Is good social work political social work? Negotiating quality and different expectations in relation to social work's political role

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Backgound and purpose: Defining and assessing quality in social work practice has become a very relevant issue connected to evaluation, accountability and – in the end – the legitimacy of social work. However, attempts of quality control often rely on abstract and simplified ways of defining quality based on universal rational criteria and from external viewpoints. We approach the quality issue in a different way, arguing that quality assurance in social work is a political and moral enterprise and that negotiating quality is part of a methodology sui generis of social work practice. The proposed contribution will present the main findings of a project of participative quality development in social services in South Tirol in Northern Italy. The project is based on the assumption that quality standards get their validity only as the outcome of a negotiating process between the different actors involved. The aim of the project was a) to explore the different dimensions of quality within the perspectives of different stakeholders and b) to identify ways and reference points of negotiating quality between general principles and the specific requirements of particular situations. This way, the project aimed to contribute to the development of more complex quality systems, which include participatory mechanisms allowing creative negotiations and reflexive thinking to occur.

Methods: The study explored dimensions and negotiations of quality from the viewpoint the main stakeholders in both public and private social services involving service users, social workers, managers and local political councilors. The research was developed in different phases and data were gathered through the combination of multiple, both qualitative and quantitative, methods (focus groups, semi-structured interviews, an online collection of accounts of critical incidents and an online questionnaire). The presentation will concentrate on the outcomes of the qualitative part of the study.

Findings: The project identified four main dimensions along which the different stakeholders define quality: the political role of social workers, their ability to work and play an active role in the organisation, their ability to connect to other professionals and services, and the direct relations to service users. In accordance to the main conference theme and the question of how social work values can be embodied and realized in social work practice, the presentation will particularly focus on the political dimension of social work pointing out different expectations, challenges and limits regarding social workers' political role and engagement.

Conclusions and implications: The findings give indications for the development of more comprehensive quality assurance systems, which can take into account different dimensions of quality. In particular, different understandings, expectations and limits in relation to the political role of social workers can contribute to the negotiations of how social work core values should be embodied and realized on different levels and in different directions of social work practice.