

Italian social workers' opinions on their margins of discretion and power towards clients

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This paper aims at exploring the issue of social worker's power in their relation with clients in the opinion of the social workers themselves. The theme is relevant as professional social workers are involved with clients on a day-to-day basis. They implement social services and sometimes even compulsory measures representing the interface between the welfare state and citizens' needs and problems. Accordingly they often have to balance and mediate between public welfare and politics and the uniqueness of every human situation, and they do it with a considerable margin of discretion.

The following research questions will be answered:

- 1) How do Italian social workers view their margins of discretion and power towards clients?
- 2) What explains similarities and differences among Italian social workers and which role does the welfare model play?

By including a comparison with social workers in the Nordic countries the relevance of welfare regimes can be explored. Other factors explored are age and education of the social workers, the field of specialisation (e.g. child protection, disability and addiction), the working sector and more general values such as views on the causes of poverty. The paper presents results from a survey directed towards social workers in four Nordic countries and Italy. The survey was answered by in total 7 569 social workers (Sweden N= 2809, Norway N= 703, Denmark N=743, Finland N= 1299 and Italy N=2718).

Preliminary results indicate important differences between Italian and Nordic social workers. For example, 45 per cent of the Italian social workers express that they do not have great power towards clients compared to less than 20 per cent for the Nordic social workers.

Key words: social work, attitudes, margins of discretion, power