Social work is a women's profession, but it is rarely explored as such. The article deals with how gender structures the ideals, values and future expectations of social work students.

SOCIAL WORK in the different countries is predominated by women. In addition to this, most of the clients of social workers, two out of three, are women (Barretti 2001). This circumstance is not, however, visible in the research conducted on social work.

In the Anglo-American discourse, gender has been an issue to some degree but in the English speaking world as a whole, research from the viewpoint of gender is scarce (Barretti 2001; Nichols-Casebolt & Krysik 1994.) Although some researchers in Finland1 have in their analysis taken gender into account, most of the research conducted in our country is gender-neutral. Until the beginning of the 1990s, the academic debate on social work in Sweden was also neutral in terms of gender but after that time interest in issues of gender has gradually increased (Hedin & Månsson 2000). In this article, I am trying to determine how gender structures social-work students' experiences and conceptions of social work as a profession and of themselves as practitioners of social work. Furthermore I analyse how the way of thinking and speaking that is typical of social work education and practices steers the understanding of the meaning of gender.

Memory work as a method of collecting material

I used the method of memory work (Haug et al 1987) as a tool for part of the material collected for this article. The memories thus collected relate to certain places and periods of time. The underlying idea was that memories tend to reveal how a person takes part in the renewal of the prevailing social and cultural structures. I studied the memories by asking what kind of social relations and actor categories the writers had produced in them and how they had placed themselves, as men or women, into the social categories they had constructed (Haug et al 1987). I define memories not only as stories of past events and their writer's former self, but also as narratives helping the narrator create from his/her present-time memories and the contexts of these memories an acceptable and understandable picture of his/her present self (see Middleton & Edwards 1990, Juhila 1994, Komulainen 1998).

The students participating in the provision of material came from three different universities. Ten of the students were women and three men. Their ages varied from about twenty-five to nearly forty years. Five of the writers had already completed some other social work training program at a vocational school or a polytechnic. One had graduated in health care, another in deaconry. All participants had gained practical experience of social work, in summer jobs, as trainees or substitute social workers over a longer period of time. I asked the students to write down memories of events in their lives that in their opinion had contributed to their decision to opt for social work. I asked them to reflect in their essays on how gender has shaped their memories and influenced their choice of career; furthermore, on how social work studies have changed their way of thinking and their understanding of the meaning of gender for their own attitudes. I also asked them to write about their expectations as regards future in general and their working as social workers in particular, furthermore, what values, ideals and

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goals they considered important for their future professional activity. From the material I then selected for my analysis memories and themes of essays that seem to have the most obvious connection to gender.

Gender in childhood memories

The childhood memories in the material are written by female students. Two of these memories mirror particularly happy moments in childhood. Five memories describe childhood as a period of time marked by family problems such as quarreling parents or alcohol abuse. Four of the memories describe a child helping mother, taking care of siblings or otherwise assuming responsibility for tasks of everyday life.

She had once again been asked to take care of her little sister... She was playing with her friend... they were playing home. Little sister was also there, in a baby carriage... All of a sudden, just as they were baking meatballs of mud...there was a scream, and crying, just beside them. and she realized that her little sister was lying on the ground... She can still vividly remember the anxiety that overwhelmed her... She felt ashamed... When mother came home from work, she told her meekly and under tears what had happened. She felt that she was the worst and unfittest big sister in the whole world (Susanna).

She had once again been left waiting. Although she had been among the first to dress, she would never be able to get into the yard among the first. She had to tie two pairs of shoelaces, that of her twin brother and her own. She felt angry also this time, she nearly felt like crying. But she could not leave the laces untied because mother had told her to help Pekka. She had grown in thinking that it was not enough to care for oneself only... Sometimes, being in charge felt an unduly heavy burden (Annika).

Connecting childhood memories with choice of career mirrors on the one hand the conception that adult life and adult choices are the result of childhood experiences (see e.g Bardy 1998.). Although the memories are about individual experiences, they nevertheless give evidence of the gendered upbringing practices mothers use to teach their daughters to assume responsibility for duties of everyday life, to care for and help those members of the family who are in need of help (Korhonen 1996). When linked to social work, the memories indicate that a natural explanation for a person’s opting for social work may be found in an early engagement in female care and nursing.

Gender in memories of career choice

The memories of career choice – all but two narrated by women – described the searching of one’s own field of study and the routes that had led to studying social work. These memories were often written without direct reference to gender. Although many of the students’ former attempts at studying were also connected with areas or professions predominated by women (educational studies, teaching, psychology, nursing and various fields of social care), the reasons for choosing female-predominated fields of study were generally not reflected on. Gendered themes can, however, be located in some of the memories... A student named Susanna deals in her memories with the conflict she had experienced between her interest in care work and the low status of the caring professions.

She assumed her studies of psychiatric nursing in August 1994. One day, on her leave, she went out to walk her sister’s dog when, on a narrow street, she bumped into an acquaintance. This girl had always been a bright student, a good scholar like herself. She remembers how the girl asked her about her life and the feelings she had at starting her studies. She told her, in a deprecating manner, that she was studying to become a nurse only, but she remembers to have pointed out that she would above all had wanted to go to university to study psychology... Then she walked away with her dog, feeling more and more miserable..., repeating in her mind her mother’s comment that a high-school graduate with the best possible grades should be able to make it to something better than a nurse... (Susanna).

Susanna states in her essay that becoming a nurse had been her childhood dream. Later on, however, the low status of the nursing profession had made her seek an academic career. She had wanted to “shake off the dust of care work”. Her dissatisfaction with her studies of social politics had then made her switch to social work as a major. She describes in her essay how “the pieces fell into place” when she changed to social work. Susanna as the only writer called social work a caring profession and herself, a future social worker, a caring professional. The use of the term “caring” in Susanna’s essay can probably be seen in connection with her studies of nursing before switching to social work, and with the fact that the notion of “caring” determines professions of health care much more explicitly than professions of social work (see e.g. Henriksson 1998, Poole & Isaacs 1997).

Although no other students used the notion of “caring” in their memories of career choice,
values and orientations related to caring can be located in the memories of other students as well:

It is fall and she has just entered grade 8. The guidance counseling teacher asked the class if anyone would like to take part in a project of cooperation with the nearby old people’s home and occasionally visit an elderly resident especially selected for him/her. She did not hesitate a second to volunteer: She had always liked old people and valued their experience of life. The visits went well right from the start. She talked with “Lempi” about life and took her to a nearby park for walks. Every time she came for a visit, “Lempi” got tears of emotion into her eyes. She, too, felt often “a lump in her throat”, thinking: “What would it feel like to be so lonely?” (Kirsi)

The memory is “womanized” by its theme: Caring for the elderly, whether paid or unpaid, has traditionally been seen as a female duty (see e.g. Jakobsson & Johansson 2003). The memory is linked to caring by its description of how a girl places herself into a relationship with another person in a manner that Gilligan (1987) characterizes as “care-ethical”. The memory describes a close interaction with another person and an emotional identification with the person’s neediness. According to Alison M. Jaggar (1995), caring includes always an emotional element, and care-ethical orientation requires the ability to feel empathy.

The writer of the following memory, Annika, had already completed a professional training in deaconry:

“…whatever you do for one of the least of these, you do for me …” She is reading Mathew’s Gospel…. Soon 15, she is fiercely pondering the meaning of life. She understands that in order to grow towards adulthood one needs to make choices and assume responsibility. For her, trying to live respecting others is not enough. She feels that she has been entrusted with a special duty to serve but also with the skill and the power to fulfill this duty (Annika).

This memory reflects the historical roots of the caring profession and the ethical vocation, linked especially at the turn of the 20th century to women’s working outside of the home, that defined helping the sick and the needy as a serving duty suitable for women (Henriksson 1998). The fact that this memory is linked to social work shows that the way of thinking described above has also created a basis for social work as a profession.

Gender in memories of work experience

Most of the memories of first working experiences in the field of social work deal with client-work. All but one of these memories were recorded by female students. Six were about encounters between students and mother-clients, two involved other female clients. One memory about encountering a female client was written by a male student. In three memories, a female student meets a child-client and in two a male client. Some of the memories were about client-work on a more general level.

Three of the memories about encountering mothers as clients were written by one and the same student called Taina. Apart from wondering about and criticizing the professional practices, these memories are characterized by an idealization of motherhood and an identification rather with mother-clients than with co-workers.

A mother came … to the social welfare office. She was wearing a sporty Adidas warmup suit, hiking shoes, and a backpack. The small, resilient being was very different from the “traditional” clients of a social welfare office. One could sense the love she felt for her children, her honesty and her long-lasting fight against tiredness. This time, the trainee managed, with the great authority of a substitute social-worker, to get all four brothers into the same camp. The joy on the mother’s face, the faith and determination that lit up her eyes will always stay in the trainee’s mind (Taina).

Emphasizing the mother-client’s strength and unremitting caring for her children, this memory reflects the concept of motherhood prevailing in Finnish culture. According to Ritva Nätkin (1997: 245), motherhood in Finland is seen as a womanhood in which a woman “self-confidently and without complaining about tiredness, is determined to manage a heavy burden of work and children, if necessary alone.” Like many other memories by the same writer, this memory is characterized by maternalistic values and the presentation of motherhood as a respectable, morally superior mission. Motherhood was also the theme of another student’s memory. The viewpoint is, however, rather different.

My first client was a Chinese woman whose husband often traveled to China and God knows where. This mother told me, keeping a straight face, that she intended to move to China with her son and leave behind her 13-year-old daughter whose knowledge of Chinese had badly rusted. She did not know what to say …(Kirsi)
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In that memory, the decisions of a mother who belongs to another culture are judged from within the norms governing Finnish motherhood. The expression “with a straight face” reveals that the writer regards a mother who voluntarily separates herself from her child as an exceptionally cold mother. A common feature in the memories of these two students is the central role cultural norms and ideals of motherhood play in the definition and interpretation of clients.

Two memories of meetings with children take place in children’s home:

Her night shift in the children’s home was over... Last spring she had started doing substitutions alongside her studies. The children came from difficult life situations and showed severe symptoms. But the work did not stress her. On the contrary. It gave her the diversion she needed from her studies, and made her experience success. The good-night story was the best moment of the day. It was enough to be present, to read and to caress the child into sleep (Seija).

She completed her training period in a children’s home. She liked the work although it was mentally straining... she could remember especially well one of her last working days as a trainee: She was reading a good-night story to a 5-year old child who was awaiting family placement. The child had a very difficult family background and there had still been no change in her biological mother’s situation. Even in the children’s home, the child had often been disappointed by her mother who had broken her promise to come to the child’s birthday, etc. The child listened to the story peacefully, and after it, the student asked the child how it felt about the family placement. The child looked deep into her eyes and said: “It’s quite nice to get a family but it isn’t nice to lose one’s own mom!” She told the child what the situation actually meant, that it would not lose its mother, but in that situation, all words seemed empty to her (Kirsi).

These memories are about being in close contact with, touching and comforting a child, but also about the feelings arising in encounters with children. On the other hand, the memories are about the students’ experiences and feelings in connection with the novelty of first work experiences. The memories can, however, also be regarded as stories about self. These stories are conform to the cultural conceptions of womanhood according to which self is presented as someone caring for, touching and comforting children, i.e. as a performer of traditionally womanly activities (See e.g. Rose 1994). For some reason, the memories about client-work focus more strongly on women than men. An explanation for this may be the fact that in social work there are fewer men as clients as women (See e.g. Forsberg 1998, Barretti 2001). The following memory about encountering a male-client is an example of a gendered situative interaction:

She was walking in the office corridor in her green summer dress when she heard a loud voice: “We came here to see that... (the narrator’s family name)”. At the very moment, she realized that the office attendant was following two rough-looking guys and trying to stop their advance in the office. She understood at once that these rough men, tattooed all over, were looking for her. She then realized that one of them was a client of hers who had recently been released from jail, and she asked them in: "Fuck. I must get my next month’s money now. If I don’t get it, I’ll cut the leading social worker’s throat”, the client trumpeted. She checked the matter and managed to find a solution without greater problems (Tuija).

In the memory, the narrator refers to her own appearance and, in doing so tells, in deviation of the other memories, about herself as a bodily, gendered actor. The memory is about a situation in which the interaction is governed by social conventions guiding male-female relations rather than by professional discourses emphasizing a gender-neutral worker-client relationship. The definition of self by means of outer appearances may reflect the narrator’s experience of self as an object of gendered looks from male-clients. (cp. Gergen 2001). From this point of view, the peaceful ending of the situation can be seen in connection with the narrator’s positioning of self as a woman in the situation. The defiance of the male-client subsided after the situation was perceived as an inter-gender encounter rather than a worker-client-relationship. This interpretation is also supported by the narrator’s own assessment that her youth and her womanhood had helped her solve the situation without greater problems.

The gendered emotional rules directing interaction were the theme of another memory about encountering a male-client. A female student who found accepting feelings from female clients natural and easy, described how a male-client’s crying and grief about the death of a loved one had confused her and created an embarrassed silence.
Gender as a theme of essays

In the essays, the theme of gender appeared most clearly in the different characterization of male and female workers. As only few men opt for social work, mention of the shortage of men in workplaces was made quite often, or men were referred to as the only men in the office. The concepts of men were marked by pronounced gender stereotypes:

Having no men in the work community, was harmful at times. As I was not a strong man, I could not throw out the rioters but had to ask the office attendant for help. Sometimes, when making child protection visits to homes, I would have needed a sturdy man as my pair, for my own safety (Lotta).

The characterization of men in this way reflects a complementary gender-thinking in which the genders are perceived as opposites that complement each other. As typical details of workplace culture in the area of social work, the research material contained references to office attendants as the only men and the only representatives of “manly” characteristics:

As I worked...as a social worker in the office where the only man was the office attendant, I saw very clearly what men can accomplish in offices. It is their task, somehow, to put the women in line by bringing a little bit of realism into the social worker’s day. It is easier for men to explain and accept certain realities of life such as homelessness and alcoholism (Outi).

A view expressed in several writings was that it would be good to have more men in social work since it would raise the status of the profession and bring along a better pay. Men were held to be more steadfast in their decisions and more ready to challenge decisions made by others. Men were also assumed to be favored in the filling of openings. In the women-students’ view, men easily break away from client-work and advance to leadership more often than women. Although the writers were aware of men’s better chances to advance in career, this was mostly taken with a surprising generosity, probably because the status problems of social work were seen as resulting from the predominance of women in the area.

The heaviest burden in social work is the predominance of women in the profession In the closing seminar of a training period, a female student snapped at a male student (who, by the way, is a real rarity in the area): “Why should you really worry about how things are actually done? You are going to become a director anyway”. And this is what it is really like, men are not interested in basic social work. They have not yet realized that some of them would have some splendid opportunities in this female-dominated area (Outi).

The essays described women-workers as goal-oriented, responsible, pressure-resistant and skilled in their work, but at the same time incapable of defending their own rights. Women were said to work unpaid overtime and set aside their own needs. Women were characterized as helpful, caring, understanding and supportive of others. They were also seen as more sensitive than men and especially sensitive to children’s misery. In general, women were characterized as particularly skilled at dealing with emotional issues.

I believe women are more sensitive and empathetic than men although sometimes even men can be very reflective in their working. The ability to listen and talk that is typical of women (a stereotype, I admit) fits extremely well into client-work. Men do not opt for social work because it is alien to them...I would not manage with drunkards and drug abusers, and I couldn’t possibly be empathetic all day... (Anssi)

Through womanhood and the point of view of caring, the possibility to help, listen, understand and support becomes something very valuable in work, like in social work. Working for the benefit of others and helping others can make you feel good, too.... I myself feel, although I haven’t got a family yet, that as a woman I am very sensitive to children’s misery and ill-being but also to the misery of women (Susanna).

When reflecting about their professional future, the students surprisingly often expressed a fear of burn-out:

At times I feel great anxiety because of my choice of career. I wonder if I shall have the power and endurance needed to stand it through....So many of those working in this field have had a burn-out, so what do I have that makes me stronger than they are? I have made it so far without losing my interest but I do not know what will be left of it in five or ten years. (Jonna)

Some of us social workers are overly responsible personalities who ignore their own needs. That is not right because sacrifices like that will never be rewarded. At some point of my career I shall very likely feel totally exhausted. I have seen it happen to so many strong and skilled social workers (Annika).

The essays gave evidence of the female nature
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of exhaustion in a double sense. First, burn-out was brought up in none of the men’s essays. One male-student described social workers engaged in basic social work as burdened and stressed but did not mention a personal fear of exhaustion. Second, burn-out was linked to women in that the risk for exhaustion and burn-out was explained with the characteristics of female workers basically defined as womanly, such as a readiness to care for and help others while ignoring one’s own needs.

There is also a connection between the caring instinct, and with it womanhood, and the setting aside of one’s own needs while caring for and helping others. In my belief, this has a lot to do with the exhaustion of female social workers and their inability to assess and value high enough their own needs. There should be a limit to how much you work for others, and this limit should be drawn in such a way that it respects the social worker’s own resources and ability to cope (Susanna).

Why do women engaged in social work keep so quiet! Being so humble and good is a shame. Why do they again and again work unpaid overtime? People have M.A.’s and yet they are meek and ducked as if they knew nothing at all. They bear great responsibilities in their work .... they are goal-oriented while under who knows what cross-pressures ...... and they master their jobs, so why don’t they defend themselves at all? Is it because they are women! (Lotta)

Probably, the frequent allusions to burn-out in the essays can partly be explained by the problems that mark the field of social work, such as shortage of staff, scarcity of funds and inadequate planning of work. (See e.g. Kemppainen, Koskinen, Pohjola & Urponen 1998). The femininity of the phenomenon of burn-out can, however, also be ascribed to the predominance of women in social work: Since the workers are women, the people with burn-out must also be women. The interdependence of exhaustion and womanhood can probably also be found in the Finnish culture and the high demands of coping it places on women: A Finnish woman is expected to endure hard work pressure (Julkunen 1999). Due to the special expectations directed at women, womanhood involves a risk for burn-out (compare Korhonen 1996).

Although both the memories and the essays contribute to the understanding of social work as a profession in many ways structured by gendered hierarchies and the concept of gender, the essays on the other hand tend to deny the meaning of gender as a determiner of a person’s choice of career and professional way of thinking and acting. Many of the essays expressed the view that gender does not or should not have any significance for a person’s values, choice of career or professional life.

It is hard to estimate the role of gender in a person’s choice of social work as a career. Does the worker’s gender have significance from the point of view of client-work? That is hard to tell. I often feel that the worker is only a faceless and genderless representative of red tape for the client (Seija).

I never felt that gender played any big role in my choice of career (Kirsí).

For me, the never-ending discussion about gender in social work is “a not so fresh breeze” from the patriarchal society’s churchyards ....(Jani)

In my opinion, my values and ideals are not only those of a female student of social work but also independent of any gender division (Taina)

In the memories and essays, social work was described as a field gendered in many ways. The students’ view that gender had played no part in their choice of career and did not influence their professional thinking and acting, gives support to Satka (1997:86) according to whom “novices in this field are already during the training period initiated into the gender hierarchy of social work. The important thing is that it is never taught. The students learn by a hidden curriculum that this hierarchy is not an issue for open discussion”.

Social work and gender in students’ writings

In this article, I have looked into how gender determines the experiences of students and the way they understand social work as a profession and themselves as professionals. In the memories and essays of students used as material, gender has been most visible in that the students’ career choices and experiences of social work have been linked to memories that this hierarchy is not an issue for open discussion”.

The orientation towards social work has been
explained as a socialization, from a child, into the female duty of caring. Some of the students had already acquired a qualification in a caring profession. Their choice of career had been steered by care-ethical values. For one student, a vocational ethos traditionally linked to care professions had formed a basis not only for her earlier qualification in deaconry but also for her opting for social work. In the memories about client-work, caring was seen as the objective of social work. The memories dealt with mothers’ duty to care for their children while the students placed themselves into the position of a supporter and/or controller of their mother’s duty. In memories dealing with child-clients, caring manifested itself as empathy for children’s emotions and response to their needs. The theme of caring did not occur in the memories about male-clients. On the other hand, these memories described how a woman-worker, when encountering a male client, positioned herself as a woman; on the other hand they brought up gendered emotional rules that blocked the acceptance of a male-client’s grief.

Furthermore, the material was clearly structured by gender in that women and men were described differently and characterized as suiting for different areas of social work. Due to their sensitivity, empathy and skillfulness at interpersonal relations, women were described as being particularly suitable for client-work. On the other hand, men were characterized as determined and realistic and tending to easily advance to leading positions. Thus, the material created a picture of social work as a profession structured not only by gender hierarchies but also by a complementary gender thinking (cp. Hirdmann 1990; Rantalaiho & Heiskanen 1997).

Although there has been a lot of discussion in the Nordic countries about gender and caring as determiners of female professions (Waerness 1983; Anttonen, Henriksson, Nätkin et al 1994; Simonen et al 1994), there is hardly any research on social work as a female profession, nor has social work been looked at through the concept of caring, at least not in Finland. The research conducted on the Swedish concept of “social omsorg” has also been mostly gender-neutral. Gender-oriented Swedish research on social work has focused on the womanization of poverty, on family and parenting as well as on themes of sexuality and the social exclusion of women. Viewpoints of men’s studies have been utilized in the research on fatherhood. Up until now there is, however, not much gender-oriented research on the professional and institutionalized practices, organizational forms and management of social work (Hedin & Månsson 2000).

According to Joan Orme (2002), social work, caring and femininity were tightly linked in the earliest history of the profession. Social workers’ womanly inclination to caring was characterized as altruism or a caring similar to maternal love (Orme 2002). Today, responding to clients’ needs has been replaced by care management, and the element of caring inherent in social work is no longer ascribed to women-workers’ special characteristics (Orme 2002). As the current professional rhetoric has clouded not only the link of social work to caring but also the womanliness of the care deliverers, the modernization of social work seems to have started a development that has purified the professional rhetoric of feminine determiners. The students’ writings prove, however, that the gender-neutral rhetoric has not led to gender-neutral practices but at best swept the topic of gender away from public discussion. Since social work research has not engaged in producing concepts or approaches that would make gender visible, the individual social worker may have difficulty in recognizing gendered ways of thinking and acting. In my view, the gendered practices of social work should be recognized and submitted to critical reflection. In the research and theoretical papers on social work, social workers should be conceptualized as gendered subjects and not as abstract, bodiless actors, as so often seems to be the case in the specialized literature based on professional ideology. Even though the gender-neutral approach that makes gender invisible is sometimes defended from the point of view of gender-equality, making gender-hierarchies visible and subjecting them to conscious debate would be a far more functional strategy.
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Summaries

Gender and orientation towards social work

This article deals with how gender structures social work students’ experiences and conceptions of social work as a profession and of themselves as social work practitioners. The material analysed in the article consists of essays by thirteen Finnish social work students. The article argues that a central theme through which gender structures the memories is the connection between womanhood and caring. Women and men were described very differently and characterized as suited to different areas of social work. Due to their sensitivity, empathy and skillfulness at interpersonal relations, women were described as being particularly suitable for client work whereas men were characterized as determined and realistic and tending to advance easily to leading positions. Thus, the material created a picture of social work as a profession structured not only by gender hierarchies but also by a complementary gender thinking. Nevertheless, the students did not consider reflecting on gender as a very central part of professional thinking. The article suggests, however, that the gender-neutral rhetoric of social work ought to be deconstructed by making the gender hierarchies visible and subjecting them to conscious debate.

Sukupuoli ja orientoituminen sosiaalityöön


Kynjaviðhorf og afstaða til félagsráðgjafar