

## Social Work promoting participation. Reflections on Policy Practice in Italy

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### **Abstract**

One of the core dimensions of social work practice, identified since its establishment as a professional endeavor, is concerned with political action. Nonetheless, policy practice, which entails that social workers should connect their work with individuals, as in traditional casework, to wider political action, is often perceived as marginal in everyday practice. This paper connects views on social work policy practices to the context provided by the ways social policies are actually constructed in Italy. A research study on governance processes across Italy, addressing the main actors involved in social policy making, reveals that in fact practitioners' political action is differently represented within different frameworks, ranging from being seen as a near impossibility, to being perceived as a crucial factor in the policy making processes. If context and cultures play such a relevant role, synergistic work at different levels and by all the different actors in the social work community is required if we want social workers to be able to express their potential fully in the political arena.

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workers should connect their work with individuals, as in traditional casework, to wider political action, is often perceived as marginal in everyday practice. This paper connects views on social work policy practices to the context provided by the ways social policies are actually constructed in Italy. A research study on governance processes across Italy, addressing the main actors involved in social policy making, reveals that in fact practitioners' political action is differently represented within different frameworks, ranging from being seen as a near impossibility, to being perceived as a crucial factor in the policy making processes. If context and cultures play such a relevant role, synergistic work at different levels and by all the different actors in the social work community is required if we want social workers to be able to express their potential fully in the political arena.

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## **1 Social services and governance in Italy**

One of the core dimensions of social work practice, identified from its establishment as a professional endeavor, is concerned with **acting at a political level** (Stuart, 1999). The view of social work as promoting equality and social justice, as the international definition declares, seems in itself to require political action by social workers (Domanski, 1998; Fargion, 2008; Gray et al., 2002; Nothdurfter, 2015; Stuart, 1999; I. Weiss-Gal, 2013; Idit Weiss-Gal & Gal, 2008). **Despite such considerations, research has shown that the political dimension**, which would entail that social workers connect their work with individual persons, that is traditional casework, to a wider **involvement at a political level**, appears to be marginal - if considered at all - in social work practice (Buchbinder, Eisikovits, & Karnieli-Miller, 2004; Figueira-McDonough, 1993).

This paper reflects on these issues, in view of new political scenarios linked to the success of the ideas of governance and participation in the construction of social policy. More than 15 years ago, Barnes maintained that participation and governance had become a shared ideology in many countries in Europe (Barnes, 1999). Legislation in most European countries reflects the idea that social policies cannot be created from above; it has been widely recognized that for social services to have a positive impact, there is a need to involve relevant stakeholders in their designing and realization. Service users and their communities cannot just be on the receiving end of social services, but need to be part of the planning (Beresford, 2001; Carr, 2007; Bovaird, Van Ryzin, Loeffler, & Parrado, 2014).

The model of governance which is based on the participation of stakeholders in the definition of policies, should entail that social services and frontline social workers, who are the subjects closest to service users and citizens, be strongly and in manifold ways involved in social policy making. **The new participatory devices that many recent European laws have put into place certainly do not represent a guarantee for democratic participation, and could certainly be instrumentally used as mere tools for legitimizing unpopular choices. Nonetheless, they represent a potential space for social workers, as well as for service users' organizations, in which it is possible to fight or negotiate for the voices of the most vulnerable and powerless subjects in society to be heard.**

**The considerations presented here are based on research undertaken on social policy planning across Italy. In Italy in the last 14 years a law (L328/2000) was issued by a center/left government; it introduced a reorganization of social services, reinforcing a welfare model and establishing a new system for social services planning. The new structure entailed a participatory process for planning social interventions and social services. The law aimed to promote solidarity in society, bottom up processes and a democratization in social interventions. The center-left government which issued the L. 328 lasted only until 2001 and was followed by a right wing government. Although changes at a**

political level have certainly affected the implementation of the law - together with changes in the Italian constitution, which have redefined competences at the local level - nonetheless the law has remained effective and, as far as social plans are concerned, has been and still is applied all over Italy.

This paper analyses how all the subjects who, following the 328 law, should be involved in social planning (including social workers) represent / view the role of social workers in the construction of those plans. Results identify a connection between the role attributed to practitioners and different ways of interpreting the idea of participation in policy making. These results also support some considerations on what the concept of policy practice encompasses.

## **2 The research: case studies of social area plans**

The thinking presented here draws on a wider research project which explored how the 328/2000 law had been implemented particularly as far as the idea of governance in social policy is concerned. The law states that:

*In order to manage social policies, Italian municipalities have to join in new inter-municipal groupings called 'Piani di Zona' (Area Plans). Moreover, the law provides for engaging in these Plans even local third-sector organizations and citizens. (Bifulco, Centemeri, 2008, p.211)*

The law aims specifically at the reorganization of what in other countries are known as personal social services, which are devoted to interventions in support of children and families, elderly people, people with reduced autonomy - such as people with disabilities - as well as adults in poverty or in difficult circumstances. The law, albeit specifically aimed at social intervention, dictates that social services should cooperate and integrate with the national health service, particularly for the areas which are connected both with health and social issues e.g. disability or old age, addictions, mental health.

It has to be specified that just after the 328 law was passed, there was a change in the Italian Constitution, which established that Regional councils had competences for regulating and planning social services. This meant that the 328 law would provide guidelines and a framework for the regional councils laws, rather than regulate social services in a direct way. As we said there was also a change in government, with the new administration certainly not in favor of the development of social services. Regional councils can have very different political orientations and can differ greatly from each other, in terms of social services organisation, as well as in terms of the available resources: it has been maintained that there are even different welfare regimes in the twenty Italian Regions (Bertin & Carradore, 2015). Despite these premises, all Italian regions have established social area plans, albeit in different ways, and they have stimulated changes at multiple levels: from how services are managed, to their integration with health, education and employment services, and how different subjects are supposed to be involved.

The project ‘Politiche partecipate e cittadinanza attiva’ (participatory policies and active citizenship) focused exclusively on participatory processes, and developed from the idea that, although there had previously been few such experiments in governance, this law was introducing a radical change in the methods of developing new policies. The Law, as it were, would entail a changed role for public administrations, from a position of authority and power, to one of coordination. As Bifulco and Centemeri underline, the process of involving different subjects in policy construction is a process that cannot be taken for granted. On the contrary, there is possibility that the new proceedings introduced by the law may become merely formal procedures or, as mentioned above, may be used just to legitimize choices made from above or cuts in social expenditure.

This research starts from a consideration of the complexity of this process, and sets out to explore how participation in different areas has been implemented, considering different aspects and different

perspectives. Five Universities contributed to the project, which was financed by the Ministry of University<sup>1</sup>

It was decided to adopt a case study strategy and to select 20 cases of area plans. The area plans were selected on the basis of their geographical location (north, center, south and islands) and on the different characteristics of the areas (small or big cities), with the criteria being the representativeness of cases from all the diverse Italian contexts. All cases were studied both through gathering all the available documentation around the planning process and through interviews: five informants were selected for each Area Plan. The interviews were one hundred in total and the informants were selected among stakeholders on the basis of their participation or interest in participating in the process; they had to include someone responsible at the political level, a manager, a social worker, somebody from the third sector and some representatives of service users. The informants were selected using different strategies: for managers and politicians there was often no choice to be made as there was only one such figure in each area. The others informants were chosen among names which appeared in documents as participating in the planning process, or using a snowball sampling strategy. Needless to say, we were aware of the fact that our group of informants could be biased: we risked selecting all those on friendly terms with the local authorities. Nonetheless, the actual content of the interviews shows a wealth of different views, both positive and negative towards the construction of area plans and this is partly reassuring. The process was conducted following the ethical guidelines of the leading

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<sup>1</sup> The group was coordinated by Sassari University and in the research team there were other 4 Universities ( Free University of Bolzano, Milano Bicocca, University of Pisa, University of Trieste) and the cooperation of other 3 Universities (Università of Bari, of Piemonte Orientale e University of Calabria)]

University. Having guaranteed confidentiality to all participants, the role of the informant only is mentioned, and not the relevant area plan, in order to prevent identification.

The research aimed at illuminating the whole process of planning, looking at matters such as the connection between local planning and the regional and national policies, the connection between social and health services, what issues and problems were deemed to be crucial and how they were identified. It also aimed to explore the specificity of governance in multicultural environments, how the process was conducted, how different subjects were involved and how the process was evaluated and what opportunities for reflection were put in place.

This paper focuses on one aspect of the research, examining the data related to the role attributed by informants with different roles to social services and particularly to social workers in the process of constructing the area plans. The 100 interviews have been analyzed using NVivo 8. What has emerged in the analysis is a strong connection between the way informants described the role of social services and social workers, and different representations of what participative processes entail. As others have observed, different representations of participation can be partly connected to more general policy discourses:

We therefore outline the social policy space currently constituted by four major discourses: neo-liberalism, managerialism, new paternalism and network governance as they intersect and interact chaotically, reshaping participation and partnerships between government, community service (Keevers et al., 2008)

The paper aims to offer an understanding of how social workers' policy practice appears within those different discourses. It should be stressed that the analysis is about representations and not actual practices. We cannot draw any conclusions either on the actual participatory processes or whether they have a positive impact on social service outcomes, an issue which has been previously discussed (Irvin

& Stansbury, 2004). However, on the one hand we maintain that practices are strongly connected to the frameworks and cultures prevalent both in social services and in the political arenas. On the other hand, we believe that participation has a political value in terms of the democratization of public policies, and should be valued accordingly, rather than on the basis of financial or practical considerations.

### 3. Representing social workers' policy practice within participatory processes

As was anticipated, the data analysis prompted the identification of very different ways of portraying what social services and social workers should do and the part they should play in policy making. In trying to make sense of these differences, we saw how strongly they were associated with specific ways of conceiving governance and participatory processes. In fact we identified four different representations; the descriptions of social workers' roles appeared to differ in relation to these:

- Participation is seen as utopian: this view is connected to a traditional idea of government as based on hierarchy and in which politicians, with support from experts, are the ones in charge of defining policies.
- Participation is defined at a micro-level as the possibility of individual choice. This view of participation is linked to the neo-liberal ideology and to introducing market principles in the running of social services.
- Participation appears to consist of the possibility for actors to express their viewpoints and define their needs. This view can be related to something akin to what Keevers et al. have defined as new paternalism, as well as to a neo-liberal ideology. In this case participations risks becoming a mere ritual entailing a very low degree of power sharing (Arnstein, 1969; Beresford, 2001)



- Participation is seen as co-construction of social policies, which could be linked to the ideology of a universal welfare regime in which people are entitled to have their say on how their needs and rights should be met. This last representation of participation is the one closest to what the law prescribes and to the main definitions of what direct participation is about / entails. Certainly there are different views on whether this kind of participation is worthwhile in terms of outcomes (Irvin & Stansbury, 2004), but it is certainly the representation that more corresponds to a process of democratization of policy making processes.

Although different kinds of data were available, researchers were not in a position to come up with an independent evaluation as to how participation was in fact carried out. Sometimes the coherence between different informants suggests that at least they agreed strongly on what happened. In some other cases the representations of the same planning process were quite diverse, showing how the frames of reference of the various actors also differed. In the following paragraphs, I am going to present these views on participation and connect them to representations of policy practice.

### *3.1 Participation as an Utopia*

The first representation I was able to identify portrays participation as an impossible task, particularly considering the actual circumstances. In this case, usually politicians and administrators see participation as illusory: scarce resources, the rigidity of bureaucratic organizations, lack of time appear to be the main determinants of how plans are developed. It appears that in this political climate, nobody would take openly the position that policies should be defined from above. Some informants appear to believe that, having taken into account the conditions in which planning is performed, it does not make sense to embark on complex processes of participation. This position can be found especially in more traditional areas in the south of Italy, but also in some northern areas, with right wing governments.

The involvement of third sector subjects or service users can be seen as complicating the already difficult processes of reaching decisions on complex and disputed policy issues. Involving the public in decision making can be expensive and time-consuming. Often the citizens are portrayed as not interested. In this case the position of the informants is very close to that described by Barnes: 'Officials sometimes complain that the public is apathetic because it fails to respond to opportunities to have its say.' (Barnes 1999 p-62).

The informants say that activating participatory processes would end in frustration as it would be impossible to innovate social services and to implement anything different from what is in place. As a manager puts it:

We do not have enough funds, and all considered it is difficult to think of innovation. The money we have is used for what we already have (Planning manager – social plan 16)

Sometimes this hierarchical approach to planning is seen as the only sensible and possible way in every context: 'don't tell me that there is something different in other places, because I do not believe it' says a manager . Another manager comments:

'It is not that we do not have time, but it is a question of motivation, activating participation is hard work, and it costs: you do all this work, but then you do not have money to create new services...'(Planning manager – plan 16)

This position is mostly expressed by politicians and managers. In this context social services and the social professions are seldom mentioned, indeed they seem to play no part in planning social policy. Social workers in particular are described as those who have to 'dispense' social provisions. As a social workers puts it,

‘(for the plan) we have had just two meetings [...] we became involved when the plan had already been made and it just had to be signed, we were not even listened to. [...] What I am asked is just to put a patch over problems [...] There is this thing, that maybe they give you 3,000 Euros and your task is to distribute them to families in poverty. Everything seems to revolve around money’. (Social worker- plan 16)

Social workers who want their actions to be congruent with their professional ethos seem to find themselves in a kind of ‘shock absorbers’ role – buffers between the needs of people and rigid social planning which takes no account of people’s circumstances. However, in many cases this entails overwork or using their own resources to find solutions:

‘...It is not that the person can wait until we are able to answer, they want an answer now and from me... I end up doing a lot of things, sometimes I have taken my car to accompany them to hospital or the like... (Social worker - plan 16)

Several practitioners emphasise how the rigidity of the system results in money being wasted instead of saved. Elderly people for instance sometimes are sent to very expensive residential care homes when, with a more appropriate service organization, they could be better and less expensively looked after at home.

In conclusion, within this representation, participatory planning makes sense when there is the possibility of creating new services, and this possibility is connected only and directly with available funds. The motto here seems to be: no money, no participatory processes. One could envisage a very different scenario: the less money you have, the more choices you are forced to make, and those choices could be made involving people. But this does not seem to be the case here.

Social workers on the other end are here caught in an impossible dilemma: either they give up their professional role altogether and become bureaucrats, or they are overwhelmed and overloaded by their roles in buffering the rigidity of the system, which apparently makes it impossible for them to work towards changing the system. Thus one can well imagine how the task of pressurizing politicians and managers to implement the law and involve service users could be perceived as a further burden that practitioners simply cannot bear.

### *3.2 Participation at a micro level: the possibility of choice*

In this case again informants tend to attribute low relevance to participation when describing how planning was structured, and this type somehow overlaps the previous one. Nonetheless, in this case when asked about the role of citizens and service users, informants answer that users have a part, in as much as they can choose the service they will use. This choice of what provider to use is considered a way of giving people control over what services they receive (Barnes, 1999; Carr, 2007).

It looks like – in the last few years - you have in front of you persons who must be capable of negotiating what interventions and services they want ...service users buy services and they have the right to choose (Social worker – plan 13)

Not by chance, this kind of representation has emerged in areas like Lombardy where over the last ten years a neoliberal policy has been predominant. In fact, this kind of participation is often connected to the neoliberal ideology that sees the introduction of the market as a solution to most problems in developing responsive services. Within this understanding of social services, the users/consumers, by exercising their right to choose, will determine what services will survive and what will disappear.

Now, under the voucher system, if the service does not respond to their needs, citizens can go to someone else, it is not like when we are contracting out social services: in these cases, people can complain, but then usually nothing happens. (Planning manager – plan 14)

In this view, social workers are seen as the ones who empower people through giving them the possibility of choosing:

We have the task to inform citizens to enable them to choose not just the service provider, but also how they want the service to be delivered (Social worker – plan 12)

It seems here that the role of practitioners is perceived as limited and there is an emphasis on not interfering with what clients want. Only a few informants underline that in a specific situation service users/consumers need to be guided. In general the rhetoric revolves around the empowerment of individual consumers, and how consumers can influence social services if left free to choose.

### *3.3 Participation as voice*

The most frequent ways of describing the changes that the law has introduced relate to affirming that stakeholders, citizens or their organizations are provided with opportunities to express their needs and their opinions. In this case promoting participation is represented as organizing meetings or committees on specific themes such as disability, migration or poverty. Those in charge of planning are supposed to invite everybody in the area and all the subjects are encouraged to express their needs and opinions.

Participation here is equated to consultation.

We consult all subjects in the area as much as we can so that the plan is made considering our specific situation, this is what the new rules say: we invest time and resources to consult all the associations but also the whole population in the area. The meetings are open and all citizens and service users

can come. It is a system that we put in place a few years ago and it has yielded many positive outcomes. All can express their ideas (Planning manager – plan 19).

Administration here is often described as very close to the population. However, the actual planning, in the accounts of the informants, happens in a separate place, albeit taking into consideration what the subjects have said. This task division is well expressed by this informant:

They make suggestions and then professionals prepare a project and decisions are taken at a political level (Planning manager – plan 19)

Several service user organizations seem to recognize this as an important form of participation.

Nonetheless, they stress more frequently that on the one hand they have the possibility to express their positions, but on the other, they are not always listened to, and the plans thus only partially reflect what was discussed. A service user for instance recognizes that there are other factors to be considered, especially funds, but people do not seem to be informed about these factors, which are described as out of their control.

Within this type of representation, social services and social workers are seen as mediating, particularly between service users, who are marginalized and vulnerable, and those in charge of planning. Social services are then regarded as a kind of ‘observatory of needs’, and social workers as those who are better informed about the views of the population:

‘I have to say that we work a lot on the representation that social services give us of service users and of what their needs are. I know it is partial, but on this basis we define our orientation for the plan (Planning manager – plan 4)’

Sometimes social workers have prepared specific tools in order to gather and organize information about service user views, as in this case:

We are involved in creating a database on problems, we want to understand better what the needs are. We have created a space where on certain days and at certain time everyone can come to us and present their problems and issues. In this way we are provided with the necessary information for re-organizing social services (Social worker – plan 19).

At other times social workers particularly see listening to people as an inherent part of their practice, which encompasses a duty to make user voices heard:

My job is about inclusion, it is to give voice to people. For instance, very elderly people need somebody to represent them and support them. It is my professional duty to represent them (in the political arena); it is my professional mission and I think it is my ethical duty, it is the core of my job (Social worker – plan 5)

There is an acknowledgment here that all clients have a perspective that has to be considered and taken into account in the political arena. Nonetheless the subjects themselves are often excluded from direct participation, appearing only partially involved in planning. **This entails a risk that participation may be merely formal . As for the social workers' roles, the risk is in their taking a patronizing attitude, standing in for clients and unquestioningly assuming that they will be able to represent perfectly the users' viewpoints. This position tends inevitably to disqualify the knowledge acquired via the direct personal experience of issues and needs (Beresford, 2001; Postle & Beresford, 2007)**

### *3.4 Participation as cooperation in planning*

The last approach to representing user participation is one that many authors recognize as fully congruent with the meaning of the word, namely participation is seen as taking part at the same level as the other subjects in the planning process ( Beresford 2001; Innes & Booher 2004). For this type of representation we found a very good case of an area plan in which all the subjects interviewed described the planning process coherently. As the area politician puts it:

We started from an idea that put the public administration, citizens, NGOs into a position of sharing responsibility. Without this network, we go nowhere. (Politician – plan 17)

The social services manager, underlying the difference between listening to people and governance according to their views, declares:

The way we did it is different: We have said to people: you are structurally with us in building the policy of the public administration on this matter, you can have your say, if not always on technical issues, certainly on the way resources are used (Planning manager - plan 17)

Social workers in the area are described as deeply involved in planning, and each area team had to define one social worker who was responsible for participation in the process. As a practitioner says:

It has been a political choice to think of a city built with citizens, eschewing a public policy based on providing and dispensing services and resources, but involving the community, so that the community itself becomes an active subject within the social policy. (Social worker – plan 17)

The representative of user associations is of the same opinion and affirms that:

The plan here has been co-prepared. Hundreds of stakeholders were involved and it had a great impact afterwards because the plan was well known to everybody (Association of service users – plan 17).



In this view, social services are seen as playing a crucial role as they are at the center of the social networks that are supposed to take part in planning. It is not just that social workers see themselves as active in this sense; policy practice is not a self-attributed task, as the management recognizes policy practice as a part of social workers' workloads. The politician responsible for social services actually declares:

Social workers then had a very innovative task: they had to promote knowledge and activate all their networks, all the social organizations they are in contact with such as churches and parishes, elderly groups, schools, health services, associations of former alpine soldiers, or young people who live in the area or whatever you have in the area (Politician – plan 17).

In this case social workers saw themselves as having a crucial role in creating a network with the different social services stakeholders, and in involving citizens in participatory processes - including vulnerable and socially powerless subjects who are usually cut off from political processes (Bobbio & Pomatto, 2008; Fazzi, 2003).

Interestingly, in this case practitioners see this task as possible because of all the networking that they have previously carried out:

When we had to organize the groups on different matters, we had the plus that we could take advantage of all previous work: We can organize groups based on the issues we have already identified in our daily work, and we are all social workers (Social worker – plan 17)

Here therefore social workers are seen as promoting participation by providing room for people to take part directly in the process. The same social workers provide several examples demonstrating how they were able to put into contact people who shared the same problem or situation, such as young single

mothers or elderly people or carers, and provide them with the opportunity to self-organize and participate in the political process.

Several issues emerge in which social workers play a relevant role in promoting participation:

- actively networking in order to promote participation;
- relating directly to citizens so they can support the development of a shared language;
- as other authors have underlined (Rocha, 2007), they can play a relevant part in dealing with the inevitable conflicts that participatory processes entail
- from their perspectives, they can perceive emerging problems and issues that need addressing.

An interesting aspect underlined by several subjects and worth mentioning is that participation was not the product of pressures from below, but was promoted and organized from above. The same observation was made by Bobbio, and certainly has an impact on the ways different subjects relate to each other and to the public administration (Bobbio, 2007). Such cooperation between service users and social workers can certainly be viewed as **positive, however it might result in some service users being more reluctant to express dissent or enter into conflicts. In this sense this kind of participation can have the side effect of becoming a way to legitimize unpopular plans and cuts in social expenses, and to avoid conflicts (Irvin & Stansbury, 2004).**

**However, it has to be acknowledged that in this view participation is also / additionally represented as a time- and resource-consuming process. The stakeholders interviewed were particularly satisfied, but one cannot avoid noticing that the area in which this representation was unanimously shared, is in fact one of the richest among the ones considered.**

#### **4. Discussion**

What do these four representations tell us about the nature of policy practice, its relevance and the conditions that allow it to develop? One first remark concerns how different welfare cultures are present and intertwined within the Italian welfare system. At the moment one might observe how it is impossible to identify a prevalent line (Bertin & Carradore, 2015) The analysis of each representation allows us to see that in the first instance practitioners perceive themselves as facing the alternative between bureaucratization or self-sacrifice. One can imagine that here front-line workers will have to deal with a great deal of discontent from users, and this will put more pressure on them. We further have to consider that where the hierarchical idea of how policy is constructed is dominant, there is a perception on the part of frontline workers that they would have to fight in order to find a space to negotiate and to be listened to. Practitioners often feel that they do not have the time and energy to do so, particularly when it is a battle they have to fight alone. If the whole social policy process is not changed, it may make no sense to burden social workers with the idea of policy practice, which is easily perceived as an additional task, yet another duty placed on someone who feels already overwhelmed. At the same time, it would be important for practitioners to be aware that they are in an impossible situation and faced with an impossible task: if the planning of social services is rigidly defined from above, whatever frontline workers do will only partially meet the needs and expectations of users.

The same can be said of the second type, in which social workers are seen to engage in empowering their clients only through supporting their individual choices. This practice, which is sometimes known as 'voting with your feet' (through moving to a different service), has been shown to create the worst possible conditions for those who - because of their life situations - cannot choose. The strongest clients, the ones able to negotiate better interventions, move to different services. The services which are deserted by the strongest clients do not disappear, but go on servicing the most vulnerable part of the population, and, as they are not challenged, they tend to deteriorate further (Mejias & Starkey,

2012). Again the idea here is that practitioners have to process individual requests with no involvement in policy making. And they often lament that the most vulnerable users are further marginalized and ill served.

Within the first two images of participatory processes, social workers' policy practice does not appear as particularly relevant, if at all. In the two further representations identified, two frameworks appear to emerge where some form of policy practice has a relevant part in the representation, nonetheless there are substantive differences between the two ways of describing both participation and policy practice.

When participation is identified as voice, with the possibility of having a say, very often service users and their organizations are seen and see themselves as counterparts. The relationship can thus become adversarial, as service users are not in a position of knowing and having control over how resources and money are spent. Moreover the risk inherent in this kind of participation, verging on a paternalistic relationship, is clear when clients' voices are not heard directly, but through the mediation of social workers, who could interpret or even distort what service users have to say. Service users here are not perceived as capable of standing up for themselves. Of course social workers play an important role here; but how far is this role coherent with the emancipatory ethos of social work?

Only with a view of participation as co-production of social policies, with all the critical points identified, can we grasp the fully rounded meaning of policy practice, its *raison d'être* (Fazzi, 2003). In this case the role of practitioners is seen as properly connecting micro practice to social action aimed at favoring the inclusion of the least powerful and seldom listened to. Many now in fact underline how the individual participation of service users hardly ever occurs, even if beneficial. For people to participate to political processes, they have somehow to connect and create collective organizations, forming interest groups or movements: individual participation makes less sense and it is also less accepted and practicable. For this to happen – as stressed by Anker in relation to homeless people in Denmark - there

is a need for favorable institutional conditions, but also for sympathetic professionals who support the process (Anker, 2008; Cornwall & Coelho, 2007). Social workers can in fact play a crucial role in acting as sympathetic professionals who may enable normally isolated people to connect. In this sense they participate in the process of democratization of institutions. As Dryzek maintains:

Democratization ... is extensions along three dimensions. The first is franchise, expansion of the number of people capable of participating effectively in collective decision. The second is scope, bringing more issues and areas of life potentially under democratic control. The third is the authenticity of the control: to be real rather than symbolic, involving the effective participation of autonomous and competent actors. (Dryzek, John 2000, p.29).

In this sense social workers can play a very important part as they can support a learning process for people who have traditionally been excluded from the political scene. As one of our interviewees observes, the movements here seem to develop thanks to facilitation by social workers; however it can be seen as a first step in developing participation.

Considering the idea of democracy development quoted before, social workers are seen here as playing a further role in 'bringing more issues and areas of life under democratic control'. This is totally different from acting as a client spokesperson, which, as we have seen, could be seen as patronizing. It consists, on the contrary, in using and interpreting the information they have through their connections with people and with social milieus in order to identify emerging social issues that need addressing.

## **5. Conclusions**

Firstly it seems worth stressing further that although we are analyzing representations and not practices, we know how powerful these can be in determining the possibilities for action that people perceive. It can be moreover seen how powerful representations are, their potentially strong impact on actions and the possibilities for action that people can detect. Thus in a context where social workers are perceived as service distributors it will be hard and energy consuming for them to play different roles. In this regard, this study can validate Weiss Gal and Gal's model, derived from their comparative research (Gal & Weiss-gal, 2015). The model maintains that the involvement of social workers in policy practice can be connected to:

- opportunity, which consists of how practitioners policy practice has a structural place in policy making;
- facilitation, which is based on to the culture in organizations and policy arenas;
- motivation, connected to how practitioners perceive policy practice in their roles and how they are prepared to perform it.

In Italy, Law 328/2000 provided the opportunity: nonetheless, our research has shown that facilitation, namely the culture around social policy construction and governance, can vary dramatically in different local authorities. What we have seen is that, when those in power do not perceive participation as a possibility, for practitioners policy practice becomes something distant and unmanageable: the effort to bridge the gap between policies and the personalized needs of people seems to absorb all energies. Thus practitioners are caught in a vicious circle: the more they try and manage to close the gap, the less they have energies to devote to changing the system, and therefore the more they have to mediate and compensate for the inadequacies of the system.

Conversely, we can see how a view that embraces governance in its deeper meaning entails first a radical change of perspective; a revolution in how interests and different points of view are dealt with,

particularly as far as lay, professional, and technical perspectives are concerned (Bifulco & Centemeri, 2008). It entails validating different kinds of knowledge, particularly the knowledge of the expert gained through experience. It is within this landscape that practitioners' policy practice becomes relevant, if not crucial, and can be understood in its fullest and deepest meaning. It entails on the one hand working with marginalized sections of the population, so as to create the conditions for them to be included in political processes, and on the other using their knowledge and their privileged perspectives on social dynamics to bring the newest and hottest social issues into the political arena.

The last comment here is devoted to how the conditions to develop policy practice may be created. Many authors who advocate a major engagement of social workers in policy practice end by considering individual social workers as entirely responsible for it: it seems that low involvement in policy practice is to be attributed to social workers' low motivation, bad training, scarce attention to values. The analysis presented here yields, in tune with Gal and Weiss-Gal (Gal & Weiss-Gal 2015), considerations as regards how involvement in policy practice is connected to a culture of how policies are constructed. If structure and culture play such an important role, one can see how unrealistic it is to expect the system to be changed by the individual actions of a few heroic practitioners.

We have to take into account here the identification by several scholars of different routes to policy practice : from the level of social work organizations, to academic social work action down to individual social work practice. In this regard it is worth considering that those levels are strongly interconnected and there is need for further enabling synergies between them if we want social work to deploy all its potential at the level of social policy construction. Social work practitioners can play a very important role at this level, but for this to happen, social work scholars and social work organizations also have a direct responsibility and should shift their attention to how governance and participatory ways of co-producing social policies can become standard practice in political arenas.

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