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Social workers' attitudes towards the unemployed in the Nordic countries

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Stream 12. Social Work and Social Policy

Abstract

During the last decades municipal social workers have become the implementers of new types of social policy measures aimed at activating the (poor) unemployed. These policies put a greater emphasis on individual explanations for unemployment, that is, on the individual's own responsibility for being unemployed. The purpose of this paper is to analyse the attitudes towards the unemployed among Nordic social workers and to examine the determinants behind them: Do social workers' attitudes correspond with a more individualistic view on unemployment, or are social workers' images of the unemployed more in line with the normative standpoints of the traditional Nordic welfare model, which emphasizes structural (macro) conditions as reasons for unemployment? We utilise the data from surveys among professional social workers in four Nordic countries (N=5551). Our analyses show that individualistic attitudes towards the unemployed appear not to be very common among Nordic social workers. However, there are attitudinal differences both between and within countries. Social workers in Finland and Norway display more individualistic attitudes towards the unemployed than social workers in Sweden and Denmark. But also differences in the educational background, the length of work experience, and the nature of work affect social workers' attitudes.

Introduction

During the past decades, the Nordic municipalities have become increasingly important actors regarding so-called active labour-market measures, especially when measures aimed at the long-term unemployed and different special groups like the young are concerned. This has meant that municipal social workers, especially within social assistance, have become the implementers and their clients the target group for new types of social policy measures (Johansson & Hvinden, 2007; Keskitalo, 2008.)

Such ‘activation’ measures are, however, not entirely new within the Nordic municipalities. Able-bodied persons not participating in ‘working life’ have, at various points throughout history, been viewed – in contrast to e.g. the sick and the old - as not deserving the help and social protection of the society (Giertz, 2004) and for example the tradition of poor relief included ideas of work-oriented goals (e.g. the workhouse system) in the municipalities (Sunesson et al., 1998). However, the principles behind municipal activation were affected by the development of the universal welfare state model in the Nordic countries. One of the characteristics of this model has been a view according to which unemployment is a result of structural conditions, rather than of individual shortcomings (Blomberg et al., 2010b; Kautto et al., 2001).

By the 1980s, the connection between social assistance and “demands” on the unemployed to ‘activate themselves’ had in practice become rather weak since the dependency of social assistance was expected to be temporary and jobs to be readily available when the client was able to look for work. However, the situation in the labour markets changed during the 1980s in some of the Nordic countries, and some of especially during the early 1990s’ recession in Finland and Sweden, when unemployment figures in these countries rose dramatically. As a response to this development, and inspired by international policy ideas of the day, ‘activation measures’ were included in Nordic social assistance programmes (se e.g. van Aerschot, 2011). According to many scholars, these measures marked a change in the view of the unemployed which is not commensurable with the Nordic welfare state model-view stressing structural explanations for unemployment (cf. e.g. Kananen, 2011) : these policies, which bear some resemblance to pre-welfare statist ideas of municipal welfare policy mentioned above, (once again) put a greater emphasis on individual explanations for unemployment, that is, on the individual’s own responsibility for being

unemployed. As a consequence of this change in view, the importance of incentives that result in the unemployed “choosing” work instead of being unemployed (i.e. on benefits) are being emphasized. The programmes have remained popular, even though their impact on future employment is uncertain (Salonen 2006; Giertz, 2004; Johansson & Hvinden, 2007; Julkunen, 2006).

Little is known about how social workers, that implement these policies, themselves view the (poor and) unemployed (see however Kroll & Blomberg, 2010). In other words, do social workers’ attitudes indicate a more individualistic view on unemployment, emphasising that the unemployed are responsible for their predicament through their own behaviour? Or are the social workers’ images of the unemployed more in line with the normative standpoints of the traditional Nordic welfare model, that emphasizes structural (macro) conditions as reasons for unemployment? The purpose of this paper is to shed some light on these issues in a Nordic, comparative perspective.

The normative views of social workers are important for a number of reasons. Social workers, as street-level bureaucrats, exercise considerable discretion in the implementation of social services (e.g. Lipsky, 1980), and their views can, thus, be assumed to be one factor influencing this implementation process. Social workers’ attitudes concerning the disadvantaged groups of society could also be related to how they treat their clients (Appelbaum, 2001; Reingold & Liu, 2009; Weiss, 2003). In other words, opinions towards the unemployed could influence the professional behaviour of social workers. Furthermore, citizens’ perceptions of how they are treated by the social welfare system have been shown to be of importance for their attitudes towards the welfare state in general (Kumlin, 2007; 2002.)

As far as we know, there are not many empirical studies on the attitudes of social workers towards the unemployed and unemployment. Yet, the unemployed are one of the biggest group of social work clients, at least in the Nordic countries (van Aershot, 2011). Both some existing national (Rehner, Ishee, Salloum & Velasues, 1997; Sun, 2001; Weiss-Gal, Benyamini, Ginzburg, Savaya & Peled, 2009) as well as the limited comparative (Blomberg et. al. 2010a; Jones, 1994; Weiss et al., 2002) research on the (presumably) related question of social workers’ and social work students’ perceptions regarding the causes of poverty indicate however that social workers place greater emphasis upon the *structural* causes of unemployment and poverty than upon a lack of individual

motivation. But the question remains to what extent this is true for social workers' views on the unemployed in the Nordic context as well and, also, whether the Nordic institutional context seems to have resulted in uniformity in views on these matters.

Nordic social workers' attitudes in a comparative perspective

There are both reasons speaking in favour and against such a uniformity in attitudes. In addition to the traditional welfare model, also Nordic activation policies have many similarities: they are aimed at the long-termed unemployed and tied to municipal social assistance. Activation measures include e.g. activation plans, sanctions (benefit cuts), work-oriented activities which may include training, rehabilitation, education, job seeking exercises, or integration measures such as language courses for immigrants. In all Nordic countries, sanctions, obligations and work-oriented activities have been targeted especially towards the young unemployed receiving social assistance. (van Aerschot, 2011.) As a consequence, the measures have strengthened the position of municipal social workers as regards decisions on e.g. benefit penalties or job seeking exercises.

In spite of such clear similarities, there are however also differences between Nordic countries. Firstly, there are some structural differences in unemployment. For example, Finland has the highest (long-term) unemployment rate while Norway has the lowest (see Appendix Figure 1). These differences are interesting, since it has been assumed that, people in general are more understanding towards disadvantaged groups in society in times of large unemployment, since it makes it harder to regard the unemployed as “deviant cases” being personally responsible for their situation (Albrekt Larsen, 2006). A similar mechanism might be prevalent among social workers, too.

Finland also differs from other Nordic countries concerning recipients of social assistance. The long-term unemployed and young people are the largest group of social assistance recipients in Finland – not immigrants as in other Nordic countries – since the level of primary unemployment security, among other things, is lower than in other Nordic countries. (van Aerschot, 2011; Julkunen, 2006).

And despite the above discussed similarities, there are also some differences in the activation policies between the Nordic countries. In Denmark, activation policies have been implemented for a longer period of time than in the other Nordic countries. In Finland, Norway and Sweden these policies have a shorter but ‘intense’ history: politicians have been eager to widen and promote such policies, despite a lack of clear proof of their effectiveness (cf. above). Sanctions in case of non-compliance are also harder in the Danish system than elsewhere, and include, e.g., possibilities of a total withdrawal of social assistance. Also, a reduction or total withdrawal of (non-EU) immigrants’ rights to social assistance has been made a general goal in Denmark. Statistics indicate that about 80 per cent of the Danish municipalities have actually used available activation measures. Thus, one may assume that Danish social workers are in practice implementing such (strict) activation measures to a greater extent than social workers in the other Nordic countries where local practises seem to vary a lot between municipalities. (Johansson & Hvinden, 2007; van Aerscht, 2011.) Various (and varying) institutional demands might be assumed to affect social workers’ attitudes through various mechanisms (cf. also next section). Findings from Sweden, for instance, seem to indicate a fairly uncritical position of individual social service officials towards activation programs (Hollertz 2010), which would appear to be in line with such an assumption.

Furthermore, there are also studies showing rather significant national attitude differences between the general populations of the individual Nordic countries on related matters, differences that might be prevalent also when it comes to the attitudes of social workers. According to a study by Halvorsen (2002), Norwegians seem to have more negative attitudes towards recipients of unemployment benefits than respondents in Sweden and Denmark. Also according to some earlier empirical studies focussing on ‘the poor’, there are significant attitudinal differences between the general populations of the individual Nordic countries. These studies also show that although structural explanations for poverty are commonly embraced in all Nordic countries, individualistic explanations enjoy comparatively more widespread support in Finland. This is the case both among the general public, and among social workers. In this sense Finland is a “deviant case”, especially considering the comparatively high Finnish (long-term) unemployment rate assumed to result in an opposite effect. The Danes, again, often seem to explain poverty by fatalism, which seems at least as puzzling, while structural causes seem to stand out as the most common explanation in Sweden and Norway. (Albrekt Larsen, 2006; Blomberg et al., 2010a; Lepianka, van Oorschot & Gelissen,

2010; van Oorschot & Halman, 2000; also Niemelä, 2008.) Such variations in attitudes may reflect cultural and, historical which co-exist with rather similar institutional settings in the Nordic welfare states.

In sum, in the light of the above institutional and structural factors, it seems difficult to present any clear-cut hypothesis about possible cross-national differences in attitudes, especially since there are also other types of factors which might determine social workers attitudes, some, but not all of which also vary significantly between the Nordic countries.

Determinants behind social workers' attitudes

There are some reasons to believe that the attitudes towards an important client group, such as the unemployed, could be rather unanimous within the social work profession (despite existing national and cross-national differences on other dimensions). A shared educational background, similar ethical guidelines and core professional values might influence the attitudes of social workers in a similar way. A professional identity, the similar nature of work, and the professional “ideological climate” and culture at large could develop a common way of responding to social risks and to people who are experiencing such risks, regardless of variations in other individual or societal circumstances (Weiss-Gal & Gal, 2007). It is a question of professionalisation as a “socialisation process”, meaning the identity-building, social and cultural process, which starts already during the university education (Dellgran & Höjer, 2005).

The prevalence of similar attitudes among social workers could also be understood as a result of the professionalization processes: a specialisation to certain work tasks, an alienation from other professional groups in the area and a struggle for power. Here, professionalization can be understood as a collective process, i.e. how a professional group by various means upholds and improves its status, authority, control over education and monopolises the working field through knowledge and expertise (Dellgran & Höjer, 2005). Thus, social workers could be expected to form a distinct, and in certain aspects consistent, societal group. Professionalization is also connected with the strive for recognition and prestige and hereby it might lead to a situation where social workers (seek to) identify themselves with political/societal elites, rather than with the client groups

preferences and wishes (Weiss-Gal & Gal, 2007). Identification with elites could, for instance, be assumed to lead to an acceptance by social workers of dominating views guiding social policies in a country, in this case views concordant with activation principles.

But there are also various reasons which could lead to substantial attitudinal differences concerning the view on the welfare state and its clients among social workers. One possible reason for variations in attitudes towards the unemployed could be related to the *gender* of the social worker, reflecting diverging normative views and interests between men and women concerning the social security system (Svallfors, 1991). Some studies have indeed indicated that male social workers/social-work students tend to favour individual explanations of social problems (such as poverty) than women (Jones, 1994; Sun, 2001; Blomberg et al., 2010a). However, prior studies among the general public (in the UK and Sweden) have concluded that gender does not appear as an important factor when attitudes towards the unemployed and the causes of unemployment are explained (Furnham, 1983; 1982; Furåker & Blomsterberg, 2003). Thus, we assume that gender difference in attitudes among social workers will be rather small, even though men might express individualistic attitudes to a somewhat greater extent than women.

Furthermore, factors related to the experience, knowledge and nature of work of social workers can influence social workers' opinions. For example, *the educational background* of the social workers, reflecting different forms of secondary socialization (e.g. Cryns, 1977) as well as formal knowledge and competence (Dellgran & Höjer, 2005; c.f. also Holm, 2002) might contribute to attitudinal variation. According to Blomberg et al. (2010a), those social workers who have a degree in social work are less likely to blame the poor themselves for their situation than those social workers who do not have a degree in social work. Thus, we assume that those who have a degree in social work have less individualistic attitudes towards the unemployed than those who do not have a degree in social work.

Also *the length of work experience* might explain attitudes towards unemployment among social workers. The mechanism behind the connection between length of work experience and attitudes could here be understood by the exposure to certain client groups. It has been assumed that personal interaction with the poor and unemployed encourages the development of positive emotions and empathy among social workers and increases knowledge about these groups (Lee, Farrel & Link,

2004; Pettigrew, 2008). However, "heavy" exposure (e.g. among social workers who have frequent contact with clients) may lead to harder attitudes towards different client groups such as the poor, unemployed and homeless people (Lee et al., 2004; 1990; Rehner et al., 1997).

But 'occupational years' can also be seen as an indicator of professionalization. It is based on the idea of professionalization as a continuous process where learning through experience is an essential source of knowledge and competence. Instead of a socialisation or collective process, here, it is a question of professionalization as an individual process: in other words, how the individual social worker becomes more professional in his or her daily work through e.g. practice, advanced education and supervision (Dellgran & Höjer, 2005).

Empirical studies have shown that work experience can be of major importance for social workers' attitudes: Jone's study (1994) showed that those who have longer work experience in social work are using external attributions more often than those who have rather short work experience when explaining the causes of unemployment. According to Blomberg et al. (2010a), the amount of personal work experience in social work is of major importance for perceptions of the causes of poverty: respondents with shorter work experience are more inclined to support individual explanations and less inclined to support structural explanations than social workers with longer work experience in the Nordic countries. Therefore, we assume that those who have worked for a rather short time as social workers will have more individualistic attitudes towards the unemployed than those who have worked for a longer time period.

It has also been assumed that *the work tasks* of social workers can affect their attitudes towards the unemployed. According to Rehner et al. (1997), direct service providers have more negative attitudes towards the poor than administrators who have less direct contact with clients. Moreover, it has been pointed out that Nordic social workers who are working within social assistance more often blame the poor themselves for their situation than other social workers (Blomberg et al., 2010a). This might be related to differences in the type of clients one is working with, the intensiveness of exposure or the general ideology and cultural climate of the work place. Thus, we expect that those who work with social assistance will show more individualistic attitudes towards the unemployed than other social workers. We also assume that social workers who are working in managerial positions will have more positive attitudes towards the unemployed than others.

Research questions, data and methods

The more precise research questions of this paper are: (1) What are the social workers' attitudes towards the unemployed? (2) Are there variations in attitudes between the Nordic countries? (3) What factors seem to determine variations in attitudes at the individual level?

In our analysis we utilise the data from four nationwide 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 and having an e-mail address (ca 70 per cent of the members) participated in the study. The response rate was circa 60 per cent. In Sweden, the electronic questionnaires were sent to randomly chosen social worker members (by e-mail) belonging to Akademikerförbundet SSR¹ (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 for making a survey electronically. Also in these countries, the response rate turned out to be about 60 per cent. These trade unions organise the main part of all professional social workers in their respective countries².

In the analyses presented in this paper we have chosen to include not only social workers presently working with the unemployed but also social workers working within other fields of social work, since a rather large share of the clients dealt with by social workers within fields such as child welfare or substance abuse, are usually also unemployed. Unemployment, especially long-term unemployment, is also clearly in connection with poverty and other social problems, often dealt by the social workers in the Nordic countries. Thus, it seems relevant to study the whole social worker profession and their attitudes towards the unemployed.

With reference to earlier research (Albrekt Larsen, 2006; Bullock, 2004) in issues on explanations for perceptions and attitudes towards the poor and unemployed, we use four statements which are seen to measure various aspects of an individualistic view on unemployment as dependent variables. Statements 1 and 2 are connected to the willingness and efforts of the unemployed to find work. In previous literature on perceptions and attitudes towards the poor and unemployed (Albrekt Larsen, 2006; van Oorschot, 2000), the perceived amount of “control” over one’s personal situation is the key in explaining the modest support for welfare benefits for the unemployed: the unemployed are regarded as being much more responsible for their neediness and more in control of their situation, than, e.g., the disabled, the sick or old people. The third statement concerns the ethical aspect of the behaviour of the unemployed, here measured as attitudes towards the misuse of social security by the unemployed. The fourth statement focuses on the expected behaviour of the unemployed: that is, to what extent they should show towards society because of the benefits they receive (cf. *ibid.*).

The chosen statements are (1) Most unemployed people could get a job if they were willing to do any work at all³, (2) The desire and willingness to work is much lower among the unemployed than among those who have jobs, (3) Many unemployed people manage to get benefits and services that they are not entitled to, (4) The unemployed should be grateful to society for the benefits and services they receive. The response categories are strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, strongly disagree and don’t know. The dependent variables are recoded as follows: (1) strongly agree and agree (0) other answer. The don’t know answers are treated as missing data. These are all questions have been used previously in several national and international survey questionnaires for the general public.

We begin our empirical analysis by looking at the results of descriptive analysis. Analyses are then continued by using multivariate methods (binary logistic regression analysis). This method is suitable in situations when a dependent variable is dichotomic (Hosmer & Lemeshow, 2000). The multivariate models are presented in Table 2. This table include odds ratios, statistical significances, and standard errors of the independent variables. The analyses are carried out as follows: in Model I the results of the bivariate analysis are reported and in Model II the results of multivariate analysis are reported.

Our multivariate analyses are built around six independent variables, four of which are related to the social workers' professional background. We are interested in how the *length of work experience* in social work, *educational background* (does the respondent have a degree in social work or not) and *work tasks* are related to the respondent's attitudes towards the unemployed. In the latter case two dummy-variables are used: is the respondent working with social assistance or not, and is he or she working as a manager or not respectively. Furthermore, one general sociodemographic independent variable is used in the analyses, namely *gender*. In addition, we are using the respondent's *country* as an independent variable. The distribution of independent variables is reported in the Appendix in Table 1.

Results

Turning to the results, we begin by exploring the attitudes of social workers towards the unemployed in the Nordic countries. As can be seen in Table 1, there is some variation between statements. The statement that most unemployed could get a job gets the largest support among the social workers: Between 40-50 per cent of Finnish and Norwegian respondents think that the unemployed could get a job if they were willing to do any work at all, whereas only about 25 per cent of the respondents in Sweden and Denmark agree with the statement.

On the other hand, only between 9-14 per cent of Nordic social workers perceive that the unemployed are less willing to work than those who have jobs and less than 10 per cent of the respondents believe that the unemployed manage to obtain benefits and services that they are not entitled to. Thus, it seems that Nordic social workers perceive misuse of social benefits among the unemployed to be a minor problem.

Finally, between 7-15 per cent of the social workers perceive that the unemployed should be grateful to society. As can also be seen from Table 1, it seems that in general individualistic attitudes are more common in Finland and Norway than in Sweden and Denmark, although differences on some questions are rather minor.

[Table 1. about here]

We will now investigate whether the country pattern above changes in multivariate analysis (see Table 2). These reveal that the attitudes of social workers towards the unemployed still vary across the Nordic countries when controlled for different individual characteristics of the social workers and that these differences are rather significant. It seems that social workers in Finland and Norway are more inclined to agree that the unemployed could get a job if they were willing to do any work at all. They are also more inclined to support the statement that the unemployed manage to obtain benefits and services that they are not entitled to as well as the statement that the unemployed should be grateful to society. Concerning the view that the desire and willingness to work is much lower among the unemployed than among the employed, it is however the Finnish and the Danish social workers that are most inclined to support this statement.

Table 2 also reveals the attitudinal differences among social workers that are due to differing individual characteristics. We have analysed the whole data using country as one independent variable³. According to the results the length of personal work experience in social work is of major importance for attitudes: respondents with shorter work experience in social work have more individualistic attitudes towards the unemployed than social workers with longer work experience.

Also educational background seems to be an important factor in explaining the attitudes of social workers. Those who do not have a degree in social work clearly have more individualistic attitudes towards the unemployed than those who have.

Furthermore, those who work within social assistance seem to have more individualistic views on the unemployed than other social workers. Concerning the question that the unemployed could get a job if they were willing to do any work at all the difference is statistically significant only in the bivariate analysis. In contrast to findings from earlier research and our assumption, managers do not differ in their opinions from “grass-root” social workers.

Furthermore, as we assumed, men have more individualistic attitudes towards the unemployed than women. They support all four statements more than the women. However, the results concerning the first and the last attitude statements (unemployed could get a job or they should be grateful)

indicate that men differentiate from women in a statistically significant way only in the multivariate analysis.

[Table 2 about here]

Discussion

The empirical results of this paper illustrate that Nordic social workers' images of the unemployed are fairly well in line with the normative standpoints of the traditional Nordic welfare model. There are, however, differences both between countries and within this professional group. According to the results, social workers in Finland and Norway have in general a somewhat more individualistic view on the unemployed than social workers in Sweden and Denmark (although it is the Finnish and the *Danish* social workers who are more inclined to support the statement that the desire and willingness to work is much lower among the unemployed). Below, we will discuss some possible reasons for these discovered national level differences.

The more individualistic views in Finland *and* Norway are interesting, among other things, because the (long-term) unemployment rate in the Nordic countries is the highest in Finland and the lowest in Norway, a factor that has been expected to influence attitudes. Furthermore, Finland has the least generous unemployment schemes in the Nordic countries, which has led to a situation in which the unemployed are over-represented in the group of social assistance customers compared to other Nordic countries. Our results are thus difficult to interpret in terms of structural differences. Neither do national variations in activation policies seem to provide any explanation concerning attitude differences between the Nordic countries, considering the fact that the implementation of sanctions is said to be the "harshest" in Denmark (van Aerschoot, 2011).

As mentioned in the sections above, Finland has been considered to be the deviant case concerning attitudes towards the poor and unemployed: the general public has shown rather negative attitudes towards these groups, which contradicts the assumption that a higher unemployment rate results in fewer people blaming the poor and unemployed for their situation. One explanation for this finding

might be related to cultural context (cf. Jo, 2011), since the ethos of “everyone should try to manage by themselves” is rather strong in Finland in comparison with (some) other Nordic countries (cf. Albrekt Larsen, 2006; Blomberg et al., 2010a; van Oorshot & Halman, 2000). If this is the case, this “national culture”, it seems, has some bearing also regarding welfare-state professionals like social workers. This interpretation seems plausible also concerning the comparatively “harsh” attitudes among Norwegian social workers, since prior empirical research indicates that the Norwegian general public hold more individualistic views on recipients of unemployment benefits than citizens in Sweden and Denmark (Albrekt Larsen, 2006; Halvorsen, 2002; van Oorshot & Halman, 2000).

Even though the attitudes of social workers seem to follow the same national pattern as the attitude of the general public in the home country, individualistic views on the unemployed still seem to be much rarer among social workers than among the general public. This might be a consequence of social workers’ educational background, core professional values and occupational experience, factors that might lead to social workers explaining social problems like unemployment and poverty more in structural terms than general public does. Furthermore, the individualistic images of the stereotypical behaviour of the unemployed might not affect attitude formation processes of social workers in the same way as among the general public, who are not necessarily constantly in interaction with disadvantaged groups. It is possible that the general public form their opinion after what they have heard, not necessarily after what they have experienced. Thus, one could talk about information differences between the general public and social workers, since social workers do possess professional information that others do not have access to.

Concerning within-country differences and, thus, the impact of individual-level determinants of attitudes towards the unemployed, length of working experience in social work clearly differentiates attitudes. Social workers with a longer work experience seem to have more positive attitudes towards the unemployed than those who have shorter working experience. This could be understood by exposure to the unemployed⁵; the longer a social worker has been working in the field, the more she or he has been in interaction with disadvantaged groups like the poor and the unemployed.

Education is also, as we assumed, of major importance for explaining social workers' attitudes towards the unemployed. Those who do not have a degree in social work have more individualistic

view on the unemployed than those with a degree. As mentioned earlier, both the length of working experience and the educational background of the social worker can be seen as indicators of professionalization, which thus seem important for attitude formation.

As we assumed, those who are working within social assistance do, at the same time, have more individualistic views on the unemployed than other social workers. This difference could perhaps be understood by social workers within social assistance being socialised to a greater extent to the new activation goals of social services. Furthermore, these attitudinal differences could be understood by the fact that social workers within social assistance might be more committed to controlling the behaviour of the unemployed, believing at the same time in their ability to activate the unemployed to enter labour markets. Without believing in that the unemployed might have some motivational problems, activation-related social work might seem altogether pointless to social workers. Results might, thus, reflect the fact that the dilemma of social work concerning control, empowerment and help might be especially prevalent within social assistance generally.

Lastly, as we assumed, male social workers seem to have more individualistic attitudes towards the unemployed than female social workers. However, against our assumptions and earlier studies among the general public, these differences are even fairly significant (Furnham, 1983; 1982; Furåker & Blomsterberg, 2003).

This paper has aimed at shedding some light on the little explored area of social workers' attitudes towards the unemployed. In the future, it would be essential to study how these perceptions towards the unemployed and the poor are related to the professional behaviour and attitudes of social workers in terms of their different helping strategies. At present, we also lack quantitative data on social workers' attitudes towards other disadvantaged groups and (potential) customers of the social work services.

Notes

1 Akademikerförbundet SSR is a union of university graduates whose members have a degree in economics, social science, social work or personnel management in Sweden.

2 We were aware of the possibility that not all social workers will be reached by the trade unions' registers (e.g. not all social workers without a degree belong to trade unions). However, since there is no official professional register concerning social workers, this was the only way to collect the survey. The content of the questionnaire was not influenced by the unions and therefore the objectivity was preserved. We are also aware that there are accessibility problems in internet surveys, but computers and email are nowadays essential tools in Finnish and Swedish social workers' everyday work. The old email addresses (e.g. in the case of change of work place) might have also influenced accessibility.

3 As mentioned above, we are interested in attitudes towards the willingness and efforts of the unemployed to find a job. From this perspective the first statement is not ideal: it might be understood as a question measuring whether there *are* jobs available at the moment, rather than as a question measuring whether the unemployed *should* receive any job available regardless of their education, work experience etc. However, the indicators are the best which are available at the moment.

4 Separate analyses were also performed, but since the results were quite similar to those presented in Table 2, country specific results are not reported in this paper. In addition, because of the low number of observations (and thus small n problem in the categorisations of independent variables) in Denmark and Norway, the separated analyses are not reported.

5 However, we cannot rule out the possibility that differences are caused by a generational effect, since age and work experience are strongly correlated. Younger social workers might have been socialised to a greater extent to the new activation ideas within the Nordic welfare states.

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Table 1. Social workers' attitudes towards the unemployed. Distribution of those who agree with the statements by country %, (N).

	1. Would get job if they were willing to do any work at all	2. The desire and readiness to work is much lower	3. Manage to get benefits and services that they are not entitled to	4. They should be grateful to society
Finland	43 (549)	13 (167)	8 (102)	15 (190)
Norway	48 (322)	10 (65)	9 (58)	14 (92)
Sweden	26 (685)	9 (236)	6 (153)	7 (189)
Denmark	25 (182)	14 (97)	4 (27)	10 (70)

Table 2. Social workers' attitudes towards the unemployed. Binary logistic regression. Odds ratios, statistical significances, and standard errors in parenthesis.

	1. Would get job if they were willing to do any work at all		2. The desire and readiness to work is much lower	
	I	II	I	II
Male	1,16 (0,09)	1,37*** (0,09)	1,39** (0,12)	1,45** (0,13)
Female	1,00	1,00	1,00	1,00
Have social work education	0,52*** (0,07)	0,70*** (0,08)	0,68*** (0,10)	0,59*** (0,17)
No social work education	1,00	1,00	1,00	1,00
Not working with social assistance	0,85* (0,08)	0,97 (0,08)	0,57*** (0,10)	0,71** (0,17)
Working with social assistance	1,00	1,00	1,00	1,00
Not manager	1,00 (0,08)	0,96 (0,09)	0,85 (0,12)	0,79 (0,13)
Manager	1,00	1,00	1,00	1,00
Work experience less than 5 years	1,83*** (0,08)	1,98*** (0,09)	1,53** (0,13)	1,53** (0,14)
5-9 years	1,81*** (0,08)	1,86*** (0,09)	1,53** (0,13)	1,54** (0,14)
10-19 years	1,33*** (0,08)	1,25** (0,09)	1,22 (0,13)	1,20 (0,13)
20 years or more	1,00	1,00	1,00	1,00
Finland	2,30*** (0,10)	2,44*** (0,12)	0,95 (0,14)	0,76 (0,16)
Norway	2,74*** (0,12)	2,31*** (0,14)	0,68* (0,17)	0,51** (0,20)
Sweden	1,04 (0,10)	0,99 (0,11)	0,62*** (0,13)	0,58*** (0,15)
Denmark	1,00	1,00	1,00	1,00
R ² (Nagelkerke)		9 %		3 %
N		4986		4868

Significance levels: *p<0,05; **p<0,01; ***p<0,001; I: Bivariate analysis, II: Multivariate analysis.

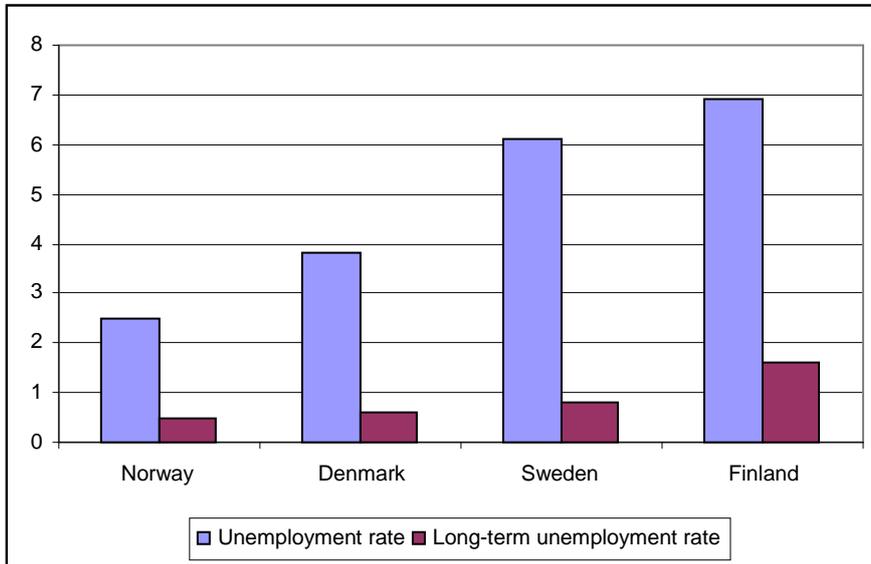
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(Table 2 continued)

	3. Manage to get benefits and services that they are not entitled to		4. They should be grateful to society	
	I	II	I	II
Male	1,47* (0,15)	1,66** (0,15)	1,24 (0,13)	1,58** (0,14)
Female	1,00	1,00	1,00	1,00
Have social work education	0,54*** (0,13)	0,69** (0,14)	0,60*** (0,10)	0,79* (0,12)
No social work education	1,00	1,00	1,00	1,00
Not working with social assistance	0,64** (0,13)	0,69** (0,14)	0,57*** (0,11)	0,73** (0,12)
Working with social assistance	1,00	1,00	1,00	1,00
Not manager	0,93 (0,15)	0,80 (0,16)	1,37* (0,14)	1,19 (0,15)
Manager	1,00	1,00	1,00	1,00
Work experience less than 5 years	2,65*** (0,15)	2,69*** (0,16)	4,34*** (0,14)	4,44*** (0,15)
5-9 years	1,49* (0,17)	1,43* (0,18)	3,13*** (0,14)	3,16*** (0,15)
10-19 years	1,12 (0,17)	1,03 (0,17)	1,94*** (0,15)	1,78*** (0,15)
20 years or more	1,00	1,00	1,00	1,00
Finland	2,25*** (0,22)	2,71*** (0,27)	1,67** (0,15)	2,05*** (0,18)
Norway	2,55*** (0,24)	2,84*** (0,29)	1,47* (0,17)	1,58* (0,21)
Sweden	1,60* (0,21)	1,80* (0,26)	0,71* (0,15)	0,75 (0,18)
Denmark	1,00	1,00	1,00	1,00
R ² (Nagelkerke)		6 %		10 %
N		4731		5046

Significance levels: *p<0,05; **p<0,01; ***p<0,001; I: Bivariate analysis, II: Multivariate analysis.

Appendix figure 1. The unemployment rate and long-term unemployment rate in four Nordic countries in year 2007 (Data source: Eurostat, <http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu> [11/2010])



Appendix Table 1. Distribution of independent variables % (N).

	% (N)
Male	14 (720)
Female	86 (4612)
Have social work education	80 (4458)
No social work education	20 (1096)
Not working with social assistance	83 (4594)
Working with social assistance	17 (960)
Not manager	84 (4659)
Manager	16 (895)
Work experience less than 5 years	20 (1106)
5-9 years	20 (1032)
10-19 years	25 (1382)
20 years or more	35 (1901)
Finland	23 (1299)
Norway	13 (703)
Sweden	51 (2809)
Denmark	13 (743)