

SOCIAL WORKERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE CAUSES OF POVERTY IN THE NORDIC COUNTRIES

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1. Introduction

When it comes to the perceptions of social workers regarding the causes of poverty, the Nordic countries seem to represent an interesting case. In comparison to most welfare states, the countries belonging to the Nordic welfare state model are usually regarded to have based their general social policy solutions to a higher degree on the very same principles that are also often regarded to constitute a part of the universal normative foundations of professional social work: That is, on the idea that deprivation and poverty are first and foremost a result of *structural conditions* and not of, for instance, a lack of individual thrift, and that such phenomena can, and should, be alleviated by the state on behalf of the groups in question (cf. Blomberg et al 2010; Weiss et al 2009). This has resulted in a system in which also the 'personal social services' and benefits of last resort in the Nordic countries, which are administered by social workers, and which are directed at the least advantaged groups in society for which other services and benefits are not providing sufficient support, constitute an integrated part of the broader public social policy system which aims at reducing individual social risks as well as social inequalities in society.

Such a setting, in which most professional social workers are employed by the public sector and are, thereby, expected to act first and foremost as public civil servants implementing overlapping (traditional) ideals of the Nordic model and of social work, could lead one to expect exceptionally uniform perceptions of the causes of poverty among social workers in these countries, stressing the importance of structural/social explanations of poverty.

However, there also are circumstances which might be taken to speak against such an assumption. Firstly, recent research has shown that the general public in the Nordic countries display rather differing views on the reasons of poverty (Lepianka et al. 2010) and, thus, it seems unclear whether social workers despite of this could be expected to display a uniform view on the matter. Secondly, there are also some recent national Nordic studies indicating that there might be a fairly large general variation in attitudes and assessments among social workers also in individual Nordic countries, due, i.a., to differences in organizational settings, type of work tasks or education (Holm 2002; Stranz 2007). Thirdly, in the Nordic countries, publicly administered social work is first and foremost provided by the municipalities, which have fairly large discretion in implementing social service goals. This might have implications for social worker's perceptions for two reasons: Although being a part of the universal welfare system, especially the municipal individual social services do also have roots in the municipal pre-welfare state poor relief system, which can be seen to have been based on individualistic rather than structural explanations of poverty. Some observers have stressed reminiscences from earlier ways of organizing services in (parts of) the service system of today (cf. e.g. Sunesson et al. 1998). Furthermore, existing variations in the local social and political circumstances, affecting both policy choices and the general 'political climate', might possibly have an impact on the views of social workers.

By date, not much is known about the perceptions or attitudes of social workers in the Nordic countries on any matters, a fact that may perhaps be attributed to the coinciding general social policy goals and traditional social work objectives discussed above. In this paper, we utilize survey data gathered among professional social workers in four Nordic countries, including information on individual-level factors such as work tasks, education and work experience, which we combine with data on circumstances at the macro-level, in this case from the municipalities in which the respondents work, in order to analyse empirically the impact of such different kinds of factors for the perceptions of poverty of social workers.

We believe that such analysis could provide new information regarding the processes underlying the formation of perceptions of social workers in general, as well as to be of interest from a policy perspective, by highlighting to what extent Nordic social workers, with fairly large discretion in their work with clients (e.g. Stranz 2007), seem to agree with general policy aims.

In order to better understand the various processes which might influence Nordic social workers' perceptions of the causes of poverty, the following section focuses on earlier research on these issues in a cross-national perspective. Then, section 3 provides a more detailed discussion on various types of factors which have been assumed to influence the thinking of social workers. Since the number of studies on perceptions and related phenomena among social workers is fairly limited, and since there are assumptions according to which social workers' perceptions and attitudes may be influenced by their position in the general (national) social structure, references in these sections are also made to earlier comparative studies on perceptions among the general public. These considerations are followed by a presentation of the data and methods used (section 4), after which the results from our empirical analysis are presented in section 5. In the final section, the results are summarized and the implications from the point of view of our points of departure are discussed.

2. Cross-national differences in explanations of poverty

In order to measure Nordic social workers' adherence to structural explanations of poverty, as well as the prevalence of possible alternative perceptions, various theoretical distinctions could be utilized. A classical way of discerning between different explanations of poverty is to make a three-fold division into (1) structural explanations which focus on external societal and economic factors; (2) individualistic explanations, which emphasise the characteristics and actions of the poor themselves; (3) fatalistic explanations which place the responsibility for poverty on bad luck and fate (Niemelä 2008; Lepianka 2007; Feather 1974). This categorisation has been widely criticised as being too crude, even though it has gained empirical support in studies using, e.g., factor analyses (Lepianka et al. 2009; Lepianka 2007; Morcöl 1997).

Van Oorschot and Halman (2000, 4-8) have developed this categorization by distinguishing instead between four types of poverty reasons which are (1) individual blame; (2) individual fate; (3) social blame and (4) social fate. The two blame categories name explicit types of actor which can be held responsible for the existence of poverty. The 'individual blame' type of explanation stresses factors related to laziness and weak moral among the poor, whilst, according to the 'social blame' explanation, the reason for poverty is, instead, to be found in the discrimination and stigmatization of the poor by more powerful societal groups. In this category, the poor are considered victims, while ruling elites as well as societies at large, in which inequalities are accepted, are the one's responsible for the existence of poverty.

In contrast to the two ‘blame’ categories, no actors are considered responsible in the two ‘fate’ categories. Instead, poverty is considered either a consequence of random bad luck and misfortune among those who are poor, or as the result of ‘natural’ social processes, for instance related to business cycles in a market economy.

The above categorizations have also been applied both in a few existing social worker studies as well as in studies among the general population. Those of interest to this study will therefore briefly be discussed in the following.

As touched upon by way of introduction, it may be considered surprising how little we know about Nordic social workers’ attitudes towards social welfare policy in general and regarding their perceptions of causes of social problems, considering that they constitute a fairly large and important group among the employees of the Nordic welfare states. Earlier quantitative research within this field has mainly been conducted in Israel, the USA and Great-Britain (Weiss-Gal et al. 2009; Weiss-Gal & Gal 2008; Bullock 2004; Rehner et al. 1997; Jones 1994). These studies have usually found that social workers (and social work students) support social and structural explanations of poverty (Reingold & Liu 2009; Woodcock & Dixon 2005; Weiss et al. 2002) and do so to a greater extent than the general population. These results have been interpreted as reflecting values embraced through their education and involvement in the social work profession.

Comparative attitude studies among the general public have, in turn, mainly deployed an institutionalist approach: Here, it is assumed that institutional variations in different welfare state models create different perceptions of poverty (Albrekt Larsen 2006; van Oorschot & Halman 2000; also Kallio & Niemelä 2010). Results have, however, been contradictory, possibly due to the use of different independent variables measuring poverty perceptions. Albrekt Larsen (2006) studied the popular support for the ‘individual blame explanation’ and found clear differences between different welfare state models: In the Anglo-Saxon welfare state model people did blame the poor themselves, while individual explanations were not supported to a greater extent in the Nordic countries. Perceptions in the Continental European welfare model could be placed in between the views expressed in Nordic and Anglo-Saxon models. However, another study (van Oorschot and Halman 2000) did not find attitude differences following the grouping of countries into welfare state models. It remains unclear, whether this might be a consequence of their use of their own four-fold indicator of poverty perceptions (c.f. above), instead of focussing on individual explanations only.

Especially interesting from the point of view of our research, are findings from some further studies, both comparative and national, which indicate that there seem to be fairly large differences in the perceptions of poverty between the general populations of the individual Nordic countries: the Danes often seem to explain poverty by social fate (while ‘social blame’ is not favoured) while social blame seems to stand out as the one most common explanation in Sweden and Norway. In Finland, again, individualistic explanations seem to be more commonly favoured in comparison with the rest of Norden, although structural explanations remain most commonly embraced in Finland also (Lepianka et al. 2010; Niemelä 2008; Albrekt Larsen 2006; van Oorschot & Halman 2000.) Such nation-specific differences, possibly reflecting differences in national histories and cultural values and beliefs which co-exist with the common goals and structures of their fairly similar welfare states, might, then, be presumed to affect the perceptions of professional social workers also.

Regardless of such a possibility, as has also been indicated above, there are reasons to expect social workers to display diverging perceptions as compared to the rest of the population in a country, but

also possibly to display within-group variations in perceptions. The following section, therefore, deals with these questions in greater detail.

3. The formation of perceptions among social workers

Assumptions regarding the formation of social workers' perceptions of the causes of poverty and/or attitudes towards the welfare state in general can be divided into those focusing on factors believed to result in fairly unanimous views among this professional group, and those pointing at factors which are believed to bring about an opposite effect.

The factors discussed by Weiss-Gal & Gal (2007, 349-350), that is a) professional values and ethic codes in social work b) (negative) effects of the professionalization of social work and c) the socioeconomic status of social workers all represent the first of the above mentioned types of assumption. A shared educational background, ethical guidelines, and core professional values, such as those discussed in the introduction, might influence perceptions and attitudes of social workers. Thus, one might, on the one hand, expect that professional identity, culture and the professional 'ideological climate' at large would result in certain commonly accepted ways of explaining social problems and, thus, also to rather homogeneous perceptions of poverty, regardless of variations in (other) individual or in societal circumstances¹.

Assumptions concerned with 'negative' consequences of professionalization can, on the one hand, be based on the idea that professional recognition, prestige and authority requires social workers to identify themselves with political/societal elites, resulting in an alienation from client groups' situations, preferences and wishes (Weiss-Gal & Gal 2007, 350). Another approach to the logic of 'side effects' of professionalization however, highlights a process including specialization and monopoly on specific skills and knowledge that the clients (or other professional groups) do not possess. As Reingold & Liu (2009) write, '...the sociological study of professions suggests that social service professionals, like other experts, will likely express negative attitudes regarding clients, attributing poverty to perceived individual failings'.

A third kind of assumption is related to the fact that social workers belong to the middle classes. They are well educated, have fairly large autonomy in their work as well as reasonable remuneration, attributions typical for the middle classes (Weiss-Gal & Gal 2007, 350). When stressing the general position of social workers in the societal structure, rather than their intra-professional factors, this assumption is concordant with traditional assumptions concerning self-interest in attitudinal research (cf. eg. Jaeger 2006; Kangas 1997).

Turning to views which highlight possible reasons for differences in perceptions and attitudes among social workers instead of similarities, it is, again, possible to identify factors both more and less closely related to the profession: One line of reasoning is concerned with gender aspects. Women and men can be assumed to have diverging normative views and interests concerning the social security system (Svallfors 1991). Some studies have found that when perceptions of poverty are concerned, the ideological and value based determinants are essential: women value social equality, solidarity and communality more than do men (Arts & Gelissen 2001, 295-297; Haikonen & Kiljunen 2003, 326). Both earlier studies among the population in the Nordic country of Finland,

¹ At least, social workers might feel obliged to answer surveys in accordance with the professional ethical codes regardless of their own opinions.

as well as among social workers outside Norden have shown that men tend to favor individual explanations to a greater extent than women do, while women, instead, tend to favor structural and fatalistic explanations (Niemelä 2008; Sun 2001).

Effects related to education, such as secondary socialization have further been assumed to affect social workers views (Cryns 1977). According to Hodge (2003, 110-114), conservatism increases as the amount of social work education decreases.

Some US studies have also concluded that the amount of social work education affects social workers views on poverty: Those who have a master's degree in social work are more likely to embrace structural attributions of poverty, than bachelors who more often seem to favor individualistic explanations (Reingold & Liu 2009; Rehner et al. 1997).

Finally, it has been assumed that personal interaction increases the feeling of identification with the poor, thus decreasing the likelihood of supporting individual explanations. According to existing research, greater exposure to homelessness increases the likelihood of attributing it to structural causes, and decreases attributions to individual causes. It seems like if 'exposure' encourages a development of positive emotions and empathy. However, there are also studies indicating that heavy exposure to the poor (like work in the social services) may result in harsher attitudes towards disadvantaged groups: for instance, it has been shown that in US non-whites have 'harder' attitudes towards the homeless than whites and that social workers that have frequent contact with consumers of social services have the more negative attitudes towards poverty and the poor than administrators with less frequent contacts. (Lee et al. 2004; Rehner et al. 1997; Lee et al. 1992.) Thus, the amount of work experience and work task might be of importance for social workers' attitude formation.

As mentioned in the introduction, it seems reasonable to believe that attitudes are not only governed by the social worker's professional status and/or personal socio-economic attributions, but also affected by differing local contexts. In other words, social workers with similar individual level characteristics might think differently depending on circumstances at the local, municipal level. The political context, or 'climate', of the municipality might, for example, be of importance for attitude formation among social workers, out of which a vast majority are employed by the municipalities. One could expect such factors to be especially important in municipalities where one party or one side of the ideological spectrum is dominant. The formal and informal rules, instructions etc guiding, or even steering, social services might also look very different in "ideologically" (and as a consequence possibly also institutionally) different municipalities (Johansson Sevä 2009; c.f. also Blomberg & Kroll 1999; Kallio & Kivijakola 2009).

The composition and prevalence of, and possible increase in, social problems (such as unemployment) are other factors which might be of importance for social workers' attitudes. Studies among the general public have shown that people living in countries with high unemployment are more likely to endorse social than individualistic poverty explanations (Lepianka 2007, 118–121; Albrekt Larsen 2006, 74–79; Gallie & Paugam 2002, 24–26). In addition, similar findings have been reported concerning the incidence of poverty. The increased visibility of poverty at the country level increases the likelihood of choosing social injustice as an explanation of poverty and reduces the likelihood of choosing individual laziness as the explanation (Lepianka 2007, 118–121).

Summing up, in the light of earlier research on poverty perceptions, as well as the often contradictory assumptions to be drawn on the basis of different intra- and extra-professional factors, it seems difficult to present any clear-cut hypothesis about the perceptions of poverty among Nordic social workers, when we now shift focus to our own empirical data.

4. Research questions, data and methods

With reference to the above discussion, our research questions can be formulated in the following way:

- 1) How do social workers in the Nordic countries explain the causes of poverty and are there variations between countries in social workers' perceptions?
- 2) What is the impact of different individual and municipal level factors for social workers perceptions of the causes of poverty?

In our analysis we utilize the data from four nation-wide surveys among professional social workers in four different Nordic countries, namely from Sweden (N=2809), Norway (N=703), Denmark (N=743), and Finland (N=1299). The data was collected in the autumn of 2007 in Sweden and Finland. In Norway and Denmark the survey was fielded in the spring of 2008. In Sweden and Finland the survey was carried out by means of an electronic questionnaire, which was sent to social workers by email. All Finnish social workers being trade union members of the Union of Professional Social Workers (Talientia) and having an e-mail address (ca 70 % of the members) participated in the study. The response rate was circa 60 percent. In Sweden, the electronic questionnaires were sent to randomly chosen members (with e-mail) belonging to Akademikerförbundet SSR (response rate circa 60). In Norway and Denmark, questionnaires were sent by mail to randomly chosen members of the Norwegian Union of Social Educators and Social Workers and The Danish Association of Social workers respectively, due to the lack of technical possibilities of making a survey electronically. Also in these countries, the response rate turned out to be about 60%. These trade unions organize the main part of all professional social workers in their respective countries.

As dependent variables we have used one version² of the operationalisation of the above discussed model by van Oorschot and Halman's (2000), which contains four different questions naming different reasons for people living in poverty, with the exact phrasing being: 'People in this country live in poverty

- Because they are unlucky
- Because of laziness and lack of willpower
- Because of injustice in our society
- Because it is inevitable part of modern progress'

The category of 'the unlucky' has been taken to represent the individual fate dimension, 'laziness' to represent the individual blame dimension, 'injustice..' to measure social blame and 'progress' to indicate perceptions of social fate in van Oorschot's and Halman's (2000) model. The responses are grouped into three categories: (1), those who disagreed with the statement (strongly disagreed, disagreed) (2) those who neither disagreed nor agreed with the statement and (3) those who agreed with the statement (strongly agreed or agreed). Empty responses were treated as missing data.

² The questions concerning perceptions of poor have been used in the Comparative Questionnaire Module on Welfare Values and Opinions. One interesting difference in relation to some earlier studies which have used variants of these questions is that respondents have not been asked to choose the explanation(s) considered most important. Instead, respondents were asked separately to state whether they agreed or disagreed with each type of explanation.

The independent variables used are on two levels, namely the individual and the municipal level respectively. At the individual level, we are interested in how the *length of work experience* in social work, *gender*, *educational background*, *work tasks* and *employment sector* are attached to the respondent's perceptions of the causes of poverty. Also, we are using the respondent's *country* as an independent variable at the individual level, since only four countries do not allow for an inclusion of them in the analysis as macro level factors.

Because of, among other things, the availability of comparable data at the municipal level, we have included the following variables at the municipal level: the political climate in the municipality (measuring the strength of parties belonging to the leftist block), the unemployment rate as well as the share of the population receiving social assistance in the municipality in which the social worker's job is situated. Detailed information about municipality and individual level indicators is presented in Appendix Table 1 and 2.

We begin our empirical analysis by looking at results of descriptive analysis. However, the main method used is multilevel logistic regression analysis, which allows for the inclusion of independent variables at two levels (for example from individual and municipal levels). The method is suitable in situations when a dependent variable can have more than two values and when its scale is ordinal. Compared to traditional multivariate analyses, the multilevel methods give more exact standard errors, confidence intervals, and significance tests. When traditional methods are used, there is a possibility that the significance levels of macro-level independent variables will be overestimated. (Hox 2002) Missing cases have been taken into the analyses using multiple imputation (for details see Hippel 2009; Royston 2004). The only cases which were dropped out from our analyses were cases without a municipality code.

The multilevel models will be presented in four tables. The tables include odds ratios and statistical significances of the independent variables and the variances between municipalities. Analyses are carried out as follows: Models 1-4 show the effects of individual-level independent variables, while the last model (Model 5) includes both individual and municipal-level variables. In this last model the effects of the country variable is also standardized. The empty models are presented in Appendix 3.

5. Results

Turning to the results, we begin by looking at how social workers in the individual Nordic countries perceive the causes of poverty.

As can be seen in Table 1, there is quite some variation between the four Nordic countries. 'Social blame' is indeed the most popular explanation in all countries studied, but support for it varies significantly. Denmark stands out as the most deviant case. Here, only about 40 percent of the social workers support this explanation while the figures for Finland, Sweden and Norway are between 60 and 70 percent.

All the four explanations of poverty are fairly commonly embraced by the Finnish respondents. They differ the most in relation to other respondents regarding the popularity of the two individual explanations (individual blame, individual fate), where their support is clearly higher than it is in the other countries studied.

The Danish respondents, in turn, support fatalistic explanations almost to the same degree as they support the social blame explanation and, thus, in 'relative terms', Danish social workers display a more fatalistic way of thinking as compared to the social workers in the other Nordic countries.

The perceptions of Swedish and Norwegian social workers seem to be rather similar: 'social blame' explanations of poverty are clearly the ones favoured, while other poverty explanations do not enjoy the same degree of support as in Finland or Denmark.

Table 1 about here

After a general descriptive presentation of social workers' perceptions of poverty, we will now turn to possible differences in perceptions among social workers due to differing individual characteristics.³

In Model 1-4 (Tables 2-5) the effects of personal characteristics for poverty perceptions are analysed: According to the results, the amount of personal work experience in social work is of major importance for perceptions of poverty: respondents with shorter work experience are more inclined to support 'individual blame', 'individual fate' and 'social fate' explanations and less inclined to support 'social blame' explanations than social workers with longer work experience.

Tables 2-5 about here

Also 'education' seems to be of importance for attitude differences: respondents without a degree in social work are more inclined to support individual blame explanations and less inclined to support social blame explanations than are respondents having a degree. However, 'education' is of no importance for the support for fatalistic explanations.

Further on, men are more inclined to agree with individual blame explanations, but less inclined to support individual fate explanations than are women.

There are, in general, no differences between social workers working with different tasks (social assistance vs. other tasks, child welfare vs. other tasks, client work vs. management). The only exception found concerns the 'individual blame' dimension: social workers working directly with social assistance are more inclined to support individual blame explanations than are other social workers. Employment sector, in turn, is not of major importance for poverty perceptions, although there are some minor significances which are hard to interpret.

In Model 5 also the effects of the country variable and the different municipal-level indicators are analysed. According to the results social workers poverty perceptions do not vary across municipalities (see also Appendix 3), but only across countries. The results for the country variable follow the same pattern as already described in connection with the results presented in Table 1.

6. Discussion

³ Separate analyses for each country were also preformed, but since results were quite similar to those presented in Table 1 country specific results are not reported in this paper.

The empirical results of this study illustrate that the most commonly perceived reasons for poverty among Nordic social workers are connected to ‘social blame’ (that is, to injustice related to structural conditions), a result which is well in line with the normative standpoints of the Nordic welfare model, as well as with basic universal normative foundations of the social work profession.

Despite this fact, however, such perceptions are hardly dominating enough to make it possible to talk about a uniform professional view. Instead, Nordic social workers display a surprisingly large variety of and variation in perceptions: there are great differences between countries, but also within countries.

Norway and, above all, Sweden, seem to be the countries in which structural conditions are most commonly perceived as the reason for poverty, to judge from the strong support for social (blame) explanations, combined with minor support for other explanations. Finnish social workers, in turn, support several poverty explanations, and in comparison with the other Nordic countries, individual explanations enjoy a rather widespread support in this country. The views on poverty vary the most among the Danish social workers, as shown by the fact that none of the poverty explanations enjoys very widespread support. However, in comparison with other Nordic social workers, the Danes could perhaps be best described as ‘fatalistic’. Thus, these findings seem to bear resemblance with previous national and comparative studies among the general populations in the Nordic countries. Unfortunately, the interpretation of these national differences remains unclear: previous comparative studies have not offered any explanations, and our results do not provide any additional hints as to these national variations either.

Concerning the impact of individual level determinants on perceptions, our results show that work experience clearly affects Nordic social workers’ views. As mentioned earlier, it has been assumed that ‘exposure’ to the poor encourages the development of positive emotions and empathy among social workers. The number of years in social work has also been seen as an indicator of the acquisition of professional skills and increased knowledge of the phenomena (in this case poverty). These assumptions are in line with our results, according to which social workers with longer work experience are less inclined to support individual blame as well as fatalistic explanations and more inclined to support social blame explanations.

Of course, we cannot rule out the possibility that the differences we have detected are not in reality a ‘generational effect’, rather than being an effect of work experience, since age and work experience are strongly correlated. Since the 1990’s we have seen cutbacks and various reforms more in line with assumptions of individual blame (e.g. different sanctions in the case of non-compliance with various demands) in the personal social services and a more general retrenchment and restructuring of the welfare state in all Nordic countries, perhaps especially in Finland and Sweden. Even though the traditional ideals of the Nordic welfare model have not been officially abandoned, welfare policies for the most disadvantaged groups have become harsher (e.g. Sunesson et al. 1998; Johansson & Hvinden 2007). Thus, the results might, at least partly, also reflect younger social workers having been socialized to a greater extent to these ‘new ideas’ within the Nordic welfare states.

In contrast to what could be expected, (differences in) ‘work tasks’ are not of importance for explaining differences in perceptions. Although social workers administering social assistance are more inclined to support individual blame explanations than other social workers, they do, at the same time, also support social blame explanations to the same degree as do other social workers.

This might imply that social workers within social assistance would have varying perceptions of the reasons for poverty in different client groups.

'Front-line bureaucrats', in other words social workers working directly with clients, do not differ from social workers in a leading (management) position. This finding might have to do with the fact that managers in social services in the Nordic countries usually have a long work experience as front-line bureaucrats before advancing into a superior position. Employment sector does not have a notable impact on Nordic social workers' perceptions of the reason for poverty either, which is not all that surprising, bearing in mind that no differences were detected within the municipal sector.

Summing up, the results obtained in the Nordic countries would indicate that the amount of work experience (in social work), regardless of task, position or type of employer is in a key position in forming the perceptions of poverty, and possibly regarding other perceptions and attitudes among social workers within a country as well.

But also 'education', in this study measured as having, as opposed to not having, a degree in social work, seems to be of importance for perceptions among social workers: respondents without a degree in social work are more inclined to support 'individual blame' and less inclined to support 'social blame' explanations. Whether this is an effect of the type of Nordic social work education programs and their curriculums, or whether social work students possess their perceptions about society already prior to taking part in social work education (and that this fact would, in fact, explain their choice of education) is, of course, hard to estimate. On the basis of previous international research, however, it seems as both processes might be at work here (c.f. Weiss-Gal et al. 2005).

Gender is also, as suggested by earlier research, of some importance for explaining social workers' views on the reasons for poverty: men are more inclined to support individual blame explanations and less inclined to support individual fate explanations, which is in line with prior findings.

Factors related to the respondent's work tasks or employment sector are of modest importance for social workers perceptions of poverty. Neither do structural or political differences (the level of unemployment, the number of social welfare recipients, dominating local political block) between municipalities affect social workers' perceptions of poverty, although such differences might be quite substantial. How should such a lack of 'contextual effects' be interpreted? In population studies, such differences have been thought, and also sometimes been found, to be of importance for the fairly abstract questions that also we have used. One explanation would be that the 'internal differences' within the countries are still not great enough in relation to the effect of general 'systemic' values on the one hand and those (unknown) factors which lie behind the national differences in the perceptions of poverty on the other. In any case, it would be worth investigating, whether local differences still might have an effect concerning attitudes to more specific social work measure concerning the poor, for instance various workfare-related policies.

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Table 1. Social workers' perceptions of the causes of poverty in the Nordic countries (%).

	Individual blame	Social blame	Individual fatalism	Social fatalism
Finland	17	73	52	26
Norway	4	65	17	32
Sweden	4	68	13	24
Denmark	3	43	34	35

Table 2. Social workers' perceptions of individual blame. Multi-level ordinal logistic regression analysis. Odds ratios, statistical significance levels and standard errors in parentheses.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Male	1,24* (0,10)	1,36** (0,10)	1,26* (0,10)	1,36** (0,10)	1,46*** (0,10)
Female	1,00	1,00	1,00	1,00	1,00
No social work education	1,80*** (0,08)	1,63*** (0,09)	1,78*** (0,08)	1,72*** (0,09)	1,61*** (0,09)
Have social work education	1,00	1,00	1,00	1,00	1,00
Working with social assistance	1,61*** (0,09)			1,35*** (0,09)	1,24* (0,09)
Not working with social assistance	1,00			1,00	1,00
Working within child welfare	1,01 (0,07)			0,94 (0,07)	0,90 (0,07)
Not working within child welfare	1,00			1,00	1,00
Manager	0,97 (0,09)			1,16 (0,10)	1,15 (0,10)
Not manager	1,00			1,00	1,00
Work experience 5-9 years		0,71*** (0,10)		0,72*** (0,10)	0,71*** (0,10)
10-19 years		0,44*** (0,10)		0,45*** (0,10)	0,44*** (0,10)
20-29 years		0,34*** (0,11)		0,35*** (0,11)	0,32*** (0,11)
30 years or more		0,40*** (0,13)		0,41*** (0,13)	0,37*** (0,13)
Less than 5 years		1,00		1,00	1,00
Employed by municipality			0,66** (0,13)	0,72* (0,13)	0,83 (0,13)
Other employer			0,77* (0,12)	0,82 (0,12)	0,84 (0,12)
Employed by state			1,00	1,00	1,00
Share receiving social assistance within municipality					0,97 (0,03)
Unemployment rate in municipality					1,00 (0,02)
Left-wing strength in local government					1,00 (0,01)
Finland					4,44*** (0,24)
Norway					1,27 (0,18)
Sweden					1,51* (0,18)
Denmark					1,00
<hr/>					
_cut11					
_cons	2.023*** (0.123)	1.234*** (0.130)	1.862*** (0.113)	1.326*** (0.141)	1.612*** (0.254)
<hr/>					
_cut12					
_cons	3.497*** (0.134)	2.743*** (0.138)	3.332*** (0.124)	2.838*** (0.149)	3.129*** (0.258)
<hr/>					
Municipality variance					
_cons	0.495*** (0.064)	0.586*** (0.066)	0.496*** (0.064)	0.551*** (0.065)	0.245*** (0.071)
<hr/>					
N	5186	5186	5186	5186	5186

Significance levels: *p<0,05; **p<0,01; ***p<0,001

Table 3. Social workers' perceptions of social blame. Multi-level ordinal logistic regression analysis. Odds ratios, statistical significance levels and standard errors in parentheses.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Male	0,93 (0,09)	0,89 (0,09)	0,92 (0,09)	0,91 (0,09)	0,92 (0,09)
Female	1,00	1,00	1,00	1,00	1,00
No social work education	0,79** (0,08)	0,84* (0,08)	0,80** (0,08)	0,83* (0,08)	0,72*** (0,08)
Have social work education	1,00	1,00	1,00	1,00	1,00
Working with social assistance	0,75*** (0,08)			0,81** (0,08)	0,87 (0,08)
Not working with social assistance	1,00			1,00	1,00
Working within child welfare	1,11 (0,06)			1,14 (0,06)	1,09 (0,06)
Not working within child welfare	1,00			1,00	1,00
Manager	0,96 (0,08)			0,88 (0,08)	0,85 (0,08)
Not manager	1,00			1,00	1,00
Work experience 5-9 years		1,01 (0,09)		0,99 (0,09)	1,00 (0,09)
10-19 years		1,16 (0,09)		1,15 (0,09)	1,14 (0,09)
20-29 years		1,63*** (0,09)		1,62*** (0,10)	1,61*** (0,10)
30 years or more		1,53*** (0,12)		1,53*** (0,12)	1,54*** (0,12)
Less than 5 years		1,00		1,00	1,00
Employed by municipality			1,07 (0,11)	1,03 (0,11)	1,06 (0,11)
Other employer			1,08 (0,10)	1,04	1,10 (0,10)
Employed by state			1,00	1,00	1,00
Share receiving social assistance within municipality					1,03 (0,03)
Unemployment rate in municipality					1,02 (0,02)
Left-wing strength in local government					1,00 (0,00)
Finland					2,87*** (0,20)
Norway					3,20*** (0,13)
Sweden					2,76*** (0,14)
Denmark					1,00
<hr/>					
_cut11					
_cons	-2.313*** 0.113	-2.038*** 0.121	-2.272*** 0.106	-2.054*** 0.130	-1.209*** 0.205
<hr/>					
_cut12					
_cons	-0.955*** 0.108	-0.675*** 0.116	-0.915*** 0.100	-0.690*** 0.125	0.170 0.204
<hr/>					
Municipality variance					
_cons	0.385*** 0.053	0.396*** 0.055	0.410*** 0.053	0.372*** 0.054	0.000 0.063
<hr/>					
N	5186	5186	5186	5186	5186

Significance levels: *p<0,05; **p<0,01; ***p<0,001

Table 4. Social workers' perceptions of individual fate. Multi-level ordinal logistic regression analysis. Odds ratios, statistical significance levels and standard errors in parentheses.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Male	0.66*** (0,09)	0.67*** (0,09)	0,66***(0,09)	0.67*** (0,09)	1,03 (0,10)
Female	1,00	1,00	1,00	1,00	1,00
No social work education	0,99 (0,07)	0,96 (0,07)	0,98 (0,07)	0,96 (0,08)	1,12 (0,08)
Have social work education	1,00	1,00	1,00	1,00	1,00
Working with social assistance	1,14 (0,08)			1,08 (0,08)	1,04 (0,08)
Not working with social assistance	1,00			1,00	1,00
Working within child welfare	0,92 (0,06)			0,91 (0,06)	0,92 (0,06)
Not working within child welfare	1,00			1,00	1,00
Manager	0,86 (0,08)			0,89 (0,08)	1,01 (0,09)
Not manager	1,00			1,00	1,00
Work experience 5-9 years		0,71*** (0,09)		0,71*** (0,09)	0,95 (0,09)
10-19 years		0,81* (0,08)		0,83* (0,08)	0,77** (0,09)
20-29 years		0,70*** (0,09)		0,72*** (0,09)	0,66*** (0,12)
30 years or more		0,63*** (0,10)		0,64*** (0,10)	0,57*** (0,13)
Less than 5 years		1,00		1,00	1,00
Employed by municipality			0,90 (0,10)	0,90 (0,10)	0,86 (0,11)
Other employer			1,20* (0,09)	1,23* (0,09)	0,75* (0,11)
Employed by state			1,00	1,00	1,00
Share receiving social assistance within municipality					0,97 (0,03)
Unemployment rate in municipality					1,03 (0,02)
Left-wing strength in local government					1,00 (0,00)
Finland					0,56** (0,19)
Norway					0,97 (0,13)
Sweden					0,61*** (0,14)
Denmark					1,00
<hr/> _cut11					
_cons	-0.445***	-0.703***	-0.408***	-0.714***	-0.892***
	0.101	0.111	0.095	0.120	0.212
<hr/> _cut12					
_cons	1.044***	0.794***	1.081***	0.784***	0.461*
	0.103	0.111	0.096	0.120	0.217
<hr/> Municipality variance					
_cons	0.654***	0.675***	0.655***	0.664***	0.019
	0.047	0.047	0.047	0.047	0.181
<hr/> N	5186	5186	5186	5186	5186

Significance levels: *p<0,05; **p<0,01; ***p<0,001

Table 5. Social workers' perceptions of social fate. Multi-level ordinal logistic regression analysis. Odds ratios, statistical significance levels and standard errors in parentheses.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Male	1,00 (0,10)	1,04 (0,10)	1,02 (0,10)	1,04 (0,10)	1,02 (0,13)
Female	1,00	1,00	1,00	1,00	1,00
No social work education	1,21* (0,08)	1,15 (0,08)	1,21* (0,08)	1,17* (0,08)	1,11 (0,09)
Have social work education	1,00	1,00	1,00	1,00	1,00
Working with social assistance	1,16 (0,08)			1,01 (0,09)	1,04 (0,08)
Not working with social assistance	1,00			1,00	1,00
Working within child welfare	0,96 (0,06)			0,93 (0,06)	0,90 (0,07)
Not working within child welfare	1,00			1,00	1,00
Manager	0,93 (0,09)			1,03 (0,09)	1,03 (0,08)
Not manager	1,00			1,00	1,00
Work experience 5-9 years		0,97 (0,09)		0,97 (0,09)	0,93 (0,10)
10-19 years		0,79** (0,09)		0,80* (0,09)	0,80** (0,10)
20-29 years		0,65*** (0,11)		0,65*** (0,12)	0,67*** (0,12)
30 years or more		0,57*** (0,13)		0,57*** (0,13)	0,56*** (0,13)
Less than 5 years		1,00		1,00	1,00
Employed by municipality			0,92 (0,11)	0,94 (0,11)	0,86 (0,12)
Other employer			0,73** (0,11)	0,75* (0,11)	0,77*
Employed by state			1,00	1,00	1,00
Share receiving social assistance within municipality					0,97 (0,03)
Unemployment rate in municipality					1,03 (0,02)
Left-wing strength in local government					1,00 (0,00)
Finland					0,56** (0,19)
Norway					0,99 (0,13)
Sweden					0,61*** (0,14)
Denmark					1,00
<hr/>					
_cut11					
_cons	-0.129	-0.415***	-0.165	-0.447***	-0.929***
	(0.110)	(0.125)	(0.104)	(0.131)	(0.209)
<hr/>					
_cut12					
_cons	1.208***	0.933***	1.174***	0.905***	0.425*
	(0.119)	(0.130)	(0.114)	(0.136)	(0.212)
<hr/>					
Municipality variance					
_cons	0.169**	0.156	0.183**	0.171**	-0.001
	(0.060)	(0.088)	(0.060)	(0.063)	(0.157)
<hr/>					
N	5186	5186	5186	5186	5186
<hr/>					

Significance levels: *p<0,05; **p<0,01; ***p<0,001

Appendix table 1. Description of municipality level variables.

Variable	Description	Categorisation	Data source	Reference
<i>Left-wing strength</i>	Last municipal council election, valid votes for left-wing parties (% of all valid votes).	Is used as a constant variable.	Finland: Statistics of Finland	http://www.stat.fi/index_en.html (3/2010)
			Sweden: Statistics of Sweden	http://www.scb.se (3/2010)
	Finland: Election of year 2008. Parties: The Social Democratic Party and The Left Party.		Norway: Statistics of Norway	http://www.ssb.no/en (3/2010)
	Sweden: Election of year 2006. Parties: The Social Democratic Party and The Left Party.		Denmark: Statistics of Denmark	http://www.dst.dk/homeuk.aspx (3/2010)
	Norway: Election of year 2007. Parties are: The Labour Party and The Socialist Left Party.			
	Denmark: Election of year 2005. Parties: The Social Democrats Party and Socialist People's Party.			
<i>Unemployment rate in municipality</i>	Municipal unemployment rate	Is used as a constant variable.	Finland: National Institute for health and welfare	http://uusi.sotkanet.fi/portal/page/portal/etusivu (2/2010)
	Finland and Sweden: Mean of the years 2006-2007		Sweden: Statistics of Sweden	http://www.scb.se (2/2010)
	Norway and Denmark: Mean of the years 2007-2008		Norway: Statistics of Norway	http://www.ssb.no/en (2/2010)
	Norway: County statistics is used because of the lack of municipal-level information.		Denmark: Statistics of Denmark	http://www.dst.dk/homeuk.aspx (2/2010)
<i>Share receiving social assistance within municipality</i>	Individuals who have received social assistance in the current year (% of all inhabitants)	Is used as a constant variable.	Finland: National Institute for health and welfare	http://uusi.sotkanet.fi/portal/page/portal/etusivu (2/2010)
			Sweden: Statistics of Sweden	http://www.scb.se (2/2010)
	Finland and Sweden: Mean of the years 2006-2007		Norway: Statistics of Norway	http://www.ssb.no/en (2/2010)
	Norway and Denmark: Mean of the years 2007-2008		Denmark: Statistics of Denmark	http://www.dst.dk/homeuk.aspx (2/2010)

Appendix table 2. Description of individual-level variables.

Variable	Description	Categorisation	%
<i>Gender</i>		1. Male	14
		2. Female	86
<i>Education</i>	Does the respondent have a degree in social work?	1. Degree in social work	80
		0. No degree in social work	20
<i>Work task</i>	Main type of work task (3 variables used)	1. Working with social assistance	17
		0. Not working with social assistance	83
		1. Working within child welfare	44
		0. Not working within child welfare	56
		1. Manager	16
		0. Not manager	84
<i>Work experience</i>	Number of years in social work	1. Max 4 years	20
		2. 5-9 years	19
		3. 10-19 years	25
		4. 20-29 years	24
		5. 30 years or more	12
<i>Employment sector</i>	Employment sector of the respondent	1. Municipality	79
		2. Other employer (voluntary and private sector and something else / no response)	11
		3. State	10
<i>Country</i>		1. Finland	23
		2. Norway	13
		3. Sweden	51
		4. Denmark	13

Appendix table 3. Empty models. Multi-level ordinal logistic regression analysis. Municipality variances, statistical significance levels and standard errors.

	Individual blame	Social blame	Individual fate	Social fate
<hr/>				
_cut11				
_cons	1.173***	-1.991***	-0.336***	-0.363***
	0.043	0.049	0.039	0.047
<hr/>				
_cut12				
_cons	2.629***	-0.637***	1.147***	0.972***
	0.062	0.037	0.042	0.053
<hr/>				
Municipality variance				
_cons	0.488***	0.397***	0.670***	0.159
	0.066	0.052	0.047	0.106
<hr/>				
<i>N</i>	5186	5186	5186	5186
<hr/>				

Significance levels: * $p < 0,05$; ** $p < 0,01$; *** $p < 0,001$