

Italian and Swedish social workers' perception of power - between welfare and child protection systems, professional mandate and clients¹

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Abstract

Summary: This article aims to compare how social workers in Italy and Sweden perceive their power towards clients and to explain similarities and differences in the light of different welfare systems and other factors at organisational and individual level. As social workers implement social services and contribute to community wellbeing in accordance with the welfare system in which they operate, they have to balance and mediate between public welfare policies, the organisation in which they are employed and the uniqueness of every situation. Social workers also have, as part of their mandate, the possibility to implement coercive measures, for example in child protection cases. This study originates from a national survey carried out in the two countries involving in total 5,527 social workers.

Findings: The results show that Italian and Swedish social workers represent different self-perceptions of power. Far more Swedish social workers perceive themselves as possessing power as concerns clients and possibilities to intervene against clients' wills compared to their Italian colleagues. While this power perception seems to be strongly correlated with the welfare systems, other factors (at organisational and individual level) are also proven relevant. The difference in the mandate of social workers, and in particular the role of the juvenile court and of the family, in the Italian system are discussed as possible explanations.

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Applications: The article contributes to the discussion on power in social work related to welfare systems and to the interpretation of social workers' mandate in terms of both professional and organizational mandate.

Keywords: Social workers, Power, Child and family welfare, Social work values,

Introduction

This article deals with social workers' perception of power towards clients. Their attitudes and perceptions are understood within the framework of their professional role, embedded in their organisational and institutional context. Our interest is to highlight differences and commonalities in social workers' perceptions of power in relation to the welfare system in which they operate i.e. the Italian or the Swedish system.

The relevance of the concept of power is common to many professions. Police officers, doctors, teachers, educators and social workers deal with power in their everyday practice. Power is necessary to effectively address the tasks, goals and duties implied by the professional role played within the framework of the human-service organisations on behalf of which they exercise their profession (Hasenfeld, 2010).

In social work the issue of power has been dealt with in particular in relation to process of oppression and empowerment (Tew, 2006). There is however no clear consensus on how to define power and according to Arnon Bar-On (2002) definitions are often either too broad depriving the concept of practical meaning or too narrow tending to exclude important aspects of power. Some scholars have engaged in trying to understand the nature of power in terms of its locus as individual or structural power, while others have focused on power relations as hierarchical and imbalanced versus shared and balanced (Bundy-Fazioli, Briar-Lawson & Hardiman, 2009). Studies about social workers' perception of power are few and are often inspired by these debates. They are often based on qualitative methods focusing on small numbers of social workers aiming at understanding different approaches to power and power relations among practitioners (see for instance Bundy-Fazioli et al., 2009; Bundy-Fazioli, Quijano & Bubar, 2013; Cohen, 1998).

The present article's contribution is threefold: firstly it applies a quantitative approach by studying the perception of power among a large sample of social workers. Secondly it

focuses on the factors explaining power perception rather than on understanding social workers’ perception of power. Thirdly it relates the perception of power to the context in which the social workers practice their profession, i.e. the national welfare system, through a cross-national comparison. For this purpose the article takes stock in literature about power and power perception in social work (Bar-On, 2002; Bundy-Fazioli et al., 2009; 2013; Tew, 2006), social workers’ mandate in the organizational and institutional framework (e.g. Hasenfeld, 2010; Lipsky, 1980; Lorenz, 2006) and cross-national studies of social workers’ attitudes (e.g. Blomberg, Kallio, Kroll & Erola, 2013; Kallio, Meeuwisse & Scaramuzzino, 2015).

The issue of power is an integral part of the relationship between the helper and the helpee (Bundy-Fazioli et al. 2013) and social workers’ attitude to power has been described as “bifurcated” (Bar-On, 2002). Accordingly, some feel powerless especially when it comes to the resources available for helping the clients while others feel too powerful in particular in relation to clients. The issue of power is especially crucial in child protection services where, beside supportive measures, also authoritative, coercive measures are available in cases of abuse or maltreatment. In fact it can be argued that “parents are in the least powerful position whereas child welfare workers occupy positions of authority” (Bundy-Fazioli et al., 2009).

To explore the extent to which context matters when it comes to social workers’ perception of power we have chosen two countries that display very different welfare and child protection systems (see Scaramuzzino, 2012; Guidi, Meeuwisse & Scaramuzzino, 2015; Guidi & Di Placido, 2015). The Swedish welfare state relies heavily on the public sector offering a wide range of risk coverage with generous entitlements. The state is also responsible for the production of welfare services. The Italian system, instead, is characterised by greater inequalities in protection, entitlements, and welfare services between regions and social groups and strongly relies on solutions based on family, third sector and civil society

(Kazepov, 2008). In both countries, social workers are mostly employed by public organisations and are responsible for contacts with clients, case management and assessment of needs and interventions (Guidi, Meeuwisse & Scaramuzzino, 2015). Hence Italy and Sweden are often considered as examples of different welfare regimes i.e. conservative for Italy and social-democratic for Sweden, while they are depicted as having the same family service orientation as regards the child protection system (cf. Esping-Andersen, 1990; Hetherington, 2002; Guidi, Meeuwisse & Scaramuzzino, 2015).

The family service orientation that characterises the Swedish and Italian systems tends to focus on the entire family situation and on the provision of therapeutic and practical support, framing the relationship between the client and the professional as a partnership (Spratt, 2001). The child protection orientation, more common in Anglo-Saxon countries, “...is characterised by a primary concern to protect children from abuse, usually from parents who are often considered morally flawed and legally culpable” (Spratt, 2001, p. 934).

By comparing social workers' perception of power in the two countries, the article will answer the following research questions:

1. How do Italian and Swedish social workers perceive their power towards clients and their possibilities to intervene against clients' wills?
2. To what extent are differences in social workers' perceptions explained by national contexts compared to other factors at organisational and individual level?

Hence the article explores Italian and Swedish social workers' perception of power and tests the relevance of national contexts against other intermediary variables at organisational level (e.g. sector of employment and area of intervention) and at individual level (e.g. age, attitudes and values). The determinants behind welfare state attitudes in general are usually understood as both contextual and individual (Jaeger, 2009; 2013). At the individual level, opinions have been explained by self-interest and ideology (Jaeger, 2006; Kangas, 1997).

When attitudes of social workers are in focus, determinants related to professionalism, occupation, or work are also considered relevant (Blomberg et al., 2013; Makaros & Weiss-Gal, 2014). Cross-national comparative research on social workers' attitudes is however scarce (Blomberg et al., 2013). The existing literature indicates that the context in which the social work is performed is one explanatory factor for differences in attitudes among social workers; this holds true for welfare systems (Kallio, Meeuwisse & Scaramuzzino, 2015), areas of intervention (e.g. financial support; children and families; substance abuse; Meeuwisse, Scaramuzzino & Swärd, 2011) and sectors of employment (e.g. public, voluntary or private; Kallio, Meeuwisse & Scaramuzzino 2015). Age has also proved to be an important factor (Kallio, Meeuwisse & Scaramuzzino 2015), suggesting ideological differences between different generations of social workers. The welfare and child protection systems have also proven to affect the way in which social workers reason around and assess cases involving families with children at risk (Blomberg, Kroll & Meeuwisse, 2013; Guidi, Meeuwisse & Scaramuzzino, 2015; Guidi & Di Placido 2015).

This study draws on two nationwide surveys (5,527 N.) in Italy and Sweden in which social workers have been asked about their views on the power of social workers in their own country. Hence, we have not asked them if they perceive that they as respondents have power in their particular position in the system. However, by controlling for variables at organisational and individual level, we also acknowledge that general power perception might be influenced by, for example, individual social workers' sector of employment or age.

The article is divided in five parts. The first part presents a comparison of Swedish and Italian social workers' mandates and roles, first in general and then more related to different family welfare systems with regard to child protection interventions. Second, we provide a conceptual description of the power issue relevant for this study. Third, the methodological

framework of the research, including the variables considered, is presented. The fourth part presents the results followed by a fifth part - the concluding discussion.

The professions and the welfare systems in Italy and Sweden

Both research on attitudes and on power perception suggests that 'context matters', something we want to test in this study. Our first step is then to try to outline the contexts in which Italian and Swedish social workers practice their profession with a particular focus on social workers' mandates and roles, welfare policies, types and standards of services provided to citizens (Lorenz, 2006) and the orientation and logic of child protection systems (Gilbert, Parton & Skivenes, 2011). The interplay between these elements will be addressed in the following section as the institutional context in which social workers' practise their profession.

Social work professional status and role

In Italy, social work was introduced at the end of the Second World War and gained legitimacy and recognition in the second half of the 80s when, for the first time, academic courses were acknowledged as the only educational path for social work and the ethical code promulgated. (Campanini, 2004; 2009). Social workers in Italy are primarily employed in the public sector with a limited number operating in third sector organisations. Since 1993 (law n. 84) Italian social workers, must pass, after the bachelor level, a state exam to become licensed and then registered as a social worker. All registered social workers are represented in society by an organisation called "Ordine Nazionale degli Assistenti Sociali". In the whole country which counts ca. 60 million inhabitants, there are around 42,000 registered social workers (CNOAS, 2016).

The percentage of social workers with academic degrees has increased continuously in Sweden since the 1960s and today there are about 27,000 social workers in a country with a total population of ca. 9.5 million inhabitants. It is hence a relatively extensive profession.

The professionalisation of the practice of social work has been driven also by the training for it becoming part of an academic degree and being linked to research (Blomberg-Kroll, Kroll, Meeuwisse & Swärd, 2009). The category of social worker in Sweden has accompanied, step-by-step, the expansion of the public welfare system. Most social workers operate mainly in municipal social services and often encounter individuals and make individual assessments of needs. Social workers are represented in society by the trade union Akademikerförbundet SSR, which functions both as a union and a professional organisation.

Hence, while the profession in Italy is clearly more regulated than in Sweden i.e. through a specific state exam and registration requirement which is absent in Sweden, the position of the profession in academia is much stronger in Sweden. In fact, in the Italian academic world, social work has still not been recognised as an autonomous discipline and is considered as part of sociology without independent status (Campanini, 2009). Hence research and education in social work are limited and less developed than in Sweden where both the discipline and the profession are permanently present at universities.

The denominations of the professions in the countries and their duties and functions differ slightly between Sweden and Italy. Most social workers in Sweden work with both authority/control measures and social support interventions as *socialekreterare*. Italian social workers are *assistenti sociali* and maintain a position of case manager acting on both support and authority measures. However social support interventions in Italy are also performed by another professional group, educated in pedagogics and organised separately i.e. educators (*educatori*) who are mostly employed in the third sector (educators are not included in the study).

When it comes to power towards clients in social work, the area of child protection is crucial. Both in Italy and in Sweden this is the field in which coercive measures i.e. interventions against the parents' will for the protection of children, are available in the

toolbox of the social worker in public social services (Guidi, Meeuwisse & Scaramuzzino, 2015). Hence, in the following description and comparison of the national systems, focus will be on the welfare system in general and on the child protection system in particular. In Sweden, unlike in Italy, compulsory measures are also possible for adults suffering from severe alcohol or drug abuse. Compulsory measures in the area of alcohol and drug abuse are however much less common than in child protection.¹

The welfare and child protection systems

With reference to Titmuss (1974) the Italian welfare system has traditionally been viewed as an example of the *particularistic-clientelistic model*. In more recent research, it is sometimes characterised as Southern European or Mediterranean welfare system (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Ferrera, 1996). The Italian welfare system is traditionally based on pensions, education and health care. Italian pension expenses are the highest in Europe: in 2008 pensions represented 60% of entire national social expenditure, with an increase of 3% in comparison to 1991 (Ascoli & Migliavacca, 2011, p. 48). Social services remain, on the contrary, at the margins of the welfare sector. The first national Social Service Reform in 2000 (law 328/2000) introduced an integrated system of social intervention and provisions characterised by a strong presence of third sector organisations collaborating with public services.

In recent years, cost-containment policies and the transition to a regionally decentralised system, due to the Title V constitutional reform (2001), undermined the coherent development of a comprehensive national welfare state, amplifying differences among regions and inequalities among municipalities in terms of welfare provision (Gambardella, Morlicchio & Accorinti, 2013; Graziano, 2009).

In this context the Italian system of child protection was developed during the 1990s, promoted by professional mobilisation rather than through an organised, systematically-

developed child welfare policy. In fact as argued by Bertotti and Campanini (2012a) “compared to other European countries, Italy moved late, and in fragmented and contradictory ways, towards the adoption of a child welfare policy that conceived a child as a subject with rights, and that is coherently planned and implemented” (p. 101). While the law prescribes a child welfare system with a family service orientation, lack of resources and caseload pressure often force social workers to concentrate on the most serious cases and prioritise interventions in term of risk management (cf. Fargion, 2007).

The Swedish welfare state is instead considered a reference point for many countries (Forsberg & Kröger, 2010). Historically, it has its roots in the traditional goals of the Social Democratic Party that led the country from 1932 for approximately fifty consecutive years. The aim of reducing class differences in Sweden was guided by the political concept of “The People's Home” (*Folkhemmet*) as a democratic vision of the future society (Ponnert, 2012). Free education, good living conditions, child allowances regardless of parent's income and universal health care services are key features of the Swedish welfare system, emphasising the rights of citizens in reference to the State. This has led to a decentralised system, based on universal entitlement and citizens' rights satisfied mainly by state and municipalities with a high rate of public service provision.

This traditional preventive and supportive role of the state has, however, been criticised and challenged by highlighting the authoritative position of the social services in particular when it comes to out-of-home interventions in child protection. In a comparative perspective, Pösö, Skivenes and Hestbæk (2014) point out that, in relation to other countries, the percentage of out-of-home placements and the number of removals in the Nordic countries is increasing (see also NoSoSCo, 2013, p. 59), something that stands in contrast with the preventive orientation of the welfare state. The system should, in fact, promote prevention in advance and hence be able to avoid last resort interventions, such as out-of-home placements.

Moreover criticism has been stated as concerns the excessive social control of families in distress and the fact that the state allegedly interfered too much with private sphere of the families (Cocozza & Hort, 2011). From a broader perspective, the Swedish welfare state is informed by a tradition of interventionism with the ambition of eradicating social problems through both preventive and repressive measures e.g. in child protection and in drug-abuse treatment. This approach has been argued to pursue social justice and equality (cfr. Lorenz, 2006) but also to impose moral norms and regulation upon citizens, and especially upon vulnerable and marginalised groups (cf. Berggren & Trägårdh, 2015).

While the Swedish system is primarily based on the municipal social services playing a dominant role in case management, in the organisation, in the financing and often even in the production of services, the Italian system is based on a division of roles and responsibilities between different actors. The Italian judicial system, the public administration and other welfare actors interact and collaborate with the juvenile court, the social and health care services, the third sector and the families (Bertotti, 2010). The local juvenile court, which has no corresponding institution in Sweden, guarantees the respect of law. The public social services operate under court mandate when family consent is absent. Only the juvenile court can limit parental authority, involving local social services in order to protect the child and help the parents (Bertotti & Campanini, 2012b). This means that social workers can only work with a case insofar as they have the family's consent; otherwise, they need a specific mandate from the juvenile court to be able to proceed with assessment and intervention. Swedish social workers have a broader mandate and can operate autonomously even without the families' consent. Only when it comes to compulsory measures e.g. out-of-home placements, do they need an approval of the municipal social welfare board (Guidi, Meeuwisse & Scaramuzzino, 2015).

The following table (table 1) summarises the most salient differences between the Italian and Swedish welfare and child protection systems with a particular focus on social workers' professional role and mandate.

Table 1: Welfare systems' frameworks and professional mandates in public social service.

	Italy	Sweden
Welfare model	Conservative (Esping-Andersen 1990), rudimentary (Lorenz, 1994) and Southern European model (Ferrera, 1996)	Social democratic model (Esping-Andersen, 1990)
Primary orientation of child welfare system	Family service orientation with emphasis on family and network resources	Family service orientation with emphasis on public service provision
Type and level of service provision	Limited, decentralised with considerable differences among local contexts and delivered by third sector organisations on behalf of the public sector	Broad, decentralised, based on universal entitlement and citizens' rights and delivered by public sector organisations
Margin of discretion, control and mandate	Conditioned mandate; principle of legal control through juvenile court.	Strong mandate; principle of public/political control through municipal social welfare boards.
Authority receiving reports	Local Juvenile Court (public prosecutor's office)	Local social services
Start up social work assessment	Possible only with parents' consent or (compulsory) under court order	Within the power of public sector social workers
Compulsory intervention	Possible with mandate of juvenile court	Possible with mandate of social welfare board

Source: Guidi, Meeuwisse & Scaramuzzino (2015, p. 9) (Table adapted).

This far from complete description of the national contexts suggests a stronger mandate of Swedish social workers than that of their Italian colleagues. The Italian state exam and a license system might on the one hand have a legitimizing effect for the profession that is absent in Sweden. On the other hand, the higher status of the discipline in the Swedish education system, the stronger professional autonomy of Swedish social workers and the access to a relatively well funded welfare state with its universalistic ambitions are elements that strengthens the mandate of Swedish social workers. The following part will try to link social workers’ status, position and mandate to the issue of power and how it is perceived by social workers.

The nature of social workers’ power and their professional and organisational mandates

In the interpretation of the social workers perceptions of power we need a theoretical framework that relates them to factors at institutional, organizational and individual level. While we do not engage with social workers different interpretations or understanding of power rather with the extent to which they perceive to have power over their clients, we need to acknowledge at least two contrasting views that have dominated the field (Tew, 2006): power as domination (power over) and power as empowerment or emancipation (power to). The view of social workers’ power as a resource for the promotion of the client (power to) is emphasised in many ethical codes that furnish a comprehensive map for intervention, orienting the deontological positioning of professionals’ behaviour in concrete cases. The respect of client's self-determination is a core element in ethical codes. Professionals who engage with citizens, as social workers do, should hence give great consideration to the quality of the relationships they build with their clients. “These relations are the *primary vehicle* through which workers carry out their work” (Hasenfeld, 2010, p. 21). The (power) relationship is thus considered as a cornerstone of good practice.

The position of the social worker and their power as concerns clients is hence shaped by the *professional mandate* that is defined by the ethical codes and the way in which the profession understands its role in society. Both the Italian and Swedish social workers’ ethical codes stress the importance of this relationship. The Italian ethical code (CNOAS, 2009) states that the social workers must promote clients’ self-determination, their capabilities and their freedom: clients are active in the help process and social workers foster a trusting relationship with clients and constantly evaluate their own conduct (Art. 11). The Swedish ethical guidelines (Akademikerförbundet SSR, 2006, p. 13) state that social workers should show an egalitarian attitude towards other citizens and treat their clients with respect, empathic attention and amiability; they should also respect the client's personal integrity and safeguard individuals’ rights to self-determination in so far as the rights of others are not infringed upon and there is no risk of damage to the client. Measures should, as far as possible, be based on participation and mutual understanding.

Despite the centrality of self-determination and respect, power implications embedded in the social worker-client relationship, appear to be traditionally overshadowed in the social work debate (Hasenfeld, 1987). A strand of research labelled “critical social work tradition” has questioned the way in which ethical codes and their values are implemented in the relationship between social workers and clients, stressing the dominant position of the social worker (Adams, Dominelli & Payne, 2009). Scholars have pointed out the negative consequences of the use of power (over) in social work practice, in particular when it comes to marginalised groups (Smith, 2013). These concerns appear to be confirmed by research on social service clients. For example, studies show that children from socially disadvantaged families and/or with migrant background are traditionally over-represented among child protection clients in Sweden (cf. Lundström & Sallnäs, 2003).

The relationship between social workers and clients does not take place in a social vacuum, it is embedded in an organisational and institutional context that enables and constrains the agency of the two actors. Most social workers are committed to a public institution as civil servants in the implementation of social policy and at the same time as they face their clients in day-to-day relationships, trying to support them. “They operate in an environment that conditions the way they perceive problems and frame solutions to them” (Lipsky, 1980, p. 27). Organisations govern the activity of their front-line workers in accordance with the achievement of organisational and institutional goals. Consequently social workers are supposed to enjoy significant autonomy in dealing with clients (Sosin, 2010). It is within this framework that the *organisational mandate* is defined.

The organizational mandate is defined both by the ‘margin of discretion’ that circumscribe the social workers’ ability to act and the ‘resources’ that the social workers have access to and can be transformed into action (cf. Bar-On, 2002). The differences in margins of discretion and in resources between Italian and Swedish social workers have already been outlined in the previous section. We will use this limited theoretical framework around power and mandate in the interpretation of the results as one of the possible mechanisms that link the welfare system (institutional level) to the individual social workers practising their profession (individual level) embedded in an organisational context (organisational level). The following analysis will assess to what extent social workers’ perception of power can be empirically linked to factors at these levels.

Method and data

The empirical data are based on two nationwide surveys of professional social workers from Italy and Sweden. The first survey was carried out in Sweden in 2007 and the sample was elaborated among members of the social workers’ union (Akademikerförbundet SSR). In Italy the survey was carried out in 2013 among the social workers (*assistenti sociali*) in the

registry of the National Order (*Ordine nazionale degli Assistenti Sociali*). In Sweden the sample was structured on national basis using a random sample. In Italy we used a stratified sample which was representative for age and gender on regional basis (six regions were excluded as information about members or e-mail addresses were incomplete). The social workers in the samples were sent an electronic questionnaire to their e-mail addresses. The survey was answered by in total 5,527 social workers (Sweden N = 2,809 and Italy N = 2,718) (see table 2 for a description of the populations, samples and respondents). After excluding faulty e-mail addresses and “bounces” the response rate was around 60% in Sweden and 50% in Italy.

Table 2. Description of populations, samples and respondents (N.)

	Italy	Sweden
Populations	42 000	27 000
Samples	7 500	8 000
Respondents	2 718	2 809

We are aware that the difference in time between the Swedish and Italian studies might impact on the results when it comes to the relevance of the national contexts. We will come back to this limitations in the conclusions. When it comes to the relevance of other factors at organizational and individual level, such correlations can be assumed to be stable even if the perception might vary over time.

The questionnaire included questions divided in five sections: 1) questions on the respondent’s age, gender, sector of employment, etc.; 2) questions designed to measure various dimensions of the working environment (Blomberg, Kallio, Kroll & Saarinen, 2014; Meeuwisse, Scaramuzzino & Swärd, 2011); 3) questions regarding the characteristics of

social work in the own country; 4) questions concerning how social work should be developed; 5) questions concerning the causes of poverty and attitudes to unemployed people from the Comparative Questionnaire Module on Welfare Values and Opinions used in the European database Comparative Welfare Surveys.

The questions used in this study with the exact (translated) wording are presented below.

Operationalisation

In order to measure social workers' perception of power we have used two separate attitude statements as dependent variables (see Table 2). They measure the respondents' perception of social workers' power towards clients in the own country. The two statements were related to a general question asking "The practice of social work in our country is characterised by":

A: "Social workers have great power towards clients"

B: "Social workers have many possibilities to intervene against clients will"

The response categories to the dependent variables were "strongly agree", "agree", "neither agree nor disagree", "disagree" and "strongly disagree". These answers were recoded as "agree" and "disagree" with the "neutral" answers recorded as missing.

The two statements cover far from all the aspects of the complex phenomenon that is 'power'. The questions measure social workers' power perception from two points of view: a) in general towards clients and b) concerning coercive interventions. The open feature of the statements in terms of "power" and "possibilities to intervene" is important considering the fact that power may be accorded different meanings in different contexts and be interpreted in different ways, not least depending on the mandate that social workers are entrusted within the different welfare systems. Of course it is also one of the limits of the study as we can only

speculate, depending on how the answer correlate with other value-based answers, on what kind of power the respondent refer to (e.g. power-over or power-to).

In the analysis, these two dependent variables are understood in relation to other factors relating to organisational context, individual characteristics, assessment of the welfare system and personal social values. The institutional and organisational context was measured by three variables: *country* (Italy and Sweden), *working sector* (public, private or voluntary) and *area of intervention* and in particular whether the respondent worked in the sectors “families and children” and “drug addiction” (in the public sector) which are the areas in the social welfare system where compulsory measures are considered viable solutions in at least one of the countries.

The individual variables are both factual and cognitive. The factual variables were measured by demographic factors such as the *age* (29 or less, 30-39, 40-49, 50-59 and 60+) and *gender* (male or female) of the respondent (section 2 in the questionnaire).

The cognitive variables were measured by the respondents’ attitudes regarding characteristics of social work in their own country (section 3 in the questionnaire). These factors were operationalised by three variables measuring issues related to the organizational mandate and more specific margin of discretion and resources: *lack of resources*, *importance of municipal budget*, and *importance of law and regulation*. The respondents were asked to what extent they agreed with the following statements related to: “Social work in our country is characterised by”. The statements were: “Shortage of resources”, “The financial interests of the municipalities is at least as important as the interest of the clients” and “The role of social workers is limited by rules and regulations”. Also here the five alternatives were reduced to two: “agree” and “disagree” with the middle alternative considered as missing.

Cognitive factors at individual level are more related to the professional mandate and were measured using social values of the social workers through three variables regarding

different attitudes towards clients. The first statement was “Clients and citizens should have more influence” suggesting an approach to power as “power to”. The second statement considered was “There should be more sanctions on clients who break agreements” suggesting a “power over” approach. The last statement “People live in poverty because they are lazy and lack willpower” expresses a more general social value perspective which has proven significant in previous research on social workers’ attitudes (e.g. Kallio, Meeuwisse & Scaramuzzino, 2015). These variables were also recoded as mentioned above by applying two alternatives: “agree” and “disagree” and considering the “neither-alternative” as missing.

The results are presented as follows. First, a descriptive analysis through cross-tabulation of the perception of power in the two countries (Table 3). Second the correlation between our two dependent variables through Pearson Correlation (Table 4). Third, a binary logistic regression analysis to assess the importance of other factors in addition to the country/welfare state factor (Table 5).

Results

The following table shows a comparison of the percentage of social workers in Italy and Sweden who answered positively (‘strongly agree’ or ‘agree’) to the two statements about power. The fourth column shows level of significance (*<5%; **<1%; ***<0,1) and of association (Cramers’ V).²

Table 3. Percentage of positive answers to the statements on power (dependent variables)

	Italy	Sweden	Significance & association
Social workers have great power towards clients (n. 5.274)	24.4 %	73.0 %	*** 0.526
Social workers have many possibilities to intervene against clients' wills (n. 5.233)	13.9 %	35.7 %	*** 0.341

As presented in the table there are significant differences between Italian and Swedish social workers’ views on issues of power. In particular the view on their power as concerns clients appears to be very dependent on national context and hence welfare system. While almost three of four Swedish social workers perceive they have great power towards clients, only one in four Italian social workers agree to such a statement. The level of association is particularly high as more than 50% of the variation in the perception is explained by national context.

When it comes to their view on compulsory interventions, a minority of both Swedish and Italian social workers agree that they have “many possibilities to intervene”. However, while Italian social workers are a small minority (13.9%) Swedish social workers that agree to such statement are more than double (in percent) compared to their Italian colleagues (35.7%).

As both our dependent variables relate to issues of power we might expect them to correlate in some manner. The following table presents such correlation (using Pearson Correlation):

Table 4. Correlation between the two dependent variables

Pearson Correlation	Social workers have many possibilities to intervene against clients' wills
N.	0.514***
Social workers have great power towards clients	5181

The table shows a strong, positive correlation between the two perception-oriented questions. In fact almost 50% of the variation in one variable is explained by the variation in the other. It shows that social workers interpret “having great power towards clients” as related to “having possibilities to intervene against their will”. The fact that the issues are not entirely correlated, however, suggests that the social workers interpret their power as something that goes beyond compulsory measures. Here we can only speculate that they might also regard power as an expression of professional autonomy, discretion, empowerment, opportunity to help clients who are in need etc.

In order to further explore the importance of the national context and of other factors at organizational and individual level, we separately tested in two models the correlation between the two dependent variables and our independent variables. This analysis allows us to see the relative impact of different factors on the social workers’ perception of power. For each model we present the standard error (S.E.) and the odds ratios (Exp(B)). Odds ratios higher than 1 show that the factor makes it more likely for social workers to agree to the statements on power, while ratios lower than 1 show that the factor makes it less likely. The last row shows the level of explanatory power (Nagelkerke R square) of each model.

Table 5. Factors defining the social workers' perception of power - Binary logistic regression

	Power perception		Compulsory perception	
	S.E.	Exp(B)	S.E.	Exp(B)
<i>Country/National context</i>				
Sweden (Italy ref.)	0.199	24.337***	0.157	5.613***
<i>Sector of employment (public ref.)</i>				
Private sector	0.330	0.871	0.314	1.027
Third sector	0.255	1.070	0.254	1.760*
<i>Area of intervention</i>				
Children and families	0.232	0.627*	0.184	1.048
Drug addiction	0.398	0.611	0.309	1.237
<i>Age (29 or less ref.)</i>				
30-39	0.266	1.048	0.245	1.243
40-49	0.263	1.666†	0.245	1.551†
50-59	0.262	1.211	0.247	1.611†
60+	0.410	1.597	0.352	1.779
<i>Gender (female ref.)</i>				
Male	0.261	0.913	0.212	1.669*
<i>Perception of social work system</i>				
Lack of resources	0.394	1.179	0.304	1.085
Circumscribed by regulations	0.166	0.746†	0.160	1.177
Economic interest	0.166	1.467*	0.154	1.409*
<i>Social values</i>				
More influence for clients	0.169	1.926***	0.153	1.396*
More sanctions on clients	0.170	0.911	0.154	0.966
Individual blame	0.261	1.646†	0.246	1.384

Constant	0.497	0.221	0.434	0.074
Observations	1,204		1,156	
Nagelkerke R square	0.433		0.222	

† < 10% * < 5%, ** < 1%, and *** < 0.1% significance

First of all the regressions show that the explanatory power of our two models vary considerably. The explanatory power of the first model on power perception is very strong with over 40% of variation explained by our set of variables. The second model on the perception of possibilities of compulsory measures has less explanatory power (22%).

It can be acknowledged that the variable of national context is significant to both dependent variables, even when controlling for a large set of variables at both organisational and individual level. The regression analysis, in fact, follows the same pattern as the bivariate analysis (Table 3) and supports the results that the national context influences social workers’ perception of power. Particularly striking is that Swedish social workers are 24 times more likely than their Italian colleagues to perceive that they have strong power. We find also correlation between the national context and the perception of possibilities to intervene against clients’ wills. In fact Swedish social workers are more than 5 times more likely to agree to the statement. We understand this as a consequence of the fact that Italian and Swedish social workers practise their profession in different welfare and child protection systems which affects their view on their power as concerns clients, something we will return to in the discussion.

However we find interesting correlations also between our two dependent variables and other variables both at organisational and individual level. We tested, for example, for the importance of both sector of employment and areas of intervention. Our previous studies on

social workers' views on privatisation in the Nordic countries and in Italy suggest that sector of employment plays a significant role for welfare-related attitudes (Kallio, Meeuwisse & Scaramuzzino, 2015). Also the importance of the area of intervention has been proved in our previously-published results based on the Nordic data (Meeuwisse, Scaramuzzino & Swärd, 2011). The models presented also show that in the case of power perception, variables at organisational level appear to be relevant. Such differences should not be interpreted as a direct reflection of the social workers' different perception of their own power, as the respondents were asked about their perception of social workers' power in general in the country. Rather it mirrors the fact that they are present in different parts of the system, and hence are socialised in organisations where different views might be dominant (cf. Kallio, Meeuwisse & Scaramuzzino 2015; Guidi, Meeuwisse & Scaramuzzino 2015).

It is of interest to notice that social workers who are practicing their profession in the third sector are more likely to agree on the fact that social workers have many possibilities to intervene against clients' wills. Such a view might be a reflection of a more critical, or at least a more sensitive, stand in third sector organisations as concerns power issues in the welfare system. Many third sector organisations have, besides a service function, also an advocacy function and tend to critically scrutinise public policy and advocate for user groups' rights (e.g. Lundström & Wijkström, 1997 for Sweden; Cartocci & Maconi, 2006 for Italy) something that might influence their employees' view and perception of the profession's public mandate and consequent power as concerns clients.

Social workers working in the public sector with children and families are instead less likely to perceive that they have strong power towards clients, compared to their colleagues who do not work within this area of intervention. Such negative correlation is remarkable as these social workers work within units that have access to compulsory measures that can be employed if clients (i.e. the parents) refuse to collaborate. One reasonable explanation is that

it is the social workers that have the ability, the duty and the responsibility of applying compulsory measures who mostly perceive the limits of such power.

Also variables at individual level have proven to be relevant in our previous studies on social workers' attitudes (Kallio, Meeuwisse & Scaramuzzino, 2015). At individual level we find a positive correlation between power perception and gender concerning the perception of possibilities of intervening against clients' wills. Male social workers are 1.6 more likely to agree to this statement. This is consistent with previous research on power perception showing that the feeling of powerlessness is particularly experienced by female social workers (Bar-On, 2002). The importance of the age of the respondent for power perception is, however, not very clear because of the low levels of significance. The data however does suggest that younger social workers tend to agree to both statements to a lesser extent. It is possible that the more experienced social workers are more likely to view their position as authoritative towards clients as they identify more strongly with the profession and become more self-confident in their role and function. It might also be an expression of “generational” differences between social workers (cf. Kallio, Meeuwisse & Scaramuzzino 2015).

The social workers' perception of the system defines and circumscribes the organizational mandate and the margins of discretion of the professional as discussed earlier. Resources that social workers' have access to contribute to define their capacity to act (Bar-On, 2002). Perceiving a lack of resources does however not seem to be relevant for social workers' perception of power. Laws and regulations in their turn define and circumscribe social workers ability to act (Bar-On, 2002) and hence their organizational mandate. Our analysis shows in fact that the perception of being circumscribed by laws and regulation make social workers less likely to agree that they have great power as concerns clients, even if the low level of significance makes this correlation more uncertain. We find however a positive correlation for both our dependent variables and our third (independent) variable related to the

organizational mandate, namely that the financial interests of the municipality are at least as important as the interests of the clients. It is interesting to notice that giving a high priority to the financial interests of the municipality is interpreted as enabling rather than hindering the use of power. One possible explanation is that financial and budgetary concerns might trigger the perception of the profession that by means of its organisational mandate, it is necessitated but also has the opportunity to resist clients' requests.

Finally, cognitive factors such as attitudes towards clients which we relate to the professional mandate also seem to impact on social workers' perception of power. A wish for more users' influence, for example, makes social workers more likely to perceive that the profession has great power as concerns clients and power to adopt compulsory measures. Possibly, social workers that take a critical stance on power are more likely to be sensitive and hence aware of the power of the profession towards clients as an expression of a professional mandate. Also social workers who tend to blame individuals for their situation of poverty seem to be more likely to perceive the strong power of the profession, even if the significance level is quite low. The fact that clients are, to a greater degree, to be blamed for their situations might reinforce the perception of a profession that can wield a considerable power in relation to the clients. The way in which such value-based variables impact on the professional mandate, and hence on the perception of power, we can only speculate on.

Conclusion and discussion

Two types of reasoning have been used to understand the mechanisms behind the influence of different factors on power perception. On the one hand we have argued that social workers' perception of power is a reflection of actual institutional differences (e.g. being circumscribed by laws and regulations) and on the other hand we have argued that they are a reflection of the way in which they are socialised in organisations and in continuation of their own values (e.g. working in third sector organisations or agreeing on the need of more influence for clients).

These two approaches mirror two different theoretical traditions in the study of attitudes (Kallio, Meeuwisse & Scaramuzzino, 2015) which leads us to the following two questions: do Swedish social workers perceive their profession as powerful as concerns their clients because their system gives them more instruments of support, control and coercion? Or is it because they are socialised in an institutional and organisational environment where power issues are more visible and where the power of the profession has been more critically scrutinised?

The different time frames of the surveys might as discussed earlier impact on our results. The development of social work during the six years that separate the two studies cannot be ignored. Privatization of services based principles of managerialism and New Public Management have for instance affected social services in both countries (Blomberg et al, 2015) something that might increase the feeling of powerlessness of social workers (cf. Bar-On, 2002). Attitudes are however relatively stable over time (Kallio, Meeuwisse & Scaramuzzino, 2015) and we would argue that the differences between Italian and Swedish social workers' perceptions shown in our study are too prominent to be just the consequence of the time that has passed between the carrying out of the Swedish and the Italian survey.

Differences in power perception between social workers in Italy and Sweden show two different professional positions in relation to power. The answers from the Swedish social workers describe a consolidated awareness/perception of the use of power as concerns clients (cf. Johansson, 2012) that appears not to be present in Italy. This may be related to differences at cultural level involving the role of the family in the welfare system. While the Italian system gives a central position to the family as producer of welfare, the Swedish system promotes the independence of the individual from the care of the family by means of the universalistic welfare state (cf. Berggren & Trägårdh 2015). Furthermore the Italian system guarantees the integrity of the family against public authorities' interventions to a higher degree. Hence it might reflect the fact that, while both in Sweden and in Italy interventions

are seldom determined by the social workers themselves but by other authorities (i.e. the social welfare board in Sweden and the juvenile court in Italy), the mandate of Italian social workers is formally more limited and restricted by the legal control of the juvenile court. It might hence be the consequence of the presence of intermediary structures in Italy that regulate the relationship between social workers and the families who resist social workers' efforts to assess situations and plan interventions. This regulation of, and potential limit to, Italian social workers' use of intervention against clients' wills creates a mediation embodied by the local juvenile court authority that is absent in the social service network in Sweden, where social workers may act against parents' wills on a self-professional assessment basis. This control function embedded in the Italian system might be one of the mechanisms behind the perception of a weaker mandate among social workers.

It may be important to point out that the fact that fewer Italian social workers perceive themselves to possess strong power as concerns clients does not necessarily mean that they are critical to their status and mandate and that they would like more power. The way in which social workers are more or less satisfied with their mandate should, consequently, be a theme for further studies. As argued in the introduction there are few quantitative studies on social workers' perception of power. This article shows that this approach allows to address the factors that influence social workers power perception as in previous studies of social workers' attitudes. The mechanisms behind attitude formation however are not self-evident and should be explored further also through qualitative method. One of the limitations however is that the method does not allow a nuanced multi-dimensional approach to power. Further quantitative studies of social workers' attitudes to and perception of other dimensions of power are needed.

Ethics

The present research did not require any ethical approval in accordance with the laws of the countries involved.

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1 In Sweden, on 1 November 2013, compulsory care was provided for 5, 398 children (Socialstyrelsen, 2014a) while “only” 310 adults were provided compulsory care for alcohol or drug abuse treatment (Socialstyrelsen, 2014b).

2 Cramer’s V is often used as an association measure in cross-tabulation between nominal variables, giving a value between 0 and +1, where the value 0 represents no association and the value 1 represents complete association.