

Why Are You Backing Such Positions? Types and Trajectories of Social Workers' Right-Wing Populist Support

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Abstract

The rise of right-wing populism and its impact on inclusive welfare and fundamental principles of social work have been discussed mainly as an external challenge to the profession, assuming, implicitly, that social workers are immune to right-wing populist positions because of their professional values and identity. This article questions this assumption, presenting the findings of a qualitative study carried out in the Italian context. The interview study involved a sample of twenty-one social workers recruited to participate via Facebook, where they had published posts and comments supporting right-wing populist parties and positions. The findings indicate different attitudes, experiences and trajectories which are summarised in an interpretative model, reconstructing four ideal-typical profiles of social workers supporting right-wing populist positions. The article suggests abandoning the hypothesis of social workers being immune to populist influences and instead takes seriously the experiences and frustrations that make them turn towards the siren calls of right-wing populism. The article also makes a plea for qualitative in-depth analyses of processes of micro-mobilisation leading to right-wing populist support.

Keywords: Ethics work, political orientation, right-wing populism, right-wing populist support, social work values and ethics, welfare agenda

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Introduction

After the referendum on Brexit and the election of Trump, the rise of right-wing populism has become a worldwide phenomenon (Rooduijn, 2019). Social work has so far addressed the issue of right-wing populism mainly as an external challenge (Noble and Ottmann, 2018). Social work pursues goals of universalism of rights, social justice and inclusion while right-wing populists instead advocate for an exclusionist welfare agenda, social discrimination and ostracism of those who are different. Therefore, the dominant view among social workers is that right-wing populism is radically antithetical to their profession.

Yet some studies indicate that social workers may also be susceptible to the temptations of right-wing populism (Fazzi, 2015; Milbradt and Wagner, 2017; Radvan and Schäuble, 2019). What are the mechanisms that induce social work professionals to support right-wing populist ideologies? Are social workers who endorse right-wing populism just aberrated exceptions or has their support something to do with more complex experiences and feelings that must be better understood? These questions are addressed by presenting the findings of a qualitative interview study carried out on a group of Italian social workers who had publicly commented on Facebook in support of right-wing populist parties' positions on immigration and security issues.

The article first discusses the relationship between right-wing populism and social work and continues with a brief description of the Italian case. Thereafter, the aims of the study as well as methods of data collection and analysis are elucidated, and the main findings of the study are presented and discussed. Finally, conclusions to be drawn from the findings are identified.

Right-wing populism and social work

The past decade has been characterised by the rise of right-wing populist movements in Western countries (Agnew and Shin, 2019). Different labels such as 'populist radical right' or 'right-wing populism' are used to denote a multi-faceted phenomenon including parties such as the Brexit Party in the UK, the new Republican Party of Trump, the Italian League of Matteo Salvini, nationalist parties in countries of the former Eastern Bloc (Hungary, Poland), the AfD in Germany, etc. Their common denominator is best summarised in the slogan 'own people first' denoting ideas of an exclusionist type of citizenship that contrasts with modern ideas of universalism and social inclusion (Rydgren, 2005). In its most radical version, right-wing populism advocates an idea of the state as a territory defined by borders separating the natives from the non-natives, who are considered a threat to the cultural and political integrity

of the nation (Abou-Chadi, 2016). Accordingly, the promoted conception of welfare is based on assumptions about the needs of the native ‘common man’ (Derks, 2006) and on ‘welfare chauvinism’ as the combination of strong support for economic redistribution in favour of the average native citizen with the demand for a reduction of welfare entitlements for non-natives (Keskinen *et al.*, 2016).

Right-wing populism constitutes a challenge for social work as it enters into conflict with its founding principles (Noble and Ottmann, 2018, 2020; Dunn and Fischer, 2019). Dealing with the needs of disadvantaged and marginalised groups, social workers are required to promote and protect the rights of people who right-wing populists pillory with their propaganda. Social work scholars and social work associations have begun to denounce right-wing populism, to reaffirm the importance of social work values and its political stance, and to call for paying due attention to issues of human rights, social justice, activism and advocacy (Ife, 2018; Noble and Ottmann, 2020). However, are these calls sufficient?

One of the main problems of right-wing populism is that it is a phenomenon with rampant power and a certain ‘charme’ (Meyer, 2019), which is still underexplored and poorly understood in its impact across different population strata (Spruyt *et al.*, 2016). While the dominant view holds that right-wing parties gather support principally from those who are mostly affected by economic and cultural uncertainties and who have fewer tools to assess the soundness and rationality of populist arguments, recent research advocates for a more nuanced understanding of right-wing populist success even beyond a typical voter profile and within more ‘unsuspected’ groups (Van Hauwaert and Van Kessel, 2018).

A main assumption implicit to the debate on right-wing populism and social work is that the professional community is immune to right-wing populist influences for reasons of identity and because of the very founding principles of the profession. However, there is evidence that even among social workers and social work students, sympathy for or even explicit support of right-wing populist thoughts can arise (Fazzi, 2015; Milbradt and Wagner, 2017; Radvan and Schäuble, 2019). Although little studied yet, this tendency is not surprising. Several authors have highlighted how the great contemporary social, political and economic changes entail a profound recasting of social workers’ identities (Fenton, 2019). Phenomena like depoliticisation or the increase of positive attitudes among younger practitioners towards welfare conditionality indicate that social workers are constantly confronted with the spirit of the time in which they live (Reisch and Jani, 2012; Brandt *et al.*, 2019). Likewise, the spread of right-wing populism is a phenomenon driven by social and economic contradictions that concern large sections of the population. Right-wing populism succeeds in intercepting positions and

defensive sentiments both of conservative and anti-establishment stances, but also within groups disillusioned with progressive parties. Without being able to go into more detail about ideological backgrounds here, it is worth mentioning that conservatism has been discussed as a counter position to neoliberalism (Lee, 2014), that anti-establishment movements have been shown to be susceptible to right-wing populist influences (Chiaromonte *et al.*, 2020), and, as movements such as Blue Labour in the UK show, even within traditional left-wing parties, certain groups promote conservative ideas on economic and social questions, including immigration and security issues (Bloomfield, 2020). Against this background, right-wing populism finds fertile grounds and it is not unreasonable to assume that it also represents a new frontier in the processes of redefining the social and professional identities of social workers. Such processes can have radical transformative effects on professional cultures and practices, and they should therefore be thoroughly explored and understood.

The Italian case

Italy has been described as an early playground of populism and as a country where right-wing populism has been most successful in recent years (Caiani and Graziano, 2016; Ruzza, 2018). The best-known populist right-wing party is the League (*Lega*), formerly Northern League (*Lega Nord*), which is flanked by other minor political formations with sovereignist and populist ideologies such as the post-fascist party Brothers of Italy (*Fratelli d'Italia*). The Northern League was part of the national government for the first time in 1994 with Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi. In 2010, after a phase of fluctuating electoral results, it became the first party in the regions of the industrial North. The boom achieved by the League at a national level after 2015 was driven by the controversial management of refugee and migrant landings on Italy's coasts (Fiore and Ialongo, 2018). The League profited from the protest to these arrivals and to reception policies. In the 2018 national elections, it obtained 20 per cent of the votes and formed, together with the anti-establishment Five Star Movement (*Movimento Cinque Stelle*), the national government. This government was in charge for just over one year. It adopted, however, measures with a strong media impact regarding security and halting migration flows, upholding the principle of 'Italians first'. During this period, the Lega also won the regional elections in areas historically governed by progressive parties. Although right-wing populist parties are currently not part of the national government coalition, support for them continues to be high with the League constantly confirming its first position in opinion polling for the next general elections.

Professional social work in Italy started to develop in the aftermath of World War II and received both academic and legal recognition only after the 1980s with the institution of first university degrees and the establishment of an official professional register (Campanini, 2007). The number of social workers is around 45,000 with substantial growth since the mid-1990s (Facchini and Lorenz, 2013). Currently, the situation for social workers is like that in other countries, which in the past decade have implemented policies of neoliberal austerity and rationalising social spending (Garrett and Bertotti, 2017). Faced with resource cuts and the worsening of working conditions caused by an increase in managerialism and bureaucracy, Italian social work is undergoing a period of severe identity crisis and a search for new forms of social and professional legitimacy.

Research aims and methods

The research was carried out on a sample of twenty-one social workers by means of semi-structured qualitative interviews. Interviewees were recruited via Facebook, where they had publicly shown support of right-wing populist parties' programmes and positions. Potential interviewees were first contacted by means of a private message and then by a telephone call in which the aims of the study were explained and guarantees of privacy and anonymity were given in order to obtain their informed consent for participation. Out of twenty-six social workers contacted, twenty-one agreed to take part in the study. The interviewed social workers were between twenty-seven and fifty-five years old, fourteen of them were women and seven were men.

The recruitment procedure considered the debate regarding the ethics of using social media platforms as recruitment tools, while respecting the criteria of full transparency and guarantee of anonymity (Gelinis *et al.*, 2017). Facebook and other social media are recognised as powerful tools for studying human attitudes and behaviour (Kosinski *et al.*, 2015). Facebook profiles contain information that corresponds to the non-idealised personality of the profile owners and they, therefore, constitute a valid information basis that strongly reduces typical self-reporting biases (Reagan *et al.*, 2019). Additionally, recruiting interviewees via Facebook facilitates participation as people making their opinions public on social networks are generally more willing to argue their positions. Right-wing populist support is a rather awkward and hence eschewed issue in mainstream social work debates. Therefore, using Facebook as a recruitment tool had the advantage of being able to identify and contact participants who would otherwise be extremely difficult to reach and interview because of their positions being disapproved by the professional community.

Without obviously considering criteria of representativeness, this recruitment strategy made it possible to get in contact and to interview social workers supporting right-wing populist positions. The overall aim of the research was to explore and to better understand why they support such positions, how they argue their standpoint and reconcile their political attitudes and positions with their professional identity. The interviews were conducted using a flexible guideline of open questions to deepen the following aspects: (i) education and training, professional experiences and career, (ii) expectations regarding the professional mandate and community, (iii) political orientation and commitment, (iv) general personal value orientation, (v) professional values, (vi) job satisfaction and well-being, (vii) perception of the social role of the profession, (viii) forms and reasons of right-wing populist support, (ix) experiences and relationships with migrants and other non-conventional or marginalised groups. The interviews lasted between one and a half and three hours. The analysis of the transcribed interview data followed different steps of coding and thematic development. Taking the domains of the interview guideline as an analytical grid to the text, the analysis combined the use of a broadly pre-structured approach with the openness of inductive thinking in coding and categorising the data within the addressed domains (Padgett, 2016). Eventually, data analysis led to the definition of an interpretative model that reconstructs ideal-typical profiles of social workers supporting right-wing populism and highlights different attitudes, experiences, trajectories and meanings leading them to do so.

Research findings

The research findings show that social workers supporting right-wing populism cannot be associated with a single type or clear voter profile. On the contrary, they have different personal and professional characteristics as well as different experiences and reasons that lead them to sympathise with or actively support right-wing populism. The analysis of the interview data identified four clusters of social workers who differed in terms of their employment situation and satisfaction, professional experiences, personal and professional value orientations, welfare attitudes, as well as their political orientation and commitment. They argued their support for right-wing populist positions rather differently, depending on whether they referred mainly to their concern with conservative values, to their own experiences of precariousness and exclusion, to their disappointment with welfare policies and frustrations in professional practice, or to their explicitly right-wing political commitment and activism. A summary overview of the characteristics, orientations and attitudes of these different types of social workers supporting right-wing populism is

shown in [Supplementary Table S1](#). The findings of the analysis were summarised in an interpretative model that reconstructs four ideal-typical profiles labelled as (i) conservative, (ii) angry, (iii) frustrated and (iv) militant. Subsequently, the four types are described in more detail, pointing out for each one; who are the social workers associated to it, what are the main reasons for their right-wing-populist support and how they reconcile their positions with social work values and ethical principles. This typology follows the heuristic purpose of an ideal-typical representation while social workers' positions and representations also showed some inconsistencies and combinations of different elements. However, with the exception of one interview, all the interviewees could be clearly associated to one of the four profiles.

The conservative

A first group of five interviewed social workers mainly represented a profile labelled as conservative. They were employed on open-ended contracts in public services, both in frontline and in middle management positions. They described their working conditions rather positively and were mainly satisfied with their job. The values shared by these respondents were the central role and the protection of the so-called traditional family, the importance of social order and the maintenance of established education, as well as of religious and cultural customs. These social workers saw migrant people as threatening traditional values, security and the social order. Their main cause of concern was the growing number of people belonging to cultures and religions considered hardly compatible with the culture and religion of the native population. They were more tolerant towards migrants who, in their opinion, share traditional values about the family and who are Catholic, while a feeling of suspicion or even manifest rejection was expressed especially towards Muslim people.

Muslims, for example, look with contempt at our values, for which we are the infidels, and their attitude is to claim for their traditions and not to be respectful of their duties. (From interview 9)

Conservatives find support in right-wing populist programmes for values they perceive are being challenged by social and political transformations and by an increasing value uncertainty. Right-wing populism is therefore seen as a reaction against the spread of relativist and arbitrary positions and non-traditional values. [Inglehart and Norris \(2017\)](#) use a cultural position scale to define right-wing populism that includes not only sovereignty but also the promotion of traditional values, an insistence on law and order, and opposition to the ideas of a multicultural society. People with conservative attitudes can consequently find in the

positions of right-wing populist parties a response to what they consider the problems traditional conservative parties have been unable to address, such as the crisis of the family, the erosion of traditional values and social ties, the decreasing importance of religion, and the lack of respect for law and order.

For me there is a normality that needs to be protected. It is the one of the family made up of father, mother, and children. I don't care that there are homosexual couples or anything else as long as we don't want to question the role of the normal family. (From interview 5)

(...) you have to look at the problems for what they are and try to ensure a minimum of order and security. (From interview 5)

The conservatives were aware that right-wing populism can collide with the values of social work and they therefore rejected its most radical positions.

You can't talk about sinking migrant boats, this can't be accepted. (From interview 8)

Through the stigmatisation of the most intransigent manifestations of right-wing populism, they seem to mark out a 'moral perimeter' to distinguish socially and ethically unacceptable aspects of 'bad' populism from a 'good' version of populism as the last defender of traditional values.

Concerning ideas of solidarity, conservatives are in favour of optimising the use of available resources for those seen as bearers of values more compatible with a model of society they embrace, and, thus, as worthy members of a community of solidarity. The values of social work were not questioned, but they were given an interpretation coherent with conservative ideology. Social work values and principles were adapted to thought patterns located at a deeper level of belief than professional ethics. Respect for people thus became respect for people in the context of a particular idea of belonging, where rights were subject to compliance with traditional social norms.

The angry

A second group of five interviewees represents a type best named the angry. They were members of a younger generation of social workers working on precarious contracts with one of them being unemployed at the time of the interview. The perception of a situation of personal and occupational precariousness was a typical feature of these social workers. They declared that they had invested great efforts and resources in becoming social workers and experienced their working conditions with great discomfort.

Recently, I started a new job again, another maternity substitution supposed to last for a year, then it became six months. I don't know if I was right to take it for six months. You know, it takes a while to get used to everything and then knowing that there's a deadline somehow affects your motivation. (From interview 1)

Social work has undergone radical transformations in Italy over the past decades. The public sector has ceased to be the primary employer for social workers. Approximately half of new graduates in social work find employment in the third sector with lower salary levels than in the public sector (Fazzi, 2012), while the number of graduates who do not find a job or who are hired with fixed-term contracts is high. According to several interviewees, these transformations created a situation of injustice in which one wins or loses not on the basis of merit and professional competence. This constitutes fertile ground for the support of positions condemning the economic and social contradictions of which the interviewees themselves are victims.

What does it mean rights for everyone? Who is in there? Me, for example, as a precarious social worker who in three months must start to find a job again, where am I? Isn't that a question, too? (From interview 1)

The definition of 'angry' refers to the 'emotional' nature of populism (Salmela and von Scheve, 2017). The anger underlying the consensus for populism is explained as an emotional reaction of individuals seeing their social role and status compromised. These emotions activate two mechanisms. The first is resentment that transforms fear and shame into anger towards social groups perceived as being responsible for the precarisation of status and identity. The second is emotional distancing, which consists of the search for elements of shared identity within native social groups and the distancing from individuals with dissimilar characteristics. Populist messages attract this group of interviewees mainly because they promise to restore better economic and social conditions to the members of the native population most affected by the crisis. Right-wing populist support in this case is not tied to the desire to preserve traditional values and to issues of social order and security. Support for the slogan 'Italians first' is motivated by the concern that foreigners have become real competitors.

If an immigrant costs ten and an Italian twenty, the employer takes the one who costs ten or, if possible, even five. And if he is young and strong even better. (From interview 20)

When asked which occupations are endangered by migrants, the answer was that even in the social services sector their increasing presence contributes to altering the conditions of the labour market and that they have become competitors within the segment of lower paid social care work jobs. A shared perception among these respondents was also that reception policies had given rise to a corrupted system, whose managers

took advantage of the resources made available for purposes other than the protection of migrants' rights and the promotion of inclusion.

These interviewees saw social work values as relatively important and contradictory, and their sense of identification towards the profession was weak.

Honestly, what the code of ethics says is of little interest to me in the face of such things. It's easy to speak just theoretically. (From interview 10)

They had carried out a temporally reduced professional activity, mostly on short-term contracts and often in roles not much akin to those of social work in the strict sense, lacking, therefore, the experience of identification with a professional community. Furthermore, their precariousness induced them to feel different from colleagues with permanent jobs, whose professional identity and social role they could not share. These findings are in line with the literature stating that this generation of social workers is influenced by a *Zeitgeist* very different from the one in which previous generations grew up and were educated (Brandt *et al.*, 2019). Empirical research has shown that young social workers are on average less sensitive to the values of the traditional welfare state, more exposed to precariousness, and give stronger emphasis to control and welfare conditionality (Dollinger *et al.*, 2013).

The frustrated

A third group five of interviewees represent a type best labelled as frustrated. These social workers were highly frustrated with their working conditions. Unlike the angry, they were regularly employed professionals with good levels of experience. They belong to a generation of social workers who grew up within a broad consensus on the principles and traditional ideas of the welfare state. They had therefore chosen to become social workers for strongly value-based motivations and invested high expectations and a great deal of energy in the construction of their professional identities. However, they were frustrated by working under conditions depleting the quality of their work and in services under pressure from cuts in resources and the rationalisation of social spending. The frustrated complained about work overload, lack of resources and time, and about the hostility of managers who pursued goals often perceived as contrary to their professional aims and principles. They saw professional discretion at stake, given both the growing limitations by procedures and regulations and the reduction of resources that can be activated to deal with social needs. They experienced their working conditions with strong unease and were pessimistic about the future of social work.

The future of social work, honestly, I can't imagine it. If until ten years ago I had hope that there would be a better recognition of the profession, today I see only darkness ahead. If it goes on this way, social work for me is destined to disappear. There will still be social workers but not as they used to be once. I've seen what has happened over the years. (From interview 17)

In this group, negative attitudes towards migrants were primarily based on difficulties of working with people with complex needs in conditions of stress and lacking resources that frequently become a source of misunderstandings and professional failures. In this context, migrants become scapegoats made responsible for professional fatigue and are perceived as taking advantage, not understanding, constantly claiming and showing disrespect. These arguments are used to stigmatise behaviours that social workers cannot interpret and translate into expressions of needs more consistent with the services provided. This stigmatisation thus seems to take on a function of self-justification intended to protect fragile professional identities challenged by broader institutional and organisational processes.

The support expressed by frustrated social workers for right-wing populist programmes was closely linked to these conditions of demotivation and stress. Originally, they were not politically oriented towards right-wing populism. They instead absorbed some of its features as a reaction to their frustration of working within highly unfavourable organisational, institutional and political contexts. Accordingly, support for right-wing populist parties was selective and can be understood rather as a protest against the decline of the welfare state, the worsening of working conditions and the delegitimisation of social work, processes for which these social workers blamed mainly the progressive parties.

Today the climate is heavier, and the job is more difficult. But above all I have the impression that nobody or almost nobody cares anymore about what we do. Social services have become the last resort of the most desperate people, as if the belief that what we do is useful for something had disappeared. (From interview 17)

This type of social worker is particularly interesting to study because they do not seem that different from many social workers today employed in social services. As to social work values, these social workers were in a conflicted position. On the one hand, they felt required to uphold the principles of social justice and inclusion, while on the other hand they were personally experiencing the problems of working according to such principles in a climate in which resources are being rationed and frontline practitioners are increasingly overworked and suffering from confusion about their identities. These tensions between expectations and the reality tend to generate a corrosion of job satisfaction and well-being. It is known that violations of professional expectations can generate negative psychological and social consequences such as loss of

self-esteem, increased personal conflicts in the workplace and aggression (Savaya *et al.*, 2018). Selective support for the right-wing populist position might be, in these cases, a kind of valve for these negative feelings.

The militant

The last group of six social workers—five very clearly and one in part—represent a type called the militant. These interviewees were regularly employed in social services, mostly on permanent contracts. The militants were social workers with solid professional curricula and good education and training. The decision to become a social worker was not taken at random but appeared to have been prompted by clear role expectations. For these respondents, working as a social worker meant dealing with the social needs of disadvantaged individuals and trying to improve their lives. Their ideas of the professions' mandate were not completely disconnected from political commitment, even though some tended to emphasise a more technical and expertocratic notion of professionalism, seeing room for political engagement, given, or even better, located outside the professional scope.

Four interviewees were members of right-wing populist parties, while two participated as supporters of their political initiatives such as demonstrations and election campaigns. Militant social workers shared the feature of being 'perfectly normal people' (Blee and Creasap, 2010, p. 271), found to be widespread among right-wing populist activists. Two interviewees were also active in cultural and religious associations. As shown in the literature (Muis and Immerzeel, 2017), these right-wing populist party activists are, distinct from political extremists, not hostile to democratic political processes. Only one interviewee hoped that the current parliamentary democratic system would be superseded by granting exceptional powers to a leader, who, however, must be elected in a democratic manner. Regarding political beliefs, the interviewees gave priority to values such as respect for the law, defence of the social order and security, while in matters of family, as well as sexual and gender diversity positions, were more differentiated. The toughest position was taken towards migrants. For the militants, it was not so much work pressure that generated this negative attitude, but the overall argument was made in ideological rather than in practical terms. For these interviewees, migrants took resources away from Italians, endangered order and safety, and opened the door to contaminations of the native language, culture and traditions. When asked if this attitude was in contrast with the constitutive principles of social work, the militants responded by declaring that they took action against a 'reverse discrimination' whereby migrants are unfairly privileged with respect to Italians. The militants were the most explicit in claiming that progressive policies had opened

the doors to people who took advantage of welfare benefits and removed resources from those who had less visibility and support from unidentified ‘strong powers’ and established elites.

Then you'd have to turn over billions to welcome strangers you don't know where they are coming from or what they're coming to do. This is not ok for me. When we say our people first, this means that before them there are the problems of normal Italian people. It's not that they disappear just because there is no fancy journalist from the lefty newspaper who puts them on the front page. (From interview 2)

Despite performing a social profession in which they claimed to believe, the militants strongly asserted their right to exercise their political beliefs.

The idea that a social worker is necessarily leftist is absolutely wrong. (From interview 21)

They also declared that by performing a role of political representation, they were able to carry on social causes and a higher systems commitment, that in an exclusively professional role would be impossible.

The other day I met the deputy mayor in (city). If I didn't have a political role, I would have to talk like a technician, from a position where you can't talk about certain topics. (From interview 13)

The professional community was blamed for emphasising the recognition of diversity in relation to ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation, while neglecting the problems of disadvantaged categories of the native population, such as the elderly or unemployed young people. The perception of the militants was that they are not well regarded by their colleagues because of their political commitment. They believed that the culture of social workers was still largely leftist. Consequently, the militants did not seek professional solidarity with their colleagues to address the problems of cutbacks in social spending, the inequity of the distribution of resources, and the crisis of the welfare state. They saw themselves as invested with a role of ‘agents of change’ that extended beyond their professional identity and involved them in their role as activists and supporters of right-wing populism and its welfare agenda.

Discussion and conclusions

Despite its small-scale qualitative nature, the study provides insights for better understanding the qualitative momentum and different types and trajectories of right-wing populist support. From a social work perspective, there are several conclusions to be drawn. First, the assumption of social workers being immune to right-wing populist attitudes must be questioned. Furthermore, social workers’ experiences and feelings that can induce them to turn towards right-wing populist positions have to be

taken seriously and be addressed by a debate that goes beyond declaration or abstract references to ethical codes. Finally, the overall welfare agenda must be taken into account as an important arena for amplifying or countering the spread of right-wing populism.

The findings show that right-wing populism is not just an external threat to social work. The debate must, thus, look at attitudes, conditions and experiences that induce right-wing populist support even within the social work community. Contrary to the common assumption of all social workers being progressive, there are social workers upholding conservative values and political ideas compatible to a certain extent with right-wing populist positions. Furthermore, the findings suggest that right-wing populism afflicts the professional community in more subtle ways, by acting also on wider groups of practitioners in precarious employment or suffering from difficult working conditions, cuts on social services, managerial reorganisation and professional delegitimisation. These conditions are increasingly experienced by a large share of social workers. In this study, these social workers have been described as either angry or frustrated. The frustrated, although initially or in principle strongly committed to social work values and ethical principles, feel especially betrayed and abandoned at the frontline of social services. (Selective) support for right-wing populist position may function for them as a protest reaction or a redemptive valve.

Against this background, the professional community would do well to address the issue of right-wing populism by opening a debate on attitudes and positions that derive or cannot derive from the values and the founding principles of social work. Professional ethics is the product of a variety of constantly evolving circumstances (Reamer, 2013). Moreover, among social workers, there are different attitudes and interpretations regarding professional ethics, depending on practitioners' motivational and cultural background and their conception of the professional mandate. Very different weights can, thus, be given to the dimension of social justice and the political commitment of the profession. Reamer (2013) problematises an amoral attitude characterised by the marginalisation of values and ethics shared by social workers who have an essentially technical approach to their profession. At a time of profound change in political and cultural prerogatives, such an instrumental conception of professional action as technical and neutral must be disputed by arguments concerning the founding values and principles of the profession that are not limited to fair-weather slogans and rhetorical references to an abstract ethical code.

This leads to the question of how to foster political and ethical debates and reflections, both in social work practice and education. As to social work ethics, several authors have critically discussed the actual usefulness of abstract ethical codes (Congress, 2010; Banks, 2009, 2016; Weinberg and Banks, 2019). Without questioning the value of a

document that states the values and ethical principles of the profession, new approaches, efforts and discursive spaces are needed for ethical debate and reflection to avoid the risk that discourses on social work values and ethics are perceived as detached discourses of a professional or scholarly elite, distant from the everyday challenges and dilemmas on the frontline of social services. Banks (2016) proposes a more situated approach of ethics work as an integral part of everyday practice that starts from the challenges social workers encounter in carrying out and justifying their actions in difficult circumstances. Only starting from these concrete accounts is it possible to conduct an ethical discussion that recognises everyday challenges and efforts in terms of ethical work and ethical resistance to organisational pressures, regulatory practices and resource rationing (Weinberg and Banks, 2019). At the same time, it seems important not to overload social workers with an ethical responsibility unethical at a time of strong questioning of an inclusive welfare system. The debate on the ethical behaviour of social workers, therefore, cannot be disconnected from a serious consideration of the situation in welfare services and, last but not least, the overall welfare agenda. In this sense, social work education should also foster its references to political philosophy in order to promote a critical understanding of the role of political ideas and orientations in the development of welfare agendas and the strategic role of welfare politics within the context of political competition and the spectrum of party politics.

Furthermore, there is growing debate on institutional responses to populist pressures and the role of policies and services (Raadschelders, 2019). The exploration of connections among service governance, the role of professionals and populism has highlighted that alongside the modes of governance and available resources, practitioners and the confidence in them also play an important role in countering populist attacks (Pavolini *et al.*, 2018). In this context, the role and working conditions of those who represent and implement policies and services on the frontline must be better taken into consideration. The findings of this study highlight that it is also the precarious conditions as well as frustrating professional experiences that give rise to right-wing populist support. There are social workers feeling highly frustrated and left alone by progressive politics, which are blamed for the decline of the welfare system and the delegitimisation of those who represent it. While there is a growing debate on the role of social policies and services in countering right-wing populism, social work must contribute to this debate and bring in the question of social workers as important welfare actors and their working conditions and experiences that may be decisive for either reinforcing or countering right-wing populism.

The challenge is, thus, to go beyond depicting right-wing populism only as an external threat and to promote a discussion about the conditions for social workers as a professional group that is very exposed and

not immune to such positions. At the same time, it is important to highlight the role of social work in the context of reactions and responses to right-wing populism as a phenomenon which attacks the foundations of inclusive welfare and constitutes a challenge for democratic institutions.

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Supplementary material

Supplementary material is available at *British Journal of Social Work* online.

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