



**WESTERN  
MICHIGAN**  
UNIVERSITY

The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

---

Volume 12  
Issue 2 *June*

Article 4

---

May 1985

## Applying the "Unmotivated" Label to Clients in Social Service Agencies

Ben-Zion Cohen  
*University of Haifa*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>



Part of the Social Work Commons

---

### Recommended Citation

Cohen, Ben-Zion (1985) "Applying the "Unmotivated" Label to Clients in Social Service Agencies," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 12 : Iss. 2 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol12/iss2/4>

This Article is brought to you by the Western Michigan University School of Social Work. For more information, please contact [wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu](mailto:wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu).



**WESTERN  
MICHIGAN**  
UNIVERSITY

APPLYING THE "UNMOTIVATED" LABEL TO  
CLIENTS IN SOCIAL SERVICE AGENCIES

Ben-Zion Cohen, Ph.D.  
School of Social Work  
University of Haifa, Haifa 31999, Israel

ABSTRACT

This study, based on the responses of a sample of 245 public-sector social workers, explores the factors associated with labelling clients "unmotivated." The variables examined relate to clients, workers, agencies, and the interactions among these elements. Multiple regression analysis reveals that the best predictor variables are client-related. The client most likely to be rated by the social worker as lacking in motivation is of lower socioeconomic status and is perceived as believing that he or she does not require much professional intervention. The research supports the argument that clients who workers believe are unreceptive to their professional styles are likely to be labelled "unmotivated."

INTRODUCTION

Question: How many social workers does it take  
to change a light bulb?

Answer: Just one, but the light bulb had better  
be motivated to change.

That bit of self-critical humor reflects a central concern of social work practice: dealing with the "resistant" or "unmotivated" client. Social workers are more involved with this problem than the other

helping professions because most social workers work in agencies where many clients are socially-selected rather than self-selected (Fischer, 1978). When a person arrives at a social agency having been sent there by a court, a school, a relative, or another social agency, he or she is likely not to resemble the textbook client who arrives at the agency presenting a problem and requesting psychosocial intervention (Briar ` Miller, 1971). In the public-sector social agency the client typically has no "presenting problem." Either no problem at all is presented (only a referral) or the client has already decided on a solution for the agency to implement. In such situations the worker's initial definition of the situation depends largely on the client's motivation, i.e. the degree to which the client appears willing to cooperate with the worker, to perform according to the agency's expectations, and to assume the client role. Most often, it is the social worker who decides to what degree the client is motivated. In this sense social workers "create" unmotivated as well as motivated clients. The present study will attempt to identify the factors influencing this process.

Traditionally, social workers have approached the topic of motivation as if it were a trait or attribute of the client. Hollis (1970), for example, states that the client's motivation is a major determinant of what the worker will offer. Moore-Kirkland (1981) points out that applicants for service are screened during the initial contacts to help determine whether their degree of motivation justifies an investment of resources by agency and worker. Moore-Kirkland suggests that the notion of the motivated/unmotivated client may be "the functional equivalent of early social work's 'deserving' and 'undeserving' clientele" (1981: 31).

The classic treatment of motivation in the social work literature is Lillian Ripple's motivation-capacity-opportunity model (Ripple et al., 1964). This model also regards motivation as a property of the client, a function of the

"discomfort-hope balance" - the ratio of the "push of discomfort" generated by the problem to the "pull of hope" for solving it that the client brings to the treatment situation. Hooker's (1976) concept of "learned helplessness" attributes lack of motivation to the irrational belief that what one does cannot influence what happens, stressing the "hope" component of the "discomfort-hope" formulation.

Siporin (1975) argues that there are no unmotivated clients; rather, there are individuals who may be acting "defensively, or ignorantly, or just contrary to our expectations" (1975: 198). Brager (1965) has pointed out that "unmotivated" is a label that can legitimately be applied to an individual only in relation to a particular activity. According to Brager, an unmotivated client lacks motivation only with regard to a specific service. Zola (1965) added an early interactionist perspective to the controversy:

... unmotivated from whose point of view?  
Does "unmotivated" mean that he is a vegetable and does nothing about it? No, it means that he is unmotivated in some area that causes us trouble. (1965: 147).

Kadushin (1972) also regards motivation as an interactive phenomenon, stressing that the client's initial motivation is a consistently poor predictor of the course of his or her therapeutic involvement as the treatment relationship unfolds. He states that motivation increases when the agency and worker are aware of the psychological penalties of seeking help and succeed in counteracting them. This argument is reinforced by the findings of Duehn and Proctor (1977) who, focusing on the question of premature discontinuance of treatment, found that the clinician's behavioral responses to the client are the crucial factor in whether treatment is continued beyond the initial interview. Rosen and Wish (1980) studied the relationship of therapists' responses to clients' affect. They discovered a powerful association between the relevance of the therapists'

responses and decreases in clients' feelings of apprehension and dejection.

Gitterman (1983) sees the widespread use of the concept of resistance by social workers as a tactic to avoid confronting deficiencies in their agencies and themselves. In his view, the client is likely to be labeled "resistant" or "unmotivated" when he or she has been "unreceptive to an agency's system of service delivery or uncomfortable with a worker's method or style." (1983: 127).

The studies reported above differ in their emphases on the relative influence of clients, workers, and agencies on the process leading to some clients being defined as lacking in motivation. The present study will attempt to provide empirical evidence to help clarify this issue.

This research will address the question: what perceived characteristics of agencies, workers, clients, or interactions among these elements are associated with a high probability of the client being labelled unmotivated? Presumably, the answers will provide some clues for understanding how social agencies and social workers use their power to label clients.

### RESEARCH DESIGN

The present research focuses on variables related to workers, clients, agencies, and the interactions among them. The data were collected by means of a confidential questionnaire containing thirty-two closed items, administered by trained interviewers in the spring of 1983 to a sample of public-sector social workers in the greater Haifa area. Haifa is Israel's third largest city, with a population of approximately 300,000. Its social class and ethnic composition roughly parallels that of Israel's urban population.

Approximately half the questionnaire items referred to the last client seen by the respondent. The remaining half elicited background material on the worker and the agency.

The dependent variable, degree of client motivation, is ordinal. Each respondent evaluated the relevant client's motivation on a scale from one to ten; the subjectivity of this measure is appropriate here because the respondents represent the very persons who subjectively evaluate the motivation of clients in the real world.

The questionnaire also recorded the background information, presented in Table 1, below. Most of these background items serve as the independent variables of the study. Two additional items measured the worker's evaluation of the need for professional intervention in the case and the worker's perception of the client's evaluation of that need.

The independent variables include two composite measures. The first is an index of client socioeconomic status, derived from the weighting and adding of three items: income level (by population decile), dwelling density (ratio of rooms to persons in the home), and years of formal education. The second composite measure is the differential between the worker's and client's perceptions of the optimal role for the social worker in the case, scored on a ten-point scale, graded from minimally to maximally active.

The study derives its data from the workers' responses, drawing on a research strategy more consistent with a phenomenological than with a conventional positivist position. The phenomenological assumption (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) is that outcomes are best understood in the context of actors' perceptions and cognitive constructions of reality. The outcomes pertinent to this research are the workers' labelling decisions. Consequently, and because no attempt was made to study the clients

directly, the analysis focuses on the connections between workers' perceptions and workers' decisions.

The respondents were selected by a cluster sampling procedure. From a list of the ninety-eight agencies in the greater Haifa area who employ professional social workers, a random sample of thirty-two was drawn. The number of workers per agency ranged from one to twenty-seven. The cooperation of all 269 workers employed in these agencies was solicited and 245 usable questionnaires were obtained. Some respondents, however, did not answer all the questions so that there are variables with less than 245 responses.

The characteristics of the social workers in the sample and their perceptions of the characteristics of their agencies and clients are presented in Table 1.

As can be seen in Table 1, the workers are predominantly female (81.6%), young (mean age = 33.8), experienced (mean years = 7.7), and a large majority (81.2%) have a university degree in social work. Most of them work in public welfare bureaux (55.9%) and most work in agencies employing more than ten social workers (58.1%). It is characteristic of their employment settings that most have regular supervision (69.5%), and that most have professional social workers as their immediate supervisors (82.9%). The clients, on the other hand, are mostly male (54.8%) and somewhat younger (mean age = 30.6) than the workers. The adults among them (N = 195) have had 9.9 mean years of education and a majority of the adults (53.1%) are married. The median number of years these clients have been known to the agencies is 2.0.

Table 1. Sample of Social Workers,  
Their Agencies and Clients (N=245)

---

Characteristics of Workers

Sex: 81.6%(199) Female;  
18.4%(45) Male  
Age: Mean=33.8, S.D.=8.7 (N=239)  
Education: 81.2%(199) BSW/MSW;  
18.7%(46) Other  
Professional Experience: Mean=7.7 yrs,  
S.D.=6.4 (N=241)

Characteristics of Agencies (by worker)

Type: 20.0%(49) Local Welfare Offices  
55.9%(137) Govt. Agencies;  
24.1%(59) Other  
Size: 7.5%(18) Small(<4 wkrs);  
34.4%(83) Medium(4-10);  
58.1%(140) Large (>11 wkrs)  
Supervision: 69.5%(169) Regular;  
Immediate  
Superior: 82.9%(203) Social Worker;  
17.1%(42) Other

Characteristics of Clients

Sex: 45.2(108%) Female;  
54.8%(131) Male  
Age: Mean=30.6, S.D.=15.4  
Years of Education\*: Mean=9.9, S.D.=3.2  
Marital Status\*: 53.1%(102) Married;  
28.6%(55) Never Married;  
18.3%(35) Other  
Yrs Known to Agency: Median=2.0, Range: 0-37

---

\*Computed only for clients aged 18  
and over, N=192.



## FINDINGS

To estimate the relative explanatory power of the independent variables this study utilized multiple regression analysis. A preliminary procedure was to examine the zero-order correlations of all the independent variables with each other and with the dependent variable: the client's motivation score. Table 2 presents the zero-order correlations among all variables with correlation coefficients stronger than .100 with client motivation.

The eight variables presented in Table 2 served as the variables for the multiple regression analysis. The direction of measurement for the continuous variables (1,2,3,4,6,8,9) is from low to high, and for the two dichotomous variables -- worker's education (0 = Not BSW/MSW, 1 = BSW/MSW) and immediate supervisor (0 = Not Social Worker, 1 = Social Worker) -- it is from negative to positive.

As can be seen from Table 2, many of the correlations are statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ). To prevent problems of multicollinearity a maximum tolerance criterion of .01 was maintained for entering variables into the regression equation.

The results of the analysis -- unstandardized regression coefficients, standard errors of the coefficients, values of "t" and their one-tailed significance levels, and the standardized (beta) coefficients -- are presented in Table 3.

Table 2. Correlation Coefficients Among Variables Included  
in the Regression Analysis

Variables	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. CI Motivation	.369*	.483**	-.180**	.153*	-.326**	-.104	.440**	-.275**
2. Wkr Eval of Need		.390*	-.109	-.071	-.241**	-.156*	.077	-.098
3. CI Eval of Need			.061	.017	-.181**	-.034	.081	-.400**
4. Yrs CI in Agency				-.089	.052	.099	-.237**	.011
5. Wkr Education					.027	-.025	.152	.004
6. CI/Wkr Diff in Perception of Wkr Role						-.130*	-.124	.237**
7. Immediate Supervisor							-.175*	.103*
8. Client SES								-.123
9. CI/Wkr Diff in Eval of Need								---

\*p < .05, \*\*p < .01

Table 3. Regression Analysis of Client Motivation Score

Independent Variable	Unstandardized Regression Coefficient	Standard Error	"t"	Beta
Client's Evaluation of Need	.451	.084	5.40***	.359
Client SES	.178	.029	6.12***	.377
Cl/Wkr Diff. Perception of Wkr Role	-.133	.048	-2.77**	-.176
Wkr's Eval. of Need	.233	.099	2.34*	.158
Constant	-.778	.490	-1.59	

R<sup>2</sup> = .45  
 \*\*\*p <.0001  
 \*\*p <.05  
 \*p <.01

In considering the regression results it is important to remember that the data derive from social workers' responses. As noted above, so-called objective factors are less significant for present purposes than the workers' perceptions because, in the final analysis, the workers decide which clients they will define as "unmotivated."

The four variables entered into the regression equation generate an R<sup>2</sup> of .45; operating together, they account for forty five percent of the variance in the

clients' motivation scores. The beta coefficients in Table 3 reveal that the most important predictor of the client's motivation score is the client's socioeconomic status (beta =  $-.377$ ). The lower the client's socioeconomic status, the lower he is likely to be graded on the motivation measure.

The second most important predictor variable in the regression equation is the client's evaluation of the need for intervention (beta =  $.359$ ). The less the client believes in the need for professional intervention, the lower his or her motivation score tends to be. These first two independent variables are by far the most important and they both represent client attributes.

The third independent variable is interactive: the absolute difference between client and worker in perception of the optimal role for the worker (beta =  $.176$ ). The larger the difference, the more likely the client will be defined as "unmotivated." The contribution of this variable is significant at the  $.05$  level but it is not nearly as important as the previous two. (It should be noted here that an additional composite variable -- difference between client and worker in evaluation of need for intervention -- was attempted, its zero-order correlation with the dependent variable was significant ( $r = -.28$   $p < .001$ ), but it failed to enter the regression equation.

The worker's evaluation of the need for intervention is the fourth predictor variable in the regression equation (beta =  $.158$ ). The weaker the indication for professional intervention in the worker's view, the lower the motivation rating the client is likely to receive. This is the only worker variable to enter the equation, the direction of the association is not entirely unambiguous, and the contribution of this variable is the least important of the four.

The most striking feature of Table 3 is that the two most important predictors of motivation scores are client variables, with one interactive variable and one worker variable making extremely modest contributions.

## DISCUSSION

The results of the analysis indicate that in public service agencies in Israel the situation most likely to result in a client being labelled lacking in motivation exists when the social worker is confronted by a client of lower socioeconomic status perceived as believing that he or she is not in great need of the worker's services. It is, of course, possible that this finding is specific to Israel, but we can find no basis for such an argument. The welfare state ideology is well-developed in Israel, the social workers are trained in schools using American methods and materials, and the social service system is broadly based on an Anglo-American model.

The predominance of client-related variables in the regression equation appears to reflect a belief on the part of the workers that their use of the "unmotivated" classification is a diagnostic response rather than a defensive or manipulative maneuver. It is difficult, however, to rationalize a diagnostic approach which seems to discriminate against clients of lower socioeconomic status.

Gitterman's (1963) thesis that clients defined as unmotivated are most often those who are incompatible with the worker's style gains support from the findings of this study. Public-sector social workers tend to be upwardly mobile. Moreover, most subscribe to a professional ideology that includes a profile of an ideal-type client on whom they can best practice their skills (Briar and Miller, 1971). Enter the client who, emerging from the lower socioeconomic strata of the agency's target population, appears to be requesting aid while claiming that his or her case does not require much professional intervention. Not only has the ethic of upward mobility been violated, but the client is perceived as deviating even further from the ideal type in underemphasizing the request for professional services. The worker, sensing that this is a client who will not fit easily into the client role, defines him or her as lacking in motivation.

## CONCLUSION

Not one social worker in the sample objected to the question asking that the client be scored on a general measure of motivation. This was not because they were in awe of the questionnaire; many of them registered opposition to other items. It seems, rather, that they did not agree with (or never heard of) the idea that motivation should be assessed differentially for different activities. They were prepared to apply the label to the whole client.

This study has addressed the problem of identifying the client to whom the "unmotivated" label is most likely to be applied. The study design, drawing on a phenomenological view of labelling (Daniels, 1970), framed the question in the context of the workers' cognitive schema. The findings of the study support the assertion that clients perceived as unappreciative of social work are the most likely to be labelled "unmotivated."

Additional research is clearly needed on the role of this and other labels in the social services. Meanwhile, it would be wise for practitioners to think again about the use of categorizing labels, especially those that can have far-reaching consequences on their clients' lives.

## REFERENCES

- BERGER, PETER L. and THOMAS LUCKMANN  
1966 The Social Construction of Reality: A  
Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge.  
Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday.
- BRIAR, SCOTT and HENRY MILLER  
1971 Problems and Issues in Social Casework. New  
York: Columbia University Press.

- BRAGER, GEORGE  
 1965 "Motivation - a social worker's perspective." In Education for Practice in the Treatment of Unmotivated Clients. Brandeis University Papers in Social Welfare, No. 4. Waltham, Mass.: Florence Heller Graduate School, Brandeis University.
- DANIELS, ARLENE K.  
 1970 "The social construction of military psychiatric diagnoses." In Hans Dreitzel (ed.), Recent Sociology, No. 2. New York: Macmillan.
- DUEHN, WAYNE D. and ENOLA K. PROCTOR  
 1977 "Initial clinical interaction and premature discontinuance of treatment." American Journal of Orthopsychiatry 47: 284-290.
- FISCHER, JOEL  
 1978 Effective Casework Practice: An Eclectic Approach. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- GITTERMAN, ALEX  
 1983 "Uses of resistance: a transactional view." Social Work 28:2:127-131.
- HOLLIS, FLORENCE  
 1970 "The psychosocial approach to the practice of casework." In Robert W. Roberts and Robert H. Nee (eds.), Theories of Social Casework. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- HOOKE, CAROL E.  
 1976 "Learned helplessness." Social Work 21:3: 194-198.

- KADUSHIN, ALFRED  
 1972 The Social Work Interview. New York:  
 Columbia University Press.
- MOORE-KIRKLAND, JANET  
 1981 "Mobilizing motivation: from theory to  
 practice." In Anthony Maluccio (ed.),  
Promoting Competence in Clients. New  
 York: Free Press.
- RIPPLE, LILLIAN, ERNESTINA ALEXANDER, and BERNICE  
 POLEMIS  
 1964 Motivation, Capacity and Opportunity.  
 Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- ROSEN, AARON and ERIC WISH  
 1980 "Therapist content relevance and patient  
 affect." Journal of Clinical Psychology  
 36: 242-246.
- SIPORIN, MAX  
 1975 Introduction to Social Work Practice. New  
 York: MacMillan.
- ZOLA, IRVING K.  
 1965 "A social scientist's perspective on the  
 problem of the unmotivated client." In  
Education for Practice in the Treatment of  
Unmotivated Clients. Brandeis University  
 Papers in Social Welfare, No. 4. Waltham,  
 Mass.: Florence Heller Graduate School,  
 Brandeis University.