

**Reflections on the client-social worker relationship  
from single mothers and social workers in Australia,  
USA, Canada, Russia and Norway:**

# **Close but not too close Distant but not too distant**

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*Reflections on the client-social worker relationship from single mothers and social workers in  
Australia, USA, Canada, Russia and Norway: Close but not too close. Distant but not too distant.*

## **Abstract:**

In this explorative and comparative article a suitable social distance in the client-social worker relationship will be in focus. When do clients need a social worker “as if she is a friend” and when do they appreciate a professional “as if she is a stranger”? How does context have an impact on what we see as legitimate relationships? We will be listening to voices on these issues from poor single mothers and social workers in five countries – Australia, USA, Canada, Russia and Norway.

## **Keywords:**

welfare delivering systems, opinion about social workers and what is regarded as help, closeness in the relationship, discourse on “suitable social distance”.

## **Introduction**

Poverty is seen scary and shameful. Single mothers` different experiences of poverty are also related to if and how they get help from their families, nongovernmental (NGO) and governmental -institutions. They take into account their own coping abilities, when they are reflecting upon how to keep a suitable social distance towards their children and towards social workers.

In all countries social workers are dealing with social problems such as child protection, economical issues, drug abuse and they are involved in moral issues about how to live a decent life. Social workers possess more institutional based power than clients, and sometimes this is reinforced by relational and individual power. Both parties express that it is important to listen to clients and give help in accordance with what they ask for. Clients also need to get information, various opinions and to get in touch with “new outside voices”. However, social workers are not only motivated by helping others. The closeness or distance towards clients may sometimes trigger their curiosity about what it is to be human and they might appreciate their own social background and that they manage to cope with their own lives.

“Relation is a good word”, said a Canadian social worker when she was asked to describe social work. In this article poor single mothers and social workers from Russia, USA, Australia, Norway and Canada will give voice to describe the helping relationships within five different social political contexts. In dealing with clients in social work, research has shown that relationship, alliance, support and encouragement have more impact on successful outcomes than specific theories and techniques (Coady and Lehmann 2008:14). Factors related to the social worker - client relationship seems to have particularly importance (ibid). According to Healy: “There is no such ‘thing’ as social work independent of the contexts in which it is constituted” (2000:7). How context, like for instance welfare systems, have an impact on social distance in a relationship, will therefore vary between countries. It also means that general discourses on laws, economy, religion and others that have an impact on social work (Healy 2005) will need to be interpreted and confronted with relevant discourses within each country.

To explore and compare similar processes and issues between different contexts, may help us to illuminate and contrast some of the common assumptions in one`s native social work context. In one context social workers can ask and say something that is experienced as personal and a good rapport, while in another context those same issues will be perceived as private and too close. The legitimization of what is regarded as close but not too close or distant but not too distant will vary between contexts. A suitable distance in the client - social worker relationship will be the thematic focus in this explorative and comparative article.

Next I will present the social work contexts in these five countries by giving an introduction to social policy, social work education and professional organisations for social workers. I will also present what kind of data this article has derived from. Since the article is based on small qualitative empirical material from each country, it will not be possible to draw conclusions about differences between countries in regard to how the client - social worker relationship is understood. The data will provide a source for asking informed questions about processes focusing on what create distance and closeness in this relationship.

The methodological part will describe how data were collected and how they are analysed. The first interview data presented focus on distance and closeness in the client-social worker relationship within different welfare systems. Secondly indifference and involvement in helping processes are described and finally a description on how client and social workers describe closeness and distance in the relationship.

In the discussion part Simmel`s (1950) concepts of “friend” and “stranger” are used to discuss and illuminate the closeness-distance dimension in the client - social worker relationship. And in the concluding comments I will raise the question if a “suitable distance in the client-social worker relationship” might be considered as a discourse itself in social work.

## Social Work Context in Australia, Canada, Russia, Norway and USA

This article is based on data, reports and articles from the project: “Legitimation of professional social work studied within a comparative perspective” <sup>1</sup>. The main purpose of this project has been to better understand how professional social workers, working with poverty within different educational and professional contexts and welfare systems, legitimate their work.

In this project 20 single mothers on welfare and their respective 14 social workers were interviewed in 2001, 2002 or 2003. Public agencies were preferred in this research, but in the USA and Australia agencies were limited to those who allowed their workers to participate.

**Table 1: Clients, social workers and agencies sample:**

Country	Russia	USA	Australia	Canada	Norway
Where social workers are employed	Public agencies	NGO	NGO	NGO (1) Public agencies (2)	Public agencies
Number of Social Workers	2 women	2 women	2 women	3 women	5 (1 man and 4 women)
Mothers	6	2	4	3	5

In studying similarities and differences between the countries, most similarities are identified within the social work educational system. There are more diversity in the construction of social work as a profession and the role of the professional organisation in these five countries, while the biggest differences were to be found within social policy (Hutchinson et al 2001:290). The professional social workers associations, except in Russia, have as their main concern and objective to influence national social policy and public policy towards the promotion of social justice (ibid: 277).

<sup>1</sup>. The project has received a grant from The Norwegian Research Council in the KUPP-program for the years 2000-2003. Project leader: Dr. Rolv Lyngstad. Co-partners at Bodø University College: Associate professor Gunn Strand Hutchinson, Assistant professor Lisbet Lund and Dr. Siv Oltedal. International partners: Professor Karen Healy, Australia, Professor Elaine Carey- Belanger, Canada, Professor Pam Brown, USA and Professor Elena Iarskaia Smirnova, Russia.

Professional social work courses were established in the following years: 1898 in USA, 1914 in Canada, 1920 in Norway, 1929 in Australia and in Russia as late as 1991. In no countries is there an recognized authorization connected to professional social work, as there is for comparable groups such as doctors, nurses or psychologists. How many inhabitants there are per educated social worker vary a lot between countries<sup>2</sup>: In Norway each social worker are covering around 500 inhabitants, in the US the number is 600, in Canada 800, in Australia 2 700 and in Russia about 18 400 inhabitants (Hutchinson et al 2001:275). In all these countries social workers are working with income security and reduction of social problems in direct contact with clients. The extent of poverty is very different with Russia with 36,7 % poverty, the USA with 18,7 %, Canada with 16,4 %, Australia with 14 % and Norway with only 2,1 % (ibid: 271).

To give a picture of how much money clients and social workers have to their disposal examples of clients and social workers with lowest income per month in the sample are shown below (Lyngstad et el 2004):

**Table 2: Income after tax and housing costs:**

Country	Russia	USA	Australia	Canada	Norway
Client income	620 rubles	630 \$ US	800 \$ AUS	1 098 \$ CAD	11 500 NOK
Housing costs for client	200 rubles	91 \$ US (596 \$ US before subsidised)	340 \$ AUS	580 \$ CAD	4 000 NOK
Social worker income	SW 1: 2 300 rubles SW 2: 380 rubles (?)	1 700 \$ US	Unknown	3 000 \$ CAD	15 000 NOK

1 US \$ is 28 rubles December 2001

In all five countries the welfare system is in a process of change with Russia undertaking the most extensive change. Since the 1990s they have experienced a total shift of economic and political organisation, from a centralist communist economy to a market economy. Universal social benefits do still exist, including universal health care, education, childcare, old age and disability security. For example, most enterprises in Russian industry continue to provide an extensive array of social benefits, although it is considerable less than in the Soviet era. Since the policy-makers began the transition to a more market-based economic system, the tendency towards a residual social assistance model of means-tested benefits has increased (Iarskaia-Smirnova 2001:183). There is a lack of new approaches and social work programmes, as well as a lack of finances and a deterioration of family values is under way in society. The rate of poverty, crime and prostitution is of much concern (Hutchinson et el 2001: 279).

Canada is a welfare state classified as liberal with medium range benefits and with some features of universality (Carey-Belanger 2001:80). The public sector is beginning to transfer its responsibilities by "contracting out" to private agencies on the one hand, and towards government funding for community groups on the other hand. While the accreditation norms of social workers are improving and becoming more demanding, there is a tendency to employ other professionals to occupy positions formerly filled by social workers at lesser cost. This creates a climate where bureaucratic and rational values clash with the social justice incorporated into all documents of Associations and social work training institutions (Hutchinson et el 2001: 279).

<sup>2</sup>. The numbers are from 2000 for the US, Canada, Norway and Russia while regarding Australia they are from 1996

Norway probably has the most stable welfare regime of these five countries. A study of the development of the welfare state in the Nordic countries concludes that “The Nordic model stands stable but on shaky ground “ (Heikkilä, Hvinden, Kautto, Marklund, Ploug 1999:262). However, the last decade has had a special focus on the work approach indicating a more restrictive welfare policy (Lyngstad 2008). The profession of social workers are discussing the nature of social work practice, in order to highlight the ethical dimensions and the ethical code of social work, such as client’s integrity, empathy and respect for the client’s self-determination (Hutchinson et al 2001: 279).

The US welfare system provides a minimal safety net for some and nothing at all for others, for example lack of health insurance (Brown 2001: 211). Welfare reform and its impact on poverty have been debated. The social work profession here is also debating ethnicity, races and culture in Social Work. Cultural competence, ethnic-sensitive practice, and a multicultural philosophy have taken a central place (Hutchinson et al 2001: 279).

“The Australian welfare state is characterised by a mixed economy of social services. This means that both the government and non-government agencies are involved in the funding and delivery of services” (Healy 2001:16). There is strong concern about the role of the profession in protecting the human rights of service users. Social exclusion and marginalisation are discussed in relation to professional practice, as is the impact of competitive reforms on the management and delivery of welfare services (Hutchinson et al 2001: 279).

Pamela Brown has analysed the interview data from Norway, Russia and the USA mentioned above and she is surprised by the shared experiences of clients and social workers in spite of living in significantly different socio-political and cultural contexts: “The relationships women have with their social workers vary, but not so much among countries as within each country” (2008:16). Below I will describe how the interview data in the five actual countries were collected. I will also present the analytical approach that I have used. I have looked for variations between and within countries. However, when writing this I have chosen to organise the empirical findings in such a way that the reader can follow similar themes country by country.

## Collecting and analysing data

Researchers from Russia, Australia, Canada, USA and Norway developed through face to face meetings and via electronic mail interview guides for interviews with clients and social workers. Researchers in the different countries were given the responsibility to follow national ethical research norms. The researchers recruited the social workers whilst social workers recruited the clients. Poor single mothers with at least one child under ten years of age and social workers with a bachelor degree in social work were interviewed. All the social workers, except for the Russian one, had more than three years of work experience. The social workers chose clients that they knew had reflected a lot upon their own situation and was able and willing to talk. Some said that there were not so many relevant women to choose among. The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and Norwegian and Russian materials were also translated into English. There were two interview sessions, one between the client and her social worker and the other between researcher and social worker based on the audio-taped client-social worker interview. The interview materials were made available to all research partners. When presenting the empirical material, sometimes clients’ and social workers’ own words are framed with quotation markers. Other times the content of what they have said is summarised or presented as integrated part of a text. The reader will be informed when social workers and clients are referred to. Finally, the information in the interview material will be interpreted, analysed and commented on

Both clients and social workers said that it was interesting to participate in the project. One Canadian social worker found the interview an enriching experience where she got new information about homesickness, isolation and substitute families. According to another Canadian social worker her client was happy to be able to criticise the system and thus feeling she has a voice. She liked being part of a research, doing a job and getting paid. A Russian mother would not participate in the interview because she thought it was expected of her to only say nice things about the social centre. From an interview with a Russian client it is reported that the dictaphone in the research interview confused them: *“When she could not add anything more and the conversation was finished I put it away in the box – that was the moment when the confessions began. They mainly concerned the fact of how badly the centre works, how poorly they live (...).”* Norwegian social workers said that the research interview was very good because they got feedback from clients, which is unusual in an ordinary conversation at work. *“I think we talked about good stuff!”* is the way a US client is characterizing the research interview. In an interview with an Australian social worker the clients' last comment was: *“I'm interested to know what the other countries had to say. I'm just interested in receiving feedback at any stage when it comes through”.*

To go back and forth between data and theory as a constant comparison is used within grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967) to develop theories from empirical data. It is important to become familiar with data to be able to be sensitive to the context where data is collected from.

In this approach one should stay attentive to data and tentative in the conceptualization of them. Sensitizing concepts (Blumer 1954) may start as quite a broad one, for example focusing on the relationship, while during the process of shifting between a deductive and an inductive approach, concepts will become more scrutinized. I approached the material by asking questions and then I grouped the answers. From that it was possible to develop new questions and thereafter analyse different perspectives on central issues. I gathered my findings under the following headlines: Welfare provisions in different contexts, opinions about social workers and what is regarded as good help. Based on that I was able to focus on the social distance in the relationship and approaching closeness “friend” became a relevant concept and approaching distance “stranger” became relevant.

Charmaz (2006) is emphasizing the social constructionist approach in grounded theory and that the distinctions we create are not out there in reality. We as subjects participate in the construction of the reality (Berger and Luckmann 1966) when we are drawing conceptual as well as empirical distinctions. We continually interpret what is said and never encounter the situation as such:

*“.. every single piece of knowledge means becoming aware of something that is already valid and established within the objective determined context of the contents of knowledge. Finally from the psychological point of view, this is associated with the theory according to which everything held to be true is a certain feeling which accompanies a mental image; what we call proof is nothing other than the establishment of a psychological constellation which give rise to such a feeling. No sense perception or logical derivations can directly assure us of reality.” (Simmel 1990: 452)*

How are we going to decide what can be regarded as proof or more objective knowledge? When something is documented the reader needs to identify with what is written. An important goal in constructivist grounded theory is to construct processes. My approach has been to read the material over and over again with different questions as data generative tools. The aim has been to make further discoveries and clarifying concepts through writing

and rewriting. In the following when presenting data from interviews with social workers and clients I am also aiming at discussing what seems to be similarities and differences in the material across different countries.

## **Distance and closeness in relationships within different welfare systems**

What sort of help single mothers receive from friends and family will affect what kind of help social workers are requested to offer. We will explore how mothers experience help from different welfare delivering systems such as families, NGO's and governmental institutions. What does it mean to be a mother on welfare? How do they experience their situation? How do they feel responsible for their children's lives and what about their own lives? What kind of coping strategies are developed by these female clients in their interaction with different welfare delivering systems?

In Canada there is a safety net, but one must be vigilant, according to a social worker. Social assistance does not allow you to live, it only allow you to survive. People who are in poverty sometimes refuse to ask for help, because it is stigmatizing and you need to be registered. *"Dear Lord, how did I do that"*; a Canadian client is telling herself when she manages to do deal with problems. This is a client that does not buy second hand stuff and she feels it is stigmatizing to get such help from a NGO. She is very concerned about her five year old boys' situation. She does not think that he regards them as poor and she is proud that her child is not lacking anything. However, she does not know what will happen next month, and she finds this difficult. Her family knows she is on social welfare, but they do not know how bad it is. It is easier to ask her brother than her father for help, because the brother is quite well off. She gets a loan from her brother, maybe once a year, and then in a birthday party he can say: *"OK, forget about the money"*. Another client looks at NGOs as a place where she can get emergency help. They are like a family for her, but not as reliable as a family. She feels a triple discrimination as a women, single mother and immigrant and it is very difficult for her children to deal with their poverty. They compare themselves with others, who have better houses, more interesting things to tell after the weekend, and they experience that nobody will swap lunch with them because their food is not attractive. The children get timid and isolated and this makes the mother nervous. As an adult this mother thinks that she understands what it means to be poor, but it is more difficult for her children to understand the situation.

An Australian mother says that she is now in charge of her own life, not waiting for others to help her. Her doctor has told her that she should use what she has learned of coping strategies from daily experiences and accept that there is no name on her child's disability. Being a single mother in Australia is putting of the benefit of your child first, and they feel they have to answer for doing something just for themselves. One mother reports that it hurts when others are talking about trips they went on with their children, trips which are not affordable to them. Some tell about the problematic relationship towards the children's father when he just support the child with money to be used in their adult lives, and is not helping with everyday challenges and expenses now. There is generally more satisfaction with the help from NGOs than from the government. Centrelink is a rather new one-door comprehensive governmental welfare agency that many Australian clients mistrust. A client says that when they are in a crisis situation; the only help they get from Centrelink is help to call a NGO. Her opinion is that the quality of the services from Centrelink will become better if the people working there were more flexible.

Clients in the US are telling that they are amazed by how other people manage their poverty. The economic situation is hard. They worry for the basic health care for their

children. Clients borrow money, turn in cans and go to food banks to receive free meals. It is embarrassing and also scary. When being scared, the mother needs to think of possible ways to get money to make it through. There are attitudes against US mothers on welfare who can afford to buy shoes for themselves for example. One US mother says that they are not good enough caretakers for themselves, because they should do something with their lives, not only doing something for their children. Also in the US, clients' experience a good nongovernmental support system and especially some civil right based NGOs. However, welfare systems in the US are complicated and it is even difficult for the social workers to understand them. Clients are afraid of doing something wrong and ask for information about laws and what rights they have, because they are the ones responsible for not winding up in jail for welfare fraud. One social worker says that it is almost like a catch 22 situation with a combination of loopholes and safety net difficulties.

Russian social centres mediate help such as food, second-hand clothes and also help from psychologists, lawyers and speech therapists. They also organise holidays for children and it is possible to receive child allowance through the centre. From Russia it is reported to be a distance in the way the help is given. Clients say that social workers gave help so it could be registered as help-giving, but it did not fit the user. The client get the question: *"Does the public service centre support you?"* And she answers: *"Yes, yes. But how to say... of course, they support us. Actually they are writing more in their reports and papers, but they give us less. When I lived in a flat in (name of a local place), they brought me out of fashion shoe (of 1950-s) and besides they were small in size. Nobody needs such shoes, but it was written in documents that I have got footwear, clothes. I have got nothing, and it was nothing to take."* The client says that it is impossible to call this life, living in this kind of situation. Social workers on home visits cannot find anything when asking families to show them what food they have got at the moment. One client is a teacher in a kindergarten but cannot afford to have her own child in the kindergarten. A woman says she feels like a beggar, she feels shame for the Russian state and the upbringing of children in this context. Mothers focus on their children and a social worker put it this way: *"They are so much filled with their children, with their problems. I have a feeling that there's nothing beside children in their lives"*. In one house the social worker saw a set of encyclopedia for children, and she said that the mother was ready to be underfed to have a full collection for her son. One coping strategy mothers are using is not to expect much: *"I don't rely on anything. I'm satisfied with what I'm given."* A woman is saying: *"Well on the whole people support me, but certainly, I'm very nervous. It depends, everything happens."* A Russian client says she gets help from the child's father, although he has another family to take care of. This client feels it is difficult to live with her parents; three generations in the same house. Another client says that her mother helps her with money. For one client it was an important reason to move to get closer to relatives who could help her and her child.

Norwegians feel uncomfortable to seek help from the public welfare system, as one client said: *"I remember the first time I went to the social welfare agency, I was entirely exhausted. One is going to open up- and tell about one's problem."* And another said: *"One does not know how this is going and what will happen. What if one does not get anything "*. Norwegian social welfare is a safety net; the benefit of last resort. Due to the principle of local autonomy in the municipalities, the amount of money given to clients differs a lot. Some people have the right to get social welfare money, but they do not ask for it, they want to manage their lives themselves. None of the actual Norwegian clients have had contact with NGOs and social workers do not ask them to seek such help either. Norwegian social workers say that they can ask the clients to ask their family for help, but they need to do this carefully and be aware of each individual's relationships. A Norwegian client regards herself as poor when her children cannot participate in a lot of leisure time activities as other kids, or cannot afford to buy birthday presents. A Norwegian client says that you cannot give in when you have children. She says that many

times she does not eat so that she can give her boy food: *"No I don't think about myself. No, do you know what, I've never really done that"*. She felt guilty by using money on herself. When this mother moved close to her own mother, she was accused of breaking the boundaries between child and father. Her mother told her it felt good to help her daughter: *"that for ME to be able to help YOU...that is something nice. It gives me this nice feeling inside"*.

The word "poor" seems to have different interpretations in different contexts. The mothers in the US and Russia tend to talk more about lack of resources to meet basic needs, while mothers in Norway, Canada and Australia are describing a more relative poverty when they compare themselves with other families. In all countries women report worry for their children. Sometimes it can be considered a taboo when women are preoccupied with their own situation. It seems to be a challenge to manage to keep a balance between caring for themselves and caring for their children.

It gives the clients pride to get more control over and manage their own lives. To get help from families is a rather legitimate way to get help. And generally it seems to be more accepted than help from NGOs. However, it seems that where the welfare state is more comprehensive as in Norway and Canada, it is more problematic with help from the family than in less developed welfare systems. But in all contexts it is difficult to ask for help from friends and family if they have scarce means themselves. Much work is put into the transfer of help between family members or friends to avoid getting into an embarrassing situation. It is less complicated but may be more shameful, to get help from more distant helpers or even strangers like NGOs and governmental institutions.

### **Help being provided with indifference and involvement**

What reflections have clients and social workers regarding a suitable involvement in the client's life? What kind of strategies, methods or experience based knowledge have the participants developed to keep a good and flexible balance? What are clients' and social workers' view on what they regard as good help? Should help be offered with involvement and/or indifference?

*"I would hate to be a social worker"*, one client from the US is telling us. In the clients' opinion you get an anxious feeling that you are not good enough, when social workers are involved. And they tell you that you must do this and not do that. Clients say they have to find their own way, and it is frustrating when a social worker gives advice such as: *"Things are hard in life now and you should not try to do that."* The client is answering: *"Well things are always going to be hard"*. A social worker being confronted with this information, says that this social worker maybe responds like this because she is tired of seeing clients not obtaining what they are deciding or planning to do. This client said she had to do something with her life: *"I just went out and found different outside voices because the previous ones were not going my way"*. When she was depressed she tells the interviewer that her own children were not enough reason for living, because she could not see that she had something to offer them.

Clients should be present when they are talked about, says a social worker because then the social workers will be careful with how they interpret the situation and avoid presenting their own *"self-perceived ideas about what is wrong"*. The aim is to make clients experts and not social workers. It is important to analyze client's life histories. According to this social worker one should: *"Not look at pathology but at contexts."* Helpers must listen more to the clients' experiences instead of coming up with proposals and solutions. One description of when social workers experience their job as meaningful is when they are invited into peoples' lives. A private social worker says that she is asked to write letters about critical matters, because public social workers themselves can be fired if they are criticizing the

system. Canadian clients think there should be more positive information and focus on what social workers do instead of pictures like: *"They that take away children."*.. One client says it is good to meet social workers because they look upon you as your equal and as normal people. Earlier a client had had the impression of social workers as those people that will make trouble in your life. But her experience is that they make life easier for her. Another client recognises that it is important that she herself has learned to ask for help. The client tells that a good way of doing social work is to give information, and when social workers are listening they can help clients to see things differently. A social worker says: *"When we talk about concrete things, I learn a lot about underlying feelings and values"*. Other experiences mentioned by Canadian social workers are: It is important to ask good questions that will bring out needs. People need concrete resources. Work on people's potential to overcome their problems. Emphasize strength that people do not recognize themselves. Skills-exchange among clients creates a form of autonomy and interdependence, and this leads to dignity. Respect for their rhythm – for example when you can ask about certain things. A Canadian social worker tells us that it is meaningful to be a social worker to get recognition from clients for the help and support she provides. Another Canadian social worker says that: *"When I have difficulties, I think of Karen and that motivates me"*. This can also be interpreted as something that makes the work valuable for the social worker, because it helps her to deal with her own private problems.

A quite general perception of Australian social workers seen from a client point of view, is that they are people that take your children away from you. An Australian client is talking about a good social worker, who does not want to take your children away. This same client had a very bad feeling when she got flowers from child service at the hospital when she had just given birth to her daughter. Another client that feels she is not heard and listened to, talks about her meetings at public services as *"wasting my time"*. An informant perceives services and the workers to be bad and negative when she does not understand their processes and decision making. One Australian social worker says it is important to listen to clients and communities and believes that they have creative and good solutions. It is important to assist clients to think in alternative ways, and to use time to listen to the clients' stories. Loosing control is shameful for clients. Another social worker is telling that an aim within social work can be that the client does not need a social worker anymore. A social worker also tells the interviewer that it is meaningful to be a social worker when they through their work can create changes for people and in the communities.

Social work in Russia is a new label. Social workers can be acknowledged in a more professional way as a specialist or in a more bureaucratic way as *"sobes"*; an expression from the Soviet epoch. A client says that she is uncertain if they need social workers or not and then she is adding; *"sure if they can give food and money."* A client had met with social workers and she said it was very interesting that her problems were not indifferent to others. Another client tells that she met a social worker that was able to split her problem and thus helping her to deal with her situation. This social worker was sincere and warm hearted. The client was ready to burst into tears when the social worker took her to a psychologist and a lawyer. So she felt that the social worker understood and realised her problem. Social workers never address politicians for help although they say that the most important task in social work is the struggle with poverty. The job for a Russian social worker consists of registration, establishing the problem and reflecting where to address the problem for the specific client. One social worker tells that they write down facts when visiting clients, but that they should have written more about the helping processes. People at the centre are afraid of digging to deep into people's problems, because they might not be able to solve them. According to one social worker all social workers are saying that they respect clients, however, there are ethical problems with attitudes toward clients: *"As they say, once call a man a pig and he'll grunt (.....) And it's not common in our society to respect each other."*

A Russian social worker gives a picture of a meaningful situation for her in the following: *“When I came to her to write an examination act, and later when we brought some food, I wish you could see her eyes. When you see those eyes you understand that you’re needed”*.

*“As a social worker you must be quite strong thinking of all the shit you get thrown at you”*, says a Norwegian client. A client is telling that she is afraid because social welfare has the power to take her child away: *“..it was the manager herself who told me: if I didn’t sort out my life and my finances, then they would take my son away from me. (.....)She said it in a way that seemed like she could just give a little flick and so...they would take my child away from me.”* A Norwegian client says that a social worker needs to communicate in such ways that the client feels you understand his/her situation and that they feel welcomed. A client appreciates her social worker because she has given her needed documentation and explained misunderstandings. A Norwegian social worker says it is important to give economic support to people, so they get a breathing space. To give information to politicians about social problems and needs that should have been addressed is not easy because all information needs to go through the administrative hierarchy. There are discussions among social workers about poverty and what to demand, and what should be the minimum amount of money given to clients at a municipality level. Social workers say it is important to be aware of how clients are met, because many clients feel ashamed when seeking help from social welfare. A Norwegian social worker says that it is meaningful for her to get close to people who are in vulnerable situations.

Social work is a profession that can influence very important parts of peoples’ lives. One image is a profession that is not very much appreciated in society, but maybe more by their clients. *“The profession that takes children away from the parents”*; has a problem regarding how they possess power and the legitimisation of their work. Voices from Russian mothers show us a positive connotation between social workers and child care. It is also emphasized as good when social workers are interested in their problems. When social workers are involved in child care, this need to be investigated further in regard to how it is operating in a specific context.

Both clients and social workers emphasize that good help is to be listened to, understood and it is empowering for the client when the helper are tuning into their rhythm. However, there may be a tension between this and the social workers’ need and wish to achieve results in the work and finding solutions to the problems. Ethical awareness is highlighted. A Russian social worker emphasized that ethics are important because people tend to think that their perception of the world is the correct one. It seems like social workers in all contexts are aware of the political dimension of social work, but it is difficult to find suitable modes of putting issues on the political agenda. When clients seek help they do not want to feel this as *“wasted time”*. They want to be met with respect. Actually clients say that they had to learn to ask for help, because it is though not to manage one’s own life and admitting the need for help.

### **What is a suitable distance between clients and social workers?**

How do clients experience closeness and distance in the relationship? What does it feel like when social workers get too involved? How is it possible to create a relationship where the clients feel s/he is an individual person and not only a work-task and a number for the social worker? Australian single mothers have a rather negative attitude towards public services. For example: *“Some of them talk to you like they are taking money out of their own pocket and doing you a favour.”* The client would have preferred that they had a more professional and distant work approach. It is easy to relate to social workers when they have similar background and experiences. One social worker defined a worthy life for clients as having

good relations with friends and family. If a client lacks family or a friend network it can be good that the social worker become like a friend. A client describes a good relationship when the professional has become more of a friend than a social worker.

Although US clients are critical to helpers, there are exceptions like those a client describes as friends that love her, and will not leave her. One client is very satisfied with the help she gets from the private social worker, who she recognizes almost as a part of her family. The best help this social worker can give her is not to leave her. The private social worker is informing her that she can contact her, after the contract period is over: *“And you know that my services are only a phone call away. We might not meet face to face, but (if) you’ve got questions, (if) you’ve got an issue, you call me.”*

A Canadian client says she feels at ease with her social worker, it is like a family and she feels as she is with her sister. The actual social worker says she does not feel that way, and she thinks they have a proper professional relationship. But they have gone out drinking coffee, and she says that this may be the reason why the client looks upon her as a friend. Social workers say that the process is important. And to think carefully through what hints and advices that you will give the client. A clients’ motivation is the real plus, says the social worker, and you must therefore be sure to build on the clients’ experiences.

Social workers in Russia often feel they are in the same boat as their clients, having similar problems. People come in and demand help and a Russian social worker says: *“We are hungry ourselves, we are not paid, our salary is less than yours, we need help ourselves; and you come and demand something”*. A decent and good life for the social worker is for example stability; to know what will happen to her in half a year. She is always aiming at something, but when interviewing the clients the most difficult question to ask was about their future, because they had very little to tell regarding their thoughts about their future.

A Norwegian client had a good experience when an earlier social worker called her to say goodbye when she was moving. They had got real personal contact, it was nearly scary, she said. However, others are describing more distant rapports where clients get the money and nothing else. The client tells the social worker that the research interview is a better experience than the ordinary talk at the welfare office: *“Because I haven’t seen you as a support organisation in that kind of way. Because all the other social workers I have had, they have never asked me about things as you’re doing now. They have just said yes and mm and then shown me out of the office, all right. Here it is bye bye, that’s it for the week.”*

In different countries clients use the word friend or family-member to describe a good relation, while social workers hesitate to use these labels because they think it is not professional enough. Both clients and social workers are giving examples of social workers being dedicated by for example giving a client a good clue or a social worker making an extra phone-call to say goodbye. A type of closeness that is not good is when social workers leave the client with a feeling that she as professional not only has done a job but have been doing you a favour as “taking money out of her own pocket.”

## **Discussion: How “stranger” and “friend” as concepts can illuminate the reflection regarding a suitable distance**

A suitable relation is about balancing between distance and closeness in specific contexts. To find a suitable distance in the client -social worker relationship or a mother-child relationship can be difficult. Relevant questions to ask are: What are legitimate and proper relationships, what will function best to help the other, and maybe there is an issue of capacity and priority involved as well. Clients and social workers for example can have a

lot of strangers in their lives, but the numbers of friends are often fewer. The responsibility of the profession is to ensure what is regarded as proper social distance, while the client is expected to open up about life experiences. Sometimes social workers fulfil the role of a family member or friend. Since this is not a legitimate or at least a controversial client-social worker relationship, reflection upon a suitable distance is needed.

What constitutes a good relationship is a contested issue. It depends on what kind of values and aspirations people have and what is being taken for granted or not. Maybe it is possible to approach the issue of "suitable relational distance" as a discourse in social work? If so we would need to focus on implicit and explicit differences in life experiences influencing different opinions about what meaning is. "Any analysis of meaning involves teasing out these negations and oppositions, figuring out how (and whether) they are operating in specific contexts. Oppositions rest on metaphors and cross-references "(Scott 2003: 380). The power to claim something as a truth resides in what is considered as something that "everybody knows" and is not much talked about within the social welfare professions and institutions or in social relationships between clients and social workers. When people account for and explain something one does also express that this is not self-evident and legitimization is needed. An interesting question is for example: Why does a theme or a problem in one context need to be accounted for while in another context it is just taken for granted? "Discursive fields overlap, influence, and compete with one another; they appeal to one another's "truth" for authority and legitimisation" (ibid: 380). Discourse is an institutionalized way of thinking and sets the limit for acceptable speech. "A discourse is not a language or a text but historically, socially, and institutionally specific structure of statements, terms, categories, and beliefs. Foucault suggests that the elaboration of meaning involves conflict and power, and that meaning are locally contested within discursive "fields of force" (Scott 2003:273). Foucault was interested in the rules and practices that produced meaningful statements and regulated the discourse. A discourse constructs the topic and govern the way a topic can be meaningfully talked about. If we take the example of "social distance in the client - social worker relationship", we may claim that if the distance is too small or too big it will ruin what we call a "client - social worker relationship". It can still be a relationship but it may have changed into other types such as "friends", "lovers", "bureaucrats", "enemies" or "strangers". While if we describe the distance "as if friends" or "as if strangers" we may explore a wider variety of rules and practices available in a professional client social- worker relationship, than if we either stick to closeness or distance as a dominating discourse. In different historical periods within the profession of social work either a closeness or a distance discourse have prevailed. For example, social workers working in the psychodynamic tradition were told not to have flower in their office or offer a cup of coffee to the client, because they should keep a professional distance. In other traditions where it was important to empathize with clients and reduce the distance, social workers have sometimes given clients some of their own money without being expelled from the profession.

How can we understand why some discourses are in front while others are not on the agenda? Some examples of relevant discourses: In Russia it can be regarded as positive when a social worker explicitly learns something from clients (Iairskaia-Smirnova and Romanov 2004). Can this be related to a newly established profession or a general poverty that also includes social workers? In Australia it is not regarded as proper to strengthen social work as a profession but rather help clients not to need social workers anymore. Can this be traced back to the professions' radical and self-critical tradition or is the current welfare regime undermining professional social work? The welfare provision in the US is highlighted as a field that is quite complicated for clients to be involved in. Has this situation something do to with the individualistic and minimalistic welfare policy or a profession that are not allowed to put political issues on the agenda? Or is this situation

possible because of the distance between clients and social workers? In Canada the profession is asked by clients to provide a better public image so their help will be more available. Is this due to the professions own priorities and lack of visible community work or a strategy to qualify social workers so clients become their best “salesmen”? And is there a developing closeness between clients and social workers that create progress in ethical awareness? Within the Norwegian context there is a tense situation between social workers and clients regarding demands tied to mutual agreements and reduced help if demands are not followed up by the clients. One challenge in the Norwegian welfare provision seems to be the need of more predictability and thus reduce shame and increase the feeling of having rights. Is this problem also due to a profession with role confusions or is it a result of the welfare policy being highly contested on the local level? Or, does the problem reflect the Calvinist-work-ethics, following the saying from the Bible about the one who does not work shall not eat, which is most problematic to clients?

In all contexts it is possible to identify mistrust towards the public system, for example that people do not get their rights accepted. Maybe a common tendency in welfare providing systems, is shown in the Russian example when a client get shoes that are too small, but getting these shoes are still registered as help from the system. Systems develop their own binary code and thus a welfare system decides what help is or not (Luhmann 1993). “Institutions or social systems can manipulate rationalities and technologies to actualize the value they prize, but they have no way of rationally justifying those values by means of these same rationalities and technologies” (Rasch 2002: 26). They cannot decide the value for this mother of getting those (too small) shoes or not. The system may encounter problems with the legitimisation of provided help, when as in this case it obviously is not to any help for the client. A situation described in the US is also a paradox when people who need help and support are themselves given the responsibility to sort out what laws are relevant because the system is too complex for the social worker. Too much work and responsibility put on a client who needs help, is not creating confidence in such a welfare system, rather a distance between the public welfare provider and the client is being communicated. The shame dimension in being a social welfare recipient is probably different between different contexts. Receiving help from social centres in Russia is probably less stigmatizing than in for example Norway because the poverty rate is higher in Russia. Besides, experiencing the relief getting help legitimises the system. The motivation to become a social worker seems to be twofold: To help others and to help oneself. Clients have been using the “friendship metaphor” to describe a good relationship while social workers distance themselves from being friends with the clients. Being a friend is something one need to worry about and a social worker said she put the paper or “the written case” in between her and the client to mark or settle a distance (Oltedal 2004:43). But could the friend metaphor be used in a way that can motivate social workers in their work? It is for example meaningful for them to be close to people in vulnerable situations? When they have problems themselves, they get motivation from thinking of how clients meet with challenges, and they learn from how they are coping with their lives. How explicit the self-realization motivation is expressed, seems to be more context specific. The dilemma between invading people’s lives and being the person who cares about you, needs to be investigated more closely in each relationship. A Norwegian social worker used “the written case” to establish distance, a Canadian social worker “went out drinking coffee” to establish closeness and the US social worker said “I am just a phone-call away” to establish closeness after the formal relationship was finished. These different norms, ideologies, using artefacts or mediums can be called “third parts”. Bakhtin (1986:126) is describing it as hell or a torture chamber where nobody else is present rather than the torturer and the tortured. This third part may be God, a vision, the people, a law, it can be an abstract or a concrete third part such as a person. To have a third part or a super-addressee representing an outsidersness of the situation is also important for being heard in the society. A third part as “as if” will be able to split the dyad in a friend

relationship. Different “third parts” can facilitate the move between “as friends” and “as strangers”, getting either more or less of closeness or distance.

Friendship is a positive word for a client, signifying a social worker they can rely on and the one who do something special for you, and give you the feeling that your are chosen or treated individually. For social workers the label is more problematic, because it can be interpreted as if their relationship is too close and not professional. Clients can also experience problematic closeness when social workers identify themselves so much with the work that for example giving away money feels like they “take money out of their own pocket”, and personally are doing the client a favour. A stranger would not invest feelings in giving money to the client. Therefore such distance, and maybe also a kind of professionalism, would then probably be preferred from the clients’ perspective. According to Simmel a stranger is the potential wanderer, although he has not moved on, he has not quite overcome the freedom of coming and going (1950:402). Stranger is a particular structure composed of distance and nearness, indifference and involvement (ibid: 404). Strangers are not really conceived as individuals, but as strangers of a particular type: the element of distance is no less general to them than the element for nearness (ibid: 407). “As the stranger is not committed to the group, he occupies a place of objectivity and, as Simmel notes, is often subject to the most surprising openness and confidentialities.” (Clarke 2002: 346) The stranger can also be understood as a person that is seeking to be accepted by the group s/he is approaching (Schutz 1972:181), s/he can be considered to be in a crisis situation where s/he is questioning almost everything the insider take for granted (ibid: 185). We are usually seeking information that can reduce our risks and challenges regarding the new situation we are encountering (ibid: 185). “A social worker as a stranger” can in some situations be conceived as too distant and as one that does not understand what is going on. Friends can maybe take too much for granted. According to Simmel friendship is a relationship limited to the dyad (1950:138). The feeling of the other person as having a decisive role in further development is important in this type of relationship: “Precisely the fact that each of the two knows that he can depend only upon the other and on nobody else, gives the dyad a special consecration – as is seen in marriage and friendship, but also in more external associations, including political ones, that consists of two groups” (Simmel 1950:135). Important within a relationship in which the professional can be described as a friend is the closeness between them. The relationship between the two of them seems to be more important than what kind of institutional setting the social worker is working within. “A social worker as a friend” would feel the responsibility for what kind of advice they gave and would find it problematic to just leave it to the client her/himself to judge what would be the best choice. In some situations s/he can be conceived as too close and the client feels that s/he has been invaded. According to Luhmann (2002); theories and concepts can help to deal with complexities in practice and therefore practice is more complicated than theories. Such metaphors as contrasting “friends” and “strangers” with each others can perhaps work as a reflection tool to figure out the professional distance-closeness relation between clients and social workers.

In visualising and generalising the lives of women one may run the risk of categorising them in a way which may or may not be representative of the lives of women (Butler 2003: 419). To be a mother is a very important identity for all of these clients. They are using different coping strategies as generalisation and comparing their own situation with that of others who are worse off than themselves. Some mothers have realised that they must count on themselves, and not expect help from others. Sometimes mothers are quite proud of themselves when they manage something they previously did not imagine they could do. In some contexts as for example in Russia and the US, even if slightly less, there are strong anger with public policy and the whole situation, and this create frustration and hopelessness. But also in such contexts one can find individual coping strategies like the Russian women who gave birth to a child when she was almost 40 and now this has filled her life with an aim: *“I can’t live for myself. It’s boring. I must give myself to somebody.”*

This closeness may create problems for the child. But mothers on welfare do generally feel a strong normative demand to prioritize what is best for their child. They have to be accountable for taking care of themselves, and then they may add that this is because they need to be able to have something to offer their children. One suicidal woman said that her children were not a reason to live, because she could not offer them anything. It is like the child is a stranger for her/his mother and there is a huge distance between them. The mothering caretaking issue when it is too close or too distant may become a burden on a child's life. Complicated relations like these between children and some mothers on welfare, may be illuminated by thinking of in contrasting a situation like a relation based on general human commonness and similarities (Simmel 1950:405) and a distance as between strangers or as in friendship with a pointed individualization (ibid:138). The presence of fathers in the child's life has also consequences for a mother's choices either restricting her or giving her more possibilities. This itself could be an issue for further comparative research; seeing each mother's life in a context of gender and family policy.

## Concluding comments

The empirical material from five different countries underpinning this article, are interviews with single mothers on welfare and their respective social workers. I have approached the material with different questions, resulting in more questions regarding how to deal with the issue of distance between client and social worker. This has been narrowed down to reflections on suitable distances in different contexts. A more focused qualitative comparative research on this issue is needed in order to make the analysis "thicker".

I have found it relevant to introduce Simmel's concepts of "friend" and "stranger" to illuminate differences in social distance between clients and social workers. I am also asking the question whether "a suitable distance in the client - social worker relationship" can be regarded as a discourse in social work. Social work is about reducing social problems on individual and societal level. Social workers participate in helping processes with theories and techniques. Clients participate with being motivated, learning from experiences and by asking for help. In addition the relationship in itself can be regarded as a working-tool in social work. However, keeping a fruitful distance in different situations is a challenging and demanding task for social workers. To use mental images "as if being friends" or "as if being strangers" may create a variety of possible positions in the relationship. In both positions the worker needs to be engaged and conscious about what consequences their attitudes will probably cause. To be professional is to be conscious about what you can do or not do, and do stand for this in practice. Sometimes a friend-like relationship is important; where the client almost get the feeling that s/he is special and it is just the two of you being engaged in the issue at stakes. S/he bears in mind that the professional said she was always "just a phone call away". While as a stranger the professional is the potential wanderer, you never know when s/he will come and go, therefore the client must rely on themselves. The stranger will when present probably agree with the client to meet challenges because as a client said: "things are always going to be hard"". It is taken for granted and self-evident within social work that client and social workers cannot be totally friends or totally strangers. We can regard "as if friends" and "as if strangers" as different discursive fields that appeal to one another's truth for authority and legitimisation. Meaning will always be locally contested and it will evolve through implicit or explicit contrasts and such oppositions rest on metaphors and cross-references.

A comparative perspective may illuminate awareness about meaning changing processes and power operations in social work regarding proper social distance. When, why and how are distance needed? When, why and how are closeness needed? In different countries we may get different answers on these questions and that can help us to explore how context have an impact on what we regard as legitimate relationships.

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