

# THE SOCIAL WORKER WHEN FACED WITH NEW EMERGENCIES. A STUDY IN THE ITALIAN CONTEXT

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**Abstract:** *This paper focuses on the interventions set up in different social contexts by social workers, in the current service system and social policies in Italy. Specifically, it looks at the results of a study carried out in the Marche Region, which examined both critical elements and significant strengths. In Italy, the reform of social assistance, Law no. 328/2000 laid a strong emphasis on the creation of individualised interventions, which integrate health and social care and are realised with the support of third sector agencies. However, in recent years the social workers on the one hand have had to deal with the growing problems of families and with increasingly complex questions, on the other the economic crisis has led to a radical reduction in social spending; this has had a profound effect on the organisation of social services as well as on the interventions of those operators who work in this field.*

**Key words:** *Social policies, social workers, new emergencies, interventions, training.*

## 1. Introduction

In the nineties, significant changes in social policy and in relationships between public bodies and the third sector took place in Italy. Over time, the Municipalities have come to play an increasingly central role, as authorities capable of implementing and managing social policies. The public-private relationships have evolved from a culture of delegation to a new model of regulation based on co-participation (Ascoli, 2005).

In Italy, the long-awaited social assistance reform, approved in 2000, represented an important stage in this process, even though many regions had

already initiated their own reorganisation of services. Law no. 328/2000 is a broad piece of legislation; its multiple contents are designed to build an integrated system of social services and interventions, combating the traditional marginalisation of this sector in the Italian welfare system and in society as a whole.

About a year after the proclamation of the law, however, changes to Fifth Title of the Italian Constitution were approved, transferring exclusive authority in the field of social policies to the regions, and therefore limiting the effect of the Act.

Over the past twenty years, in Italy, social care policies have experienced a double trend. In the first phase, increasing

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attention was focused on the expansion of services as well as on collaboration between local institutions and the third sector. This led up to the reform legislation, which created an integrated system of interventions and social services at national level.

In the next phase, however, a downward spiral began: with less interest in this issue and concerted regionalisation, in which the devolution of functions is not matched by an equal allocation of resources. In addition, the regional authorities have shown different capacities and degrees of interest, and, as a result, levels of protection vary in different local systems. In the area of social services, therefore, this has had serious consequences for the people in greatest need; with a growth in social exclusion and increasing difficulties for third sector organisations involved in the contracting out processes (Ascoli, 2011).

The Marche Region, where the research presented in this paper was carried out, has paid constant attention to the pursuit of policy choices shared at a local level. From 2000 to 2005, the regional policy directors managed to define a new regulatory structure based on territorial areas, in an atmosphere of participation and confidence in the new system.

During the next legislature, however, a significant reduction in social policies took place: the system was left without meaningful policy guidelines and the continuation of the activities in hand was made possible thanks to the commitment of the Regional Technical Office and the local Social Welfare Divisions (Genova, 2010). In addition, the development of health and social integration had to compete with the restructuring of the regional health system, which experienced a radical change in 2003 following the establishment of the single Regional Health Authority.

The lack of social policies has limited the identification of appropriate care pathways; operators have to work in increasingly complex contexts with diminishing resources; moreover, the increase in temporary employment greatly affects the quality of the responses provided and the building of career paths (Moretti, Spina, 2013).

## 2. Objectives

In such a scenario there is a sharp increase of the difficulty of families, who have fewer tools to deal with the risks they face at different stages of the life cycle.

The cultural model of typical family in Marche is founded on strong intergenerational relationships and kinship, but families cannot be left alone to deal with complex events. "A welfare system, is therefore necessary, which can on one hand welcome and value the contribution of different subjects, on the other hand activate processes that offer real opportunities to support families" (Moretti, 2008, p.81).

The sharp reduction of resources has encouraged the operators to "rethink" their interventions. Specifically, social workers have paid attention to both the training course and the functions they perform in the different areas of intervention. Therefore, priority was given to carrying out a study that would allow bringing out the opportunities and constraints that operators encounter when dealing with the new social emergencies. Analysis, therefore, designed to assess operational practices, also pays attention to training.

With regard to the training profile, the first schools of social work were established in Italy in 1945, supported by pre-existing private bodies. One of their characteristics is the high degree of autonomy they possess and which

distinguishes them, especially at the ideological level, according to their structure and their founders and funders (Neve, 2008).

It is only in the last twenty-five years that the training system for social workers has changed, in 1987, when the training was carried out at university. Currently in Italy, social work training consists of an undergraduate three-year degree, leading to a diploma which gives access to the profession, followed by a two-year master's degree. A weaker aspect still discernible in the training path relates to the lack of a well-defined autonomous scientific sector.

In 1993 the social workers' registry and professional order were set up. Registration is compulsory, and it is conditional upon passing a special state-run examination. (Fargion, 2008).

From a professional standpoint, social work has witnessed an increasingly widespread distribution and structuring of its operating practices since the 1950s, with the need to provide specific areas of intervention in order to respond to the different problems of social disadvantage.

The structuring of services, linked to issues of social inclusion and citizenship rights, results in legislation which regulates the practice of social work, entrusting it with front-office work in situations of socio-economic disadvantage, but also requiring it to take responsibility for subjects with special difficulties, and the organisation and management of interventions and social-assistance services. (Facchini, 2010).

The blend of theoretical and applied knowledge that characterises the professionalism of the social worker is dynamic in nature; the aim of this knowledge is to integrate many different areas of expertise, in relation to the complexity of both the situations of support and their social contexts. "In

practitioners' statements one can grasp a connection with a three-fold view (individual, community, institution), that some Italian authors consider typical of Italian thinking and associate with a holistic and unitary vision of social work" (Fargion, 2008, p.216, quoting Gui, 2004). Therefore, the social worker has achieved, over time, his/her own professional status in Italy.

### 3. Material and Methods

The main results of a study entitled *Analysis of the structure and employment in the social services sector in the Marche Region* will be used in order to analyse the special features of educational and operational processes in relation to social workers in the Marche region.

The study was commissioned by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy and carried out in 2010 by the Centre for Interdisciplinary Research and Service on Social and Health Integration (CRISS) of the Faculty of Economics – Polytechnic University of Marche, along with the Universities of Urbino, Macerata and another national research centre. In particular CRISS focused on the responsibilities and the training process of three occupational profiles working in the social field: social worker, educator and healthcare assistants.

In this contribution, attention will be focused on the social worker. The analysis of these job profiles basically evolved on two levels. The first part of the study, which was macro-structural in nature aimed to identify the institutional and regulatory pathway that has distinguished each of these occupations in the two last decades in Italy, then comparing it with other European countries (Spain, France, Great Britain, and Sweden). The second phase, which had a meso-structural character, focused on identifying the actual

working practices of the figures under review within the organisational contexts of eight Social Welfare Divisions in the Region.

The approach used was historical-relational and represented an epistemological break with previous perspectives proposed by the classical sociological literature. In particular, it referred to the analytical perspective proposed by Elias, in which professions are seen as entities determined by relational processes and "Interdependencies that arise from the relations between individuals mutually involved" (Vicarelli 2010, p.408). According to this model, professions should be viewed as the result of the relational network that people construct during their lifetimes, and which, from a dynamic point of view, necessarily affects their own behaviour.

Qualitative tools were chosen as the preferred methodology: a series of semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected witnesses in the field of social and health services and focus groups were set up, attended by representatives of the occupational profiles under review. The people involved in the focus groups were invited to talk about their specific areas of expertise, in relation to the context of their work.

Six areas of intervention were identified in order to analyse the specific and borderline areas of responsibility. Eight Social Welfare Divisions were involved in the research: six of them analysed a theme relating to a particular sector of operation (children, marginalisation, elderly, disability, mental health and addictions), while two of them focused on the topic of training paths. Each focus group involved 15 participants (5 for each occupational profile), selected according to the type of structure in which they work (Health care, Municipal authorities, the Social Welfare

Division, the Third sector), to their sector of intervention, to their level of training, and to their role in terms of coordination.

Each focus group discussion was inspired by the presentation of a case related to the specific field of intervention ascribed to each Social Welfare Division. In addition to the focus groups, three interviews with selected witnesses (Coordinator of the Social Welfare Division, Director of Health District, Head of a Third Sector organisation) were also conducted in each Social Area.

Finally, a Round Table discussion was organised, involving the various training organisations operating at regional level. In this paper we will outline the main aspects of the training and working practices of social workers.

#### 4. Results and Discussions

The relational-historical approach adopted in this research allowed us to interpret the characteristics of the professional profile as a result of interactions between the emergence of new needs and the development of new methods of intervention, in contexts where work is an expression of interactions which take place at a multiple level: individual, professional and institutional. In particular, attention focused on three aspects of the study: the first concerns the relationship established with the user and with the network of professionals; the second relates to the working contexts and the range of opportunities and problems professionals encounter in their different fields of activity; the third aspect, finally, examines the training.

With regard to the first aspect, the research shows that, in all areas of operation, the services are being required to meet increasingly complex demands. Indeed, these demands require a very careful analysis of the various aspects of

the personal and family circumstances of the user, as well as an assessment of the local resources available. To this end, and in order to create suitable solutions, it is clearly important to develop links between the different professionals working in the various services (Moretti, 2011).

In addition to supporting individuals and their families, their actions are also oriented to encourage relationships which involve others in the local community, in order to activate resources in the area. The opportunities for social workers and users to create networks of relationships are also correlated to the kind of resources and social policies that are present in the specific locality where the user lives. As the survey showed, in the promotion of such projects as work bursaries or other initiatives aimed at providing employment for people in need, the supportive relationship is clearly influenced by the possibility of obtaining resources to be used in the context of the individual user's life.

The lack of resources can make it difficult to design personalised interventions, limiting the possibility of building support relationships that enable people to have stable points of reference for improving their situation.

Networking is considered the most appropriate approach for constructing a global view of the user. However, social workers often find it difficult to implement this approach. In all the services, interventions are configured which amount almost exclusively to either "case work", or an "emergency": descriptions that have increasingly come to characterise all the services. Under these working conditions, the social worker's supportive relationship with the user becomes limited to dealing with emergencies and overlooks the creation of networks and positive social initiatives.

With regard to the second aspect of the study, in relation to the work contexts, the operators highlighted many features which affect the supportive relationship. Social workers state that in small towns, where there are usually no other professionals, they have to cover all fields of intervention, also performing the administrative functions which take up time that could be spent working with clients or interacting with colleagues from other services.

In addition, social workers point out that the methods used for managing care of users and their families differ according to the institution or the third sector organisation in which they work. This situation makes it difficult to define their specific duties, because they often have to collaborate with a range of institutions and perform different functions depending on the prevalent organisational model in each workplace.

Furthermore, with regard to employment, a sharp increase in job insecurity among social workers seems to emerge, affecting not only the individual operator's career path, but also the quality of the interventions provided by the system of social and health services. This aspect is also relevant in the helping relationship with the user: the social worker's condition of job insecurity affects the building of a meaningful relationship with the user, which necessarily takes on a provisional character for both parties.

With regard to the third aspect of training, particular attention was paid to the basic training of the social worker.

In the context of the degree course, the lack of adequate training focused on social services is strongly highlighted. This risk of losing specific training for the profession is attributed to latitude given to each faculty in determining the course programme, even though the Ministry establishes some compulsory areas.

What emerges is, on the one hand, the importance that training courses are in line with the purposes required by the authorities, and on the other, that this requirement does not limit a training process specifically focused on helping relationships. The three-year degree, therefore, should be training professionals who have basic skills in working with people and accomplishing management tasks, while the master's degree should help social workers to acquire expertise in planning and organising social services and social policies.

While social workers call for greater specificity in their training, in order to have a clear definition of their basic responsibilities and the limits of their professional role, the regional institutions in which they operate do not always consider this specificity adequate to the needs of the workplace. The definition of the professional profiles of social workers seems to be an on-going process in the public sector, while in the co-operatives it is a pathway that is still facing many obstacles. In many social co-operatives that participated in the research, social workers, as well as psychologists, play the role of educators.

## 5. Conclusions

In their work, social workers are affected by the conditions of the services, characterised by a lack of financial resources, high workloads and regional guidelines not supported by clear policy. All this makes it difficult to offer services sufficiently adequate to meet the emerging needs. In these conditions, the measures are usually oriented to meeting "urgent" situations, rather than creating and sustaining well-being pathways for people. Therefore, professionals often find themselves in the difficult situation where they have "to adapt" their functions to the

constraints imposed by the contexts in which they work, thus limiting the possibility of having any significant impact on the social issues involved (Moretti, 2011).

The development of the social worker profession is configured as a dynamic profession, by particular traits, in that its development is closely linked to the evolution of social policies (Trivellato and Lorenz, 2010).

In local contexts social workers operate in a framework characterized "by an explicit reduction of political support towards social services and a climate of "suspending" the emotional and motivational strength, too" (Fazzi, 2010, p. 5-6). Such a process outlines a framework of substantial destabilization of the conditions and work practices of social work and a widespread weakening of the role of the social worker. Nowadays, the practical conditions of exercising the profession often throws into crisis the knowledge already acquired and consolidated (Fazzi, 2010).

The research shows that social workers will address their interventions mainly to the construction of paths to support the person and the family. In this sense, the analysis by Dominelli (2004) to be confirmed: social workers were able to exert a greater impact on the contexts located at micro level interventions, easier to manage more coherently with professional principles of social work. Regarding the meso and macro contexts, instead, the results are less permeable to their actions.

What challenges are posed to social workers? The proposals that emerged from the survey are oriented towards two possible ways forward emerge from the research: on one hand, supporting the construction of networks among professionals and, on the other, paying greater attention to training.

Regarding the first aspect the opportunity to build networks with other professionals, and to share problems with colleagues, helps to “reassure” them about their work, making it possible give significant assistance to users. Moreover, it allows a continuity of care, something that is significantly threatened by the increasingly frequent rotation of operators within the service. To this end, social workers are unanimous in asking for a reform of the services to establish networking as a priority, and an identification of the instruments required in order to make this possible in practice.

In this sense, the signing of the memorandum of understanding between the Social Welfare Divisions and The Health Districts has proved to be significant, as it aimed at a clearer definition of the role of each institution as well as better connections between the different occupational profiles called to intervene in the helping process. Therefore, professional figures are involved in a joint effort to ensure that the logic of integration becomes a *modus operandi* in their daily work (Moretti, Spina, Ciaschini, 2012).

Another important issue concerns the training processes for the different roles: the increasing complexity of both the social demands and the institutional contexts requires a strong focus on training, both as basic and ongoing learning. With respect to this issue, as well as a greater training specificity of the degree courses in social work, social workers identified on-going professional training as the path to take in order to face new needs and new social realities, with more tools.

In 2009, the Council of the National Association of Social Workers approved guidelines for on-going professional training for both social workers and specialist social workers. The institutions

are endeavouring to set up training initiatives, but with ever-increasing difficulty; the priority is, therefore, to promote and support those initiatives that are able to respond to the needs of professionals to the greatest extent.

By putting an emphasis on ongoing learning, it is hoped that the administrators will be able to see the connection between investment in training and the effectiveness of the services provided, welcoming the operators’ request for training and identifying the initiatives to prioritise.

Aspects emerged from the research; therefore, foreshadow a “renewed attention” to the training and professional path of social worker, but also a strong involvement of the different actors present in the regional context.

The joint planning of a training programme, involving the region, the universities, other training agencies, representative bodies of the professions and the labour market, seems to be even more necessary than ever before.

Thus, we agree with the statements by some authors: on the one hand it is essential to identify possible areas of action (De Ambrogio, 2011) and find in themselves, in their own organizations and in the relationship with users, the energy available for work, following a projectual and strategic line. On the other, social workers, (Dal Pra Ponticelli, 2010 Campanini, 2009), are required to participate in a constructive process of influencing and orientation of social policies, towards the realization of the principles of equality and social cohesion.

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