

Exploring mistakes and errors of professional judgement in social work in China and Italy: The impact of culture, organization and education

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Alessandro Sicora 

University of Trento, Trento, Italy

Wei Lu  and **Jie Lei**

Sun Yat-sen University, Guangzhou, China

Abstract

- **Summary:** This article reports the results of an exploratory comparative study that investigated errors made by social work practitioners. Two groups of social workers, one in Italy and one in Mainland China, answered questions about the causes and effects of mistakes, professional errors and reactions to errors committed by their colleagues, and the influence of intuition on the decision-making process that generates mistakes and errors of professional judgement.
- **Findings:** The most salient differences between the Italian and Chinese respondents related to their willingness to talk about their mistakes and their confidence in the training received. A longer social work tradition in Italy helps practitioners in that country to feel stronger and to engage in a reflective learning process rather than defensive actions. As members of a new and not yet fully recognized profession, social workers in Mainland China are more likely to blame external circumstances for negative outcomes. Both groups shared the same positive consideration of intuition and the risk of losing service users' trust.

Corresponding author:

Wei Lu, Sun Yat-sen University, No. 135 Xin'gang West Road, Guangzhou, Guangdong 510275, China.
Email: vivia1009@aliyun.com

- *Applications:* The purpose of the article is to foster better understanding of errors and mistakes in social work, as well as more open discussion and reflection on social work practice and how to prevent negative outcomes.

Keywords

Social work, case study, indigenous, international social work, multi-cultural perspectives, reflective practice

Introduction

The media increasingly report social work mistakes involving children or vulnerable adults (Gibson, 2019; Warner, 2014), especially in those countries where the welfare state has a longer history. Mistakes are an inevitable part of social work, as in any other professional field. However, this cannot justify any passive acceptance, since mistakes may seriously damage the lives of service users and the reputations of those who made the wrong decision or carried out the wrong action. These mistakes can also damage the profession. In this regard, the process of finding and remedying mistakes is vital in order to strengthen practitioners' capacity for decision-making and reflective thinking. Furthermore, social workers are responsible for minimizing the harm caused by their professional mistakes, learning how to avoid similar situations in the future and, when possible, turning them into opportunities for new discoveries and more effective interventions (Sicora, 2017).

This article reports the results of an exploratory study based on research involving Italian social workers in 2009 (Sicora, 2010a). The study was replicated in Guangzhou (China) in 2017 in order to identify the differences and similarities found by the two studies. Social work in both Italy and China has a close relationship with government (Facchini, 2010; He & Chui, 2016), but it is given very different roles and tasks in the two countries. In Italy, there is a stronger focus on casework, while in China, social work has a closer focus on administration, over and above service orientation (Ornellas et al., 2019). Comparison between these two very different national contexts may serve to highlight some of the key features that can be used to prevent social work failures. This form of comparison-based research often makes visible shared tacit knowledge, as well as specific national welfare cultures whose impacts on social work practice are normally invisible at a local level (Trevillion, 2010). The research design was not aimed at testing specific hypotheses on the basis of systematic, analytical comparison. Rather, it comprised a very limited number of questions in order to generate hypotheses that might contribute to discussion and support future research, such as: how do social workers consider and react to their own errors and mistakes, those made by their colleagues, and those attributable to a misuse of rationality and intuition? What

causes and effects do they consider relevant? What is the role of intuition in causing or preventing errors? What additional elements of interest emerge from reflecting on one's professional errors?

This article will first present a brief review of the literature on professional error in social work, as well as a brief description of the latter in Italy and China. It will then describe the methodologies used, and illustrate, compare and discuss the main outcomes of the research. Finally, the article will highlight differences and similarities emerging from the two national contexts in order to draw some conclusions and identify possible learning strategies to help improve social work practice.

Literature review on errors and mistakes in social work

The topic of errors and mistakes has received growing attention in the recent literature (among many, see Harford, 2011; Schulz, 2010; Tavris & Aronson, 2007; Tugend, 2011), and the positive aspects of failure and being wrong have often been highlighted. The seminal work entitled *Human error* (1990) by James Reason is the most influential systematic study on this topic, and Reason's ideas have been used to build error-prevention systems in many fields, from aviation to medicine. Reason (1990) defines error as 'a generic term to encompass all those occasions in which a planned sequence of mental or physical activities fails to achieve its intended outcome, and when these failures cannot be attributed to the intervention of some change agency' (p. 9). Mistakes are defined as

deficiencies or failures in the judgmental and/or inferential processes involved in the selection of an objective or in the specification of the means to achieve it, irrespective of whether or not the actions directed by this decision-scheme run according to the plan. (Reason, 1990, p. 9)

There are two main types of error: errors in execution ('I thought well, but I did wrong') and errors in planning or in problem solving ('I did well, but I thought wrong') (Reason, 1990, p. 44). This distinction is also helpful in social work, especially when an intervention fails as a consequence of an assessment that is inadequate in light of a more detailed and in-depth evaluation of the situation. Within this theoretical framework it is also clear that failures are not caused only by 'wrong professional judgement'. For example, a surgeon could commit an error during an operation and the patient may die for one of two reasons: a wrong assessment/judgement and consequent wrong planning of the surgery, or a mistake in the execution of the plan. The same types of error occur in social work, for example during an interview or any other professional action.

The literature makes few connections between errors and social work research, education and practice. Gibelman and Gelman (2001) consider scientific misconduct and its implications for the training of social work researchers. They present some case examples and make recommendations on how to prevent the breach of basic ethical and scientific rules. A larger body of literature has focussed on social

work education. Zakutansky and Sirles (1993) state that mistakes made by students in field practice have significant professional, ethical and legal implications. They make specific and interesting recommendations to help reduce the risk of making mistakes and to improve the quality of social work field education. López Meneses et al. (2017) consider how self-reflection on mistakes facilitates self-evaluation and student growth towards professional identity and skills development.

In clinical social work practice, Dillon (2003) defines a mistake as

an attitude, behaviour, feeling, response, communication, contextual arrangement, or strategy for work that undermines the stated purpose or specific interest of a given intervention. Mistakes are the things we do, often unwittingly, that subvert our own conscious goals and plans with clients. (pp. 14–15)

According to Reamer (2008, p. 67), social work agencies should minimize the likelihood of future error and conduct comprehensive risk management audits whose primary purpose is to provide workers with a mechanism to ‘identify pertinent risks in their practice settings’, ‘review and assess the adequacy of their current practices’, ‘design a practical strategy to modify current practices as needed’ and ‘monitor the implementation of this quality assurance strategy’. More extensively, self-evaluation of social work practice through reflection on professional mistakes is an effective strategy to enhance professional skills (Sicora, 2010b, 2017).

Mistakes and risks are intimately connected to the decision-making process in any field of social work (Taylor, 2013), and the significant incident learning process may lead to better practice in child protection (Ince & Griffiths, 2011; Munro, 1996) and adult protection (Braye et al., 2015; Clawson & Kitson, 2013; Flynn et al., 2011; Parry, 2014; Preston-Shoot, 2014). Heuristics and biases (anchoring, adjustment, over-confidence and illusion of control) also simplify social workers’ decisions and often cause inaccurate and deceptive assessments resulting in negative outcomes for service users (Taylor, 2013; Taylor et al., 2018). Examples of bias interfering with decision-making have been provided, for example, by Enosh and Bayer-Topilsky (2015), who highlight the need to pay more attention to the role of ethnic and socio-economic biases in the decision-making process of professionals in child protection.

The background of the present study

This article considers *two* different national contexts whose main features influence the views and reactions expressed by the social workers interviewed.

In Italy, although social work has existed as a profession since the Second World War, full juridical recognition was achieved only in 1993 when the national parliament approved the 84/1993 Act that made registration with the ‘*ordine professionale*’ (professional order) compulsory in order to work as a social worker.

Eight in every 10 social workers are civil servants. Municipalities (local public bodies with legal responsibility to provide various services, including social work, to citizens) employ 45.5% of social workers. Local branches of the National Health Service employ 30% of social workers, and the Ministry of Justice, together with the Interior Ministry, employs 6% (Facchini, 2010).

Social work first appeared in the Chinese national development strategy 'Decision of the Central Committee of the CPC on Several Major Issues Concerning the Building of a Harmonious Socialist Society' in 2006. Consequently, Chinese social workers are now experiencing a highly innovative and constructive process of professionalization. The instrumental role of social work is frequently mentioned in the national governance reform (Liu et al., 2012). Political relevance, together with culture sensitivity and reflective practice, has become the three main elements of the indigenization of social work in China (He & Yang, 2019). With government support, China has adopted the purchase of services to facilitate the development of the social work profession (Zhuo, 2017). Social workers are required to be proficient in supplying professional help to service users. They must also contribute to social governance and civil affairs development. At the same time, capacity system building for social workers is still in its early stages. The majority of social work licence holders in China have not graduated from formal social work educational programmes, and few university graduates consider a career in social work (Tang, 2018). Therefore, both social work education and practice are struggling to cope.

In the past 10 years, even though there is still limited information on a Chinese code of ethics, it seems that social work values in China are developing to a largely uniform extent on the basis of a specific code of professional ethics in the welfare system, a position already reached in Italy (Ornellas et al., 2019). China's Ministry of Civil Affairs issued official ethical guidance for social workers at the national level in 2012, and it has stipulated various service standards since 2017. However, these official documents are more like policy rules than indigenous knowledge manuals or ethical guidelines (Shen & Lv, 2014). Frontline social workers still have to cope with too much disorder in practice.

Methodology

The empirical data for this exploratory study were collected by means of semi-structured in-depth interviews with social workers in 9 of the 20 Italian regions in 2009 (Sicora, 2010a) and replicated in the Chinese province of Guangdong in 2017. The purpose was to compare the findings from the two locations and gain deeper understanding of professional error from an international perspective. Guangdong is a leading province in the reform and opening of China. For a number of years, the province has been a national leader in terms of the number of registered social service organizations and the investment volume of government purchase of social service (China Association of Social Workers, 2019). Thus, Guangdong is the foremost frontier of social work development in China.

The large cultural and socio-economic differences between Italy and China are also reflected in social work: as said, professional social workers have been trained and employed since the end of the Second World War in Italy, while in China professional social work has been a more recent and rapid development, and social workers are mostly employed by NGOs funded by local governments on a competition-based system of purchasing services (Chen, 2018). Nevertheless, comparison between two very different objects of study often brings to light aspects that other forms of comparison would leave undiscovered.

The Italian social workers involved in the research were selected from different regions in order to include the widest variety of fields of work. The ages of the respondents reflected those of the social work population in both countries. Similarly, considering diversity and generality, in China, the researchers randomly recruited participants province-wide from a variety of service areas. They then purposely selected participants with diverse service experiences.

Both in Italy and China, respondents answered questions about the causes and effects of mistakes, their professional errors and reactions to those of their colleagues, and the influence of intuition on decision-making processes leading to mistakes. During these interviews, which were all audio-recorded and transcribed, social workers were also asked to describe work-related mistakes that they had made. The subjects were asked the following questions: Can you tell me about a mistake you made where you learned something that has been particularly useful for your professional growth? Can you tell me about an episode in your professional experience when intuition has led you to a successful intervention? Can you tell me about an episode in your professional experience when intuition has deceived you?

Table 1 describes the composition of the two groups of social workers involved in the research and provides information on places and fields of activity, as well as on gender and average age and length of professional experience. The length of work experience of Italian social workers is twice that of the Chinese social workers as a consequence of the two different national situations briefly described above.

Because of the relatively small size of the group, the 40 respondents cannot constitute a representative sample of their category; but they were carefully selected so as to include an appropriate degree of diversity and variety in terms of fields of work and experience. At the same time, gender and age were considered in order to reflect their proportions in the professional population comprising the sample.

The transcriptions of the interviews underwent content analysis in order to categorize the information and narratives that they produced so as to identify emerging themes and highlight the main differences and similarities between the Italian and Chinese social workers. A contextual and constructivist approach to data analysis was adopted; consequently, it was inevitably influenced by the subjectivity of the researchers (Madill et al., 2000). Nevertheless, personal and professional narratives are widely accepted as research materials valuable for enhancing theory on social work practice (Gilgun, 2014).

Table 1. Key features of the Italian and Chinese respondents.

	Italy	China
Province/Region	• Emilia Romagna • Friuli Venezia Giulia • Liguria, Lombardia • Piemonte, Veneto (North Italy) • Lazio, Toscana (Central Italy) • Calabria (South Italy) • Municipal social work services	Guangdong Province
Fields of activity	• Home help and residential care for the elderly • Hospitals • Family counselling • Department for juvenile justice • Services for the disabled • Child care • Mental health and addiction	• Family integrated service centres • Residential care for the elderly • Hospitals • Teenager counselling • Services for the disabled • Child care • Mental health • Administration and policy development
Gender	6 men, 14 women	6 men, 14 women
Age (average)	45	27
Length of professional experience (average)	20	10

All interviews were conducted in the respective national language and were then translated into English by the authors. A single word both in Italian (*errore*) and in Chinese (错误) expresses the concepts conveyed by the two English words ‘mistake’ and ‘error’. This made the work of translating the interviews, elaborating the research outcomes and writing this article particularly complex.

The next section presents the main results of the investigation and includes some extracts from interview transcripts. In the final section of this article, the outcomes from China and Italy are compared and discussed.

Results

Italy

Although the respondents cannot be considered representative of the overall social worker population in Italy, the diversity of the experiences described and opinions expressed provide an abundance of valuable information. For example, quite common was a preliminary comment on the complexity of the topic at the centre of the interview: ‘We should clarify the concept of mistake, because in my opinion it is an unclear concept within our type of work’ (Italian social worker 11).

Respondents expressed their views on mistakes mostly in three areas: causes and effects, the role of intuition and what to do when their colleagues were wrong.

Causes of mistakes. Participants listed three causes of mistakes in order of importance: time, relationship (with service users and colleagues) and personal skills (‘management’ of emotions and cognitive processes). Some respondents highlighted the risks connected with the lack of adequate vocational training, while others referred to more ‘moralistic’ aspects such as laziness and carelessness.

We make mistakes because there is no time to think what the best thing would be to do, to discuss with our colleagues and supervisors. We are always so pressured by urgent cases that we do not have time to reflect on what is best to do. (Italian social worker 2)

[Many mistakes are] caused not so much by the workers, but by the fact that services are badly organized for a thousand reasons. (Italian social worker 4)

Excessive self-confidence is also dangerous, especially when it generates a sense of omnipotence in the social worker, as clearly expressed by one respondent: ‘[Excessive self-confidence] could be one of the causes of many mistakes (. . .) We cannot change people’s lives, we can in some ways intervene in awareness-raising, greater self-determination and empowerment’ (Italian social worker 5).

Effects of mistakes. Participants identified the effects of professional mistakes in the descending order of frequency indicated in Table 2.

Table 2. Participants’ opinions on the consequences of errors and mistakes in social work in descending order of frequency (Italy and China).

Order	Italy	China
1	Failure to plan for inadequacy, ineffectiveness or inefficiency of the action	Improvement in personal professional competence (resilience, reflection, service area extension, cognition)
2	Damage in the relationships with the user (no confidence, escape, dissatisfaction)	Damage to the relationships with the user (no confidence, escape, dissatisfaction)
3	Damage to the user	Inadequacy, ineffectiveness or inefficiency of the action
4	Incorrect assessment	Burnout
5	Burnout	Damage to the user
6	‘Error chain’ (incorrect information between practitioners)	Lower credibility in public
7	Delays in the intervention	‘Error chain’ (incorrect information between practitioners)
8	Compromised path of life (especially in child care)	Incorrect assessment
9	Personal and professional growth	Compromised path of life (especially in childcare)

Social workers rarely recognize the opportuneness of learning by reflecting on mistakes:

Any mistake in itself is not an indicator of a failure in overall [case] management. Indeed, it sometimes opens up unknown scenarios that can still lead in directions that do not seem like the ones desired, but ‘other’ directions even more consistent with the path you want to pursue. (Italian social worker 11)

The role of intuition. Questions on the role of intuition involve a topic that is often proscribed because, in many people’s opinion, it could compromise the scientific rigour of the actions of helping professionals. As one participant said: ‘It happened that I did not trust [my intuition] and then I reconsidered. [What prevented me was this thought:] “But no, you are professional. You do not have to do certain things” (Italian social worker 2).

All participants considered intuition to be ‘very important’, ‘essential’ and ‘fundamental’. Two participants even said that intuition was worth more than any technique, although the opinions of most respondents were much closer to the following statement:

When I have to assess a case I always start from my intuition. Do I rely completely on intuition? If the question is ‘completely’, the answer

is 'never'. However, let's say, I start from it [. . .] then I use my brain. (Italian social worker 4)

Intuition and reasoning are considered a winning combination. Relying on intuition alone may lead to mistakes, but more often it helps the practitioner to do the right thing. Furthermore, intuition allows a practitioner to be 'more humane', to improve, as a social worker (Sara, female, 8) said, the 'ability to read non-verbal behaviours, and better understand situations that are not explicitly expressed through words'. It is particularly useful in dealing with interpersonal relationships characterized by high complexity or, for example, in the first contact with service users when social workers have little background information.

Other relevant issues. In response to the question of what social workers do when their colleagues make mistakes, participants' answers highlighted the sensitive nature of the issue, as in the following example: 'From a deontological perspective, we should say, at least to the individual who has been wrong. [. . .] This is the right thing to do. But, in reality, I can hardly say to someone: "You're wrong"' (Italian social worker 7).

On the contrary, the possibility of shared learning is a strong argument in favour of a frank discussion on mistakes among colleagues. In order to achieve this aim of shared learning, according to one participant: 'There are moments of encounter, structured confrontation, meetings, and supervisory moments. There are also personal moments' (Italian social worker 5).

This is a form of mutual help, not only because it promotes professional improvement, but also because important and frequent mistakes may be the consequence of personal difficulty and burnout.

When asked, respondents described episodes of their professional lives when they learned something important for their professional development. The example below highlights that everybody can always change for the better.

I remember a service user who was so well known in my service after twenty years. I had also tried everything I could with this person, as my colleagues had done previously. After that [. . .] I admitted defeat and said: [. . .] we have tried three hundred interventions, there is nothing more we can do. Well, a new colleague arrived at the job placement service. [. . .] This new colleague arrived and managed to establish a special relationship with this service user, to find him a job which he was able to keep for years [. . .]. So, I tell myself that maybe the worst mistake I made was when I put a stop to this situation and did not trust in my user's capacities. We do this [. . .] [when we no] longer see the potential. [. . .] I also realized that how we define a situation opens or closes to the person some opportunities rather than others. (Italian social worker 2)

China

It was not easy to talk about mistakes with the Chinese social workers during the interviews. In fact, most of the study participants did not like to name anything in their experience as a 'mistake' until the interviewers rephrased the question as 'Can you give any examples where you failed to reach a goal because of personal reasons?'. Even so, after talking about their mistakes, some participants expressly avoided taking full responsibility for them. For example: '...people always complain that social workers cannot offer any help. They don't trust us; therefore, I don't think it was me who made errors if the service failed' (Chinese social worker 1).

When all participants' answers were clustered and coded, the results showed typical regional features which reflected the pace of development of social work in China. Social workers' unwillingness to admit 'errors' underscores their anxiety about social reputation and professional identity. The negative connotations of errors in practice may result in excessive setbacks from the organization they have long served, service users, policy makers or public doubts about their professionalism. These negative experiences in the emerging social work field in China have constantly weakened social workers' fragile professional identity, resulting in high levels of staff turnover and wastage of talent (Liu et al., 2012). Social workers refuse to accept words like 'error' or 'fail' because they suggest that the professionalism of their work is being questioned.

Causes of mistakes. With respect to the cause of mistakes, Chinese participants paid greater attention to individual factors than did their Italian counterparts. The top three factors connected to the causes of mistakes were gaps in the following areas: vocational training (including degree education and job training), personal competence skills ('management' of emotions and cognitive processes) and social approval (in terms of professional environment). Two further factors that ranked equal fourth were connected with the lack of relationships (with service users, colleagues and, more generally, within organizations) and inadequate organization. Complaints such as too much work were rarely heard.

Many other participants attributed their mistakes to a non-professional personal background. Concerning insufficient training, one participant declared: 'If the supervisor had drawn my attention to it, this kind of error could have been avoided. I didn't major in this field; I only passed the certification exam. I need a lot of training' (Chinese social worker 5).

Individual factors and social factors complement each other. When talking about social workers' professional-confidence, insufficient support within the social environment was also described as a significant weakness:

It took me a very long time to earn the trust of the clients. They had never heard of social workers before I came to them. I was often afraid of causing more serious harm

to the client, or failing to achieve his or her expected goal. So, I intentionally reduced the frequency of interviews, resulting in such a failure. (Chinese social worker 3)

In specific regard to the social context in terms of social approval, participants highlighted the risks of social exclusion when communicating with stakeholders. This was especially emphasized by interviewees who were heads of organizations:

I knew that early coordination before this level of community activities is very important, but the government temporarily wanted us to quit. There was nothing I could do, I felt that the government has never recognized our role, nor do I think residents will accept us. (Chinese social worker 10)

Social work practice in China has indigenous political importance (He & Yang, 2019) when the employment of scientific knowledge and skills is proposed to resolve social problems and stabilize society. However, the mix of market competition and administrative hierarchy in governmental purchases of service is an obstacle to the development of social work's social identity. Despite strong state-based support for social work, there are concerns that local government and officials may not possess a full and clear understanding of what social work is, and only show enthusiasm in launching projects without having a long-term strategy (Law et al., 2015).

Effects of mistakes. Even though many respondents found it difficult to furnish details relating to the cause of a 'mistake', they showed great interest in analysing its effect. Most interviewees said that they were required to record their reflections during practice: 'I always ask the staff to focus on the effect of the work. The way in which they treat the effect, to some extent, can prove whether or not they have done the reflection' (Chinese social worker 14).

Participants also expressed their opinions on the consequences of mistakes in social work (see Table 2). Errors and mistakes are often recognized as a source of learning, even though, as an emerging profession, social work is facing many challenges within Chinese society. One of the most significant of these challenges is scant social acceptance. This explains why most of the respondents cited a causal relationship between damage in the relationships with service users and lower credibility of the social work profession. They believed that in this initial stage of social work practice in Mainland China. The basic trust from society hasn't been established.

The role of intuition. Respondents showed surprising open-mindedness when talking about the relationship between intuition and mistakes. Only one participant regarded it as irresponsible to rely on intuition and expressed the view that intuition 'easily evolves into value judgment' and that since social workers frequently encounter value conflicts, their intuition 'would skew results'. All other respondents admitted that intuition influenced at least 50% of their work. Rather than

being merely impulsive, they understood intuition as a kind of reflection from relevant previous experiences. '[The] more you do, [the] easier it is to figure out what service can match the users' demand. . .' (Chinese social worker 18).

Experienced social workers appeared very pleased to have this 'professional sensitivity', which they could use as a form of pre-assessment, especially when they had to make predictions in complex situations. When asked about the effect of intuition, the common opinion of interviewees was that intuition has been often proved to be correct before substantial action or after a more systematic consideration.

Other relevant issues. Social work managers preferred to point out staff mistakes face to face and avoid involving personal factors during team meetings. Less experienced staff, however, chose to ignore colleagues' mistakes instead of pointing them out directly, and were more likely to ask their supervisor for advice and suggestions. In any case, participants thought that colleague's mistakes should not be ignored. Only after open discussion could those who made a mistake ultimately reduce their fear and discomfort.

Some participants also reflected on whether social work professionalization in Mainland China should be indigenously embedded in a single original administrative system instead of constant discussion on how to revise and adapt models of social work from foreign countries with a longer history and tradition of social work. The following instance reflects the function of social work on a macro level:

I was asked to help a client apply for poverty subsistence allowances, but all the help seemed useless. We decided to call the mayor's hotline and luckily received a reply. Finally, all the things the client demanded were settled. But at the end of the contract period, we failed to get the next year's contract with the local government purchaser. They said that bypassing the immediate leadership and directly addressing higher levels was unacceptable awful and disrupted the original administrative order. They no longer trust us. This makes me wonder how social workers can freely perform? their function without conflicting with the original administrative order. They should be integrated. (Chinese social worker 6)

Talking about errors and mistakes in social work: Differences and similarities

The two pictures provided by research participants in Italy and Mainland China facilitate deeper exploration into, and greater understanding of, the subjective experience of social workers when they have to deal with a controversial and very awkward topic such as professional mistakes. When compared, these representations reveal some differences and similarities. The most evident differences are probably related to the frankness and openness in talking about one's own mistakes and to confidence in the training received. Conversely, the same positive consideration of intuition united research participants from the two countries.

Different views on the impact of personal, organizational and social factors. Chinese respondents were more circumspect when talking about their mistakes. If they did so, they tended to consider the cause as 'external', that is within the context of their work, and not 'inside' them. Consequently, they often blamed the limited development of social work services in their country. In Italy, the perspective was different because of a longer history of social work and the subsequent stronger recognition of the profession in society. Unlike their Italian peers, the Chinese respondents did not complain of having too much work and appeared more afraid of the consequences of their mistakes in terms of lower credibility in front of other people.

The different lengths of time for which social work has been established in the respective countries have a direct impact on the support from the social environment and the strength of the public image of social work as a profession. At present, investment in social services in the two countries proceeds in opposite directions: in Italy continuing austerity measures are reducing funds and staff. Since this means that fewer social workers have to deal with more cases, it is easy to consider lack of time and too much to do as the most important causes of mistakes. In Mainland China, welfare policies and services are expanding. The weaker (or stronger) a profession is, the more difficult (or easier) it is to be open about one's own mistakes.

Moreover, most Italian social workers are public employees who enjoy a high degree of job protection and, except in serious and exceptional cases, have little fear of being fired for their mistakes. In Mainland China, however, even though the local Civil Affairs Department or other organizations such as Youth League Committees and the Women's Federation employ a large number of 'licensed social workers' who have passed the certificate examination, they still play their original roles in the traditional welfare system such as delivering social assistance. Social work practice is conducted mostly in social organizations. NGOs employ social workers and provide services to local governments on an outsourced contractual basis. The contracts between these two parties usually last one or two years only, which creates strong pressure on social workers to make as few mistakes as possible, and not to highlight them since any failure could damage the image of high-quality performance that the NGOs have to present.

Similar needs of vocational training and impact on service users. The lack of adequate vocational training was considered important by both groups of participants, with Italy having a longer tradition of social work education (Facchini, 2010) and the Chinese participants apparently believing more strongly that their training was insufficient. Compounding this problem is the fact that, because of the rapid development of social work services in Mainland China, there are still many 'assistant social workers' who have not graduated in this field, even if they hold a licence for social work. The qualification and practical work experience of lecturers in social work at college and university levels is also weak: fewer than 19% of social work educators in colleges are social work graduates (Chen, 2018).

Another similarity emerging from this study concerns the impact of professional mistakes on the relationship between social workers and service users. The Italian and the Chinese respondents considered this impact important and often described negative outcomes in term of loss of credibility and trust.

Similar open attitude towards intuition. The similar attitude towards intuition is surprising because the two groups of participants in the research lived in very different cultural environments. Respondents from both groups considered intuition as an important and enriching part of their professional experience. The expression ‘professional sensitiveness’ used by the Chinese participants was especially apposite. However, intuition could be evaluated positively by social workers in both groups for different reasons. Italian participants had better training and seemed to connect intuition with empathy but also with a non-professional strategy of knowing the reality.

On the other hand, for the much younger Chinese participants, intuition seemed to be an important resource with which to understand the issues that they faced because they could not sufficiently rely on their training. More effective education would probably strengthen social workers’ professional ability to use intuition to distinguish useful feelings from those providing a diversion from a better understanding of reality.

Limitations of this study

The non-representativeness and the small size of the sample are the main limitations of this study. The size and the diversity of China and Italy and in regard to their professional communities of social workers would probably have required different numbers. However, as said at the beginning of this article, the purpose of the research design was to generate hypotheses that could contribute to discussion and support future research, not to test specific hypotheses on the basis of analytical comparison. Interviewees were recruited from different Italian regions but only from one Chinese province (Guangdong).

Conclusion

We do not claim that the findings of this comparative study explain what constitutes a mistake in social work, in either China or Italy. Nevertheless, this exploration furnishes new ideas and understanding that can be useful in a variety of situations. For example, some of the ‘stories of mistakes’ related by participants (and appropriately anonymized) have been successfully used as exemplary cases in social work education initiatives and supervision. Furthermore, in this field where tacit knowledge is so often involved, the comparative perspective between two very different countries provided by what we believe to be the first comparative research study of social work in Italy and China opens new scenarios and creates innovative opportunities to understand not only ‘the other’ world but also ‘our’ world and

make visible what is usually taken for granted. This process is nurtured by new and original reflective questions. On considering, for example, the strong role of the government in social work in both countries but in different forms, the following questions become apparent: What can social workers learn from each other? How can better awareness of the impact of the 'global frame' (policy and management) on daily social work practice be achieved?

The cultural context and the possibility of talking about mistakes

For each group of participants, the distinctive interrelations among culture, organizational structures, social policy and training system produced different outcomes in the complex world of professional mistakes. Nevertheless, also on comparing different social work national contexts, it is clear that none of the above levels of analysis by itself may fully explain why a mistake has been made. As skilfully described by Reason (1990) with the so-called Swiss-cheese model any negative outcome is always the final result of an intricate chain of events and actions for which the responsibility never relates to a single person or system. Lack of training or strong competitive culture, for example, cannot by themselves produce more mistakes. It is clear that the meaning of the concept of mistake is influenced by the cultural context, and the willingness to speak about one's mistakes depends on negative consequences for the person who has made them. As shown above, Italian and Chinese social workers are in different situations because Chinese workers do not enjoy job security and are subject to a fixed-term contract of employment.

Nevertheless, like any exploration, this research raises many (good) questions and gives few (partial) answers. Among the many aspects, the credibility of social services warrants further exploration. Could the Chinese culture contribute to service credibility? What is the impact of the Italian culture on service credibility? What social changes does the rapid development of Chinese social services intend to address? How do expectations about social work evolve in a country, like Italy, with a longer tradition in the helping professions? How does the quality of professional actions and recurrence of mistakes influence the credibility of social workers?

Further research could address the above questions and help social workers to understand more in depth what lies behind their professional errors and mistakes and find innovative ways to do their job better. This study has articulated the voices of social workers who agreed to talk on a taboo topic, and it provides findings arising from a comparative analysis. This could hopefully promote a different attitude towards things going wrong in social work in order to search more energetically for effective tools to repair any ensuing harm, learn from mistakes and avoid making them again.

There will always be mistakes

Errors and mistakes are inevitable in social work, as in any human field. Because bias is an element of many human cognitive processes, it also simplifies social

workers' decisions and often leads to mistakes. Talking about mistakes, and reflecting and learning from them promote reflective practice and can make social workers better and stronger, not weaker. The main obstacle to this positive outcome is the so-called blame culture, which emerged in some of the interviews and which prevents people from expressing and listening affirmatively and providing useful feedback on mistakes (Sicora, 2017b). As pointed out by Schulz (2010), any successful organizational error prevention system is based on three components: open and democratic communication, the acceptance of the likelihood of error and reliance on verifiable data. Being blind to mistakes could be reassuring in the short term, but dangerous in the long term. On considering the strong pressure to which social workers are subject from their managers, it is clear that any effective risk management process starts from open and honest recognition that 'something went wrong' and ends in effective measures to minimize harm and to prevent the same mistake from being made in the future. Service users and funders of any welfare system could be convinced that social workers and social services are of high quality, not when they make no mistakes (this could mean that they hide their mistakes), but when they are effective in detecting and managing mistakes from the very beginning.

All over the world, social work is too often entangled in the following paradox: it may be efficient, i.e. does many things and follows the procedures and guidelines correctly, but it is not really effective, that is service users are not really supported in their life challenges and attempts to enhance their wellbeing. One of the steps suggested to refocus social work on its mission is to accept the idea of being vulnerable and to willingly talk about mistakes. The outcome of this surprisingly simple step may be a significantly positive contribution to the development of effective social work practice.

Ethics

The national rules on data processing have been respected in both countries. Even though ethical approval was not required from external authorities for this kind of research, detailed information on the study was given to all potential research participants, from whom written consent was obtained at the start of the research.

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ORCID iDs

Alessandro Sicora  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7944-8144>

Wei Lu  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4565-0360>

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