CHAPTER 8

Framing the Client's Agency: Generational Layers of Lived Social Work in Finland, 1940–2000

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Introduction

This chapter takes a long-term approach to agency-from-below by focusing on the encounter between the social worker and the individual who seeks aid in the local social office in Finland. My starting point is that personal encounters with social workers are significant for the experience of society, as the local public institutions and authorities represent society and the (emerging) welfare state in everyday life.[1] Within these

[1] Kumlin, S. and Rothstein B. (2005). Making and breaking social capital: The impact of welfare state institutions. *Comparative Political Studies* 38(4), 347; Lipsky, M. (1980). *Street-level bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the individual in public services.* Russell Sage Foundation.

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encounters, the special relationship between the individual and society becomes concrete as lived citizenship, and the agency of the individual is constructed and shaped.[2]

In research, welfare state development has usually been conceptualized as a breakaway from the tradition of poor relief. In practice, Finnish poor relief offices were renamed public welfare offices (1937) and social offices (1951) when they were reassigned to implement new legislation on social security. The means-tested poor relief—since 1956 called public assistance—remained as a part of the social workers' daily work at the social office in addition to the expanding social benefits and social services. Thus, social offices became the venues of old and new expectations in the emerging welfare state.[3]

As research material storing expressions of clients' experiences is fragmented, my focus is on social workers' everyday experiences of their work with clients. By analyzing how the social workers saw the rights, responsibilities, and motivations of the individuals seeking aid and what kind of expectations they had for their clients, it is possible to explore the encounter as the context for the client's agency. I will approach the encounters as a *scene of experience*, which as a socio-spatial setting frames the situated interaction. In addition to the social workers' conceptualizations of their clients' agency, the frames embedded in the material environment and in the practices of social work, as well as the social preconditions of the social workers and clients, will be explored as a part of the scene of experience.[4]

As a scene of experience, the encounter between the social worker and client opens up a view to temporal change. Changing terminology in the social workers' journal points to a major institutional reinterpretation of the relationship between the individual and the worker. Figure 8.1 indicates how the earlier concepts of ward (*hoidokki*) and dependent

[2] Kallio, K., Wood, B., and Häkli, J. (2020). Lived citizenship: Conceptualising an emerging field. *Citizenship Studies* 24(6): 713–729; Isin, E. and Nielsen, G. (2008). *Acts of citizenship*. Zed Books; Lister, R. et al. (2007). *Gendering citizenship in Western Europe: New challenges for citizenship research in a cross-national context*. Policy Press.

[3] Satka, M. (1995). *Making social citizenship: Conceptual practices from the Finnish poor law to professional social work*. University of Jyväskylä; Harjula, M. (2020). Eletty sosiaalityö kahden sukupolven murroskokemuksena 1940–2000. In J. Moilanen, J. Annola, and M. Satka (eds.), *Sosiaalityön käänteet*. SoPhi; AsK (Statutes of Finland) 145/1922; AsK 51/1936; AsK 34/1950; AsK 116/1956.

[4] For a detailed introduction to *scene of experience*, see Kokko and Harjula, Chap. 2. On clients' agency as the relational and contextual capacity to act, see Lister, R. (2020). *Poverty*. Polity, 123–176.

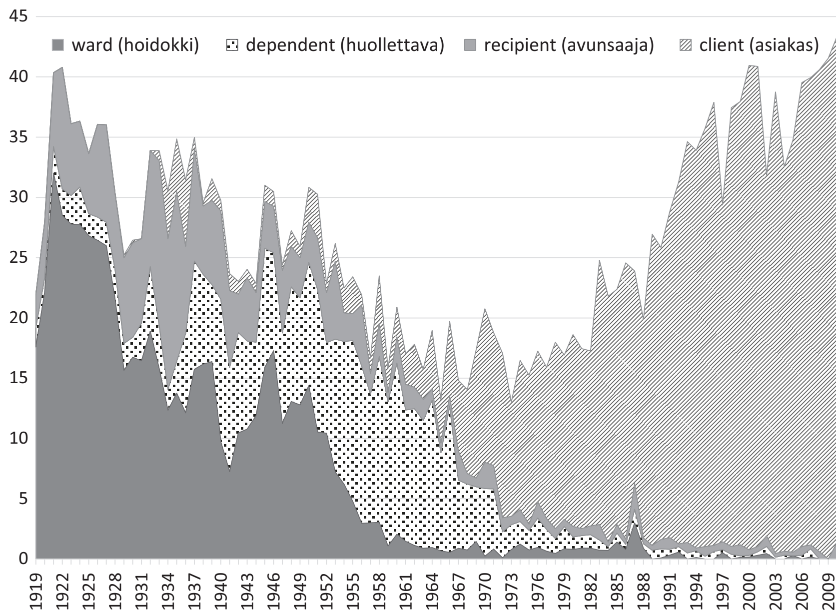


Fig. 8.1 Changing terminology for the persons seeking aid in the professional journal for social workers, 1919–2009, frequency per page (National Library of Finland, Digital Collections)

(*huollettava*) that referred to the individuals who needed aid were replaced by a new concept of client (*asiakas*) in the 1960s–1970s.[5] By focusing on the scene of experience I will explore how this major change framed the everyday agency of the clients.[6] In the scene, the societal temporal *layers of experience* that the people and the sociomaterial environment carry in the encounter are present in the framing of the individual–society relationship. Thus, the situational encounter not only crystallizes the existing shared societal layers of experience, but at the same time, it is the moment

[5] Journals *Huoltaja, Sosiaaliturva, Sosiaalitieto*. Ward: *hoidokki* and *hoidokas*; Recipient: *avunsaaja,-tarvitsija, avustettava* and *anoja*. National Library of Finland, Digital Collections. Retrieved January 18, 2022, from https://digi.kansalliskirjasto.fi/search

[6] In my text, I will use the term *client* as a general concept referring to the individuals seeking social assistance.

where new societal layers of experience take shape because of the tension between experiences and new expectations.[7]

I will combine an oral history approach, based on 36 interviews with 60–80-year-old retired social workers and their colleagues[8] with official material, such as legislation, textbooks, and journals, to obtain a structural framework for my analysis. The use of photos as expressions of past experiences will complement my reading.[9]

The interviews of 22 women and 14 men open a viewpoint on Finnish welfare state development from the 1940s to the 2000s (see Fig. 8.2).[10] The interview collections bring out lived social work in an urban environment, as most interviewees worked in the second largest Finnish city, Tampere.[11] In collection 1, social workers who started their career in the 1930s–1950s and retired in the 1970s–1980s were interviewed in 1987–1989, when the construction of the Finnish welfare state was seen to have reached its peak.[12] This collection reflects the everyday of the new profession within the rapidly expanding post-war social legislation. Collection 2 from 2018–2021 contains voices of social workers who entered the profession with an academic degree during the establishment of the welfare state in the 1960s–1970s and retired during the so-called welfare state crisis in the early 2000s. The interview material carries the multiple temporalities of experiences, as the time range covers the time remembered, the time of remembering, and the time of researching. All the different pasts and futures are filtered through these different time levels and are present in the

[7] On *layer of experience*, see Kokko and Harjula, Chap. 2.

[8] SHA1–23. Interviews of retired social workers 1987–1989; SHB1–13. Interviews of retired social workers 2018–2021. HEX, Tampere University.

[9] On *sediments of experience*, see Kokko and Harjula, Chap. 2.

[10] The interviewees who worked for part of their career in the social office are included in Figure 8.2.

[11] On the rural social work: Satka, M. (1994). Sosiaalinen työ peräänkatsojamiehestä hoivayrittäjäksi. In J. Jaakkola et al., *Armeliaisuus, yhteisöapu, sosiaaliturva: Suomalaisen sosiaalisen turvan historia*. Sosiaaliturvan keskusliitto, 281–283, 291–294, 297, 303; Satka (1995), 122–124.

[12] Kettunen, P. (2001). The Nordic welfare state in Finland. *Scandinavian Journal of History* 26(3), 225–247; Haatanen, P. (1993). Suomalaisen hyvinvointivaltion kehitys. In O. Riihinen (ed.), *Sosiaalipolitiikka 2017*. WSOY, 31–67.

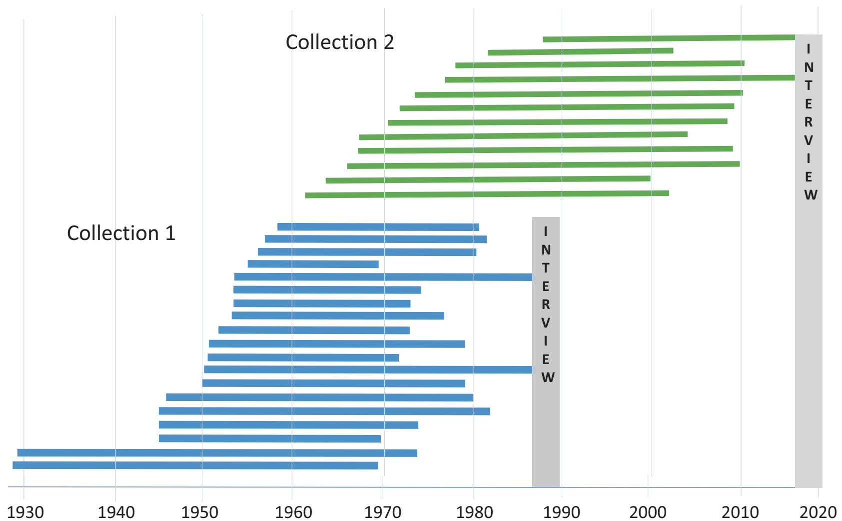


Fig. 8.2 Two collections of interviews: Timeline of social workers' working careers and time of interview

narration and analysis, guiding the selection of meaningful experiences and silences.[13]

My basic finding, based on the close reading of the transcribed recordings, is that the 1960s–1970s was interpreted as the turning point of the *old* and *new* in social work in both collections, but two contradictory and opposed meanings were given to the temporal turning point: For the social workers in the first collection, the turning point was a negative loss, while for those in the second collection the change was a break from an old burden toward a better future. This points to generational differences and makes the generation, as a sociological concept that is related to societal change, my analytic category in tracing the temporal layers of

[13] Taavetti, R. (2018). *Queer politics of memory: Undisciplined sexualities as glimpses and fragments in Finnish and Estonian pasts.* University of Helsinki; Koselleck, R. (1985). *Futures past: On the semantics of historical time.* MIT Press; Koselleck, R. (2018). *Sediments of time: On possible histories.* Stanford University Press. Kettunen, P. and Petersen, K. (2011). Introduction: Rethinking welfare state models. In P. Kettunen and K. Petersen (eds.), *Beyond welfare state models: Transnational historical perspectives on social policy.* Edward Elgar, 1–15.

experience.[14] My starting point is that the two generations of social workers—who even worked as colleagues in the same social office—each had their own shared professional preconditions and key experiences as filters that created "conditions of different chances for experiences" in the encounters with their clients.[15]

By analyzing the changing scene of experience, I will argue that—as shared societal experiences and horizons of expectation which were integral for the lived and narrated social work—the two generational layers of experiences carried different interpretations of the individual–society relationship and resulted in divergent expectations toward the clients and their agency. By indicating the meaning of the local-level individual–social worker relationship in defining the agency of the citizen, this chapter nuances and challenges the macro interpretations of welfare state development that are based on the chronology of legislation only.

"The Poor Must Be Humble": Layer of Poor Law in Lived Social Work

> [T]here were very old-fashioned social workers, and the poor relief reared the social workers to think a little differently than those of the present day. (…) In such a developing field of work (…) attitudes change, the worker comes from far behind, and does not accept all the advances in his/her mind.[16]

A social worker who started her 33-year career in the social office of Tampere as the first with a professional education in 1947 saw the poor law (1922–1956) as the most significant feature that distinguished the "old" and "new" generation. Similarly, the chief accountant, who joined the office in 1957, recognized the long-term effect of the annulled law:

[14] On the concept of generation: Virtanen, M. (2001). Fennomanian perilliset: Poliittiset traditiot ja sukupolvien dynamiikka. SKS, 15–35; Purhonen, S. (2007). Sukupolvien ongelma: Tutkielmia sukupolven käsitteestä, sukupolvitietoisuudesta ja suurista ikäluokista. Yliopistopaino. On generations in the welfare state: Bude, H. (2003). Generation: Elemente einer Erfahrungsgeschichte des Wohlfartsstaates. In S. Lessenich et al. (eds.). *Wohlfahrtsstaatliche Grundbegriffe: Historische und aktuelle Diskurse*. Campus, 287–300; Worth, E. (2021). The welfare state generation: Women, agency and class in Britain since 1945. Bloomsbury.

[15] Koselleck (2018), 210–213, citation p. 211.

[16] SHA20, 9, 11.

> [T]he older officers were inculcated with the old baggage of the poor law, and their work was still marked by it (…) at least in their stance toward their clients. And people still clearly felt the poor law was harsher and stricter all around.[17]

The first social workers were hired by the largest cities to implement the poor law in the 1920s. As the sphere of poor relief was widened to child protection and the control of alcoholics and vagrants in 1937, a new terminology based on the concept *huolto*, referring to care, support, maintenance, and supply, was introduced. The practice of the institution of *huoltotoimi* (public welfare, literally: welfare affairs) was called *huoltotyö* (welfare work).[18] New national social benefits broadened the field further from the late 1930s onward, and the foreign terms *social work* and *social affairs* were gradually adopted in the 1950s.[19]

From 1951, the around 330 towns and rural municipalities with over 4000 inhabitants were obliged to have a paid employee for social affairs, while in the approximately 220 small rural municipalities, laymen who were elected to a position of trust by the social board took care of social worker tasks. Special academic education for social workers was available from 1942, but only 45 percent of the workers had a special education or university degree in the early 1960s. A qualified applicant only needed "sufficient education or experience" to enter the field.[20]

Although the young profession with its comparatively low salary lacked high esteem, the position of a municipal official, representing the public authority, was traditionally "above the people" in the local social hierarchy.[21] In the late 1950s, 70 percent of Finnish social workers were women, but especially the higher posts in the offices were dominated by men.[22] The background of social workers was heterogenous. In Tampere, working-class men were recruited from municipal party politics and labor

[17] SHA15, 3.

[18] Satka (1994), 267, 292–294. Satka (1995), 62–63.

[19] Tarasti A. and Sipponen, K. (1957). *Sosiaalihuollon lainsäädäntö*. Suomen lakimiesliitto. Search *sosiaalityö*, *sosiaalitoimi*. National Library of Finland, Digital Collections. Retrieved December 10, 2021, from https://digi.kansalliskirjasto.fi/search.

[20] Satka (1994), 306–308, 313–314; *STV Statistical Yearbook of Finland* (1951). Valtioneuvosto, 7, 11; Tarvainen, L., Sosiaalihuollon työvoimakysymys. *Huoltaja* 5/1965, 133–134.

[21] Jalas, R., Työvoimakysymys huoltoalalla. *Huoltaja* 1–2/1944, 9; Eskola, A., Kunnan viranhaltija yleisön kannalta. *Maalaiskunta* 15/1953, 516.

[22] Satka (1994), 315.

unions on the basis of their local knowledge, while women usually became qualified after working in the social office as secretaries in the 1940s–1950s. In addition, the separate child welfare office—which was operational only in fewer than ten of the largest cities—hired women whose educational and vocational background was in childcare and nursing. Thus, the working-class family men in their new role with a tie, briefcase, and desk, and the religious, unmarried women with a vocational attitude toward child protection represented two different worlds. The shared childhood experiences of scarcity and the extreme experiences of war in their adult life, however, similarly shortened their social distance to the clients.[23]

The early term for social worker, *tarkkaaja*, literally referred to a person who observes and keeps an eye on somebody. The new profession was the "watchful eye" and "information gatherer" of the social board.[24] The other early title, *kodeissakävijä* (home visitor), indicated field work at clients' homes as the main task.[25] Each social worker had their own district in the city. After reception hours in the office, the afternoons were usually filled with obligatory home visits (Photos 8.1, 8.4, and 8.5).[26]

As the venue for the first encounter between the individual and the social worker, the social office carried the stigmatized experiences of poor relief. Still in the late 1950s, the fear of being seen entering the social office was one of the reasons that made seeking aid difficult.[27] As there were no booked appointments, long queues were an everyday experience during the office hours in Tampere, which was a rapidly growing industrial city with over 100,000 inhabitants:[28]

> [T]he poor souls sat there on the bench queuing perhaps since the morning, without eating or drinking (…) It was hard for the clients, and when they got in to see the social worker, they were already tired and tried to tell their matters as quickly as possible to get back home, the children probably waited for them.[29]

[23] Harjula (2020), 52–55.

[24] Tarasti, A., Eräitä sosiaalihuollon hallinnon uudistamisen. *Huoltaja* 24/1950, 591.

[25] Satka (1994), 293; Kaupunkien huoltotoimihenkilöiden yhdistys. *Huoltaja* 9/1935, 197.

[26] Harjula, M. (1990). *Sosiaalityön arki Tampereella 1945–1970*. Tampereen yliopisto, 27–40.

[27] Piirainen, V. (1963). *Ensikertainen huoltoavun hakeminen: Tutkielma huoltoavunhakijain käyttäytymisestä*. Sosiaalihuollon keskusliitto, 83–86.

[28] STV (1951), 10. Cf. Piirainen (1963), 86–87.

[29] SHA20, 5.

Photo 8.1 The entrance of Tampere social office. Despite the modern vocabulary based on the concept *social* since the 1950s, the sign *Huoltotoimisto* (public welfare office) dated back to the 1930s and carried the legacy of poor relief (Huoltaja 18/1962, 581. Photographer unknown)

A private conversation was an ideal that was not always met in the offices. Even a booklet, *Choose social welfare for your mission in life* (1949) for those who considered pursuing the career, indicated how the conversation with a client took place at a shared office of two workers. The body language, clothing, and the layout of the furniture construct and maintain the humble status of the client in Photos 8.2 and 8.3.

The receipt of poor relief restricted the client's rights as a citizen. The ideals of poor relief dated back to the nineteenth century, emphasizing the moral responsibilities of the citizen to the nation. Autonomous citizenship

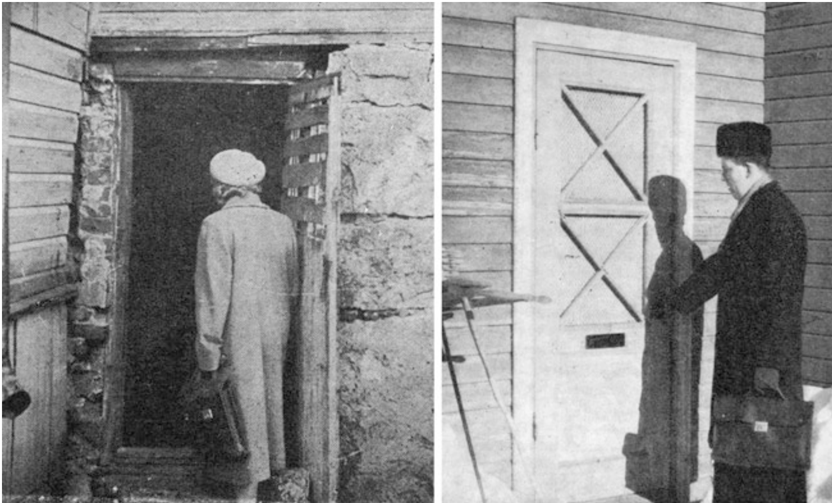
Photo 8.2 A shared office was presented as the norm in a booklet for social workers-to-be in Finland in 1949 (Valitse sosiaalihuolto elämäntehtäväksesi (1949). Sosiaaliministeriö, 3. Photographer unknown)

was earned only by one's moral self-control and hard-working behavior.[30] Therefore, poor relief was not a benefit but a loan that the receiver or relatives were obliged to pay back. All recipients of poor relief were supervised by the officials, and long-term recipients were under the guardianship of the local board. The board even acquired ownership of the recipient's belongings. Furthermore, long-term receipt of poor relief was grounds for exclusion from universal suffrage in national and local elections until the 1940s.[31] All these features led the receipt of poor relief to generally be seen as a degrading experience that made the person a second-class citizen.[32]

The practices of poor relief narrowed the client's autonomy further. Poor relief was granted either as indoor care mainly in poor houses—called municipal homes from the 1920s[33]—or as outdoor care. Instead of

[30] Satka (1995), 22–24, 68–101.
[31] AsK 145/1922; AsK 7/1928, § 6.
[32] Piirainen (1963), 16–17.
[33] Satka (1994), 273.

Photo 8.3 A social office described as exceptionally peaceful, light, and spacious in the Finnish social workers' journal in 1954 (Huoltaja 20/1954, 525. Photographer unknown)



Photos 8.4 and 8.5 Social workers with their briefcases making a home visit in Finland in the 1950s (Huoltaja 12–13/1953, 352 and Huoltaja 7/1957, cover. Photographers unknown)

cash, outdoor care was usually products, such as firewood and clothes, or payment commitments to certain shops or medical aid. In Tampere, 40 percent of the outdoor relief recipients were regularly assisted, mainly old and sick people who received their aid monthly in the mid-1940s. Because of new social benefits and social insurance, their share reduced to only 5 percent by 1960, and most clients received temporary aid. In addition to old age and sickness, also unemployment, a large family, or the "husband not supporting the family" were among the accepted reasons for short-term aid.[34]

The task of the social worker was to investigate the needs and the deservingness of every applicant case by case. Pre- and post-war social work was based on a dichotomic view of clients. *Decent* people deserved to be aided, whereas *indecent* individuals with self-inflicted troubles were placed under a step-by-step tightening control to make them adopt the moral code of a good citizen.[35] The social worker had to find out to what group each client belonged: "who is in dire straits, who is faking, who is a decent human being, who is an immoral waster."[36]

The truthfulness of the client's story had to be questioned and confirmed by the social worker. The recurrent home visit formed the core of the investigation. According to the social workers, the home as an environment could give the client confidence and space to talk:

> [W]hen a mother comes to ask for poor relief (…), the home visit elucidated the situation so much (…) you could see the environment the family lived in (…) I felt that the client was much more confident to talk about the troubles at home than in the office (…) it is more formal and when there is a queue behind the door, the clients get nervous (…). On a home visit, the atmosphere was different, and shortages (…) were brought out, such as (…) cut-off electricity.[37]

[34] Harjula (1990), 15–19, 52–58, 98–103.
[35] Satka (1995), 22, 37–40, 59–63, 80–96.
[36] Suhonen, H-M., Huoltotyön "sielutiedettä." *Huoltaja* 8/1939, 198.
[37] SHA20, 5–6.

While especially the regularly assisted lonely old women welcomed the home visitor, for a man under surveillance because of alcoholism, a home visit was a sign of distrust. Even for a mother, the home with the presence of the husband and children could be an awkward place to discuss family matters.[38] In any case, the early generation of social workers emphasized the difference between an intrusive home visit that included the checking of rubbish bins and outbuildings and a tactful handling of the situation that indicated professional consideration:

> You can do the checking in many ways so that it is not insulting. To go to the home and root around every corner, that is not needed.[39]

> [I] never opened cupboard doors, but you could still see them, they always needed something from the cupboard (…) and when you sat facing it, you saw it.[40]

> [I]n extremely rare cases, when someone asked for firewood very often, we suspected whether (…) he would sell it, sometimes we went to the wood-shed to see (…) but I would not have forced any door open.[41]

Although some social workers avoided dropping in on a home visit in case the client had guests,[42] the borders of privacy were generally vague. Neighbors and employers were regularly asked about the client's life. Notifications from the local community often started the process of child protection or the control of alcoholics and vagrants.[43] For the workers, the tight control was not seen as patronizing but as an unquestioned part of looking after the client.[44] The concepts of "ward" and "dependent" in the official discourse crystallized the power relation that framed the clients as humble minors and social workers as the experts who knew what was best for them.[45]

[38] SHA20, 15; SHA16, 8; SHA14, 5.
[39] SHA15, 9.
[40] SHA14, 17.
[41] SHA20, 5.
[42] SHA20, 15.
[43] Toivola, O., Näkemyksiä sosiaalitarkkaajista. *Huoltaja* 20/1957, 599; SHA13, 2; SHA13, 3, 7; SHA16, 10.
[44] SHA6, 6; SHA4, 8; SHA19, 9.
[45] Satka (1994), 300; Satka (1995), 132; SHA22, 4, 7.

The meager policy of giving aid seemed acceptable to the social workers during the post-war reconstruction. As the shortage of goods affected every household, the unquestioned basis was that "you must be within bounds when you ask the municipality for public welfare."[46] The regular poor relief recipients were absolutely poor: "so poor that they could not afford to have any friends."[47] The basic and humble needs of the client were easily met, which made the encounters satisfactory for the worker:

> [E]ven though a poor home, it was a clean home with proper order… Yes, you were happy to give aid to such a family (…) It was such a fine job to give assistance to a grandma or grandpa, get rent, firewood, clothes, doctor, et cetera. Both were happy and you felt that you are doing good work.[48]

In a long-term relationship with a client who was found to be decent and honest, the worker could bend the rules. The worker could utilize the common austerity practice of "giving only half" and double the applied sum when presenting the case for the director. The social worker could even forget the principle of keeping professional distance. Stories of giving one's old skis to a single mother or cooking a macaroni casserole for the family reflected a familiar relationship.[49] Despite the rule regarding addressing the clients formally, the working-class male social workers were allowed to be on first-name terms with their male clients and to use the informal language of their early social background.[50] Even a female social worker accepted a cup of coffee at a home visit when the client expressed it as a sign of her dignity: "don't I as a poor person have at least the right to offer a guest coffee (…) to show hospitality?"[51]

To stay in the frame of the deserving client, the possibility of expressing one's dissatisfaction was vague. Complaining about the meager assistance and using sarcastic names—the social worker was called a "cop" or "saucepan-lifter" and the social board "the senate of the poor"—were

[46] SHA15, 9.

[47] SHA20, 15.

[48] SHA16, 3.

[49] SHA16, 10; SHA22, 4; SHB5, 2; Eräsaari, L. (1990), *Nilkin naamio: Sosiaaliraportti*. Tutkijaliitto, 19, 27–36, 107.

[50] SHB8, 8, 12.

[51] SHA20, 16; SHA23, 5.

common strategies in coping with the situation. However, the workers described openly hostile reactions from their clients as relatively rare:[52]

> [T]he clients try (…) to control themselves and behave smartly, try to fawn over the worker to get the thing right (…) Usually, the attitudes were positive because maybe the client felt themselves at mercy (…) even though the worker under no circumstances would have wanted to act like that, but I'm afraid that many poor felt it humiliating to come [to the office] at least those days (…). is it so that the poor must be humble?[53]

As the scene of experience, the encounter with the social worker linked together the client's home, their neighborhood, and the crowded social office as a multi-locational setting, which made individual problems visible in the community and maintained the stigmatized and humble status of the client.

The Idea of Social Rights Shakes the Client Relationship of the First Generation

New social benefits opened up new expectations that started to shake the social worker–client relationship. In particular, the child benefit (1948) that was granted to all children under 16 years of age in cash at the post office was seen as revolutionary for lived social work. The social office only distributed and received the application forms, and no control of the usage of the benefit was generally included in the process.[54] For a female social worker, the new benefit was a turning point:

> [I] strongly felt a change in the clients that was, I would argue, moralistically right on the one hand, as the child benefit was given to all children. (…) It was much easier to visit the social office because it had no stigma of poor relief (…) It liberated people (…) we got new clients and younger clients (…) in a way, it made our work more difficult, as we started to have cases that we old-time poor relief workers did not consider to be poor (…) people are more strongly aware of their needs and their rights and hold on to them.[55]

[52] Tolonen, K., Köyhyys ja savolainen huumori. *Huoltaja* 14/1937, 323–326; SHA23, 3; SHA15, 10.

[53] SHA20, 16–17.

[54] Ask 541/1948; Ask 547/1948.

[55] SHA20, 8–9, 10.

Photo 8.6 A staged photo of the receipt of poor relief, Finland 1955. The three people at the front of the line are social officials acting as clients (Huoltaja 21/1955, 621. Photographer unknown)

The new clientele of social benefits were average families without deep problems, but it was their new rights-conscious attitude that made the encounters difficult for the social workers. Photo 8.6, taken for the social workers' journal in 1955, captures the tension. The first three persons in the queue are social workers, who demonstrate a new practice for delivering the regular poor relief in a small town. The habitus of the fake female clients reveals and repeats the expectations of the humble, shamed, and shabby clients. The third fake person in the queue, a man with a cap and raincoat, presumably aims to represent a new type of client called the *welfare tourist* (*huoltoturisti*). The new concept captured the disapproval provoked by young men who traveled from one locality to another trying to take advantage of the system.[56] By pure chance, a real client who did not notice the photo session joined the queue as the person on the far right. Even though the cause for his queuing remains unknown, it is his

[56] Sankari, A., Turussa avustetut huoltoturistit. *Huoltaja* 3/1960, 124–130; Lukijan sana. *Huoltaja* 5/1960, 272–273; Piirainen (1963), 98–100.

shameless and curious behavior and well-dressed appearance that significantly challenged the expected image of the client in the social office.[57]

For the older generation of social workers, the new expectations made the daily work challenging. In the early 1950s, the national social administration pushed for the adoption of "a more human view of the recipients' rights and status and, above all, the implanting of the attitude that society is responsible for organizing social security for the citizens."[58] As the Poor Relief Act was replaced by the Public Welfare Act in 1957, the social workers were advised that the receipt of the aid was a "subjective right" in case the aid seeker could not obtain necessary care and maintenance otherwise. The new act introduced the term "person of limited means," indicating a break with the idea that only absolute poverty made the applicant eligible for support. The receiver no longer had to pay back the aid that was given because of sickness or unemployment, and only recipients in mental institutions were put under guardianship and lost their right to vote (up until 1970).[59]

The old-time social workers struggled in accepting the right of a person who is "young, healthy, fit but unwilling to work" to receive aid: "in the old days we made more demands on the clients."[60] For the low-waged social workers, the rising standards of living and the client's right to "keep up with the Joneses" challenged their professional identity:

> Those days the requirements were smaller, now they are bigger and as they can't be met, the client experiences it much harder: I don't have a color TV, I have a black and white one (…) you feel like you are left without so much the neighbors have (…) and this is what the National Board of Social Welfare is pushing for, that a person must have the right, but it may cause contradictions for the long-term workers (…) You should forget yourself and not to compare, that we did not have it earlier and I have not had it (…) The worker does not develop and keep pace with the National Board.[61]

In the daily work, home visits became a game of hide and seek, as the clients tried to hide televisions and the social workers snooped around to find them. Similarly, controversial issues were radios, telephones, pets,

[57] Vilkka, R. "Avustuspussi." *Huoltaja* 21/1955, 621; Piirainen (1963), 88–108.
[58] Tarvainen, L., Sosiaalihuoltomme syventäminen. *Huoltaja* 23/1951, 546.
[59] Asteljoki, A., Huoltoapulakia pykälittäin. *Huoltaja* 10/1956, 256–258; AsK 116/1956.
[60] SHA20, 18, 19.
[61] SHA20, 10–11.

cars, and part payments. The changing gender roles and family morals—such as drinking mothers and cohabitation—were heated topics that were hard to accept for the aging social workers in the 1960s–1970s.[62]

Furthermore, as new social legislation—the old-age pension (1956), unemployment benefit (1960s), income-related work pension (1961), and sickness insurance (1963)—was implemented by new social security institutions such as the Social Insurance Institution KELA,[63] the clientele of social offices changed. New clients usually had a short-term need for aid when they waited for other social insurances and benefits to be paid by other institutions. In addition to these so-called bank clients, it was severely mentally and socially challenged individuals who entered the social office when they fell through the social legislation safety net. As the social workers had no tools to solve their multiple problems, they felt they merely helped the clients to get by.[64]

In addition to the new clientele, a significant change in the scene of experience was that the social office became the main site of the encounter. As the clients were distributed to each social worker by the alphabetical order of the family name in the early 1970s—instead of by area—office hours with booked appointments replaced home visits:[65] "Now since people have got more of these rights to social security, they have also apparently got the right to keep the door closed, you don't have to be resigned."[66]

As a result, the encounter lost the communal approach and became more individualistic. At the same time, young colleagues entered the field. Many social workers who were nearing retirement age felt the workdays were distressing: "everything was chaotic."[67] Their nostalgic look at the former golden days and experience of loss indicates the tension between the individual–society relationship that framed their client relationship and the new expectations that challenged their professional identity.[68]

[62] SHA20, 9, 11 18; SHA15, 4, 9; SHA23, 6; SHA17, 7; SHA3, 3–4; Eräsaari (1990), 52–53.

[63] Haatanen (1993); Kettunen (2001).

[64] SHA21, 2–3; SHA20, 10, 14, 18–20.

[65] SHA14, 4; SHA20, 5, 10–11; SHB8, 5, 16.

[66] SHA20, 9;

[67] SHA20, 14; Harjula (2020), 56, 66.

[68] On nostalgia: Knuuttila, S. (1994), *Tyhmän kansan teoria: Näkökulmia menneestä tulevaan*. SKS, 9–14.

The Young Generation and the New Horizon of Expectation

"There was kind of two different worlds," said a social worker who started at the social office with a university degree at the age of 23 in 1971.[69] According to her, the generational and educational gap between the old and young workers characterized the daily work at the office. By the mid-1980s, 85 percent of social workers had an academic degree.[70] The professional identity of many newcomers was based on the radical, leftist ideology of the 1960s. Instead of taking part in charity—like many old-school female social workers did—the young generation became interested in so-called progressive civic associations for gender equality and more inclusive social policy toward marginalized groups.[71] With their miniskirts, trousers, and nail polish, the young generation challenged the formal dress code of the social office (Photo 8.7).[72]

The generational gap became visible in conflicting attitudes toward change. The young worker remembered how the old ones "turned a deaf ear" to her suggestions for developing a practice for helping the clients more systematically.[73] From the perspective of an elderly social worker with a career of 25 years, such suggestions were just a waste of time:

> I had difficulties to understand how these young, green ones, who had little experience, and whom I could not value much, they were so full of new proposals: 'these documents are so old-fashioned, they must be reformed soon'. Workdays went by while new proposals were made. During that time (…) a lot of work could have been done.[74]

The main tension arose because the old generation took the frames and conditions of their work as self-evident and dedicated themselves to helping the clients within the framework of the organization. In contrast, the newcomers wanted to challenge the tight regulations to acquire more freedom of action for both the workers and clients.

[69] SHB5, 2.
[70] Mäntysaari, M (1991). Sosiaalibyrokratia asiakkaiden valvojana. Vastapaino, 156.
[71] SHB9, 3–4; SHB5, 12; B13, 2; B1, 14–15; SHA18, 11; Satka (1994), 303–305.
[72] SHB5, 2; SHB8, 13; SHB2, 11.
[73] SHB5, 3, 7.
[74] SHA20, 7.

Photo 8.7 A young female social worker and her colleagues from the old generation in Tampere social office, late 1960s (Photograph: Esko Sala)

A male social worker described how a multiple-page form for the youth welfare preliminary inquiry "raised a healthy suspicion toward the system" during his first years in the profession in the 1960s. Family benefit—granted as products instead of cash and controlled via home visits—became a source of his open criticism in the late 1960s.[75] The meager amount of aid and the patronizing attitude toward the clients were attacked by the young professionals. In the interviews, the younger generation made a break with the earlier one, whom it addressed as the "control gang" or the "municipal administration generation."[76] Despite the respect the new generation gave the old generation for its skills in meeting with individuals, it criticized the "old pathos of poor relief"[77] in the old-timers' work:

> The tension was in the issue that we had a little different view of encountering (…) and respecting the client.[78]

[75] SHB9, 6, 20.
[76] SHB8, 6; SHB9, 26.
[77] SHB1, 15.
[78] SHB8, 6.

> The client did not actually traditionally have any rights, which as such was shameful.[79]

> The aid was given in short pieces and the control was tough.[80]

The new director of the Tampere social office—who entered the post at the age of 27 with a university degree, a three-year career in social work, and a leftist party membership card—summarized the dilemma of the new generation in 1974: "is it right (…) to try to get the rebellious person adapted to society or to try to solve such societal problems that produce rebellious citizens?"[81] The old-fashioned practices were seen as "forced helping," resulting in the loss of autonomy and human rights. The new horizon was to break away from putting the clients in the position of lower-class citizens.[82] This entailed a change in the social worker's orientation:

> The social worker must not be an official implementing the aims of society, but a person who provides the services citizens need. We must turn the viewpoint from society to the citizen.[83]

> The ultimate aim will be equality. The social workers and researchers together must aim to change the society to reach equality.[84]

Although new social services such as home help (1951) and children's day care (1973) broadened the service orientation of the social office,[85] the new ideals were contradictory to the daily practice. At worst, a client had to wait for seven weeks to get a 20-minute appointment with a social worker, who had 40 different forms to complete daily in the 1980s. Because of the obscure social security system, people did not know which

[79] SHB8, 5.

[80] SHB11, 3; Tuomi, A., Byrokraattisuus ja kontrolli. *Sosiaaliturva* 10/1996, 20–21.

[81] Sosiaalitoimiston hallintoa. *Huoltaja* 24/1974, 1162; SHB2, 1–3.

[82] Eriksson, L. (1967). *Pakkoauttajat*. Tammi; Helenius, Y. (1971). *Oma vastuu vai yhteisvastuu: Tutkimus sosiaaliturvaa koskevista asenteista eri tulotasoilla*. WSOY, 104.

[83] Vilkka, R., Kunnallisen sosiaalihuollon tarkoituksenmukainen tehtävien jako. *Huoltaja* 8/1967, 246.

[84] Koskinen, S., Sosiaalityö yhteiskunnan muuttajana ja uudistajana. *Huoltaja* 24/1970, 824.

[85] L.S., Sosiaalitoimiston hallintoa uudistetaan Tampereella. *Huoltaja* 24/1974, 1161–1163.

service counter to turn to in order to get aid. The client could meet a new social worker in each encounter, as young women's maternity leave, the low status of the profession, and the plentitude of open posts made temporary work contracts common.[86] The bureaucratic organization and short-sighted policy of aid were sources of frustration and cynicism for both the workers and clients in the 1970s and early 1980s:

> There was no systematic, planned assistance. You gave aid once and said goodbye, [the client] came back some time, it was so one-off.[87]

> [T]he workers were kind of in their own bubble (…) They took shelter in the bubble and in the official practices. And the client (…) tried to play the cards well to maximize the benefit. (…) The less the worker could articulate and interact with the client, the more it became formal.[88]

> [The client] talked about society like it was a chessboard in which he, as a sly old fox, made clever moves.[89]

Leaning on Ruth Lister's categorization of the agency of people in poverty, "getting by" was the traditional poor relief recipient's experience of everyday coping, and a continuing sense of hopelessness about the future. However, new frames of agency could be found in the 1960s and 1970s, as the new social benefits and services opened a way of "getting out" for some clients. Even "getting (back) at" via everyday acts of resistance and opposition was more common than after the war.[90] An interview of 58 Finnish social workers in 1970 indicated that 60 percent of them had faced difficult encounters with clients.[91] Dissatisfied clients threatened to tell the tabloids of their ill treatment.[92]

[86] Mäntysaari (1991), 117–119, 133, 144, 157–158; Karvala, J. (1974). *Sosiaalihuolto-odotukset: Tampereen sosiaalivirastoasiakkaiden sosiaalinen tausta ja sosiaalihuoltoon kohdistuvat odotukset*. Tampereen yliopisto, 35–37; Sosiaalineuvoja työssään Tampereella. *Huoltaja* 24/1975, 1304–1305; Jalkanen, A., Sosiaalitarkkaajan näkemys työstään ja asiakkaistaan. *Huoltaja* 6/1970, 167–168; SHB9, 9.

[87] SHB5, 3.

[88] SHB13, 7.

[89] Tuomi, A., Muutos jatkuu. *Sosiaaliturva* 11/1996, 11.

[90] Lister (2020), 130–164.

[91] Jalkanen (1970), 169.

[92] SHB4, 4.

When the first academic research into clients' expectations was conducted at Tampere social office in 1970–1971, elderly men in particular refused to participate because they suspected the office would use the interview against them.[93] Although the concept *asiakas*—that could be translated either as client or customer, implying a more equal power relation—became more common in social work (Fig. 8.1), the research showed that the experience of begging and stigma still made clienthood at the social offices different from that at banks and post offices. Two-thirds of the 145 interviewees visited the social office reluctantly.[94] Even though 73 percent considered the service quite fair and just, half of them felt they should have more say in matters related to themselves.[95] As a scene of experience, the encounter at the social office was characterized by a growing tension between expectations and experiences in the 1970s and 1980s.

"Becoming Us": Toward a New Client–Social Worker Relationship

An early sign of a more equal relationship between the social worker and client was a campaign for better office premises in Tampere. The move to a new office building with open-plan reception desks—ironically called *pilttuut* (stalls)—and background music was a shock for the workers and clients of the welfare department in 1967:

> You could hear everything (…) A glass window all the way down to the floor, the waiting client could stand behind the window and look inside. [A client] rushed into the corner and said that this is awful, you really get stripped naked here.[96]

One client soon wrote an appeal to the social board and demanded a change to make the office "a real place for applying for public welfare," instead of "an information center" where everything said could be heard by others.[97] After 16 years in the unsuitable premises, the social workers organized a strike to "demand the clients' right to talk about their private

[93] Karvala (1974), 10.

[94] Karvala (1974), 32, 35, 78, 48–49; Mikkola, K. (1970). *Mitä odotamme ja saamme sosiaaliturvalta*. Tampereen yliopiston tutkimuslaitos, 4, 83.

[95] Karvala (1974), 55–56, 66–67.

[96] SHA20, 13.

[97] Harjula (1990), 119–120.

matters confidentially" in 1983. The joint action of the clients and social workers was an unheard of case that made local headlines. The radical effort was successful, as the office was finally redesigned with proper office rooms by the mid-1980s.[98]

Terminologically, the change from *public welfare* to *income support* in 1984 was a break from poor relief.[99] A substantial change was the decentralization of social work in the mid-1980s, which institutionalized the new expectations as a new layer of experience in social work. The large social office with specialized tasks for each social worker was replaced by district offices and a holistic and integrated work approach. Within a national experiment in seven cities in 1985, a new suburb of Tampere—with rental blocks of flats, a high unemployment rate, and a high percentage of children and low-income families—became a field for developing the new approach.[100]

Within this new approach, the scene of experience changed. Instead of focusing on individuals only, the new aim was to connect social work to everyday social life as community work: "I liked it that there were these networks, families, groups, et cetera. It was not just individualistic work. Because I thought that it was not enough."[101] Close co-operation with the clients, their social environment, civic organizations, and other public institutions—such as the unemployment office and mental health office—characterized the approach.[102]

The basic change was to look at the client from a new perspective: "we usually only see clients as problems, we don't see their real needs or especially their resources."[103] The new view produced non-traditional practices of partnership and participation: A middle-aged female client was recruited to interview other residents in her apartment block. The simple questions—"What is amiss in your opinion, and how would you like to see it tackled? Could you set up a housing committee and would you like to join

[98] SHB8, 11; SHB5, 18–20; Historiallinen lakko (1983, March 29). *Tiedonantaja*; Sosiaalikeskus hiljeni (1983, March 26). *Kansan Lehti*; Yllättävä lahja sosiaalityöntekijöille (1984, February 18). *Kansan Lehti*; Mäntysaari (1991), 106.

[99] Niemelä, H. and Salminen, K. (2006). *Social security in Finland*. Kela, 17, 38–39. Retrieved March 23, 2022, from https://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:951-669-707-0.

[100] Rostila, I. (1988), *Subjektina sosiaalitoimistossa?* Sosiaalihallituksen julkaisuja 7. Sosiaalihallitus, 200–201.

[101] SHB5, 11.

[102] SHB13, 6–8; SHB11, 15; SHB3, 6–7, 16; SHB10, 3–4.

[103] SHB13, 9.

it?"—resulted in residential co-operation. Similarly, a son of a single mother was asked to make a list of boys who were interested in soccer, and a client with a record of alcohol problems but previous career in the soccer league was recruited as their coach. The social worker remembered a jumble sale for the soccer tournament as a success: The boys who used to pickpocket took good care of the raffle, and a single mother who had been ashamed of her clienthood happily participated by baking and selling pastries.[104] For the social worker, the process of "becoming us" was the key in the success of the communal social work:

> I had this thought (…) that in the community, people 'become us' and everyone would find a role and connections through that role (…) The residents in the area felt that we are on their side and we felt too that we side with the inhabitants. It resulted in us feeling safe in the office, we did not have to lock the doors (…) and a client could sometimes, when the appointments were a little late, make some coffee on the fly (…) In the collective field, it kind of lost its meaning whether you were a client or not, but you had a functioning role.[105]

According to Lister's categorization of agency, "getting organized" as the strategic collective action was a novelty in Finnish social work in the 1980s. At its best, the communal social work was a combination of official and voluntary action that could provide jobs and connect the clients to their social environment as employees, volunteers, local residents, or soccer team members and create belonging to society. This was a novelty compared to the early poor relief-based social work, in which the communal approach was mainly a source of control. Finding a functioning role for each was crucial in the 1980s, as unsuccessful research-driven efforts for establishing permanent client groups without any special agenda indicated that clienthood in the social office as such was not a source of meaningful activity, positive identification, or belonging to society.[106]

[104] SHB13, 9–13; Vinnurva, J., Asiakas ja työntekijä yhteistyökumppaneiksi. *Sosiaaliturva* 21/1987, 1183–1186.

[105] SHB13, 13.

[106] Lister (2020), 164–176; Rostila (1988), 176–184, 201–212.

Turn Back Since the 1990s

The head of the Tampere social office saw the change from economic prosperity to a deep recession in the early 1990s as a sudden brake to the renewal of social work:

> During the late '80s (…) we got (…) permission to think and plan (…) and to be enthusiastic (…) Those who remember, talk about 'the spring of the social office'(…) Then comes the recession in '91 (…) everything was reversed (…) 'Better feeling (*olo*) for Tampere residents' was our guiding light (…) Quite a large part of the people were entitled to some social benefits but did not apply for them, we had aimed to market them [the benefits] by saying that this is due to you.[107]

Suddenly, the economic recession made cost-saving the guiding light for social policy, while along with high rates of unemployment and bankruptcy, the clients' problems became more severe. Organizationally, the Tampere social office returned to the post-war years: The district offices were abandoned and child welfare and social work for adults were placed in separate buildings. Long queues, increasing haste, and registering with weakening working conditions framed the reminiscences of encounters with clients at the turn of the century:[108]

> I could no longer bear the massive change, colleagues were changing all the time, whatever system was changed whenever, offices were stuffed here and there, we had to consider using headphones as we could not talk on the phone while a colleague was sitting beside me.[109]

Quite similarly to the older generation in the 1970s, frustration with the constant change characterized the experiences of the workers who were nearing their retirement age at the turn of the century. For them, the most frustrating part was seeing the return of the once abandoned principles of giving aid, recalling the earlier layer of poor relief:

> Issues of inequality are kind of similar to the '70s, and the awkward similarity in attitude (…), you must have the calculator all the time, is there money

[107] SHB2, 5–6; Holanti, P., Tampereella vauhti päällä. *Sosiaaliturva* 15/1991, 741.
[108] SHB3, 4, 5, 7, 10, 19–20; SHB10, 4–8, 13; Eronen, T., Kirjallisuutta. *Sosiaaliturva* 19/1992, 26.
[109] SHB3, 2.

enough, can we, so you must be cold (…) and say that 'no, you can't have this.'[110]

The frameworks (…) start to remind me of what was there when I entered the field.[111]

A new feature in the encounters with clients, especially in the case of disputes over child custody, was that the clients arrived with their lawyers to fight for their rights.[112] According to the aging social workers, social distance in the encounters was increasing, as in the polarizing society of the 2000s, the new young social workers were raised in a different world compared to their clients. This made the client relationship again more hierarchical, "as helping and dictating from above."[113]

Conclusion

As a scene of experience, the encounter between the social worker and client in Finnish municipal social work reveals and reflects the wide-ranging societal change between 1940 and 2000. Both the social workers and the clientele changed along with the professionalization of social work and the new legislation on social security. Both the clients' problems and the social workers' resources in assisting to solve them varied across time. Significantly, even the site of the encounter changed. Compared to the home visits with inquiries in the neighborhood and long lines at the social office in the 1940s and 1950s, the prebooked appointments at the office in the 1960s and 1970s made the encounter individualistic—with the exception, however, of the short-lived communal approach in the 1980s and 1990s, when the scene expanded to the social environment.

The change can be conceptualized as two contested generational layers of experience of lived social work between 1940 and 2000. The analysis of two social worker generations indicates that they built their work on different interpretations of the individual–society relationship, which resulted in divergent expectations toward the clients and their agency. For the *old* generation, who started their career by the 1940s and 1950s, poor relief

110 SHB8, 14–15.
111 SHB13, 19.
112 SHB5, 13–14; SHB1, 11; SHB11, 13; SHB3, 10.
113 SHB5, 8; SHB3, 5.

was the key experience that characterized their professional identity and their view of the clients as either ignorant, humble, and deserving or non-deserving and shameless. For them, the acceptance of the new social benefits and the new clientele who demanded their rights was challenging. For the *young* generation, who entered the profession in the 1960s and 1970s, the new horizon of expectation was to be liberated from the burden of poor relief to implement the rights of the citizens.

The collision between old and new in the 1960s and 1970s crystallized the two layers of experience. The main tension was that the interest of society was the guiding principle for the *old* layer of experience. As the social worker represented society, the role of the client was to become a responsible citizen by meeting one's obligations to society. In the *new* layer of experience, it was quite the opposite: It was the responsibility of society and social work to serve the individual. While the old generation accepted the framework of social work and did their best within the given frames, the young generation aimed to renew the societal frames of social work.

The dual view of the clients—as either decent or indecent—in the old layer of experience linked ideal clienthood to experiences of gratitude, submissiveness, and obedience toward society. Rather than a full member of society, the client—called a ward or dependent—was seen as a burden. The chances of escaping clienthood, which restricted membership in society, were improved along with the expanding legislation of income transfers and social services in the 1960s. For some clients, the communal work approach in the mid-1980s to early 1990s entailed empowerment without the experiences of shame or loss of dignity and autonomy. The process of "becoming us," which was the key expectation in the new layer of lived social work, was lost as the austerity policy changed the framework of the client–social worker relationship in the 1990s. The generational approach indicates how—despite the new legislation and practices—the experienced legacy of previous policies survived in welfare state practices and institutions and framed the everyday encounters with clients.

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