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Work and Social Support: Social Workers' Assessments of Male and Female Clients' Problems and Needs

Christian Kullberg

This study investigated how social workers assess single mothers' and fathers' needs in the areas of paid work and social support. It found that social workers conform to gender "heteronormative" expectations. A father's problems are assessed as being more closely linked to paid work than are a mother's, whereas a mother's problems are assessed as being related to difficulties in the area of social networks.

Keywords: *gender; single parents; social welfare; social work*

The ways in which social welfare policy emphasizes the opportunities for men and women to share the responsibility for paid work and family life are crucial to how power is distributed between men and women in a welfare state (Bryson, 1992). One of the mainstays of social welfare policy in the Nordic welfare states, as well as in the other Western European countries, is to make it possible for both men and women to balance paid work with family and caregiving (cf. Sainsbury, 1999; Skevik, 2001). It is assumed that men's greater participation in matters involving the family can enable women to achieve the power and influence that result from a strong position in the labor market. In recent decades, several significant political initiatives have been implemented in Sweden with the aim of strengthening the position of women in the labor market and persuading men to take more active responsibility for the home and child care. Consequently, it is important to investigate how the welfare state's professions deal with these two areas.

Research has shown that social workers' assessments are not always in line with the intentions of policy makers (see, e.g., Hagen & Wang, 1994; Kingfisher, 1998; Lipsky, 1980; Mayers, Glaser, & Mac Donald, 1998). That is, the relative autonomy of the welfare state's professions vis-à-vis social policies may lead, in many cases, to the reproduction, rather than the solution, of the social problems of men and women, as has been found in research on the implementation of the goals of men's active participation in the care of

their children (Daniel & Taylor, 1999; Edwards, 1998; Jaffe, 1983; Kullberg, 1996; Lazar, Sagi, & Frazer, 1991). In the case of paid work, men and women also tend to be treated differently by the social authorities (Bäckström, 1994; Bryson, 1992; Kullberg & Cedersund, 2001; McIvor, 1998). One such difference is that men are given preferential treatment in employment counseling and other services and tend to be given help more quickly in finding jobs (Bäckström, 1994; Bryson, 1992).

The study presented here investigated how the Swedish welfare state's professions help male and female clients to balance paid work with family life and caregiving. It did so by examining how social welfare officers assess unemployed single parents' problems and needs with regard to finding jobs and establishing and maintaining social networks—two areas that have proved to be important for single parents (see Atwood & Genovese, 1993).

The work of Swedish social welfare officers is regulated by the Social Services Act of 1982. This law clearly states that all residents have equal rights to receive support for upkeep and other living requirements. Financial support is determined by a means test, and there is no time limit on how long it may be received. According to the law, male and female clients who are single parents have the same right to obtain both financial and social support (i.e., in the form of guidance in their parental role). If they are fit to work, they are also equally obliged to seek employment during the time they are receiving financial support. The two forms of help (financial support and social support), officially termed "assistance," can be distributed, if necessary, by the same social worker. Financial support is not a general allowance intended to compensate parents for the increased economic burden of having children. Instead, the aim is to compensate individuals during a transitional period while they are seeking employment or are receiving income from other sources (related to the labor market or social policy), such as unemployment benefits.

METHOD

Hypotheses

The study took a gender-comparative approach (see Goldberg, 1968; Kernes & McWhirter, 2001; Kiesler, 1975; Malchon & Penner, 1981). Two hypotheses were formulated concerning how Swedish social workers, in general, assess men's and women's problems in relation to paid work and social networks and social support, respectively.

Hypothesis 1: Social workers, assuming that all other background variables (such as class, race, and age) are the same, tend to assess men's problems and need for support in the area of paid work as being greater than those of women.

Hypothesis 2: Social workers, assuming that all other background variables (such as class, race, and age) are the same, tend to assess women's problems and need for help in the area of social support as being greater than those of men.

In the study, four questions were used to test the first hypothesis. These questions concerned the seriousness of the client's problems in the area in question, the importance of paid work to the client's self-image, the importance of work for the client's own support, and the importance of paid work in helping to ease the client's social isolation. The second hypothesis was tested with 11 items. These items concerned the possible support that the social worker could give the client and the support that the client could get from his or her mother, father, other relatives, and friends.

Vignette

The vignette method, in combination with the questionnaire, was used to implement the comparative approach. The vignette that was chosen for use in the study was designed and tested in a study of social workers in Norway (Alve, 1999). It was constructed on the basis of a "typical case" or "typology" (see Bailey, 1994; McKinney, 1966), which summarizes the characteristics of a Swedish single mother with a long-term need for income support (for a review of the characteristics of Swedish men and women who receive income support, see Kullberg, 2003). Two variations of the vignette were used: one in which the client was said to be a woman (called Anne) and one in which the client was said to be a man (called Arne).

The vignette is a brief account of the client's life that reflects the client's current situation. It was written in such a way that it resembles as closely as possible the type of accounts that are frequently found in case files of Swedish social service agencies. Social workers at two social welfare offices in central Sweden judged it to be a realistic account of the situation faced by a single mother with a long-term need for financial support. Thus, this aspect of the instrument has good face validity (see Fink, 1995).

The text describes a 27-year-old client who is living in a medium-sized town in Sweden and has been unemployed for the past 2½ years. The client has a relatively low educational level (he or she did not graduate from upper secondary school) and has been a single parent of two preschool-age children (a 5-year-old girl and a 2-year-old boy) for the past year. Because of insufficient income, the client has incurred personal debts (about SEK 17,000 or US\$2,350). The client's living conditions are good, but he or she spends little time with relatives, friends, and acquaintances; feels "very lonely and isolated"; suffers from allergies and insomnia; and finds it difficult to get the children to do as they are told.

Municipal child care is not available for the children. The client's self-confidence is too low for the client to continue his or her education. The client has received an offer of a job at a relative's company. Although the

client is considering this offer, he or she “doesn’t really have the energy” to pursue it.

Procedure

The vignette and questionnaire were mailed to a random sample of social workers with the professional title of *Socialsekreterare* (social welfare officer). These social workers were selected from a register of social welfare officers who were members of the Swedish Association of Graduates in Social Science, Personnel and Public Administration, Economics and Social Work. The total sample consisted of 880 persons, 700 of whom were female (corresponding to 12% of the female social welfare officers who, according to the association’s register, were professionally active at that time) and 180 of whom were male (corresponding to 15% of the number of male social welfare officers who were professionally active).

A total of 417 questionnaires (48% of all the questionnaires that were mailed) were returned. A post hoc test, using the statistical computer program G*Power (Buchner, Faul, & Erdfelder, 1997; Erdfelder, Faul, & Buchner, 1996), showed that the 417 returned questionnaires were sufficient to give the study a power (a beta value) of 94% under the same conditions as those applying to the power analysis, which was performed before the data were collected.

The data program for statistical processing, Statistical Package for the Social Sciences, was used. The data were assessed with the Mann-Whitney rank-sum test and the chi-square test—the types of statistical methods that are recommended for data at the ordinal-scale level (see, e.g., Svensson, 2001).

RESULTS

The Respondents

Of the 415 respondents who listed their gender, 333 (80%) were women and 82 (20%) were men. The overwhelming majority (87%) were aged 26 to 55; only 15 (3%) were aged 25 or younger, and 35 (8%) were aged 56 or older. The distribution of the respondents in the age ranges of 26 to 35, 36 to 45, and 46 to 55 was relatively even, with about 120 (29%) in each age range.

The respondents had worked for an average of 11.8 years in professions that usually require a B.Sc. and had worked an average of 10.7 years in the municipal social services. The majority had experience working with clients who required financial support (83%) and had B.Sc. degrees in social work (87%), and all but 1 had a university degree.

TABLE 1: The Social Welfare Officers' Assessments of the Client's Needs and Possible Measures to Be Taken Regarding the Client's Work Situation

Statement	Client		p
	Anne (n = 211)	Arne (n = 205)	
The social welfare officer should motivate the client to accept offers of work that he [she] receives, since this could contribute to breaking his [her] social isolation.	92%	98%	.05
Getting a job again is important for the client's self-image.	88%	91%	.21
The social welfare officer should motivate the client to accept offers of work that he [she] receives, since this could contribute to increasing his [her] income.	80%	82%	.17

NOTE: Percentages shown include those who responded *completely agree* and *very much agree*.

Testing the Hypotheses

As expected, the hypotheses were confirmed. The female client's (hereafter Anne) problems and need for support in finding work were judged to be less pressing ($p = .016$) than were the male client's (hereafter Arne), and Arne's problems and need for help in the area of social support were judged to be less pressing than were Anne's ($p = .018$). The calculation was performed with the Mann-Whitney rank-sum test, in which all the responses for paid work and social support, which were specified in the cases of Anne and Arne, are ranked and then compared.

Paid work. Despite the confirmation by the Mann-Whitney rank-sum test of the hypothesis concerning the social workers' assessment of Anne's and Arne's work situation, only one of the four questions that were asked in this area was significant when each question was considered individually. Of the three questions about the extent to which the client could be helped by getting a job (see Table 1), only one displayed a significant difference in the social workers' assessment of the two clients' situations. This item concerned whether the social welfare officer should motivate the client to accept offers of work that he or she received because doing so could help ease the client's social isolation. On this item, there were more who agreed in the case of Arne (98%) than in the case of Anne (92%) ($p = .05$).

For the other two questions, which concerned the importance of a job for increasing the client's income and self-image, respectively, there were only small differences that were not significant. Nor were the differences significant ($p = .07$) in the case of the respondents' assessments of the seriousness of Anne's and Arne's problems in the area of paid work. The results indicated that a somewhat higher proportion of the respondents agreed that

TABLE 2: The Social Welfare Officers' Assessments of the Client's Needs and Possible Measures to Be Taken Regarding the Client's Social Support

Statement	Client		p
	Anne (n = 211)	Arne (n = 205)	
The social welfare officer should offer the client advice and guidance that could help the client establish a social network.	78%	71%	.02
The client is in great need of support contact persons arranged by the social welfare office.	75%	64%	.02
It is unfortunate that the client's mother lives so far away, since this makes it difficult for her to help the client.	51%	36%	.01
It is unfortunate that the client's father is not alive because he could have helped the client.	40%	23%	.00
It would have been easier for the children to be well cared for if the client's father had still been alive.	30%	19%	.02
It would have be easier for the children to be well cared for if the client's mother lived closer to the client.	33%	36%	.50
The client's friends should be able to provide important social support in the client's current situation.	84%	78%	.18
The client's relatives should be able to provide important social support in the client's current situation.	66%	76%	.14
Having a permanent relationship would help the client considerably to cope with everyday life.	24%	20%	.08
Having a permanent relationship would mean a lot for the client's self-image	25%	32%	.01

NOTE: Percentages shown include those who responded *completely agree* and *very much agree*.

Arne had serious or very serious problems (76%) than agreed that Anne did (66%).

Social support. Of the 11 questions that were used to measure social support, 1 concerned the degree of seriousness of the client's social-support problem, 2 concerned possible measures that could be taken by the social services officers, and 8 concerned the client's own networks. A distinct trend in the responses was that with the exception of the question on support from a permanent partner, Anne was considered to be in greater need of support than was Arne.

The responses to 10 of the questions about the client's social networks are shown in Table 2. For 7 of these questions, the differences were significant. For Question 11, which is not included in the table, the difference was also significant. This question concerned how the respondents assessed the seriousness of Anne's and Arne's social-network problems. For this question, 84% of the respondents thought that Anne had serious or very serious problems, whereas 69% thought that Arne did ($p = .03$).

There were substantial differences in the responses to the 10 questions presented in Table 2. The responses to the two questions concerning support by the social welfare officers to help the client establish a social network showed that more respondents thought that the social welfare officers should offer such support and guidance to Anne (78%) than to Arne (71%) ($p = .02$). The same trend can be seen in the responses to the statement that the client was in great need of support contact persons arranged by the social welfare office.

The questions for which there was the largest difference in the social workers' assessments of the two clients' situations were related to the possible support that the client could be given by his or her mother and father. In regard to the statement that "it is unfortunate that the client's mother lives so far away her, since this makes it difficult for her to help the client," more respondents agreed in Anne's case (51%) than in Arne's (36%) ($p = .01$). The father's support was also considered to be a greater resource for Anne than for Arne and in relation to the care of Anne's children. In response to the statement "It is unfortunate that the client's father is not alive because he could have helped the client," 40% agreed in Anne's case and 23% agreed in Arne's case ($p = .00$). With regard to the statement "It would have been easier for the children to be well cared for if the client's father had still been alive," 30% agreed in Anne's case and 19% agreed in Arne's case ($p = .02$).

For the statement "A permanent relationship would have helped the client considerably to cope with everyday life," a slightly higher proportion agreed in the case of Anne (24%) than in the case of Arne (20%) ($p = .08$); however, this difference was not significant either. On the other hand, 25% agreed in Anne's case and 32% agreed in Arne's case with the statement "A permanent relationship would mean a lot for the client's self-image" ($p = .01$).

Questions 7 and 8, about the possible support that the client's relatives and friends might be able to give, did not result in any significant differences. Nor were there any significant differences between how Arne's and Anne's children might be affected if the mother lived closer to the client (Question 6; see Table 2).

DISCUSSION

The Swedish social workers assessed Arne's need for gainful employment as being more important than Anne's. However, the one individual question for which there was a significant difference concerned a social aspect of work, not the importance of work as a source of income. It is expected that work could help ease Arne's social isolation more than Anne's. The results also indicate that in their assessments of Anne, the social workers applied a broader definition of what parts of the social network could be important sources of support than they did in their assessments of Arne. All parts of

the social network—the client's mother and father, the social services office, and the social welfare officer—were considered to be more important components of the social network of Anne than of the social network of Arne, for whom a permanent relationship with a partner (of the opposite sex) was considered to be more important.

The results indicate that when it comes to equal opportunities for men and women to balance paid work with family life and caregiving, there is a gap between the official goals of the Swedish social welfare legislation and the individual assessment of the professional helpers. These findings can be compared with research that has shown that the implementation of social policy from a central political level to the actual realization of measures in the welfare state's institutions is shaped in a complex interplay among organizational limitations, administrative demands, professional knowledge, and personal values (Hagen & Wang, 1994; Hasenfeld, 2000; Kingfisher, 1998; Lipsky, 1980; Mayers et al., 1998). On the basis of this type of research, it is likely that the assessments of the social workers in this study were a product of the social workers balancing the administrative and organizational considerations in their daily work with their private opinions on men's and women's positions in the gender structure. Both the area of paid work and the social network have been traditionally considered to be, and to some extent are, closer to one or the other gender. Paid work and the role of the breadwinner, in Sweden as well as in other welfare states, have traditionally been the province of men, whereas the home and the family's social network have traditionally been the province of women (Pleck, 1992; Rubin, 1983).

A reasonable interpretation of the results with respect to the possibility that social workers took administrative and organizational considerations into account could thus be that they based their assessments on their previous experience in finding paid work for single fathers and in reinforcing social networks for single mothers. It also seems reasonable to assume that the social workers' different assessments of men's and women's problems and needs indicated the kind of "heteronormative" values (Nielsen, 2000; Peel, 2001) that prescribe the meaning of men's and women's "normal" and "deviant" behavior in different life situations (Schur, 1984)—values that, in this case, are not in line with the official goals of the Swedish Social Services Act.

It is also interesting to scrutinize the results in light of gender-sensitive social work having become a topical issue in social work (see, e.g., Kruk, 1994; Nelson-Zluoko, Kauffman, & Morrison, 1995; Norman & Wheeler, 1996). From this perspective, a legitimate question is whether the differences in assessments of the male and female clients' job situations and social support can be said to be adapted to the needs of single mothers and fathers. If the results are viewed from this perspective, the differences in the assessments of the male and female clients' work situations could be interpreted as the respondents' attempts to adjust their assessments to a reality in which

paid work has not traditionally been as important for women as for men and that it is easier for women to adapt themselves to household chores and to being unemployed (Bielby, 1992; Kulik, 2000, 2001; Nordenmark, 1999). However, such assessments are not in line with values held by men and women in the age range and type of household that were studied or with the "actual" needs of unemployed single mothers and fathers. The fact is that in the case of single mothers and fathers in this age range, research in the Swedish context has indicated that women, not men, value the importance of paid work the most (Nordenmark, 1999). Irrespective of how single men and women value paid work, research has also shown that single mothers, not single fathers, are generally in the most precarious position when it comes to access to paid work (Björnberg, 1997; Polokow, Halskov, & Schultz Jørgensen, 2001; Skevik, 2001). For example, nearly 30% of Swedish single mothers with preschool children are unemployed, and similar proportions are unemployed in Denmark (Polokow et al., 2001) and in Norway (Skevik, 2001). The greater vulnerability of single mothers can also be seen in the statistics on those who are receiving social welfare. In comparison with single fathers, single mothers had higher levels of long-term income support throughout the 1990s (see, e.g., National Board of Health and Welfare, 1995, 1999, for conditions in Sweden, and Polokow et al., 2001, for conditions in Denmark). In light of the data just presented, it seems evident that gender-sensitive social work would involve paying special attention to single mothers, more than single fathers, in relation to paid work.

The gender sensitivity in the respondents' skewed focus on the mother's and father's situations with respect to social networks and social support can also be questioned. Research has generally found that men typically have weaker social support than do women (Antonucci & Akiyama, 1987; Courtenay, 2000; Fritzell & Lundberg, 2000; Kandrack, Grant, & Segall, 1991; Verbrugge, 1985). Research has also indicated that single fathers may have weaker social networks than do single mothers (Arendell, 1995). That is, fathers who actively maintain their parental responsibilities by having their children live with them after a divorce are likely to run a greater risk of becoming socially isolated than are women in the same situation (Arendell, 1995). Studies that were conducted in Germany and the United States also found that several years after their divorce, men are still in much poorer mental health and have weaker social networks than do married men and women (Decurtins, Niklowitz, & Meyer, 1997; Verbrugge, 1985). In other words, it seems that single fathers are in an even more precarious position than are single mothers in regard to support from their social networks (see Arendell, 1995; Tietjen, 1985). Accordingly, it could be claimed that gender-sensitive social workers should devote special attention more to the social networks of single fathers than to the social networks of single mothers. One may speculate that providing support to strengthen the social networks of single fathers may also be an effective means of moving single fathers into the labor force in the long run.

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