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## Focus on client needs – A study on frontline legal aid in the Netherlands

## Focus op client behoeften -- Een studie over eerstelijns rechtshulp in Nederland

Esther M. Verboon, Susanne C. Tonnon , Majda Lamkaddem, Maaïke C. Keesen, Quirine E. Eijkman and Gerrita van der Veen

Access to Justice Research Group, Research Centre for Social Innovation, HU University of Applied Sciences Utrecht (Hogeschool Utrecht), Utrecht, The Netherlands

### ABSTRACT

Individuals in multiproblem situations frequently seek frontline legal support. The support by frontline legal professionals is limited by its focus on the legal issue instead of the underlying problems. A strong focus on client values – i.e. on the outcome that these services yield in the client's perception – may lead to a more effective approach by targeting underlying problems. Through individual interviews with clients and professionals, the current study examines client values and services that may contribute to those client values. Besides functional client values that focus on resolving the problem situation, emotional client values, such as trust prove at least as important. Furthermore, client values are not only supported by the professional's legal expertise, accessibility and ability to build a relationship, but also by the professional's knowledge and skills relevant to multiproblem situations, such as his ability to empower the client, the willingness to work on concrete needs, and his ability to adopt an integrated approach. Research findings confirm the relevance of an integrated approach to multiproblem situations, with due attention to different client values. Similarly, it proves important to incorporate skills and knowledge that specifically address multiproblem situations in education and training programmes of frontline legal professionals.

### ABSTRACT



Mensen in multiprobleem situaties maken veelvuldig gebruik van eerstelijns rechtshulp. De ondersteuning door eerstelijns rechtshulp wordt beperkt door de focus op de voorliggende rechtsvraag, in plaats van de onderliggende problematiek. Een sterke focus op klantwaarden – de opbrengsten van de dienstverlening in de ogen van de cliënt – zou weleens tot een effectievere werkwijze kunnen leiden, omdat de achterliggende problemen worden aangepakt. Aan de hand van diepte-interviews onder cliënten en professionals is onderzocht welke klantwaarden voor deze doelgroep relevant zijn en welke dienstverleningsaspecten daaraan kunnen bijdragen. Naast functionele

### KEYWORDS

Client needs; legal aid; multiproblem; integrated approach

### TREFWOORDEN

Client behoeften; rechtshulp; multiprobleem; geïntegreerde aanpak

**CONTACT** Susanne Tonnon  [susanne.tonnon@hu.nl](mailto:susanne.tonnon@hu.nl)  Access to Justice research group, Centre for Social Innovation, HU University of Applied Sciences Utrecht (Hogeschool Utrecht), PO Box 85397, Utrecht, AJ 3508, The Netherlands

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klantwaarden gericht op oplossingen voor de probleemsituatie, blijken emotionele klantwaarden als vertrouwen en ontzorging minstens zo relevant. Ook dragen niet alleen juridisch vakmanschap, bereikbaarheid en de vaardigheden om met de klant een relatie op te bouwen van de professional aan klantwaarden bij, maar ook specifieke kennis en vaardigheden gericht op multiproblematiek, zoals de vaardigheid om de klant te empoweren, de bereidheid om te werken aan concrete behoeften, en het werken met een geïntegreerde aanpak. De onderzoeksbevindingen onderstrepen de relevantie van een integrale aanpak bij multiproblematiek met aandacht voor diverse klantwaarden. Evenzo blijkt van belang dat vaardigheden en kennis die specifiek gericht zijn op multiproblematiek in de opleiding van eerstelijns rechtshulp professionals worden geïncorporeerd.

## Introduction

The United Nations has incorporated a number of societal challenges in the formulation of its Sustainable Development Goals, including adequate assistance for citizens contending with a multiproblem situation (United Nations, [n.d.](#)). A multiproblem situation is defined as a combination of adverse socioeconomic circumstances, such as unemployment, poverty, debt, family and parenting problems, and physical or mental health problems. It seems that it is the interaction between these problems that makes them so impactful and difficult to solve (Tausendfreund et al., [2016](#)). In many cases, multiproblem situations occur together with social exclusion and reduced self-sufficiency (Currie, [2007](#); Dallos et al., [1997](#); Ruitenberg & Van Loon, [2016](#); Spratt, [2011](#)). Tausendfreund et al. ([2016](#)) even think it is not the lack of problems that distinguishes people in multiproblem situations from others, but their inability to solve their problems.

The Legal Services Counter (LSC) is a national organisation that offers free frontline legal support and is able to refer low-income clients to a pro bono lawyer. In this sense, the LSC simultaneously offers access to legal services to socio-economically disadvantaged clients while at the same time serving as a portal to the legal system that strives wherever possible to resolve legal issues without resorting to the courts. In 2018, the LSC handled a total of 41,717 client contacts, including return visits (Legal Services Counters, [2019](#)). People in multiproblem situations frequently turn to the LSC for frontline legal support. No less than 44% of those who attend LSC-consultation hours face problems in multiple life domains (Keesen et al., [2021](#)). These clients form a complex target group and can generally benefit from a holistic approach that targets all areas of their life (Lünnemann et al., [2017](#)), is adapted to their specific level of self-sufficiency (Oldenhof, [2014](#)), offers practical assistance (Rots-de Vries et al., [2017](#)) and prioritises existential problems (Lünnemann et al., [2017](#)). Multiproblem situations require an integrated approach, that addresses problems simultaneously while taking into account the relation between individual problems (Van Arum et al., [2018](#)).

LSC-professionals currently focus on resolving the legal questions presented to them rather than the underlying problems. The LSC has not structurally incorporated collaboration with other care professionals in its regular work processes (Commissie Wolfsen, [2015](#)). In 2016, 2% of the client contacts led to a referral to another service provider and less than 1% in a referral to a mediator (Van Gammeren-Zoetewij et al., [2017](#)). Indeed, realising an interdisciplinary approach for clients who deal with multiproblem situations (MP clients) is far from easy. The procedures followed by different care organisations may conflict, or different professionals may get in each other's way (Ruitenberg & Van Loon, [2016](#)). Local 'social maps' vary from one municipality to the next – making it impossible for the LSC as a national organisation to enter into uniform partnership agreements (The Legal Services Counters, [2017](#)). Moreover, privacy legislation presents an obstacle when it comes to exchanging client information. In short: the current approach of the LSC is not conducive to structural solutions for MP clients. The aim of our study was to

explore how the frontline legal support can connect more effectively to the actual needs of MP clients.

### **Focus on client needs**

When dealing with clients in multiple problem situations, the legal services cater largely to the same client population as social work services in the Netherlands. Internationally, social work services have been building knowledge on clients in multiproblem situations for several decades. The interconnectedness of problems is a well-known fact and service delivery relies upon it (Weiss-Gal & Welbourne, 2008). A broad assessment of the clients' needs is a programmatic part of the profession.

Meanwhile, legal services are generally focused on expertise: client questions are viewed from a legal standpoint, which usually leads to a legal solution (Verboon, 2017). LSC-professionals' tendency to deal with legal questions in isolation from other issues and their limited collaboration with other disciplines can be considered illustrative of this particular perspective.

Focussing on clients' needs instead of a professional's own expertise or service provision is a shift that has been made in several organisational fields in the past decades, both public and corporate, and is referred to as 'customer dominant logic' (Heinonen & Strandvik, 2015, 2018). This approach implies that clients' needs should serve as point of departure for determining the path of action, not the availability of services. In this paradigm, *the client's life* and his or her problems and needs take centre stage, and the professional attempts to gain insight into the *client values* – the outcomes desired by the client.

The use of the term 'customer' in this context does not suggest marketisation of legal aid, where legal aid is regarded as a commodity (McLaughlin, 2009). To the contrary: the customer dominant logic implies that client needs should serve as point of departure for determining the path of action, not the services that are available. Adopting client values as a point of departure may allow the professional to take an integrated perspective that is geared toward improving the individual's life as a whole rather than merely resolving his/her immediate legal issue. Identifying client values of MP clients can be one step towards a more integrated approach in the service provision of the LSC and other frontline legal service providers. This leads to the following research questions:

Which client values do MP clients experience when seeking frontline legal support?

Which services are conducive to those client values?

### **Study context**

In the Netherlands, the system of legal support is divided into frontline and second line institutions (Legal Aid Board, 2019). The main frontline service providers are the LSC, which has 30 offices throughout the Netherlands, and social legal advisors working for welfare institutions or a local municipalities. Frontline legal professionals are easily accessible, offer services free of charge, and aim to resolve legal issues at an early stage. Where the LSC can advise in all legal fields but cannot act on behalf of the client, social legal advisors specialise in matters of the welfare system and offer more hands on assistance, for example by negotiating payment plans. Both the LSC and social legal advisors are geared towards one-off advice, but the social legal advisors have more room for case work. The LSC has no room for follow-up consults; clients who still have questions after their consult have to make another appointment with another legal advisor.

If a case is too complicated or advances, the frontline professionals refer their clients to a lawyer for second line legal support. Clients with a low income can ask the LSC for a referral to a social lawyer, where they only pay a minor contribution. In 2019, about 38% of the Dutch population was eligible for legal aid.

Frontline legal professionals are accessible by phone, during walk-in consultation hours, clients can book an appointment online, or professionals from other institutions book an appointment for them. While the LSC operates largely independent of other institutions, social legal advisors are currently

more embedded within the welfare system. They often work for welfare institutions and therefore work closely with social workers who form the portal for welfare services at the community level.

The Dutch welfare system has been decentralised during the past decades. Currently, welfare services are executed mainly by local government and are accessible through the so-called neighbourhood teams. Those are interdisciplinary teams comprise generalist and specialist professionals and operate at the community level. The generalists are typically social workers and are in charge of making a broad problem assessment and referral to indicated specialists, such as debt advisors at the municipality, or social legal advisors provide legal advice concerning the welfare system. These specialists are deployed part-time to the neighbourhood team in order to create easy access to their specialist knowledge. The LSC does not deploy staff to those interdisciplinary teams; they operate in a more centralised manner.

## Method

We opted for a qualitative method in view of the scarcity of studies in this particular field (Van der Velde et al., 2013). Qualitative interviews were conducted among MP clients and professionals who deliver frontline legal support. Clients were deemed experts on their own needs and thus were the regarded as the most indicated group to answer the research question on client values. However, clients may have a limited understanding of what professionals do exactly to solve their problem. In order to gain a full understanding of the services conducive towards client values, we included professionals in the study group. By including both clients and different types of professionals in legal and adjacent domains, we sought to maximise the heterogeneity of the data.

The analysis applied codes derived from the study by Verboon (2017) focusing on client values of small- and medium-sized enterprises (SME) clients. The SME study was based on individual semi-structured interviews with ten SME clients who had sought legal support from a lawyer and ten interviews with lawyers who assisted SME clients. The interviews were analysed using a conventional inductive approach.

## Recruitment

Case studies normally include six to ten cases to arrive at saturation (Eisenhardt, 1989). We recruited eight MP clients and ten professionals working in frontline legal support. Recruitment of the clients took place during the walk-in consultation hours at the offices of the LSC in two Dutch cities. People who attended the consultation hours in the period February-May 2019 were asked to complete a screening questionnaire. Clients with problems in several of the life domains physical and mental health, housing, finances, care responsibilities, social support, conflict and security and sense of purpose were considered MP clients (Keesen et al., 2021). MP clients were asked to take part in an individual interview (criterion sampling). Participants were offered a 10 euro voucher for their trouble. Of the fifteen MP clients approached in this fashion, eight agreed to an interview.

The professionals were recruited through their employer as part of a larger action research programme (purposive sampling). Professionals were eligible to participate if they provided frontline legal support in the Dutch cities of Dordrecht or Arnhem.

In line with ethical research guidelines, the participants received a letter describing the purpose and method of the study, including ways in which their privacy was ensured, and the right to withdraw from the study at any time. The letter contained the contact data of the research team to ensure the rights could be enacted. All participants gave written informed consent [Table 1](#).

## Data collection

The interviews lasted around one hour each and were held either at the offices of the participating professionals or at the participant's home. The semi-structured interview guide was based on an

**Table 1.** Participant characteristics.

Clients (n = 8)	Characteristics	n
Sex	Male	2
	Female	6
Problematic life domains	Mental health	7
	Physical health	5
	Finances	5
	Housing	4
	Care responsibilities	3
	Conflict	3
	Security	0
	Sense of purpose	3
	Social support	2
	The Hague	5
City	Dordrecht	3
Professionals (n = 10)	Characteristics	n
Sex	Male	1
	Female	9
Job title	Legal adviser	4
	Social legal adviser	4
	Debt counsellor	2
City	Arnhem	4
	Dordrecht	6

outline developed by Van der Velde et al. (2013). The interview guide focused on two topics: first on client values, meaning outcomes of the service provided that the clients valued. Second, the interview guide inquired about services that were conducive to these values. Client values and conducive services were explored in each life domain that the client had identified as problematic in the screening questionnaire. The clients were interviewed about their personal situation, while the professionals based their responses on their experience with MP-client population as a whole.

### Data analysis

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed using content analysis. (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) The interviews were coded independently by two researchers. Building on the findings of the study on client values among SME clients (Verboon, 2017), we adopted its framework of client values and conducive services as an analytical framework for our own study. The study on SME clients who sought legal advice showed that, next to finding a solution to the legal problem (*functional values*), clients also had values related to social relationships (*social values*), such as having a negotiating edge over the counterparty, or *emotional values*, such as feeling reassured. It shows that client values are broader than just the legal solution.

The first researcher applied deductive content analysis – using the codes that had been generated in the SME study and adding new codes where required (Verboon, 2017). The second coder applied conventional content analysis by coding the data inductively. Both coders compared the codes and reached consensus on divergent codes. There was very limited divergence in the case of the pre-existing codes: one pre-existing code was split into two different codes to create a more nuanced picture. Most instances of divergence occurred in the case of the new codes, particularly regarding the conducive services and the optimum grouping of the associated codes.

### Results

During the analysis, the coders checked whether the data of clients and professionals could be combined. The themes that were named by clients and professionals were largely comparable. However, the professionals named more themes and services than the clients. This may be explained by the fact that the clients talked about their own case, while the professionals based their response on

the entire population of MP clients. Furthermore, the professional distinguished between short- and long term client values and services. It appeared that the clients were focused mostly on what they needed right at that moment, while the professionals oversaw the entire trajectory, which might extend over years. This indicated that clients and professionals were comparable regarding the themes they named, and complementary regarding the timing of their frame of reference. Based on this assessment, it seemed reasonable to combine the data of those two populations: together they provided a more complete picture of client values and conducive services, while the clients provided a more in-depth understanding of the reasons for their needs right at that help-seeking moment.

### Client values

The analysis showed that the identified client values could be attributed to the same three categories that had been identified in the SME study, namely functional, social and emotional client values (see Table 2). Functional client values relate to outcomes that are of practical use to the client, such as *effective solutions*. Social client values involve outcomes in the interpersonal domain, such as *limiting the damage to the (relationship with the) counterpart*. Emotional client values concern positive feelings as a result of the service, for example a *sense of justice being served*.

### Emotional client values

Similarly to the clients in the SME study, MP clients attached considerable importance to emotional client values. Especially *trust*, *reduction of uncertainty*, *hope*, as well as *feeling safe and reassured*, and *being relieved of worries and responsibilities* played a central role in the interviews. One MP client, for example, felt '... relief that there may be a way out of this situation. At a certain point, you no longer see a way out. At that point, you think: "I simply can't handle this."' (*feeling safe and reassured* client value (CV)). Another MP client noted: '[The support offered by the professional] gives you the feeling that together, we can stand strong and overcome this. After that, we can get on with our lives.' (*self-confidence* CV). Another MP client explained: 'If things were to escalate, I can come back – that's a reassuring thought.' (*being relieved of concerns and responsibilities* CV).

**Table 2.** MP client values named by MP clients and professionals.

Categories	Client values*
Emotional	Trust, reduction of uncertainty, hope
	Feeling safe and reassured
	Being relieved of worries and responsibilities
	Sense of justice being served
	Acknowledgement and recognition of the legal problem
	Sense of being heard (emotional acknowledgement)
	Unburdening of conscience
	Self-respect and self-esteem
	<b>Self-confidence</b>
	Getting your money's worth and satisfaction
Social	Acceptance of the final situation
	Edge in negotiations and hedging of risks
	Limiting the damage to (relationship with) counterpart
Functional	<b>Social support</b>
	Insight into the case or problem
	Guidance on the course action
	Effective solutions
	Favourable financial outcome/ <b>Covering basic needs</b>
	Avoiding the development of new (legal) problems
	Avoiding errors during the case

\* Client values that were not named in the SME-study and are specific to MP clients are printed in bold



The emotional client values brought forward by the MP clients deviated from those of the SME clients on two points. MP clients repeatedly talked about the importance of being heard. Since this topic played such an important role in the interviews, the SME-code *recognition* was split into two different codes: *acknowledgement and recognition of the legal problem* and *sense of being heard*. For example, according to one MP client '... [the professional] acknowledging my problem already takes away so much stress. It makes me feel a lot better.' (*acknowledgement and recognition of the legal problem* CV). Another MP client finds that 'No matter what, you feel happier when someone [the professional] has listened to you. I think that already goes a long way towards helping someone.' (*sense of being heard* CV).

MP-clients put forward one client value that had not been mentioned by SME-clients: *self-confidence*. For example, one MP client said '... that it feels good to be helped and offered guidance. The fact that [it helps] you become stronger, and are more capable to stand up for yourself.' The professionals also recognised the MP clients' need for self-confidence: 'When my consult runs longer than planned, this is often because I want to offer something social. A woman who is feeling very insecure, give her a little extra confidence.'

### **Social client values**

Social client values were also addressed by MP clients. For example: *limiting the damage to the (relationship with the) counterparty*. This is reflected in the following statement made by a client: '... and you don't want to completely destroy him either. After all, he has a young family and a mortgage to pay.'

MP-clients largely named the same social client values as SME clients. In addition, they expressed a need for *social support*. As one client said: 'I can't do it myself. And I don't know what to do now. I have no one to help me.'

### **Functional client values**

Similarly to the SME study, the realisation of *effective solutions* was the functional client values MP clients most frequently addressed. 'At a certain point, you no longer see a way out.' Clients wanted '... to arrive at a solution as quickly as possible ...'. There was one notable difference to the SME clients. MP clients often found their basic needs under pressure. For example, MP clients faced problematic debt or insecure housing. In such cases, arriving at *effective solutions* mainly came down to *covering basic needs*. For example, one MP client stated that her priority was 'to start with: simply get our own place to live. When that is done, we all can get some rest.'

Very much like SME clients, MP clients' put forward a strong need for *insight into the case or problem and guidance on the course of action*. MP clients wanted to gain a better understanding of the problem and what they could do about it. One MP client for example remarked: 'I now feel that I can do something about it. I don't know how things will turn out, but it feels good that I can do something about it.'

### **Services that were conducive to client values**

In addition to client values, MP clients and professionals were asked what the professionals did that was conducive to the client values. These conducive services can be broken down into six categories: legal expertise, building a relationship, empowerment, concrete needs, accessibility and integrated approach. Three of those categories were also addressed by SME-clients, namely legal expertise, building a relationship and accessibility. The categories empowerment, concrete needs and integrated approach were only named by MP clients [Table 3](#).

### **Legal expertise**

Similarly to the SME clients, topics in this category mainly centred on the MP client's need for guidance in the legal process. For example, this involved *expectation management and offering*



**Table 3.** Services named by MP clients and professionals as conducive to MP client values.

Categories	Services*
Legal expertise	Expectation management and offering information and explanations Coordination of the legal process Advocating the client's interest and mediate Producing good quality legal documents and advice Application of the correct legal expertise Speedy response
Building a relationship	<b>Providing tailored legal support in exceptional cases</b> Relating to the client and really listen <b>Setting boundaries for undesirable client behaviour</b> Long term involvement in the case
<b>Accessibility</b>	Being approachable and easily get a hold of Adoption of appropriate (legal) language proficiency level <b>Assessment of client self-sufficiency</b>
<b>Concrete needs</b>	<b>Prioritizing basic needs</b> <b>Offer practical support</b>
<b>Empowerment</b>	<b>Motivating the client</b> <b>Teaching the client new skills</b> <b>Stimulating client to reflect on his or her own behaviour</b> <b>Mobilising social support</b>
<b>Integrated approach</b>	<b>Being open to interdisciplinary collaboration</b> <b>Problem analysis and plan of action on multiple life domains</b>

\* Services that were not named in the SME-study and are specific to MP clients are printed in bold

*information and explanations* and *directing the legal process*. Clients appreciated it when a professional gave clear advice on what to do. MP clients felt unable to take the right steps independently and were afraid of missing (legal) deadlines: 'Then you think: 'Well, I'll do it tomorrow.' And then it takes days and there are all sorts of things that get in the way. If I met with him [the professional] once a week, he could ask me how things had been going that week. This might sound childish, but I think it's necessary.'

A comparison with the SME study resulted in the identification of an additional service within this category. In some cases, MP clients believe the professional needs to provide *tailored legal support*: 'You need to consider the context. Things don't always have to be determined by the rules. Occasionally, you need to be able to say: 'You know what, let's make an exception in this case.'

### ***Building a relationship***

By far the most frequently named type of service was the ability to *relate to the client and really listen*. Nearly every respondent emphasised the importance of this skill, as illustrated by the following MP client statements: 'I think she really wanted to help. So she was there, she actively engaged with me. So I understood: she understood me, and I understood her.' Or 'The fact that they show an interest in you and can help you with your question.' This is comparable to the interviews with SME clients, where offering empathy was also the most prominent service that was mentioned. Professionals working with MP clients indicated that setting boundaries was sometimes necessary to get their clients to reflect on how their behaviour contributed to the problem.

In both studies, the respondents frequently indicated that professionals *need to be* accessible. For both SME- and MP-clients, this entailed the accessibility of the legal professional, as well as the adoption of readily understandable language. 'The importance of clearing obstacles is illustrated very aptly by the following statement made by one of the professionals: 'The thought of having to phone us can be such an obstacle that clients give up [seeking help] altogether. I think, people have so much going on, other organisations have their own barriers ... At a certain point, they get overwhelmed, and then [these clients] do nothing at all.' Unique to MP clients was the importance of correctly estimating the client's degree of self-sufficiency. Legal professionals dealing with MP clients have the difficult task to strike a balance between taking over and leaving the client's autonomy intact by leaving the client in charge of his own fate. This means a professional

has to get measure of how much a client can reasonably be expected to handle himself. 'This takes time, and time is scarce.'

### Concrete needs

MP clients indicated they were often unable to deal effectively with practical matters that needed to be arranged. They would then rely on the professional's willingness to *offer practical support*. 'Some people who visit the consultation have no idea how to even open a website. So this means you really have to look closely at what someone actually understands and try to level with that.' For example, by 'quickly scheduling an appointment with social work in their neighbourhood.' If professionals found out that their clients had basic needs that were unfulfilled, they would prioritise those. 'Sufficient income is our priority, because people have more energy to tackle problems in other areas.'

### Empowerment

Professionals felt that their task was to empower their clients, by motivating them, teaching them new skills, stimulating the client to reflect on their behaviour, and by mobilising social support. One professional explained why it is so important to work on the empowerment of their clients: 'There are so many things that are expected from these people, expectations they fail to fulfil. And that makes them feel small. No one deserves to feel small.'

### Integrated approach

Another service the participants deemed crucial to service provision to MP clients was the professional's ability to perform a *problem analysis on multiple life domains and set up an integrated plan of action*. One of the professionals says in this context: 'People often come by with a legal question, so the first question is often quite factual. And when you start asking questions, it leads you to other areas. (...) They come here with a small part of the puzzle. But you can always weigh in, like: 'Have you ever considered talking to MEE [a specialist in mental disability]?' or 'What does your GP say?'

In addition, participants stressed the importance of professionals *being open for interdisciplinary collaboration*, since MP clients require support in multiple areas. Professionals named a whole range of activities they deemed relevant, such as warm referrals, joint case consultations, awareness of each other's specific expertise, acknowledging the limits of one's own expertise and active networking.

## Discussion

In answer to the first research question, the results show that MP clients attached importance to functional, social and emotional client values. Among the emotional client values experienced by MP clients, the ones that stood out most were *trust*, *reduction of uncertainty*, *hope* and *feeling safe and reassured* and *being relieved of worries and responsibilities*. The literature yields three possible explanations. Comparable client values figure in the literature on people with multiproblem situations, such as *trust* (Polstra et al., 2018; Van Arum et al., 2018), *positive expectation* and *hope* (Pijnenburg, 2010). Trust and hope are considered success factors in supporting MP clients (Van Arum et al., 2018). Hubble et al. (2010) conclude that hope of change and positive expectations in the aid provided may actually be the biggest asset in any treatment. In short: specifically these client values seem to be crucial to MP clients. They may represent hope for a way out of the problem situation. In addition, Verboon (2017) concludes that SME clients who turn to a lawyer with a legal problem tend to be very worried. Therefore, another explanation may be the concerns and stress experienced by MP clients when they are faced with a legal issue. A third explanation relates to the information asymmetry between the legal professional and the client. The professional provides expertise the client does not possess (Aarikka-Stenroos & Jaakkola, 2012; Mortimer & Pressey, 2013): by giving information and advice, the client feels reassured and less concerned.

Another frequently mentioned emotional client value was the MP client's *self-confidence*. This client value is mentioned in the literature in comparable wording: Fredrix et al. (2016) refer to a client's need for *self-empowerment*, which helps clients to gain more control of their own living conditions. Van Regenmortel (2002) calls this *empowerment*: a process of strengthening which leads individuals to gain control of their personal circumstances and environment.

An important social client value for MP clients was the *social support* offered by the professional. This is in line with earlier studies: individuals in multiproblem situations often lack a social network or even have a negative social network (Lünnemann et al., 2017). Helping them to build up a social network and teaching them how to maintain it appears to be an active ingredient in the support of people in multiproblem situations (Lünnemann et al., 2017).

The most relevant functional client values centre on finding an *effective solutions* for the legal – and in many cases also financial – problems of MP clients. Verboon (2017) observed the same prioritisation among SME clients seeking legal support. However, effective solutions for MP clients tend to be more existential in nature – a way to get out from under problematic debt or a precarious housing situation, for instance. In other words, these values relate to *covering basic needs*. Until these problems are resolved, the individual will remain in survival mode (Lünnemann et al., 2017; Ruitenberg & Van Loon, 2016). Finding an effective solution often goes hand in hand with clients gaining *insight into the case or problem* and *guidance on the course of action*. The literature indicates that clients with multiproblem situations lack overview and do not know where to start (Tonnon et al., 2019). In addition, the aforementioned information asymmetry seems to play a role: the client turns to a professional, because they do not see a way out of their problem (Mortimer & Pressey, 2013).

In answer to the second research question, the current study yields six types of services that were conducive to the aforementioned client values: legal expertise, building a relationship, accessibility, concrete needs, empowerment and integrated approach. The most striking outcome of the interviews is the set of services which only applied to MP clients. The services related to legal expertise, building a relationship and accessibility were relevant to both MP and SME clients (Verboon, 2017). Examples of legal expertise that were often mentioned are *expectation management and offering information and explanations* and *directing the legal process*. As previously explained, the importance of legal expertise is characteristic of relationships with information asymmetry: MP clients have a knowledge gap with regard to legal matters and want the professional to take them by the hand (Mortimer & Pressey, 2013).

As far as soft skills are concerned, the interview results primarily underline the need for professionals to *relate to the client and really listen*. A number of authors who write about multiproblem situations emphasise the importance of showing empathy regarding the client's situation through various actions, including by levelling with the client's language proficiency level (Polstra et al., 2018; Van der Steege & Zoon, 2017) and perspective on the problem at hand (Van Arum et al., 2018), showing interest and offering a sympathetic ear (Polstra et al., 2018; Rots-de Vries et al., 2017). In addition, clients highly valued professional being *approachable and easily accessible*. This is once again underlined by the findings presented in the literature about multiproblem situations (Van der Steege & Zoon, 2017). MP clients often encounter obstacles when seeking help, e.g. the cost of using a telephone, or simply being unable to conduct a phone call.

Among the services that were relevant specifically to MP clients, the service that was most frequently addressed was the professional's ability to *assess the client's self-sufficiency* and to *offer practical support*. According to Oomkens et al. (2018), 'a multiproblem situation can be difficult to square with the principle of self-sufficiency.' Various authors underline the importance of recognising a lack of self-sufficiency (Lünnemann et al., 2017; Oomkens et al., 2018; Van Arum et al., 2018; The Scientific Council for Government Policy, 2017) and offering practical support (Polstra et al., 2018; Van Arum et al., 2018; Van der Steege & Zoon, 2017). Practical support can prove particularly effective when the individual has financial problems (Bettinger et al., 2012). In addition, the literature emphasises the need to adopt an integrated approach by performing a *problem analysis on multiple life domains*, considering that MP clients experience problems in multiple life domains, and to *be open to*

*interdisciplinary collaboration*, for example through warm referrals. Many authors attest to the importance of an integrated approach to MP clients, in which the professional pays attention to all life domains (Lünnemann et al., 2017; Molenaar-Cox & Cuelenaere, 2012; Van Arum et al., 2018), as well as an interdisciplinary approach to these clients (Lünnemann et al., 2017; Molenaar-Cox & Cuelenaere, 2012; Oldenhof, 2014).

Based on our findings, the framework that distinguishes emotional, social and functional client values, that was adopted from the study by Verboon (2017) had a good fit with the client values that were identified among MP clients. Earlier studies also found these client values to be robust (Boksberger & Melsen, 2011; Sheth et al., 1991). However, at the level of individual client values, the scope among MP clients is occasionally broader than among SME clients: several client values underline the importance of results that improve the client's life situation, such as getting *covering basic needs* or *social support*. In the current study, the framework for services has been expanded with an additional category of services that are relevant to multiproblem situations, such as making a *problem analysis on multiple life domains* and *being open to collaboration with other disciplines*. These services are representative of the integrated approach, which is recommended for multiproblem cases, and allow professional to address problems in multiple life domains.

### **Methodological limitations**

One strength of our study is the combination of deductive and inductive coding: building on the results of earlier research contributes to the validity of the results of the current study. At the same time, the inductive approach ensures that as many new elements as possible are identified.

Another strength of this study is the outreaching character of the recruitment process. Clients were recruited during the walk-in consultation hour, the screening questionnaire was completed face-to-face, and one interview was completed at a participant's home. This allowed us to include some of the most vulnerable MP clients, for example people with serious mental health problems. This group is often underrepresented in research.

This study also has limitations. First of all, the number of participants is limited: we interviewed 8 clients and 10 professionals. We cannot rule out that more interviews would render different results, and therefore, the results cannot be generalised to the entire population of front-line legal support clients. That being said, there were indications of saturation at the level of the professionals. The different professionals often referred to the same client values and services. We saw far less overlap in the MP client interviews. The difference in saturation level can be explained by the client's focus on their own specific case, while the professionals based their responses on their experience with the client population as a whole. Nevertheless, the themes that were named by the clients largely corresponded with the themes mentioned by the professionals. Therefore, though it cannot be ruled out that additional client interviews would yield new codes, the saturation at the level of the professionals gives us reason to believe that the most important clients values and services were brought forward.

### **Practical recommendations**

The results of our study show that frontline legal professionals should strive to adopt a holistic approach to clients in multiproblem situations – in other words, take into account functional, social and emotional client values. That being said, each client probably comes with a different mix of client values. Research indicates that the effectiveness of interventions targeting multiproblem situations is context-specific (Evenboer et al., 2018). In other words, it's important for LSC-professionals to identify the client values that are relevant for each individual client and then shape the interdisciplinary support accordingly.

Legal support generally requires a broad professional skill set: a combination of legal expertise and the ability to build a relationship with the client, as well as rendering services that are accessible.

On top of this, frontline legal professionals who support MP clients require complementary capacities – such as the ability to empower one's client, the willingness to fulfil concrete needs, and to adopt an integrated approach. This calls for educational programmes that enable professionals to acquire this complementary knowledge and skill set.

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## Notes on the authors

**Esther M. Verboon** (PhD) is Director of the Institute for Law and researcher at HU University of Applied Sciences Utrecht. Her research predominantly focuses on customer-oriented services, specifically in the legal field.

**Susanne C. Tonnon** (PhD) is psychologist and senior researcher in the Debt and Collection research group at HU University of Applied Sciences Utrecht. Her area of expertise is behaviour change and intervention implementation.

**Majda Lamkaddem** (PhD) is a sociologist, senior researcher and lecturer at HU University of Applied Sciences Utrecht's Access to Justice research group. Her research centres on social, cultural and financial factors at play in universal access to justice.

**Maaïke C. Keesen** (MBA) is researcher and lecturer at HU University of Applied Sciences Utrecht. Her field of study is organisational behaviour and human resources, based on her HR expertise. She lectures at the Institute for Labour & Organisation.

**Quirine E. Eijkman** (PhD) is Chair of the Access to Justice research group at HU University of Applied Sciences Utrecht and Deputy President of the Netherlands Institute for Human Rights. This article is written in her personal capacity.

**Gerrita van der Veen** (PhD) is Chair of the Research Centre for Digital Business & Media and Professor of Marketing at HU University of Applied Sciences Utrecht. Her fields of study include brand and customer experience management.

## ORCID

Susanne C. Tonnon  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0595-4351>

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