Decision-Making and Ethical Dilemmas of Child and Family Social Workers

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Child protection services are characterized by the task of constantly balancing the need of protecting the child and the need to help parents, with the mission in order to achieve a better standard of living for children of evaluating the situations where problems of family life and parental behaviour create risks for children's lives. In their daily work, social workers have to make decisions taking into account different levels of judgement and evaluation, in situations where there is a structural ambivalence and no clear evidence of the 'right way' to act. Viewed from an ethical perspective, this uncertainty raises perennial questions about 'what is right" and "what is good" and professional and organizational cultures should contribute to help practitioners in dealing with these dilemmas.

In Italy, the child protection 'system' was developed during the 90's, more thanks to a professional movement from the bottom, than to a wide and systematic national child welfare policy. The way to protect children in danger was based on a sort of 'patchwork of rules' that works due to a coherent and collaborative interaction between the Juvenile court and the Welfare system, social and health services; those principles allowed Italy to developed it's child protection system somehow akin to that of other western European countries.

In this field, professional decisions about what is in the 'best interest' of the child are influenced to what happens in two macro areas, the organization of Welfare and the legal system which have being characterized by deep changes in the first years of 2000's. The former with cuts in spending, managerialism, subsidiarity, and separation between social and health services, localization. The latter with the demand of 'new' role of Justice related to a liberal view and guaranties for the people involved.

The research proposal follows the hypothesis that those macro changes result in an incongruity between the explicit mission and the real context of child and family work, and that this increases the complexity of the 'normal' dilemmas faced by children and family services, and gives rise to some ethical implications.

Following the structure of similar research conducted by S. Banks (2003) the objective of the research is to explore:

- the impact of macro changes of Welfare and Legal system on the practice of social workers involved in child protection services

- how social workers deal with the 'normal' or 'new' dilemmas arising from those changes.

2   Research design

The research is an empirical and descriptive study based on in-depth interviews with child and family social workers. It involves a purposive sample of 32 social workers chosen through 'snow-balling method', following the following three different criteria:

a) level of specialization of the child protection team. This is different in the 'statutory specialized' services, which deals with the clients referred by the court and in the 'voluntary', locally based services, dealing with general family problems as well as judicial child protection;

b) level of seniority, choosing those who have been working for more or less than 10 years. We argue that the previous ones have experienced a different more coherent system;

 c) the size of the town, looking at big towns and small villages. We argue that big towns are more exposed to the process of bureaucratization and managerialism, while small villages are more sensitive to personal relationship and 'political and community' influences.

The interview, conducted in a semi- structured way, covered 4 areas:

- Self-presentation of professional history

- the major changes experienced in last 5 or 10 years

- Ethical dilemmas and 'difficult' situations. Again following S. Banks, social workers were asked to quote a situation where they felt *a dilemma*. The interview focused on the conflicting values and the decision making process adopted

- Explicit and underlined criteria of judgment. What social workers defined as values, quality and motivation of social work

3   First results

Using content analysis, I found seven types of dilemmas that could be grouped in *three main categories*. The first category is "structural", specific of child protection services and always present; it refers to the difficulty of balancing different 'rights': the needs for protection of children and the need to support the parents (e.g. as referring a family to the court, evaluating risk for children, placement, substitute care, referring penal crimes). The second category of dilemmas arises in the relationship between social workers and the organization, with the structural ambivalence (Lorenz, 2006) of the 'double mandate' and the professional autonomy; the third category is embedded in the interprofessional collaboration and in the relationship with the Court.

Regarding perception of changes which have an impact on child protection work, the area that is more frequently and intensively quoted is the area of social policies and services organization, followed by the area of changes of the position of the Court.

In the category of dilemmas concerning the *relationship between social workers and the organization,* the majority of social workers have quoted the impact of two factors: a) reduction of resources and b) ongoing process of managerialism, understood as distrust and control for professionals. Many dilemmas refer to situations where bonds and constraints

settled in the organization have so deeply modified the real working conditions that the space of professional working is severely limited.

In those cases social workers say that they are experiencing heavy tensions between the professional and the institutional mandates, and this becomes a serious threat to their concept of professional integrity. I broadly claimed these dilemmas as symptoms of a "divorce" between professionals and organization, like families living "separate in the same home". The interviews show this signs of 'divorce' both when they talk about changes, as well when they talk about values, quality and motivation.

Moreover, many of those situations are reported as "ethical dilemmas". Just to quote few sentences, a social worker refers that she "cannot go on serving two different masters .." and another denounces the hypocrisy of the public administration that declares that "while the family is at 'the center, they are cutting 50% of budgets for children and services…".

4   Dealing with dilemmas

In those situations social workers react differently following the different contexts. In those with a managerialistic and authoritarian on going process (local services in big towns) the main way is withdrawing their professional engagement or, for those who have the possibility, looking foranother working place. Withdrawal is shown through 'individualisation' of relationship with client and other strategies of adaptation: finding the good in any cases, reducing expectations and stopping to think.

In the other contexts the organizational dilemmas are discussed with the team and with the manager (if he/she belongs to a similar profession). Discussions can possibly lead to changes in the procedures (so activating a process of learning) or to formal proposals of modification of local policies.

To conclude, macro changes have an impact on social work in child and family services, and the dilemmas increases when the contradiction between different mandates becomes heavy. Secondly Social workers conceive themselves as being part of the organization and they think it is part of their professional identity to contribute to the determination of social policies and the implementation of services, even in a critical way.

The following steps of analysis will be towards reflection on how much social workers realize their role in constructing and defining the problem and on the impact of their intervention on the life of families and clients.

References

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