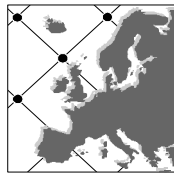


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**The Social Construction of Lone Mothers.
A Case Study of the Welfare Service in Venice**

Riitta Kyllönen

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The Social Construction of Lone Mothers.

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Editorial Note:

Riitta Kyllönen is writing her doctoral dissertation in sociology at the University of Tampere, Finland. Her main research interest is micro-sociological studies of (local) welfare state provisions and family from a subject or agency perspective, centered on actors' situated interaction. Methodologically she particularly focuses on exploring the potential of qualitative analysis for middle-range theory building and for understanding processes and mechanisms in longitudinal research design. This includes analysing change in family patterns as an outcome of aggregate individual choices and negotiation.

She has conducted research mainly on Italy, and participated in international and Italian research projects during various research stays at the universities of Modena, Padova, and Turin. Since January 1997 she has been working within the Training and Mobility Programme for Young Researchers 'Family and the Welfare State in Europe', funded by the European Commission.

Abstract

This paper examines how the welfare services of the municipality of Venice deal with lone-mother clients in a welfare system that has no provisions specifically for lone mothers. The analysis is based on interviews with six social workers operating in different districts of the city. The paper interprets discursive and ideological dimensions of social policies, highlighting the mechanisms by which the welfare programs and practices define the needs of lone mothers. It outlines the dynamics of negotiation in the welfare services, which try to reconcile the legislative and administrative norms with the social workers' professional practices and the lone mothers' claims.

The analysis rejects the commonplace view that social welfare beneficiaries are exclusively people in 'extreme discomfort', and presents two biographical pathways through which lone mothers turn to welfare services. The social workers' image of the two *subcultures* of lone mothers influences their attitudes and the strategies they set in motion for lone mothers.

Despite the Veneto region's universal law on social assistance, access to economic support is determined more selectively through proving a 'qualifying need'. Interpreting lone mothers' claims as qualifying needs along psycho-social and educational dimensions serves to transform their expressed claims into claims that can be dealt with institutionally. Social workers prefer to supply 'professional' psycho-social support for lone mothers, using their major discretion in that area. They explicitly aim at helping mothers to recover their resources so that they are able to maintain themselves and their children through paid work. Lone mothers seem to acquire a specific position among users of welfare services, as social workers perceive their problems as more complex and sound than those of other users. Therefore lone mothers are provided with a broader range of discretionary support. Social workers' discretion in supporting lone mothers in maternity and in accommodating paid employment and family compensates for the gaps left by national and local welfare policies.

Contents

Introduction	1
I LIAN SOCIAL POLICIES AND LONE MOTHERS	2
II PATHWAYS TO THE WELFARE SERVICE	3
1. 'Marginal mothers'.....	4
2. 'Normal mothers'.....	4
III THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE RESIDUAL WELFARE SERVICE	6
1. The need interpretation.....	6
2. The 'qualifying need'.....	7
3. The semantic geography of dependencies.....	9
4. Hierarchy of the interventions.....	13
5. Modes of operation of the welfare services.....	15
IV ON THE CITIZENSHIP OF LONE MOTHERS	18
References	20

Introduction

The purpose of this paper¹ is to study the relationship between lone mothers and the welfare services in a local Italian context, in order to examine how the welfare services (*servizi socio-assistenziali*) of the municipality of Venice define the subject 'lone mother'.² Using the point of view of social workers, this paper interprets the discursive and ideological dimensions of social policies, highlighting the norms and prerequisites of these policies. This will include the mechanisms by which the welfare practices and programs, considered as 'institutionalised patterns of interpretation' define the needs of lone mothers (Fraser 1989: 146). The intention then is to emphasise the 'active side of social processes, the ways in which even the most routine practice of social agents involves the active construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction of social meanings' (ibid.: 156).

It is through the social workers' work, in direct contact with the users, that the norms and guidelines of the welfare policies embody and are translated into concrete practices. However, the local welfare policies do not constitute a unanimous voice, but are the result of the interplay of different actors at various intervention levels, whose interests and perspectives do not always converge. One of the aims of this paper is to highlight certain dynamics of negotiation in the welfare services, which try to reconcile the legislative and administrative norms with the professional practice of the social workers and with the lone mothers' claims.

¹ This work has been financed by the 'Human Capital Mobility Programme' of DGXII of the European Commission 'Gender and European Welfare Regimes', co-ordinator Jane Lewis (London School of Economics/Balliol College, Oxford); co-ordinator of the Italian project, Franca Bimbi (University of Padova). I was able to complete the study with financing from the TMR project 'Family and Welfare State in Europe' of the European Commission, co-ordinated by Peter Flora (University of Mannheim, MZES). The research was carried out in collaboration with the Progetto Strategico CNR (National Research Council) 'Governance e sviluppo economico', subproject 'Distribuzione del reddito, diseguaglianze, esclusione sociale ed effetti delle politiche economiche e sociali', co-ordinated by Enzo Mingione (University of Padova). Research on 'Genere e diseguaglianze. Le donne sole ed i nuclei monogenitoriali a capofamiglia donna'. Scientific co-ordination Franca Bimbi (University of Padova). For the project reports, see Kyllönen 1996a; 1996b; 1997. My thanks go to Chiara Saraceno, Nicola Negri, Nicoletta Bosco, Antonella Meo, Astrid Pfenning and Thomas Bahle for their comments which helped to improve this paper.

² The lone mothers served by the Venetian welfare services account for only 2.2% of all female-headed single parent families resident in the municipality. Furthermore, lone mothers (217) account for only 9.2% of all recipients (2361) of welfare services. Lone mothers receiving social assistance are mostly (82.2%) in the age bracket of 26-50 years, and have experienced marriage breakdown (51.6% of all lone mothers on welfare are separated, 7.8% divorced). The rate of unmarried mothers (27.2%) is also quite high, while widows constitute only 13.4% of all lone mothers. Most women (82.9%) have minor children, and lone mothers with minors make up 31.1% of all assisted families with minor children. The majority (65.2%) of lone mothers live in nuclear one-parent families, 22.7% live in multiple and extended family households (unmarried and young mothers under 30 years are more represented here). Only 3.9% of lone mothers on welfare live in reconstituted families, and 8.2% in institutes or prisons. Only 17.6% of the mothers own their home, while 67.6% rent (41.2% rent social housing, and 26.4% private housing). The rest (14.8%) have temporary accommodation, and are in line either for social housing or home ownership, or live in institutes or prison. Of all mothers served by welfare services, 13.8% present some kind of major problem, most often mental or physical handicap. The education level of these mothers is low: only 18.1% have qualifications above compulsory schooling, yet none has a degree. Nearly 30% have only a primary school (*scuola elementare*) degree (Giullari, forthcoming).

I ITALIAN SOCIAL POLICIES AND LONE MOTHERS

In order to understand how the Italian welfare system deals with lone mothers, it is necessary to take into account the lack of (explicit) family policies at the national level during the post-war period. Existing family policies are fragmentary and inconsistent, because very often they 'are the jurisdiction of local authorities' (Saraceno 1997; 1998). The policies often tend to 'hide' or 'silence' lone mothers (Bimbi, 1997; Simoni, forthcoming): there are no national support policies for lone mothers, but rather a variety of local means-tested policies often aimed at minors and families with problems.

Local policies for lone mothers are implemented only for mothers in financial need. Italy lacks a national law on social assistance, which is the main form of support for families in financial need and the focus of this paper. The sector was decentralised in the 1970s³ and jurisdiction on welfare services given to the respective regions constituted in that period. Five regions (out of 21) have a specific family support law; in other regions, such as the Veneto region, the centre of our interest, family policies have been integrated into 'the more generalised regional laws on the reordering of the welfare services, or in the local resolutions defining the allocation forms for the supports—both of an economic nature and not—fixed for individuals and family nucleus' (Bosco 1997; Saraceno 1998).

The local authorities have the formal competence in the fields of social assistance and personal services. Therefore, it is at this level that it is possible to find the greatest number of policies directed at families. However, the local organisation of the policies⁴—the proxy to the regions and further to the municipalities—leads to great differentiation and heterogeneity according to the context: not only do policies vary from one region to the other but even within the region itself. In fact, specific models of local family policies—more or less explicit—have developed in those 'systems of local rights' that are characterised by a marked lack of homogeneity as far as money transfers and services to the individual are concerned (Saraceno 1998: 197-9). They offer differentiated definitions and solutions to different types of need (Bosco 1997: 311). As a result, the social rights of lone mothers must be sought at this level, within the complex network of social policies, keeping in mind that lone mothers are a very heterogeneous group.⁵

Apart from noteworthy differences between Northern and Southern Italy, the different social territorial settings have contributed to the creation of different welfare systems even in the regions of Northern Italy. The Veneto region, marked by a strong Roman Catholic ideology, emphasises the autonomy of

³ Decree of the President of the Republic No. 616/77.

⁴ The regional laws define a framework of measures and allocate the funds, but services and measures are organised and supplied at a municipal level (Bosco 1997: 317; Saraceno 1998). The provinces hold categorical competencies, relative to handicapped minors and unmarried mothers. Furthermore, they can finance and manage residential communities for minors (Saraceno, *ibid.*).

⁵ Taking into consideration also lone mothers with *adult children*, in Italy, widows form the biggest group, reaching 67.7% in 1990 (ISTAT 1993; Zanatta 1996). They are followed by separated/divorced mothers (26%) and unmarried mothers (6.3%). The Italian welfare system reserves a somewhat diversified treatment for the different kinds of lone mothers, as the most 'deserving' widows can benefit from a widow's pension. The separated/divorced mothers enjoy a higher degree of support compared with unmarried mothers, even though their economic conditions are often difficult (Fadiga Zanatta 1993: 8).

the family and private religious organisations in welfare provision. Lately, even the non-profit sector has acquired relevance (Bimbi 1995: 61).⁶

According to the *law* (No. 55/1982) on social assistance of the Veneto region, the intervention of the social assistance sector aims at 'prevent[ing] and 'progressive[ly] reduc[ing] the need for assistance by concurring to remove the personal, family, social and economic causes through a complex of welfare services, co-ordinated and integrated in the territory with basic health and education services and in harmony with other services aimed to social development, and through economic intervention'. The law encourages 'remov[ing] the socio-economic, and psychological causes that can create situations of need and phenomena of marginalisation'. It intends to provide services universally to 'all the citizens resident' in the region. Furthermore, the regional law recognises the role of the voluntary sector and private initiative and introduces as an alternative to the public service legitimate actors that are defined not as competing with, but as complementary to it.

II PATHWAYS TO THE WELFARE SERVICE

The analysis which follows breaks from the usual notion that social welfare beneficiaries are exclusively people in 'extreme discomfort' (*casi di grave disagio*). But in the perception of the social workers, there are two biographical pathways through which lone mothers turn to the welfare services. The social workers' image of two '*subcultures*' of mothers influences their attitudes and thus the strategies they set in motion for the lone mothers. In this sense, this paper tries also to analyse how the social workers' representations of the welfare policies that 'are meant to describe reality, in fact prescribe it' (Bourdieu 1996: 25; also Fraser and Gordon 1994a, b).⁷

⁶ To illustrate a different case in Northern Italy, the local welfare state of the Emilia-Romagna region, characterised by a strong 'socialist-communist' culture, has explicitly been inspired by the social-democratic model of the Scandinavian countries. A strong emphasis is put on services, on the nearly universal orientation in the coverage of social risks, and on aid to lower-income groups (*ibid.*).

⁷ The analysis is based on qualitative interviews with social workers in six districts of Venice. The interviews were carried out by the author and by Susanna Giullari in the spring of 1996, and a social worker was interviewed in each district. In selecting the city's districts we have taken into account their different occupational and demographic structures and have interviewed social workers operating in different social settings. In the same way, districts with varying percentages of lone mothers on welfare were selected. The six districts constitute one-third of all districts (18) in Venice. This part of the research is a close qualitative examination of the phenomenon, the quantitative aspects of which have been surveyed by Susanna Giullari and Nadia Leonetti (see Giullari, forthcoming).

It should be underlined that the analysis is exclusively based on the social workers' views of lone mothers and on the functioning of the welfare services. The welfare services in the districts did not possess systematic information about their beneficiaries, but the data, as far as the quantitative part is concerned, were obtained from the social workers' paper folders, kept individually for each user. The interviews for this part were made after gathering the quantitative data. Therefore, the survey research has presumably influenced the social workers' perceptions, and helped them to acquire an increased consciousness about the situation of the lone mothers they are working with. Yet, some social workers explicitly said that they had not thought about this group beforehand, or had done so only recently, due to lack of a specific policy for it. Focusing the interviews on lone mothers raised therefore also the social workers' consciousness of this group, and the interpretation presented reflects these conditions under which the knowledge was produced.

1. 'Marginal mothers'

The first type of lone mothers identified by social workers refers explicitly to the 'traditional' users of welfare services. The problems of the '*marginal mothers*'⁸ are perceived as constant, also since they are frequently inherited from the family of origin. This type of lone mother is quite often the daughter of a lone mother, has received assistance from the welfare services already as a youth, and may have lived in council housing. Thus, up to three generations may have been receiving assistance from the welfare services, and the daughters would then repeat their mothers' stories (cf. Trifiletti, forthcoming).

Social workers see the lifestyle of these women in terms of a '*culture of dependence*', both upon the family of origin ('it is normal that a mother goes back to her family' after her separation) and upon welfare services. Such dependence is, in some cases, connected to the extended family, and is seen as typical for the more working-class neighbourhoods.⁹ To use the words of a social worker, these mothers are easily recognisable by their 'low culture' and limited autonomy. On the other hand, children in these families are sometimes considered to be more 'protected' because of the presence of several other family figures, in particular the grandparents.

Social workers reckon that such dependence might be repeated in the next generation, thus becoming a normal lifestyle, from which mothers 'would not have resources to escape'. However, in their perception, the group of 'marginal mothers' is not homogeneous, as it includes both mothers returning to their families of origin and those who have never left it, and rely upon the welfare services, as well as lone mothers with more serious problems (criminality, problems related to mental illness and drug addiction). Very often individuals present two or more different types of problems simultaneously.

2. 'Normal mothers'

Social workers see the second category of lone mothers—called '*normal mothers*' here—as the product of contingent situations and unforeseen problems. These are typically separated or divorced women with a medium socio-economic level, who were previously full- or part-time housewives. Their position on the job market is rather weak (precarious, part-time, seasonal jobs, on the 'unofficial' labour market or in any case badly paid). These women are vulnerable because, with the dissolution of their marriage, they have lost the social status and relatively good standard of living that they had acquired through their husbands. Some of them were left by their husbands and found themselves in difficulty 'through no fault of their own'. Once they have lost their main economic support, and sometimes even their home, these women are obliged to seek social aid.

⁸ The labels used here to identify the two *subcultures* of lone mothers do not come explicitly from the social workers interviewed, but are the author's attempt to summarize their views on the two major types of lone mothers.

⁹ Data on the Veneto region confirm that it is more common in working-class families (as well as among the petty bourgeoisie) for adult children to live especially within the same apartment as their parents, but also in the same building, than is the case in bourgeois and white-collar families (La Mendola 1992: 148).

These 'normal mothers' represent a new type of recipient of welfare services, which can be defined as the result of a transformation of the family structure (Saraceno 1990: 249). This is mainly due to the increase of separation and divorce, particularly during recent years, but also to the increase of unmarried mothers, even if this is a more moderate phenomenon. In spite of the fact that 'normal mothers' are the latest to have found their way into the welfare services, social workers deem them to be the majority of lone mothers served.¹⁰

According to social workers, 'normal mothers' feel stigmatised by having to seek help from the welfare services and feel a strong sense of shame: welfare service remains the last resort when other resources are no longer available. Because of the fact that these mothers keep identifying themselves with their previous social status, they are not considered 'real' recipients of social welfare.

'Normal mothers' tend to live with their children in mononuclear families, at times far from their family of origin. Social workers approve of their lifestyle and middle-class values and recognise in these mothers a certain dimension of 'personal autonomy'. When 'normal mothers' return to their family of origin, the social workers regard this choice as a forced one, caused by the lack of alternatives. They attribute also 'a major respect towards the children' to these mothers, as they often do not wish to uproot them from their environment in order to return to their sometimes faraway families of origin.

On the other hand, social workers say that the emotional and/or geographical distance from the families of origin can be very painful, as these women are more isolated from family support networks in time of need. Thus, just as the relationship with the partner has ceased upon marriage breakdown, the other social networks might also disappear. Lone mothers, unable to maintain a certain status and their previous lifestyle, at times feel compelled to gradually detach themselves from their usual social relationships, based more on common patterns of consumption than on a profound feeling of sympathy. This phenomenon resembles what Baudrillard (1988) says about interpersonal relationships in consumer-oriented societies: they take place through 'signs', and their representations tend to become more real than the object represented.

¹⁰ Almost six of ten lone mothers served by the Venetian welfare services are separated or divorced, while almost three of ten are unmarried mothers, and widows constitute 13.4 % of lone-mother users (cf. note 2). In the Venetian welfare services unmarried mothers are thus overrepresented, and widows underrepresented, compared to the composition of all lone mothers with *minor children* in Italy: during the last decades separated and divorced women have become the largest group (56.7% in 1993-4), followed by widows (24.7%) and unmarried mothers (18.6%) (Zanatta 1996: 67; 1997: 251).

III THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE RESIDUAL WELFARE SERVICE

1. The need interpretation

Diversified access

According to the social workers, access to welfare services takes place in different ways according to the type of lone mother. Yet, beyond the type of lone mother in question, social workers assert that mothers often feel, especially at the beginning of the interaction, that the service is controlling their lives, especially with regard to their children ('are we [the social workers] represented as thieves of children?').

Social workers use the notion of '*disguised access*' to describe how 'normal mothers' first come in contact with the welfare services: the mother's first request is not interpreted as real but as a mask for the 'real' need. The first explicit request of these mothers is often oriented to a tangible or material help, related to a contingent need: the search for a house, a job, a place in a nursery or a summer resort for the youngster, sometimes also for economic support, or ways to obtain for the child exemptions from paying his/her school meals or transportation. It can also be informative, in order to be better acquainted with the available options in situations of unforeseen difficulties.

To understand the disguised access of 'normal mothers', it is vital to keep in mind their previous social position and the values relative to it. According to the social workers, in the better-off families, these mothers are used to thinking of their problems as private, and would 'hardly publicise their problems'. 'Normal mothers' have a 'high regard' for themselves, and have great difficulties in accepting the idea of finding themselves in economic difficulties and needing the stigmatising help of the social worker. They are unable to see themselves as clients of the welfare services, and the access threshold becomes very high ('Myself here, it is not my place').

On the other hand, 'marginal mothers' access is presented with a different dynamic. Because of their greater readiness to seek help from the welfare services, their first approach appears to be more vengeful ('I want, you owe me'). Social workers strongly disapprove of their 'mental dependence', and some of them also disapprove of the eventual attempts to 'exploit' public services. For these mothers it is not a matter of proper camouflage of the 'real' need but, as we shall see, about the different way in which both social workers and mothers interpret their needs.

The interchange relationship

Social workers consider *building trust* to be their main task in interacting with lone mothers. In their view, building confidence becomes a means to discover the 'true' reason for access to the service (in case of 'normal mothers'), or in any case, as a way to go beyond the mother's initial request (with the 'marginal mothers'). Especially in the first case, building up trust requires both material and economic performance in order to alleviate mothers' pressing problems. As one Venetian social worker puts it:

'Very often, economic help can relieve psychological discomfort and excessive anxiety. ... Well, holding on tight, we shall see if it can become another chance, because it might help me to strengthen the confidence relationship.'

A profitable relation can only be established if mothers become 'capable' of managing the relationship with the welfare service, accepting the relative interventions as well as the ways in which their needs are answered. Some expectations of lone mothers, if deemed 'too high' for the welfare service competencies, might have to be scaled down.

Social workers outline the relationship with mothers mainly as an *exchange* rather than unselfish help in case of economic need. The relation is defined explicitly as a *hierarchical power relationship*, where social workers define the lone mothers, interpret their needs ('trying to make them understand the situation'), and propose ways of action in exchange for economic assistance. Social workers depict themselves as consciousness-raising agents, willing to build with and for the mothers a deeper 'awareness' of their problems. The economic support is used as an instrument of negotiation, a means to reinterpret the need that the mother had originally expressed.

2. The 'qualifying need'

The '*institutional asset*' of the welfare services structures the needs (Kazepov 1995) of welfare recipients. As we have seen, the law of the Veneto region defines welfare services as 'universal' services. However, in practice in the districts considered, access to economic support is more selective and is determined by a *qualifying need* (cf. Kazepov 1995) which is created in two ways.

First, for the income support policies, in the Venetian welfare system the allocation of the economic subsidies takes place only within the welfare services and normally together with other psycho-social interventions. Second, those given economic assistance by the welfare services are defined by the *traditional categories*, originated by administrative rules ('Categories are *explicitly*¹¹ there as to the *economic* discourse, or for the home help' (*assistenza domiciliare*): youth, the elderly, the handicapped, but also 'adults in difficulties', or other 'cases of discomfort'.¹²

In the case of lone mothers, who are not specifically entitled to assistance within the Venetian welfare system on the basis of their status as lone mothers, the qualifying need acquires two functions: on the one hand, the qualifying need acts as a *prerequisite* so that mothers can be included in the service 'competencies' (access to assistance). The implication here is that mothers can receive economic

¹¹ Our italics.

¹² This stigma connected to the competencies of the welfare service in fact contributes to pre-structure the users' need. As we have seen, especially with 'normal mothers' it is transformed into a self-selection of the clientele. But according to the social workers, few persons who go to the welfare services do not receive any help. In this sense, supply and demand meet.

support only through the 'pigeonholing' in categories. On the other hand, the qualifying need refers to the social workers' *professional culture*, and is built in the process where the social workers interpret mothers' needs. As will be shown later, in this second sense the qualifying need serves in constructing the specific profile of intervention of the services.

Creating the qualifying need

A lone mother gains access to economic support in two ways: as *parent of the youngster 'at risk'*, or as a person in the category of *'adults in difficulties'*. In order to be counted in the second group, the woman should describe a 'family problem, or any personal problem provided it is not ridiculous' (the 'economic problem,¹³ family conflicts, drugs abuse' etc.). In the first instance, the real user of the welfare service is the child, and the economic allowance is finalised for him/her, although paid to the mother. In fact, the main focus of the social workers' professional activity is 'the discourse of the child', a problem which is, however, elaborated in relation to the family situation. As it is sometimes difficult to distinguish the parents' discomfort from the child's risk, lone mothers seem then to fall into both categories, without a well-defined boundary line.

The necessity of demonstrating qualifying need in itself does not cause specific problems for the *'marginal mothers'*. In the social workers' representations they already have, beside the economic need, a problem of 'dependence' on the welfare services, and a clear qualifying need ('cases of discomfort'). On the other hand the so-called 'normal mothers' do not show a qualifying need at the access, but as we previously saw, a need for material and economic help.

The construction of the qualifying need can be seen as a *discursive strategy* of the social workers to constitute 'normal mothers' as belonging to the category that gives access to economic support. Social workers can construct qualifying need by moving from the material or economic claims to *psycho-social* (the overcoming of crisis, solitude, abandon, fragility, problems with the family) and/or *educational* needs (problems with the child, his/her obvious disturbances, educational difficulties). In the first example, social workers often perceive the qualifying need as a lack of autonomy, and elaborate it within the concept of the mother's 'dependent character' (cf. Fraser and Gordon 1994a, b). They also reinterpret the 'normal mothers' needs as qualifying ones, placing in the background the requests expressed by the mothers themselves. The contingent family crisis situation then becomes the main object of their professional efforts.

According to the social workers, for some 'normal mothers' the transformation of need occurs 'spontaneously', once they have overcome the initial difficulties and have been helped with their most urgent problems. Having regained self-confidence, they start to talk about psycho-social problems relative to their situation. In the cases where all this does not happen (when the mother 'does not see them [i.e. her psycho-social problems] as a problem'), social workers are openly available to *build up*

with them their 'real' need. ('After the interviews one finally makes them admit that there are other problems'; 'what emerges besides all this is their much more complex request, or at least we make them express also a need of a psychological nature'.)

Therefore, the qualifying need is either construed within a *personal* dimension (Fraser and Gordon 1994a, b) both for lone mothers and their children, or within the *interpersonal* mother-child relationship, where any discomfort surfaces often through the mother's parental role. As minors are the jurisdiction of the welfare services, the intervention for a child 'at risk' is often elaborated within a family context. Therefore, if the child is unwell, the intervention is directed at his/her family. The one-parent family seems to be a specific risk for minor children, both for separation traumas and for the loss of the paternal figure. Social workers underline the fact that, very often, children of mothers who depend on the welfare services reveal clear disturbances ('suffering youngsters'; 'there is a perception of the solitude, there is a psychological suffering ... these are children who in any case miss the paternal figure').

For the 'normal mothers' the building of the qualifying need is sometimes originated by the crisis of separation in itself (in particular by the disappearance of relational resources, both the husband's and others'), or in any case by the crisis relative to the fact of becoming a lone mother. Even if the crisis is temporary, it is usually perceived as a psycho-social discomfort, mainly defined as a lack of autonomy and isolation, thence as a qualifying need. However, what surfaces here is the idea of a temporary definition, lasting until the crisis is overcome: social workers confirm that the basic orientation of the 'normal mothers' is towards autonomy.

It is interesting to observe that the qualifying needs thus defined create the basis for welfare service intervention. By building the needs along the mothers' psycho-social and educational dimensions, the welfare service transforms their expressed claim into one that can be dealt with institutionally.

3. The semantic geography of dependencies

Examining how and on which principles welfare service interventions are constituted, we refer to the 'semantic geography of dependencies' elaborated by Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon (1994a, b), where the concept of dependency can be reflected on the *economic* register (a person might be dependent on an institution or another person for his/her livelihood), or on the register of the *socio-legal status* (where dependency shows a 'lack of a separate legal or public identity', as the status of married women created through coverture). On the *political* register, dependency implies 'subjection to

¹³ Social workers do not appear to exclude totally the fact that economic need in itself is not sufficient to get access to the welfare service. In some cases the economic demand can be accepted without a qualifying need.

an external ruling power'. Finally, on the *moral/psychological* register, dependency becomes an individual characteristic, which shows for example her excessive emotional neediness.¹⁴

Let us now examine how the interviewed Venetian social workers construe the semantic map of dependencies¹⁵ for lone mothers, taking into consideration all the eventual sources of maintenance, or the 'income packages' (Hobson 1994: 176): earnings from the *job market*, *private transfers* (from the child's father, from the family of origin); and *public transfers* (in particular, here, of the welfare services). In Italy the *non-profit sector* also merits special attention. Together with the economic resources, the psychological support of the social networks will also be analysed. If we think of the concept of dependence as a *social construct*, we assume it can be defined differently in the different welfare systems or regimes, in order to legitimate the diverse ideologies on which they are based.

Autonomy on the labour market

Autonomy, the aim proposed by social workers in their intervention, is overtly originated by their education and is expressed as support for lone mothers' labour market participation. Besides providing a salary, a job also allows lone mothers to accumulate pension credits.

Social workers reckon that with cuts in public expenditure, social assistance is becoming less and less dependable as a source of income, and that a paid occupation can better guard the present and future interests of the lone mother. Therefore, social workers find it preferable for a lone mother to work full-time, because her work would be 'paid higher'. In this way the mother could avoid having to 'continue to work part-time and have the constant need of integrating her income', as social workers say. We must take into consideration that the expectation of paid work appears more feasible in the Veneto region, where the female unemployment rate is relatively low (9% in 1995, against the Italian average of 16.7%¹⁶). However, social workers are well aware that in this region, mothers, if once family oriented, especially if middle-aged, have a harder time re-entering the labour market, as they often have less education, little working experience and therefore, few improvement perspectives. For many women the only option would be illegal work without any accumulation of pension credits. But accumulating such credits is one of the main reasons why social workers justify the working choice as the main source of maintenance.

¹⁴ Fraser and Gordon (1994 a, b) trace the genealogy of the concept of dependency from pre-modern to post-modern society. Examining the American case, they argue that in post-modern societies, dependency is widely interpreted on the moral/psychological register which makes it an individual characteristic, instead of a subordinate relationship, as in the pre-industrial societies. Because political dependency and that of the socio-legal status have become illegitimate with the expansion of citizenship rights, and with the increasing disapproval of the economic dependence of women on their husbands, there is no longer a positive form of dependence for adults in the post-industrial societies. On the contrary, on each register dependence becomes 'bad'. Instead independence is exalted, which in the post-modern semantic geography refers to paid work and self-maintenance. With the emergence of the dependent personality, all dimensions connected to subordination in social relationships disappear, becoming intrinsic characteristics of groups or individuals.

¹⁵ The map of dependencies will be analysed here along the economic register, the moral/psychological register, and the register of the socio-legal status. The political register remains beyond our focus.

¹⁶ Source: Osservatorio Regionale sul Mercato del Lavoro, Regione Piemonte 1996. In general, Italian lone mothers have a higher level of education and are more present on the labour market than women living in couples (Zanatta 1997).

The child's father

According to the Italian law, both parents are responsible for children, not only within the marriage, but also after its dissolution and when children are born out of wedlock. As a rule, ex-wives only receive a personal maintenance allowance from the ex-husband if they are unable to support themselves. If, on the other hand, the wife is of working age, with working capacities, she must support herself, and the maintenance allowance is only intended for the children¹⁷ (Barbagli 1990). Social workers figure that the amount paid is in any case insufficient.

As for the relationship with the ex-partner, it is interesting to see how the expectations of the welfare state change from the time of the marriage until after its dissolution. In the Italian welfare system the wife's dependence on her husband is regarded as normal,¹⁸ and the welfare state is based on women's reproductive work. Yet, after the marriage is dissolved, Venetian social workers consider the wife's emotional dependence on the ex-husband to be extremely negative. At the same time such an 'emotional attachment' to the past situation is interpreted on the *moral-psychological* register, and mothers are invited to elaborate their emotional in/dependence on their partners when the relationship is still conflicting.

Social workers seek to help mothers become independent from their ex-partners by introducing them to support networks. But at the same time they try to make the mothers understand that it is necessary for the child to maintain the relationship with his/her father too. At times the mother-child relationship is seen as too symbiotic: the mothers try to be 'omnipotent', believing themselves 'capable of satisfying all the child's needs'. In such situations social workers intervene in order to redefine their parental role, trying at the same time to establish contact between the father and the child.

The family of origin

In the Italian system the division of roles between the various actors in welfare provision is characterised by the principle of subsidiarity which gives the family, both the nuclear and the extended one, the main responsibility for meeting its members' needs.

Psycho-social support

Social workers ascribe to the family of origin, in particular to the mother's family, a very important supporting role: it is considered as a 'family of reference', especially in emotional terms. The relation between the mother and the family of origin is evaluated within the model of '*intimacy at a distance*', which has non-cohabitation as its ideal. The voluntary choice to go back to the parents after a

¹⁷ The survey shows that 35.8% of fathers have no contact whatsoever with their children, and 54.9% give no maintenance support. Only 27.1% pay it regularly. 13.4% present some kind of major problems (detention, alcohol and drug abuse). Only 53.9% are employed (Giullari, forthcoming)

¹⁸ In Italy, domestic dependence, contrary to what Fraser and Gordon (1994a, b) say about the USA, is still considered more positive.

separation would show a dependent personality, and is especially disapproved of if it becomes an excuse not to have an occupation.

Social workers say they often have to intervene in conflicting situations between lone mothers and their respective families of origin, both for the difficulties which arise from the shared living, and also because parents do not always accept the lone mothers' choices. Attempts to re-establish family solidarity do not always prove successful, and in some circumstances the family of origin 'proposes models which can be negative'. In such cases social workers try to build alternative social support networks, both against solitude (choirs, sewing groups), and to face problems in managing the daily routine between employment and the family, specifically child care.

However, social workers maintain that the family of origin is often not present at all, or, if it is, it would mainly provide economic support.¹⁹ The family of origin is more frequently seen as unable to offer sufficient psycho-social support to lone mothers during the crisis and in daily routine management.

Economic support

In the allocation of the economic allowances, the principle of subsidiarity entails that they will be calculated on the family income of the whole nucleus and on all the existing means of subsistence. Some social workers, however, say they would also be willing to limit the parents' responsibility with respect to what the law foresees. They regard economic family solidarity as secondary and complementary to the lone mother's resources, in case they are lacking. Social workers assume lone mothers should support themselves and their children, and the family responsibility is therefore only called for when mothers are not able to work or support themselves. Parents cannot become a source of maintenance for mothers who do not wish to work.

In fact the economic responsibility of the family can only be realised if it is voluntarily accepted, and in situations of conflicting relationships it could virtually disappear. Social workers do not even have many possibilities to spur the lacking economic solidarity of the family, unless in co-operation with the lone mother. However, legal procedures are costly and for this very reason, often not viable.

Welfare services

The social workers perceive the economic dependence on the welfare services as the most stigmatising, and consequently, the least preferable for lone mothers. Yet, economic support becomes legitimate when mothers lack other means. The interpretation and construction of the qualifying need for mothers and the map of their preferred dependencies correspond to the selection of welfare service interventions, thus forming the basis for the concrete practices and value orientations on which the welfare services are constituted.

¹⁹ 59.9% of mothers served by the Venetian welfare services can rely on at least one supporting relative, while the remaining 40.1% have no help from their family. Yet, the survey findings show that kin provide economic resources to 36.3% of lone mothers (Giullari, forthcoming).

4. Hierarchy of the interventions

Welfare service interventions encompass three main measures: economic support, psycho-social support and social co-ordination.

Economic support

‘... To give the person time, I would say, to activate her own resources. Therefore, when the person has succeeded alone or with our help in activating these resources, i.e., has succeeded in finding a job, or in finding a calmer housing situation, for example. Then, when these conditions come into being, it can also happen that our economic intervention might end. Perhaps there can still be a more delayed [psycho-social] support further on in time. In other words a real support for the situation in general.’ (*Venetian social worker*)

The semantic geography of the dependencies presented above shows a clear hierarchy between the different interventions. A ‘very limited’ role is reserved for economic intervention: it will be supplied until the mothers ‘are able to find a job’. The economic intervention must have a short duration, keeping however in mind the social workers’ perception of the lone mother’s situation.

‘... As far as there is a situation where the person is not able to, or needs time [to find a job]—because it is not said that one can find a job in a month or in two months—then the contribution makes sense. But, if this becomes an excuse for not looking for job, then I honestly, um ... I don’t regard it as appropriate to continue to maintain a person, because it would be absurd.’ (*Venetian social worker*)

Social workers consider providing economic benefits the least satisfactory part of their job (it is ‘a routine’ and requires playing the role of a ‘policeman’). They find the total amount of the minimum income support (*minimo vitale*) insufficient,²⁰ and one of them told about a proposal to change the rules to take not only family income into consideration, but also family expenses.

²⁰ There are strictly defined means-tested parameters for the provision of minimum income support. The total amount is determined with reference to family income, not to individual income. In 1996 minimum income support for one person amounted to 520,000 liras, with increases for each dependent child. For a mother with a minor child the minimum income support rises to 800,000 liras. Social workers can present a lone mother’s application to the management board (*comitato di gestione*), the organ responsible for the final decision. The management board may recommend a total amount different from that proposed by the social worker.

Social workers have more discretion in proposing the length of the economic support and the exemption of payments (school meals and transport, day-care centres etc.). In addition, they can propose ‘extraordinary’ subsidies (*una-tantum*) for other expenses, such as the often high rents in the private market (in order to avoid eviction, and to cover heating costs). Also regarding the extraordinary subsidies, social workers give a report to a management board, but in this case there are no predefined parameters, and consequently the decisions are made case by case.

The concrete practices for supplying these services are defined in interaction between the social workers and the management board. The former, seeking to comprehend the board’s line of action, make proposals with the board’s previous decisions in mind. Similarly, the management board gives credit to the social workers’ estimates, partly basing its decisions on them. Negotiation is a continuous process and sometimes a source of disagreements.

The 'professional' welfare service

In the hierarchy of interventions, psycho-social and educational help together with social co-ordination appear as the most important measures. The emphasis on support and rehabilitation is also mentioned in the regional law, as stated previously. On the administrative plane, however, there 'is no clarity of objectives': such preferences derive from the social workers' model of professional competence. Furthermore, social workers set themselves the objective of encouraging lone mothers towards a greater *moral-psychological* independence, in addition to economic self-sufficiency.

Furthermore, psycho-social relief is the area where social workers use the greatest discretion. Because it is more closely related to their tasks oriented to the social problems, they deem it the core of their professionalism. The construction of the qualifying need for lone mothers would then seem to justify and legitimate the social workers' more 'professional' intervention, which has as its main instruments *psycho-social support* (help in crisis, creation of a support network, achievement of personal autonomy) and *educational help* (regarding the mother-child relationship, children's problems, domestic assistance for support at school and for child care while the mother is working). These types of interventions are expected to be more lasting than economic provision, since psycho-social, relational and educational problems are regarded as 'difficult, more sound' ones. Social workers view the supply of psycho-social assistance also as the most difficult part of their work, due both to the stigmatising image that many mothers are supposed to have of the welfare service, and also to their own demand to set up the relationship on the 'real' needs.

Social co-ordination

Social workers represent the welfare services as a 'basic service', a *point of reference* that receives lone mothers, listens to their problems ('friend service'), especially if they lack a reference network. Welfare services offer the 'first information' about other institutions that could supply other services. They act as a *filter*, by co-ordinating with other authorities and professional figures (school, local social and health centres, family clinics, tribunal for minors, centres for neuro-psychiatry etc.) in the problems of lone mothers and their children. With the stress on *networking*, welfare services seek to individuate single mothers' needs and when necessary, direct them to a service that can better respond to their problems, or together with other services plan an intervention in a network for more efficient support.

Networking is also a means through which the welfare service defines its role as residual, also in relation to the voluntary sector and to private initiatives, which in the Venetian welfare system are regarded as legitimate alternatives to the public service. In order to reduce the need for assistance, the welfare service maintains its role as *co-ordinator*, and social workers construct new kinds of '*private dependencies* preferred to the 'public' ones (that, in fact, are no longer perceived as 'dependencies', but as a 'private matter between two parties'). This takes place especially in the creation of social networks (such as parochial choirs, needlework groups, etc.), but also in economic help, in the supply of food packages and furniture.

5. Modes of operation of the welfare services

In operating with lone mothers, social workers use principally psycho-social support, social coordination, and networking with other authorities. Above all they aim to insert lone mothers into social networks, which especially in cases of marriage dissolution tend to be lacking, and to activate lone mothers' personal resources so that they regain their capacity to solve their problems independently. In addition, social workers give information on how to solve immediate legal-financial problems.

Social workers have few means to respond to the problems that the majority of 'normal mothers' in particular present when they turn to welfare services: especially those regarding the search for housing and a job.²¹ It is not always possible to guarantee either a place in public day care for a child while the mother is working, even though lone mothers have a right to preferential access. In particular there are no specific policies to help accommodate paid employment and family, a task that is harder for lone mothers than for couples. In the welfare system, such needs are largely considered *private*. Social workers may help mothers by using their *discretion* in supplying home help (*assistenza domiciliare*) or aid for education matters, or to entrust to the voluntary sector the task of looking after school-aged children in the afternoons when the mother is working. The eventual initiative of social workers in job searches takes place in private terms, and thus goes beyond their competence. Consciousness of this may provoke perplexity and fear of 'acting out private interests in the office'.

As for encouraging autonomy among lone mothers, it is possible to distinguish two kinds of work strategies in the social workers' accounts, related to the two types of lone mothers. The strategies are constituted according to the social workers' perception of the mothers' different resources and 'capacities' to collaborate with the welfare service for its presumed aims.

'Normal mothers'

Social workers assert that after being relieved of the most pressing problems, the 'normal mothers' would be disposed to go ahead alone, as they share the idea of the exchange and the aim of autonomy in the labour market. Therefore their insertion into the labour market corresponds to the social workers' preferential profile, and is also deemed to be smoother. The social workers more easily identify with these mothers: they share the same values, and as working mothers acknowledge the burden that these mothers must shoulder alone, preoccupied with their lack of personal and social space, 'always more and more indispensable'. They thus seek to create this space through home help (child care) and through activating social networks. The main difficulties of working with these mothers

²¹ There are some sporadic assistance measures that cover pressing housing needs, such as two residential communities for unmarried mothers, owned by the province. They solve the housing problem only provisionally, and are not regarded by the social workers as suitable solutions for lone mothers, given the problems of the individuals who are usually received in such residential communities. The prevailing perception is that housing remains an 'enormous' problem among lone mothers served by the welfare services. These mothers seem to be at a disadvantage, even though especially after the reform of the 1987 the house is usually assigned to the parent who lives with the children, thus often to the mother (Trifiletti 1995).

derive mostly from the stigmatised image of the welfare service and the control it exerts, and concentrate on the initial phases of the relationship.

'Marginal mothers'

The perceived dependence of 'marginal mothers', both on the welfare service and on the family of origin, and their possible refusal to collaborate in the exchange may be interpreted by social workers as immaturity. Social workers find it more difficult to go beyond material help with these mothers with minor children ('they don't want to admit they have problems, they escape them'), who often believe they have a specific right to subsidies and services, without conditions ('they have a bit this mentality that they are entitled—and that's all').²² Sometimes social workers feel helpless to face the 'marginal mothers' problems in becoming 'autonomous'. Some of them would like to be more specialised, in the areas of child development or gerontology—like health professionals: psychologists, medical doctors, etc. The main problems with the users are summarised by one social worker, who describes the welfare service as a 'fast-food' service: 'bite and escape'.

In cases of mothers continuing to 'refuse to go to work', thus accepting their 'dependence' on the welfare service, some social workers are willing to use the economic subsidies as a sort of negative incentive, diminishing them gradually, or even cutting them off completely. When the mother cohabits with her parents in order to avoid finding a job, social workers at times reorganise the principle of subsidiarity, in agreement with the family of origin, and take temporary charge of the mother, in order to direct her towards autonomy. Social workers thus act more explicitly as educators in relation to these mothers, reinterpreting for them, encouraging them and imposing on them the behaviour that goes in the desired direction ('if a kick in the bottom is an aid to make the person autonomous, sometimes we have to give that kick in the bottom').

Age makes a difference

Social workers seem to differentiate the treatment of lone mothers on the basis of the mother's age (cf. Saraceno 1990), in the sense that the length and the objectives of the intervention take age into account. A young lone mother without education, but wishing to have it, is sustained by the welfare service more easily and for a longer time to enable her to obtain a degree, which would improve her chances of finding a better job and ending her dependence on the welfare service.

Middle-aged women with little education, who may be entering the labour market for the first time, more often have to find their way alone. Social workers show understanding for difficult situations, also

²² From the interviews it emerges that also the kind of referral through which lone mothers turn to welfare services is connected to the ability to create a trusting relationship. Mothers who arrive spontaneously are supposed to be already 'in a phase in which they accept help, or at least, have a sensation of needing help'. Therefore, constructing trust is regarded as easier. Mothers referred by another authority would more easily feel 'obliged' to relate to the service, and could be more afraid of the estrangement of the child due to the problems that are the reason for the referral. Given the fragmentation of the social workers' perceptions, it is not yet possible to see to what extent 'normal mothers' and 'marginal mothers' turn to welfare services spontaneously or are referred by another authority.

carrying out *discretionary* interventions that are not formally foreseen, as for example those aimed at not causing further changes in children's lives (for example, being willing to pay private school fees in order not to oblige the child to move to a public school in a situation of stress and crisis). The intervention can thus vary also according to the children's needs and age. Economic support can be extended also for the first years of the child, in order to support maternity. Among the cases that are taken charge of the welfare service for a longer time are those of both the 'marginal mothers' with whom more time is needed to achieve autonomy, and those of retirement age (but without enough insurance coverage) for whom the aim of autonomy on the labour market is no longer valid.

Lone mothers: a distinct group?

Even though it is the 'categories' that in fact determine access to the welfare service in Venice, social workers prefer not to talk in such terms when addressing lone mothers: in line with the new orientation of individualised interventions, they stress instead the maximum tailoring of the support to the needs of the assisted individual.

In spite of the apparent invisibility of lone mothers in Venetian social policies, they seem to acquire a specific position in the welfare services. Such a position is built through the *professional culture of social workers*, who perceive lone mothers' problems as different from those of the rest of the users of the welfare services,²³ asserting particularly that they have fewer support networks and more complex and difficult problems, as minors are involved.²⁴ The specific intervention for lone mothers is presented as constructed mainly of the broader use of different measures of support, especially of those where social workers have more discretion.²⁵

²³ Social workers maintain that also the lone mothers regard themselves as a 'specific category' among the users of welfare services.

²⁴ Yet one social worker mentions that she tends to reason in terms of 'women in difficulties', indicating that also women in couples with minor children may receive special attention.

²⁵ The results of research conducted in Turin by Nicoletta Bosco (1996) point in the same direction: the interventions supplied for minors and women with children encompass a very diversified set of measures and somewhat longer-term economic support than for other groups.

IV ON THE CITIZENSHIP OF LONE MOTHERS

The premises of the Venetian welfare system imply that paid work for lone mothers is highly desirable. If they work in the 'grey' market, they will easily be expelled also from the existing dimensions of decommodification, as they have no rights to maternity and parental leaves. Further, when officially employed, they often earn low salaries and cannot afford eventual absences (due to parenting) from the labour market, given the low levels of indemnity foreseen.

The welfare system has different expectations for mothers according to their relationships to men. Married mothers are treated ideally as *mother-caregivers*, whereas lone mothers (except elderly widows) are ideally *full-time workers*. While the first can, however, choose between paid work and family, the latter are obliged to work. Consequently, lone mothers have few possibilities to devote themselves to parenthood, even though they have to face the responsibility of parenting alone. The higher expectations placed on them, and their scantier resources (economic, temporal) are in fact the basis for their being labelled 'at-risk' or inadequate families. Despite the strong emphasis on maternity in Italy, the children of lone mothers, who often already do not have a regular relationship with their father, have fewer opportunities to be cared for by their mothers than do children in 'intact' families. Even though the professional work of social workers seems to be a source of extra support for lone mothers with small children, in families with economic difficulties maternity depends on the welfare service's *discretion*, and does not appear as an intrinsic right. The same is true for direct support to accommodate paid employment and family, where social workers' discretion may compensate for gaps left by the national policies and local norms.

From the point of view of the welfare system, one-parent families really appear to be 'incomplete' families, due to their limited resources to face the principal role assigned to the Italian family (especially women) in the provision of care for children and the elderly. The actual organisation of the income support policies in Venice appears partly also as a discouraging measure to break off the *welfare contract* with the conjugal (but also the extended) family that is able to guarantee personal services (compensating in this way the welfare state). By refusing to acknowledge the reproductive labour done without remuneration in marriage,

and by not offering coverage against risks for homemaker mothers, the welfare system discourages them from leaving marriage. If the marriage ends, the welfare state receives the ex-homemakers only in a stigmatised manner.

On the whole, the Venetian welfare system does not treat lone mothers with economic difficulties as individuals, but puts their needs in a *family context*, either through the child or the family of origin. Yet, in order to privilege the lone mothers' individual 'autonomy', social workers may reduce the obligation of the family networks to contribute. In any case, the social citizenship of lone mothers tends to remain very residual, or intermittent, as in cases where the mother finds a job that pays just over the minimum income support.

The architecture of the Venetian welfare services acts as a 'juridical-administrative-therapeutic state apparatus' (Fraser 1989: 154-155), interpreting its beneficiaries' needs along legal (giving or refusing certain rights), administrative (interpreting the situations and problems as administrable needs) and therapeutic dimensions. The principles according to which the welfare service operates represent a mixture of new orientations (the universalistic-oriented regional legislation, aiming to curtail need for assistance) and elements and expectations derived from the old categorical system, that still today limits the access to economic support. Even though 'normal mothers' represent new needs in relation to the traditional image of the clientele, the system of social protection does not offer them new solutions, but tends to translate their claims into the old categorical and stigmatising needs.

Although welfare service interventions are constituted in their factual form also through social workers' discretion, insertion in the labour market and the search for solutions to logistical problems remain largely a private issue for lone mothers. Given that the chief value of the social protection system is autonomy, more consonant with the new clientele, 'marginal mothers', who lack this value, appear as deviant to the expectations of the system.

Yet it is interesting to note that there is a shift from the 'economistic' conception of the social intervention towards another conception that is more oriented to recovering the citizenship capacity and the use of resources of beneficiaries, through the measures of psycho-social support and coordination (Negri and Saraceno 1996: 17-18). In the Venetian case these measures direct the lone mothers further to the 'voluntary sector', reducing in this way the public responsibility.

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