpreted, and used within both counties.

Document selection followed a purposive and abductive approach. An initial set of 85 normative and strategic documents was identified, from which 17 were selected based on their central role in structuring statutory obligations, strategic and operational management, and knowledge-based management.

Analytically, the documents were treated as sites where managerial expectations, organisational priorities, and assumptions about knowledge become visible, enabling abductive examination of how social service organisations articulate strategic identity, define core tasks, and legitimise forms of knowledge for decision-making.

4.3 Analysis

The analysis followed an abductive qualitative content analysis approach, in which empirical observations and theoretical concepts were placed in continuous dialogue throughout the process (van Hulst and Visser, 2025). The procedure advanced through three iterative stages.

First, all documents were read in full to identify discursive segments describing organisational roles, professional expectations, and values related to social services. This stage focused on passages in which social services were positioned in terms of their task, responsibilities, and underlying assumptions.

Second, these segments were coded through **the lens of social identity theory** (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). For each document, coding focused on the following analytical dimensions:

1. **Identity construction:** How an implicit or explicit in-group was constructed and how the task of social work was defined from this in-group perspective.
2. **Normative expectations:** Which values and behavioural standards were attached to the role of social work.
3. **Knowledge-related assumptions:** How relevant, legitimate, or sufficient knowledge for fulfilling the task and supporting management was defined.

This coding process resulted in 42 initial codes across the dataset

In the final stage, the codes were compared, clustered, and analytically refined by grouping similar values, task descriptions, behavioural expectations, and knowledge assumptions. Through abductive iteration between data and theory, these clusters were synthesised into **identity-based resources**. Interpretive rigour was enhanced through collaborative discussions within the research group, which also sensitised the analysis to subtle contextual distinctions—for example, how effectiveness was linked to different identity-based resources depending on task definitions, behavioural expectations, and knowledge assumptions. These identity-based resources provided an interpretive lens for examining how shared identities shape knowledge formation and managerial sense-making across the two counties.

Document analysis constitutes the first phase of a broader research design. Subsequent phases will include interviews with managers and social work professionals to examine how the identity constructions and knowledge assumptions identified in documents manifest in everyday managerial practice.

5. Results

The analysis revealed three identity-based resources. In what follows, we introduce each resource and demonstrate how it is shaped through identity construction, normative expectations, and knowledge-related assumptions. Here, identity construction refers to the ways in which the documents define the in-group and its role in social work. Alongside this, the documents articulate normative expectations, such as values and behavioural standards, that guide what is considered appropriate for the in-group. Together, these dimensions inform and constrain knowledge-related assumptions, that is, what kinds of knowledge are regarded as relevant, valuable, or authoritative within the context of social work.

5.1 Identity-based Resource 1: Professional

In this identity-based resource, professionalism is emphasised by positioning social work and social care professionals as the in-group. The task of this in-group is constructed as client-centred, change-oriented social work aimed at alleviating the problems faced by clients and their close social environments, as well as promoting their participation and inclusion. The core values guiding the in-group's mandate derive from the legislation governing social welfare and from the ethical principles of the social work profession. These central values, equality, equity, respect for human rights, respect for the client's right to self-determination, and client-centredness form the normative foundation for the in-group and its task. This value orientation strongly shapes the behavioural expectations attached to the role, including ensuring the clients' interests and rights and advocating for those in vulnerable positions. In the documents, these expectations are explicitly framed as both legal and ethical obligations:

When implementing social welfare services, the client's wishes and opinions must be given primary consideration, and the client's right to self-determination must be respected. Clients must be given opportunities to participate in and influence the planning and implementation of their services. The same applies to other measures related to their social welfare. Matters concerning the client must be processed and resolved in a manner that gives primary consideration to the client's best interest. (The Finnish Social Welfare Act)

[A social work professional] shall support the rights of those in weaker positions in a way that reduces clients' stigmatisation and disadvantage. In addition, the professional shall strengthen the realisation of the client's rights and act as an advocate for the client. (Ethical Guidelines for Social Work Professionals)

The normative expectations regarding client-centredness and the safeguarding of clients' rights shape the knowledge-related assumptions of this identity-based resource. These assumptions are strongly anchored in the client's own narrative, including the needs articulated by the client and the client's observed progress. This client-derived knowledge is complemented by the social worker's professional assessment, which includes an evaluation of service needs and a description of the client's situation, needs, progression over time, and the interventions provided.

5.2 Identity-based Resource 2: Integrative

In the second identity-based resource, the in-group is constructed as a multidisciplinary expert network promoting service integration. In the documents, the task of this in-group is defined as social work that coordinates, aligns, and assembles support and services in collaboration with other professionals:

Social work refers to client- and expert-based work with individuals and families, in which a comprehensive set of social support and services is constructed based on the needs of the individual or family, aligned with support provided by other actors, and guided and monitored in terms of its implementation and effectiveness. (The Finnish Social Welfare Act)

The values guiding this in-group, such as timeliness, equality, and collaboration are rooted in Finnish social welfare legislation and the ethical principles of social work. These values shape expectations for conduct, particularly in producing expert assessments and ensuring seamless information transfer between professional groups, such as social workers and health care professionals, to secure appropriate and timely support for clients. Additional values and behavioural expectations associated with the multidisciplinary expert network stem from ministerial guidance documents and the strategic guidelines of wellbeing services counties, where effectiveness is highlighted as a central value shaping both client benefit and cost containment:

Service production must continue the implementation of harmonised practices across social and health services. Harmonised procedures also have significant economic implications, as in social services the

assessment of service needs plays a key role in granting timely and appropriate services. (Varha Financial Plan)

Thus, the normative expectations associated with multidisciplinary collaboration emphasise coordinated service production, harmonised practices, and shared responsibility across professional boundaries, along with an effectiveness-oriented approach to service organisation. Building on these expectations, the knowledge-related assumptions of this identity-based resource centre on professional assessments produced by different practitioners, evidence on service effectiveness, and organisational financial information.

5.3 Identity-based Resource 3: Outcome-oriented

In the third identity-based resource, social services are positioned alongside health care and treated as part of a unified service-producing domain governed by shared values, expectations, and knowledge assumptions. The in-group consists of organisational actors responsible for outcome-driven planning and decision-making. Within this resource, social work is framed as needs-based service provision aimed at meeting client needs through effective and measurable outcomes within financial and staffing constraints. This logic is explicitly conveyed in the following excerpt from the Finnish Government Objectives:

In social and health care, effectiveness is understood as the desired changes achieved at the individual level in a person's health status, functional capacity, or well-being. Cost-effectiveness, in turn, refers to the relationship between effectiveness and the resources used to produce that change. Within the wellbeing services counties, social and health services must be organised so that they are both effective for the individual and cost-effective from the perspective of society. (The Finnish Government Objectives)

As expressed in the excerpt above, the core values associated with this identity-based resource are effectiveness, cost-effectiveness, and operational efficiency. Correspondingly, behavioural standards emphasise minimising economic costs, optimising staffing allocations and service pathways, and increasing the effectiveness of services. This outcome-oriented logic is further illustrated in the following excerpt:

The management support unit operating under the Director of Social and Health Services has key responsibilities including the evaluation of services and operations, the coordination and development of service and administrative processes, and the monitoring of financial performance. (Pirha Financial Plan)

These normative expectations shape what is considered relevant knowledge within this identity-based resource. Key forms of knowledge include service utilisation data, such as client volumes and waiting times, evidence on service effectiveness, and information on personnel resources and financial expenditures.

6. Discussion and Concluding Remarks

The findings suggest that, during the early years of the wellbeing services county reform, knowledge formation in Finnish social services is shaped by multiple interpretative frameworks articulated in legislative, ethical, and strategic guiding documents. The analysis identifies three such frameworks, conceptualised as identity-based resources, which outline how the task, values, behavioural expectations, and knowledge assumptions of social services are framed within these documents. These identity-based resources appear to influence how knowledge is understood, valued, and prioritised in social work management, while also offering managers shared identity positions that may guide the use of knowledge and the enactment of the management role.

The professional identity-based resource emphasises client-centredness and values knowledge generated in the client–practitioner encounter, complemented by the social worker's professional judgement and expertise. This finding aligns with previous research highlighting the interactional (Leung, 2009), contextual (Trevithick, 2003), and case-based (Salovaara, 2024) knowledge formation in social work, where professional knowledge emerges through the integration of multiple knowledge sources in response to client needs. Within this resource, client narratives and observed change are central, while quantitative indicators and financial considerations may be acknowledged but remain secondary.

The integrative identity-based resource foregrounds multidisciplinary collaboration and knowledge transfer across professional boundaries. Within this resource, legitimate knowledge is understood as coordinated professional assessments and information shared among professional groups. As effectiveness constitutes a central value, information on service effectiveness and organisational financial data is also valued, serving the dual purposes of maximising client benefit and reducing economic costs.

The third, outcome-oriented identity-based resource prioritises the values of cost-effectiveness, effectiveness, and operational efficiency. Here, relevant knowledge consists primarily of service utilisation metrics, financial data, and human resource information. This resource reflects national funding mechanisms and strategic objectives that require social and health services to be evaluated through measurable outcomes and resource use (Hujala and Laihonen, 2021; Laihonen and Kokko, 2022).

Table 1 synthesises the three identity-based resources by illustrating how they differ in terms of identity construction, normative expectations, and knowledge-related assumptions.

Table 1: Three identity-based resources shaping knowledge relevance in social services management

Identity-based resource	Professional	Integrative	Outcome-oriented
Identity construction			
in-group	social work professionals	experts within the multidisciplinary network	actors responsible for outcome-driven service governance
the role of social work	a change-oriented and client-centred role	a role focused on coordinating support	a system-level role grounded in resource- and need-based decision-making
Normative expectations			
core values	equality, non-discrimination, client-centredness, human rights, self-determination right	timeliness, seamless service delivery, continuity, collaboration, equality, effectiveness	cost-effectiveness, effectiveness, operational efficiency
behavioural standards	advocating for the client's best interest, ensuring the realisation of clients' rights, defending those in vulnerable positions, advancing social justice	conducting assessments collaboratively with a multidisciplinary team and relevant stakeholders within the wellbeing services county, sharing information efficiently across professionals to ensure that targeted actions are necessary and effective, maintaining coherent and aligned practices	reducing the costs of social services, optimising service pathways and staffing allocation, increasing the effectiveness of services
Knowledge-related assumptions			
relevant knowledge	clients' accounts of their needs and progress, and the social worker's assessment of the situation, needs, and progress	information and assessments provided by other professionals and experts within the service network, service effectiveness data, financial data of a wellbeing service county	service utilisation metrics, service effectiveness data, financial data and HR data of a wellbeing service county

Together, the identified identity-based resources help to illuminate the landscape in which managers of social services navigate by shaping their understandings of what constitutes relevant knowledge and how such knowledge may be used. Based on the analysed documents, the findings suggest that knowledge formation in social services cannot be understood solely as a technical or informational process but is also shaped by the interplay of identity dynamics, organisational structures, and policy expectations. This interpretation resonates with Laihonen, Kork, and Sinervo's (2023) conceptualisation of the multidimensional nature of knowledge formation in public management, in which knowledge emerges through the intertwining of individual interpretations, organisational goals, and political-strategic expectations.

Future research should examine how these dynamics manifest in managerial practice by focusing on the everyday work of managers in wellbeing services counties. Interviews with organisational actors would enable deeper insight into how the shared identities, normative expectations, and knowledge assumptions identified in documents are enacted and negotiated in decision-making, thereby supporting a more context-sensitive

understanding of knowledge formation and the development of practices that strengthen evidence-informed governance across professional boundaries.

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