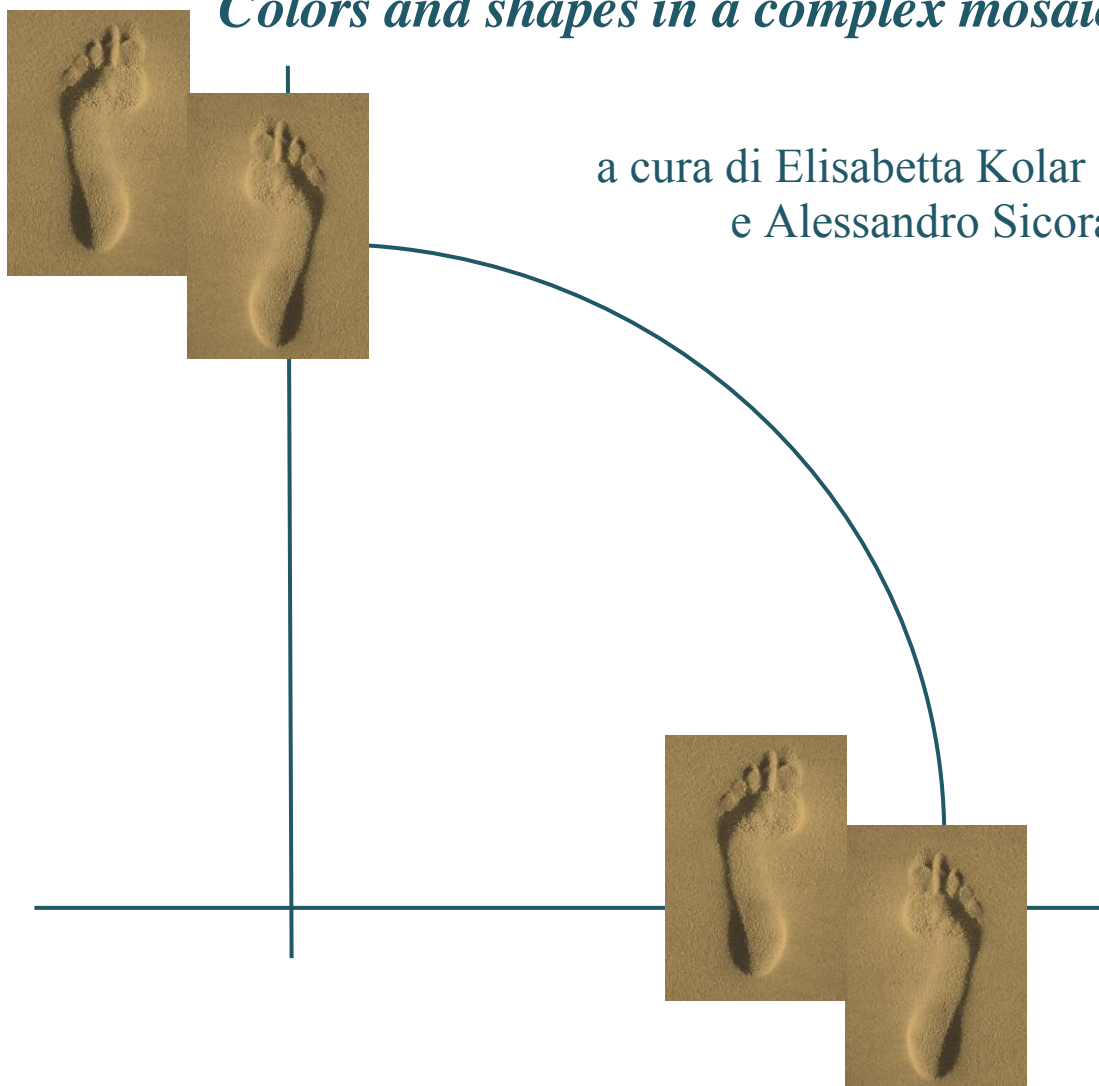


Social work around the world

Colors and shapes in a complex mosaic

a cura di Elisabetta Kolar
e Alessandro Sicora



Quaderni del CSAI - 3

CENTRO STUDI PER L'AMERICA LATINA



Con i *Quaderni del Csal*, supplementi della rivista *Visioni LatinoAmericane*, il Centro studi per l'America Latina (Csal) vuole ampliare la sua proposta editoriale.

Quaderno, nel suo significato etimologico, sta ad indicare un foglio piegato in quattro, un taccuino su cui si appuntano note e memorie per ricordare i passaggi salienti di quello che si è detto, o che si vuole dire, e di quello che si è fatto, o che si vuole fare.

È questa la funzione che noi vorremmo avessero i *Quaderni del Csal*: da una parte essere uno strumento agile di discussione, che miri agli aspetti essenziali del dibattito in corso con approfondimenti e riflessioni su tematiche specifiche riguardanti l'America Latina nelle sue relazioni con il mondo; dall'altra un documento *in divenire*, aperto a contributi successivi e mai definitivi, di studiosi e cultori delle questioni latinoamericane nel loro intrecciarsi con le dinamiche globali.

Le proposte di pubblicazione vengono sottoposte al vaglio della direzione e alla valutazione di almeno due referee anonimi italiani e/o stranieri (double-blind international peer review). Devono pervenire con un anticipo di almeno 5-6 mesi rispetto alla data prevista per la pubblicazione (Gennaio e Luglio)

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3. Social work education and practice in Italy: emerging issues, challenges and concerns

*Alessandro Sicora**

Index

Introduction; 1. The physiognomy of Italian social work: society, social policy, education system; 2. Italy and its social policy; 3. Being a profession: routes and arrival points of social work in Italy; 4. Italian social work today and where it can be next: challenges and concern; References

Key words

Social work education, social work practice, welfare mix, neoliberalism

Introduction

Although during the fascist period (1922-1943) there were some evidence of it, social work in Italy has only developed fully since after the second world war in conjunction with the growth of a structured welfare system. Initially the system was based on national public organizations, then later it became rooted in municipalities where as today it is structured like a net of non profit and public organizations, even if the latter are still predominant than the former¹. The essential element of this system is made up of 40.000 registered social workers. Approximately 9 out of 10 of them are civil servants.

* University of Calabria, Italy, e-mail: alessandro.sicora@unical.it.

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Since the end of the '80s social work education has been carried out only in universities, in 2012 there were 38 universities offering 45 social work bachelor programs. Moreover, social work master programs can be found in 36 universities across the country.

The current economic crisis (the most serious since the second world war) is heavily affecting the system of social services. The main ongoing challenge is to maintain adequate levels of support to individuals and families who are facing increasing difficulties. Social work education must find new ways to train professionals and enable them to embody the values required in this field of work.

The aim of this article is to describe social work education and practice in Italy and locate both in the frame of international social work development. This description will be focused on similarities found in the Italian structure and what is going on in the rest of the world, as well as on the peculiarities of the so called «South Europe–Mediterranean model» which is deeply centred on the role of the family in the care of vulnerable people.

1. The physiognomy of Italian social work: society, social policy, education system

Social work practice and education are shaped by mutual action and reaction of significant systems located within national borders but they are also deeply influenced by what is going on at an international level.

This complex process takes place over time and is subject to the influence of broader historical events which unite the destiny of different peoples and regions of the globe. Among the dense network of interactions three systems emerge as leading engines: society (a group of humans defined by specific patterns of relationships, institutions and culture), social policy (the sum of legislation and actions produced for dealing with social issues and needs) and educational system (all the institutions and mechanisms building and imparting knowledge).

The aim of this essay is to describe how social work education and practice are structured today in Italy and, in brief, how the current situation has been achieved. By connecting a kind of red thread to join the past with the present it is possible to draw scenarios for the future. This



is especially useful nowadays when a deep crisis is affecting Europe (above all South Europe) and is changing the role of governments in ensuring respect for the rights of social citizenship.

2. Italy and its social policy

In spite of its prominent place in European history, one must underline the fact that Italy only became a united nation in 1861. These divisions are still visible today in the many territorial differences in Italy (the country is divided in 20 regions and in 8,092 municipalities; Ministero dell'interno, 2012) and, even more, in the gap between the richer North and the poorer South. Today (more precisely in 2011), Italy is the 23rd country for population (60,770,000 people) and 8th for gross domestic product (Gdp), but only 27th in term of Gdp per capita on purchasing power parity (32,647,46 Us dollar) (World bank, n.d.).

In order to briefly describe the Italian society and the influence the state has on it, some indicators will be highlighted in this section: the Gini coefficient and proportion of seats held by women in national parliament, for income and sex inequality; opinion expressed and rate of divorce, for the importance of family; life expectancy and proportion of population who is 65 and older, for health and aging; percentage of resident foreign people, for migration; cash payments and deficit of the government for the weight of the state on economy and people's life. Of course, the picture given by these indicators is partial but is good enough to give a general idea as to where to place Italy on an international level and to provide a frame for a better understanding regarding Italian social policy and social work in the following sections of this chapter.

Is Italian society equitable? It looks like the answer is positive if based on a world perspective, however the same cannot on a European level. In fact the Gini coefficient² was 33.9 in 2011, below the Europe-

² «The Gini coefficient is defined as the relationship of cumulative shares of the population arranged according to the level of equivalised disposable income, to the cumulative share of the equivalised total disposable income received by them» (Eurostat, n.d.). Low Gini coefficient indicate high equality in income distribution. The



an Union average level (30.7), way below the average in Norway (22.9) which stands as the most equal society in Europe and in the world, but Italy stands much further from South Africa (63.1), that is the most unequable country in the world in terms of income. Similar conclusions are reached with reference to gender inequality: 22% of the seats are held by women in Italian parliament. In the world the minimum is 1% in Oman, the maximum 56% in Rwanda; in Europe the maximum is 43% in Finland (Eurostat, n.d.; World bank, n.d.).

Italy is often considered a family based society and even today in case of need caused by temporary or permanent vulnerability (e.g. disability and old age) the help in most of the cases is looked for and found within the confines of the immediate and wider family. In the world value survey conducted by Inglehart and his research group people interviewed in Italy said that family is «very important in life» in the 93.3% of the cases (the average value for all the 57 countries involved in the survey is 90.3%; World values survey association, n.d.).

Nevertheless, Italian families are getting smaller and smaller due to the decline in fertility (1.42 children per woman in 2008), the ageing of the population and the increase in marital instability (in 2008 180.3 divorces per 100,000 married were granted). Consequently, 28.1% of the families are composed of one person living alone, 27.3% have 2 components, 20.8% have 3, 17.8% have 4 and only 5.9 % have 5 or more (Sabadini, Romano, Cialesi, 2010). It is evident that it is harder for smaller families to take care of their members in need. The weakening of this very important role of the family, together with one of the largest percentage of people aged 65 or more in the world (20.29% in 2011; Istat, 2013) is also effecting the quality and quantity of migration, since even 1,500,000 (more prudent estimates are around 600,000 and 900,000 people) of the 4,570,317 foreigners living in Italy (Filippi, 2008; Istat, 2011) work as «*badanti*» that is women (only in a few cases men) taking care of elderly or disabled people and being paid by the person or its family. Furthermore, the life expectancy at birth can also be noted as an indicator of well-being: 83 years in Italy in 2012. Only Hong Kong, Japan, Ice-

maximum value (1 or 100) corresponds to a hypothetical situation in which a single person has all the income of a nation.



land, Switzerland and France have the same value. Sierra Leone has the lowest level, that is 45 years (World bank, n.d.).

The state, that is the largest collective actor, paid 42.2% of the Gdp in providing good and services and its cash deficit was 4.0% of Gdp in Italy in 2010. In the same year the minimum and the maximum percentage recorded by the World bank for the government expense was respectively 11.00% in Laos and 63.1% in Ireland, which has also the worst cash budget deficit (31.3%). On the contrary, Kuwait had the highest surplus, that is 17.5% of Gdp (World bank, n.d.). Since a deficit cannot be sustained in the long term, expenses cuts and/or tax increase are the only known way to produce budget balance. Social care and services are usually the favourite «victims» when the first of the two options is adopted.

What are the main features of the social policy in Italy? This country is usually included among the nations grouped under one of the following welfare state models: «Christian democratic» or «South Europe/Mediterranean».

As observed by Aspalter (2011: 740), «Christian democratic welfare regimes are marked by ‘corporatist systems of social service provision’ (Bode, 2003). That is, non-government organizations (Ngos) and especially church organizations carry out the brunt of social service provision. Both the principle of subsidiarity and the principle of solidarity form the base of Christian social teachings». Italy, as well as Spain, Portugal and Greece, «proceed with the establishment and consolidation of the standard social insurance programmes» and «privileged transfers over services. (...) Social assistance and the fight against poverty have been (...) the weakest front of achievement for (...) [these] four countries» where «families historically functioned as an effective (though informal) safety net: a social ‘shock absorber’ and welfare broker for their members, active across a whole range of policy fields such as child care, unemployment assistance, care for the elderly and the disabled or housing» (Ferrera, 2005: 4-5).

Not surprisingly Italy has been defined as a «pension state» to underline the disproportion between form of protection for the workers and the benefits for the whole population (Fargion, 2009). In fact, in 2006 Italy, whose gross expenditure on social protection accounted for 26.6% of Gdp (26.9% in the Eu), used 60.5% of this amount for old-



age and survivors' benefits. Sickness/health care absorbed the 26.8% of total social benefits, disability 5.9%, family/children 4.5%, unemployment 2.0%, housing and social exclusion 0.3%. All these percentages are quite below the Eu ones (Puglia, 2009).

In the '80s, after the definitive end of the dream of an Italian welfare state of a Nordic type where benefits and protection «from the cradle to death» are provided, the national parliament and the government, started to adopt laws and regulations to facilitate the activity of voluntary associations, cooperatives and other third sectors organizations. The system of social services was settled by the 328/2000 Act and the subsequent regional laws were passed as a result of a major constitutional reform that has since transferred most of the legislative power of social services from the centre to regional powers. The public sector has a responsibility to ensure all the people full respect for the rights of social citizenship, but does not necessarily have to provide benefits and services directly: a senior citizen who is no longer capable of taking care of himself/herself can go into a public nursing home or, if this is not available, in a private and accredited one for which the public pays contributions in order to cover the costs of the care needed. For this reason the main municipalities (the level of political power closer to the people) have to activate and realize processes of concerted planning. The so called *piani di zona* (area plans) defined for each *ambito*, that is a territory whose size is thought to be optimal for a better governance of social interventions. Each *ambito* includes a territory whose population is no smaller than 60,000 people, can be extended as a portion of a large or middle size town or can include several small municipalities. An area plan can be seen both as a contract and a prefiguration of the future: goals, actions, resources and time schedule are defined as always happen in any planning process, but its outcome is also a sort of contract because public actors and non-profit ones are committed to build and realize complex plans to which they contribute money, people and other necessary resources.

After the idea of concerted planning, another basic concept guiding the Italian social policy in the new century is the recognition of the specificities of the local communities, not only in relation to their needs but also to their resources. In order to avoid injustices and inequalities among communities and territories (in opposition to the principle of



universalism and with the breaking of solidarity between the poorer areas, mainly in south Italy, and the richer ones) the «basic levels» have to be defined by the state. In fact, as outlined in the revised Italian constitution, the state has exclusive legislative power to determine the basic levels of benefits/services relating to civil and social rights to be guaranteed throughout the national territory. This provision is the pivot on which the seal of the unity of the Italian system turns in the face of ever increasing push towards regionalization (Costa, 2009).

The concept of «welfare mix» is now wildly used also in Italy. It emphasizes institutional plurality and shared responsibility for welfare. Inevitably, social welfare systems draw on a variety of organizational resources, all of which are embedded within a broader set of exchange and production relationships. As the guarantor of citizen's legal entitlements and a key source of power, the state, understood more broadly as the public sector, is recognized as playing a vital role in the creation of social markets, understood as quasi-markets for social goods and services which separate purchasers, usually government agencies, from providers. The public sector is balanced, however, by two equally important sectors, the private and non-profit sectors, each of which operates according to a unique set of norms and principles. Thus, within the mixed economy approach, it is the relationship between the public, private and non-profit sectors that determines temporal and spatial variation in the output of social welfare systems (Gonzales, 2007).

3. Being a profession: routes and arrival points of social work in Italy

There were 40,065 registered social worker in Italy on 30.09.2012 – this is the most updated available information (Cnoas, n.d.), that is 63 for every 100,000 people – just for a comparison, in Italy the same ratio is 604 for physicians (Fnomceo, 2012). Even if, as better described later in this section, this profession had already been around for decades in different kinds of social services and organizations, a full juridical recognition was achieved only in 1993 when the national parliament approved the 84/1993 Act (Regulations of the profession of social worker and constitution of the professional register). The first article of this important act provides a syntactic definition: «1) the social worker



works with technical and professional autonomy and judgement in all phases of prevention, support and recovery of individuals, families, groups and communities in need and distress and can conduct teaching and training activities; 2) the social worker performs management tasks, contributes to the organization and programming and is entitled to coordinate and manage social services».

The two sections of the *ordine professionale* (professional association whose registration is compulsory to work as social worker in Italy) reflects the distinction written in this first article: section A is for people in charge of direction, management and coordination of social services; section B is related to the function better described at the point 1 above.

In both cases, some of the most important characteristics of the profession are (Sicora, 2005): 1) use of interpersonal and communication skills; 2) employment by public (or non-profit) sector; 3) strong link between social worker and the organization where he/she works; 4) social work as «operational theory» (that is, knowledge is not an end in itself, but constantly directed to guide professional action); 5) strong connection between values, practice and education; 6) field of work subject to rapid changes (trivial to say, but social work acts within a society subject to continuous evolution. One example: in Italy the «migrants» were the hundreds of Italians who left their country to find a job abroad till when, approximately 25 years ago, the direction of flow has definitely reversed and also Italy, as many other European countries, has become a country of immigration), 7) basic education provided by universities (since late '80s).

Where do the Italian social workers work? Combining the outcomes from two different researches (Censis, 1999; Facchini, 2010), the most important emerging features are that 9 out of 10 social workers are public servants and freelance workers are almost nonexistent.

Municipalities (the public bodies closer to the citizens and responsible, by law, to provide them services) employ almost half of the social workers (more precisely 45.5% according to the most recent of the two above researches), the local branches (identified by the acronyms Asl or Uls) of the National health service a portion of 30% (Facchini, 2010) or 24.4% (Censis, 1999) and the Ministry of justice, together with the Interior ministry, only a small part (around 5-6%). Users met by social workers are in the first case the general public, while in the other two



cases are related to more specific needs: the National health service provide social services where social and health conditions and problems are deeply mixed (disability, mental disorders, dependencies, old age, motherhood and childhood), the Ministry of justice implements intervention for underage and adult offenders.

The private sector is almost entirely non-profit (exceptions are, for example, rest houses owned by entrepreneurs) and includes charities, foundations, associations and «social co-operatives» (it is an associate form of entrepreneur whose profits are mostly distributed to its members who may be paid employees, volunteers, etc.). These organizations are active in specific fields of intervention and employ a slowly but steadily growing number of social workers.

What are the major milestones in the history of social work which have enabled it to arrive at the current configuration described previously? And how have the interactions among the three systems mentioned in the introduction (society, social policy, education system) manifested themselves over time?

There is still room for further study on the functions that the first social workers had in the policies of social control during the fascist period (1922-1943). Recent archive researches confirm a gloomy picture with glimpses of light and then reinforce the idea that preserving the memory of «*assistente sociale fascista*» (that is «fascist social worker», how the «grandfather/grandmother» of actual social workers used to sign at the bottom of many of the reports still preserved in the state archives. This title, in fact, was issued by the School of San Gregorio al Celio opened in Rome from 1928 to 1942; Dellavalle, 2012) can keep memory of a past which nobody wants to return to.

Looking forward, beyond the break of the second world war, the traces of a long path till today are marked by three milestones, which, originated within society, social policy or education system, represent turning points in social work history in Italy: the reform laws in the '70s, the exclusivity of social work education in the university sanctioned by Presidential Decree 14/1987 and Ministerial Decree of 30 May 1985 and, finally, the already mentioned Law 328/2000. It can be said that these events have generated four specific stages.

The first step of the proposed timeline started immediately after the second world war and was characterized by a particular importance of



basic education. At this stage social work needed to be completely re-ordered in accordance with the rebuilding and rebirth of Italy. The opening of social work schools made by Onarmo (Opera nazionale assistenza religiosa e morale agli operai), Ensiss (Ente nazionale scuole italiane servizio sociale) e Cepas (Centro per l'educazione professionale degli assistenti sociali) (Neve, 2009) began a period of qualitative and quantitative development extended on the '50s and the '60s when more and more social workers were employed by agencies controlled by the government. In these large organizations (even if they had a quite extended nets of local branches) supervision was especially widespread and well developed (Busnelli Fiorentino, 1990), maybe even more than during later decades when the reality of social services has been fragmented in smaller organizations where, also because of budget limits, supervision has often not considered of priority interest. In 1964, at the end of the so-called «economic miracle» (1958-1963), which brought social change and comfort in large segments of the population, there were about 4.000 social workers in Italy (Sgroi, 2001).

In the '70s and '80s (second stage), there are major changes of social work, social care and health care. The origin of this particularly fruitful period can be found in the many reforms that see the light in these years. Among the many, these can be remembered: decentralization (Decree n.616/1977 and others), National health service reform (Act n.833/1978), new legislation for family (for example, Act n.405/1975 established the *consultori familiari*, that is a counselling service for health and social needs of family members), psychiatric reform (Act n.180/1978) which decreed the closure of psychiatric hospitals and the establishment of community services for mental health. The need to update knowledge and skills on these reforms and on the methodology for their implementation urged schools of social work and organizations providing social services on organizing training courses for professionals on duty (Sicora, 2005).

A third phase was opened in the second half of the '80s as a consequence of two events of regulatory significance: the Presidential Decree n.14/1987, already mentioned above together with the definition of social work it provided, and some decrees enacted in 1982 and 1987 that have made academic qualification compulsory to work as social worker. Therefore, private and public schools (in the second case, usually



promoted and financed by local administrations) that till that moment had provided social work education with 3 years courses after high school stopped their activity. The consequence of this event have been very deep in the development of social work as a discipline. At that time different opinions were expressed: there were those (Giorio, 1996) who believed that university could lead to more internalized and professional behaviours bringing a stronger consolidation of the profession in the long run, and, on the other side, there were others (Vecchiato, 1995) who thought that universities offer courses that are too distant from field practice, unable to assimilate new stimuli coming from society and social services and to bring knowledge as a whole and not as a fragmented pictures painted from the perspective of several scientific disciplines (sociology, psychology and others). In any case, the '90s appear a period full of opportunities for theoretical reflection (publications, conferences and seminars) aroused by the challenge posed by the inclusion of social service in the academic world.

Another milestone, opening the current forth stage, is represented by the already mentioned n.328/2000 Act, with the consequences on social policy described in the previous section, and the Bologna declaration. This important agreement was signed by 29 countries in 1999 and is considered a very important step in the development of an European higher education system. As Campanini (2009: 37) wrote, «in accordance with the principles of the Bologna declaration, Italy has introduced a national reform of higher education, which establishes two levels of degree in all university faculties. With regards to social work, there is a degree entitled 'Sciences of social work' and a master's degree in 'Planning and management of politics and social services'. In the academic year 2009-2010 there were: forty-five bachelor/undergraduate courses (first level), thirty-seven master degree courses (second level) and only five doctorates that have special paths for social work (Trieste, Rome, Milano Bicocca, Sassari and Trento)».



4. Italian social work today and where it can be next: challenges and concern

What specificities have characterized social work in Italy over the last 30 years up until the present day? There are three useful key-words to answer this question: methodological unitarity, trifocality (or multifocality) and plurifunctionality (Dal Pra 1991; 2013).

Dating back to the '50s in Italy, as in other countries casework, group work and community work, as well as the so-called auxiliary methods (service management and applied research) had been important parts of social work practice and education in Italy. In the '80s, however, after a full sedimentation of the reforms promoted in the decade before and previously mentioned in this essay, «theoretical reflection on the unitary method as guiding and directing the framework for social workers' intervention started developing in Italy. In contrast to other countries where the methodological process is still articulated through different and separate kinds of interventions – i.e. casework, group-work, community work, and administrative work – the unitary method adopted in Italy requires professional intervention to adopt the same methodological approach without taking into account the kind or number of users, whether person, family, group or community. This process, aims to support a rational and scientific action whilst maintaining a careful emphasis on a holistic approach, and it is divided into different phases listed in chronological and logical order as follows: assessment of need, development of the project and definition of the contract, implementation of the project and the monitoring and final evaluation of outcomes» (Campanini, 2007: 108-109). The development of this peculiar theoretical frame was the direct consequence of the reforms affecting social services. These changes in legislation have been built on a community-based perspective and have been opened to all the people and not only to those with special needs and conditions, therefore it seems more effective to consider people and situations in a unified way rather than separately.

In fact, the methodological unitarity is one of the key features of the *Servizio sociale di territorio* (territory based social work), provided by municipalities and, as already said before, directly involving almost half of the Italian social workers. This consists of professional and mul-



ti-purpose actions addressed to the general public concentrated in a limited area, is shaped on the needs of that specific territory and pursues the integration of social and health care, as well as of the public and private spheres in an interdisciplinary approach (Tassinari, 2013).

Moreover, in all the fields where social workers are engaged, the concept of trifocality comes as a consequence of methodological unity and refers to the need that each assessment and intervention made by a social worker has to be focused on three areas at the same time: client/user, community and organization where the practitioner works. What the social worker does and with the person or family in need is only a part of what is required for an effective intervention. The other two important sets of actions are related, firstly, the development and integration of community resources in order to build an integrated system of services and answers the needs of the people and, secondly, the planning and organization of the agency in order to produce better services and to realize social citizenship rights (Lazzari, 2008; Gui, 2013; Sicora, 2013; Lazzari, Gui, 2013).

Social work is also pluri- or multifunctional because it has to operate simultaneously and in an organic and coordinated way on several fronts: face to face work with the users; services design, organization and management; promotion, animation and coordination of resources and services of the community and the private sector to solve general and individual social problems; study, research and analysis on problems and resources of the territory in order to carry out projects able to implement local, participatory and planned social policies (Dal Pra, 1991).

Even if traditional models of social work (psychosocial, problem-solving, task-centered, just to mentioned the most well-known) are still popular, the systemic model – based on the systems theory and the pragmatics of human communication of the Palo Alto school (Campaini, 1988) – and the network approach (Ferrario, 1992; Sanicola, 1994; Folgheraiter, 1998) are probably the most influential theoretical frames seen in social work practice and education today in Italy.

Probably the best window to view the state-of-the-art of the Italian social work is the *Dizionario di servizio sociale* (Dictionary of social work), first edited in 1995 by Maria Dal Pra e deeply revised, renamed as *Nuovo dizionario di servizio sociale* (New dictionary of social work)



and edited by Annamaria Campanini in 2013. This more recent version includes 189 terms written by more than 154 authors.

This piece of work is also an effort to strengthen the weak position of social work in the Italian academic world. «The lack of recognition of social work as an autonomous discipline, the very low amount of specific courses contributing to the total number of credits at bachelor and master levels, and the difficulty for social work teachers to get tenure in universities, affect not only the possibility to develop specific research but also the quality of the professional preparation of social workers» (Campanini, 2009: 37).

Two circumstances are particularly eloquent in supporting this: only 12 positions of teaching in different universities have been filled by people who had a job experience as a social worker or at least graduated in social work. Apart from these few cases, courses of social work (commonly named «Principles and foundations of social work» and «Methodology/methods of social work») are usually taught, in some cases even for free, by expert social workers who are selected each year and carry out this activity during the time left off from their work as employees in social services. Alternatively and in a growing number of cases the courses above are assigned to people who have tenure but are sociologists. It is to be noted that 12 positions mentioned above were not won after a selection on social work issues but on sociology since in the academic Italian system social work is considered a sub-area of General sociology; there are no department or faculty of social work at all. According to official data of the Ministry of university (Ministero dell'istruzione, dell'università e della ricerca, 2012) sixteen of the total forty-five B.A. existing in 2012 in Italy were located in faculties/departments of Political sciences, eleven in Science education, five in Sociology, five in Humanities, three in Law and the remaining in Medicine or other disciplines.

Another concern comes from the limited time for the internship, that is only 450 hours at the bachelor level in many universities. On the other side, a new opportunity is represented by the obligation to lifelong learning for all social workers enrolled in the *ordine professionale* (professional association).



The situation of social work education described here represents undoubtedly a source of concern, but also a challenge for the professional body and the slim battalion of tenure professors.

But, of course, there are also other problems some of which pose threats to social work and its mission today in Italy. First of all, the ever changing social environment requires the helping professions to equip themselves more adequately to deal with old and new problems such as ageing, migration, new families and other issues. The deep recession started in 2008 makes this task even more difficult.

Secondly and as a direct consequence of the crisis, social policies are changing and also in Italy neoliberalism, managerialism and marketing are concepts entering more and more deeply in the choice of policy makers and somehow of social workers, even if not, at least till now, at levels known in other countries. Not surprisingly, recent nationwide research found that the majority of the experienced Italian social workers thinks the capacity of social services to meet the needs of users has worsened over the past 10 years (Carboni, 2010).

Neoliberalism is «a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free market and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practice» (Harvey, 2005: 2). In times of budget cuts and when the easy formula «public = inefficiency and waste; private efficiency and freedom of choice» is gaining more and more consensus, the neoliberalist recipe attracts interest also in the social policy makers. Granting recognition and money to private services instead of building and operating services their own is becoming a common solution chosen by national and local public powers as well as the monetization of benefits and services (the money given is thought to be good in strengthen the individual free power of choice). The impoverishment of the professionalism and the role of social workers is evident (Burgalassi, 2012). Also in the light of international literature on this subject, strong criticism has been expressed on managerialism and case or care management by some scholars in Italian universities (Fargion, 2009; Lorenz, 2006).



Somehow related on a micro level to the social policy dynamics described above, the poor ability of many social workers to actually manage the organizational dimension and enable it to respond more effectively to the demands of the users are often the main obstacles which make it difficult to realise the trifocal perspective urging social workers to operate simultaneously on and with user, organization, and community. Burn-out or cold identification with the bureaucratic mechanisms are often the outcomes of this situation.

International comparison is particularly useful in order to adequately face this and other difficulties social work meets today in Italy. On this level and in a globalized world, everybody can teach and everybody can learn, but, most importantly, all social workers can bring together their different experiences and endeavour to find better solutions to deal with common problems and help those in need, which has always been the ultimate goal in the world of social work since its beginning.

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