



Awarded COFAS Marie Curie fellows – For the FIIP programme



Jan Mewes

E-mail:

jan.mewes@soc.umu.se

Home University:

University of Bremen

Host University:

Umeå University,
Department of Sociology

Project: Social Class, Job Strain and Informal Social Capital: A Cross-National Perspective

Abstract: When sociologists deal with manifestations of social inequality in modern societies, they most often concentrate on inequalities regarding the labour market, political participation or education. Yet, a growing body of empirical literature points to the fact that even immaterial resources such as relationships to partners, friends, relatives and neighbours are unevenly distributed in European societies. As these informal relationships are very important for various aspects of everyday life and for people's well-being in general, modern societies should try to overcome these inequalities. Despite the empirical facts, up to now, sociologists know little about why working-class members' social networks differ from those of middle class members.

The research project aims at contributing to fill this research lacuna. Informed by recent results of a large-scale study among French workers, it is assumed that working conditions may – at least partly – account for inequalities regarding the private sphere of relations to friends and family. This idea goes back to the studies of Robert A. Karasek, who started to investigate the role of stressful working conditions in the 1970s and 1980s. His theory, the so-called 'job strain' theory, claims that the combination of having low autonomy at the workplace and to face high levels of job demands at the same time leads to unhealthy outcomes for individuals.

A recent French study showed that stressful working conditions might not only contribute to the development of health problems, but may also lead to loneliness and a lack of social support in the long run. The proposed research project will show whether it is the higher levels of work stressors among manual workers that account for inequalities in social support from family-members and friends. This is far from being clear, because earlier studies have shown that it might be rather middle class men than working-class members who reported higher-than-average job-related stress. In order to examine this research question more in detail, it is planned to use a large dataset from more than 20 European countries: the European Social Survey. By analyzing these data with the newest statistical tools at hand, it will be possible to see how different national labour market policies and trade unions might impact the relationship between inequality and embeddedness in informal relations. Thus, the results of the project might be of some help to develop appropriate policy measures targeted at preventing individuals from falling victim to a lack of informal social support and loneliness in general.