9th Annual ESPAnet Conference

Sustainability and transformation

in European Social Policy

Valencia, 8-10 September 2011

Stream 12: Social work and social policy

Stream convenor: John Gal (Hebrew University of Jerusalem)

Social Work and Social Policy: Which Role for Social Work Professionals?

Some Reflections from an Italian Perspective.

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Strategies of social policy depend in their effects and in their legitimacy on their ‚fine tuning' (Lorenz 2006) in the micro processes which decide over social inclusion or exclusion and on their precise direction achieved in the implementation in different contexts of local welfare arrangements and - so is argued - local practices of welfare services delivery. Social work, as professional practice and applied social policy placed in the frontline of these processes, deduces from this specific position its sociopolitical dimension and its sociopolitical mandate (Lorenz 2006). This dimension of social work has often been disregarded by the social work profession and discipline itself, although - so is argued - the understanding of political frameworks and of the ways social polcies are established is a key issue that allows social workers to conceive the real nature of their work and to develop strategies of advocay and policy practice. The paper will point out that social work has to deal in a more explicit way with the processes of design and implementation of social policies in changing political and organisational contexts and the analysis of its own role within the new scenarios, on the one hand to grasp in a more systematic way how paradigmatic shifts in social policy development shape the interventions of front-line social workers and on the other one to analyze ist own

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role and its possible contribution in these ongoing processes. Referring to Lipsky (1980) and his reception in the recent social work literature (e.g. Evans 2010) a special attention is given to the key issue of professional discretion. The paper will address these issues focussing mainly on the example of the Italian case in order to concretize the contribution and to gain a more specific insight into a context where both risks and chances for the further development of social work come to light in a very demonstrative way.

Looking at the origins: Why social work?

The birth of social work as a profession was closely linked to the need of organizing solidarity under the conditions of modernity. The radical economic, political and social changes which marked the transition from traditional to modern societies, necessitated the creation of institutions and the organisation of special activities to ensure social cohesion under the conditions of modernity (Lorenz 2006). In front of the current processes of paradigmatic changes in Western welfare arrangements with their consequences not only on the organisational dimension of welfare services but even on the framing of the social professions themselves, this historical reflection is important in order to point out the specific nature of social work as a *social* profession.

The birth of social work has been interpreted in different ways (Fargion 2009), but regardless of whether it is analyzed from a more functional, a more critical or a more cultural perspective (Fargion 2009), it is important to recognize that social work has always been intertwined with the sphere of social policy and that its professionalisation has been linked to the institution of a system of welfare services. This perspective is particularly relevant in European welfare states characterized by a strong expansion of the welfare state and its services on the base of

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the strong political consensus after World War II that claimed a strong role of the state in organizing solidarity, not only to ensure the greater equality of its citizens but also as a source of its own legitimacy as Lorenz (2006, 2010) reminds us. Different approaches in interpreting the organization of solidarity in modern societies based on the institutionalization of services and the professionalization of activities show that these processes are the result of different factors, of structural changes as well as of specific political and cultural ideas (Neve 2008). However, regardless of what interpretative key is privileged, it is clear that the emergence of professional social work can only be understood in its political and social context. But why looking back at the origins of social work?

The hypothesis is that pointing out the historical and political character of the profession might be useful for analyzing and more effectively addressing the current challenges social work has to face. Lorenz (2010) problematizes the connection of the social professions with the political project of nation-state-building and shows how social work in its various forms in Europe has always been closely linked to the ways in which modern societies have defined the criteria for integration and social solidarity. It is this link, the impossibility of distancing itself from social and political processes, which identifies social work as a *social* profession, whereby social should not only be part of its name but characterize its *modus operandi* (Lorenz 2006). From such an approach the close relationship between the profession and 'the social' is not seen as a negative attribute or as an indicator of an incomplete professionalization process, but it is rather pointed out as distinctive element of professional social work. Referring to the Habermasian distinction between *System* and *Lebenswelt*, Lorenz (2006) points out that social work is rooted in both the spheres and remains always committed to both the political agenda and the private needs in the sphere of civil society. This means that social work can not be understood neither as a total product or as a mere instrument for the implementation of social policy nor as a mere ‚private' activity in the community with the intent to keep the power system at a safe distance. Professional social work is instead linked to both the spheres and it is in this field of tension that every professional social work must come into practice and be articulated. In this sense, the concept of professional autonomy can not be interpreted as blanking out of social and political issues and as a retreat into a supposedly ‚neutral' dimension of methodological issues and the microdimension of the helping relationship between the social worker and the person in need. Professional autonomy in social work must instead

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express itself as critical and reflexive practice (Fook 2002, Fargion 2009) which is based on scientific grounds and capable to analyze the needs of people in their social dimension and to find solutions that systemtically connect the dimension of helping the individual, family or group in need to a wider horizon of social and politcial circumstances and the promotion of human rights, solidarity and equality in society. This approach emphasizes the historical and political character of social work and clearly shows that 'the social' in which the profession is so deeply entrenched can not be taken for granted (Lorenz 2006, 2010). The increasing uncertainties in the current scenarios of paradigmatic welfare state change show that this perspective is an important key to critically analyze the relationship between social policy development and social work practice and, eventually, to think about the future of social work as profession.

The history and the processes of professionalization in Italian social work were charcterized by contrasting drives and tendencies. On the one hand the development of social work in Italy had always been closely linked to social movements and political processes of democratisation. It was in the climate of change and democratization after the period of fascism and the experience of World War II that the development of professional social work in Italy has its origins. In fact, from the Tremezzo conference in 1946, which is seen as the crucial event for the birth of modern social work in Italy, clearly emerged the dual need for the construction of a system of welfare services able to address the social problems of the time on the one hand and, on the other one, for the education and training of social workers as welfare professionals capable to respond to people's needs (Diomede Canevini 2005, Neve 2008, Fargion 2009). Also during the period of democratic change and social innovation after 1968, Italian social workers, mainly in and in the surroundings of the secular schools of social work, assumed an important role characterized by social and political engagement (Diomede Canevini 2005). On the other hand, on the methodological level Italian social work was strongly influenced by american models of casework oriented to a more individualistic and therapeutic approach of social work, which often surely tended to disregard the social and poltical dimension of people's needs and of the profession itself. Moreover, during the hard struggle for recognition it had been mainly in the microdimension of the helping relationship, that social work was able to carve out a proper area of recognized competence and intervention. Obviously, this dimension is at the core of social work, but at the latest when the

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conditions in terms of policies and organisation of services which determine social work practice have deeply changed, it must be clear, that the microdimension of the helping relationship between social worker and client can not be the only horizon of analysis and intervention of professional social work. As Fargion points out changes in the organisation of services have always been an important factor connected to the development of social work's identity. This does not mean that the identity of social work is given from the outside or defined only by its political and organisational contingencies, rather it highlights again the social nature of the profession which has to develop its identity through a dialectic engagement with practice realities and through processes of dynamic autorapresentation. These issues are broadly discussed on the interntational (Dominelli 2004, 2010) and the Eurpoean (1994, 2006, 2010) level, but they need to be addressed also in national and local contexts. It's through these reflexive processes inside the social work community that its autonomy as profession and discipline has to be shown, all the more in the context af changing circumstances. Or to put it very simple: it is important that social work is able to make clear what it is about, before this is defined from elsewhere (Neve 2008).

Social work under changed circumstances

So what are these changed circumstances for social work in Italy? As Neve (2008) points out, social work's identity in Italy had been strongly influenced by its public nature which had constituted for decades the main legislative and organisational as well as cultural container within which the profession had developed and the majority of social workers used to be employed. Despite the many problems in the development of a full Italian welfare state, the difficulties of overcoming a very fragmented system of welfare services, the emergence of new risks and social needs from the 80s onwards, and the tightening of the situation in the early 90s due to the crisis of Italian politics and the increasing financial pressures due to the Maastricht criteria (Ferrera 2006), the general climate was still confident about a strong affirmation of the welfare state and about its promises of redistribution and social inclusion. But the increasing weakening of the main pillars of the welfare state – due to a variety of

phenomena such as the globalization of the economy, processes of international migration, deep changes in the labor market, demographic changes, changes in the models of being a family and the de-standardization of life courses - has progressively put into question the social compromise on the welfare state and shown the very limited capabilities of the Italian welfare system to cope with new challenges and risks (Ferrera 2006, Saraceno 2010).

These changes, however, have been for long time mainly object of macro level analysis and in terms of a deeper and critical analysis often far away from the debates in social work. Like in other European countries (Rauschenbach 1999) also Italian social work - after the long awaited legal recognition and the establishment of the register of professional social workers - was still taken by its success and it often failed to tackle questions related to the erosion of the certainties of its own framing obtained during the years of generous expansion of the welfare system. The first contributions to highlight changing conditions in the Italian welfare arrangements in relation to social work were focussed on the pluralization of actors in the emerging welfare mix connecting this perspective on the methodological level to a networking approach *(lavoro di rete)* (Donati/Folgheraiter 1999). These contributions, however, were part of a rather optimistic and acritical debate characterized by a relational view on welfare (Donati 2000, 2003, 2010; Folgheraiter 2007), identifying innovative challenges for social work practice.

From the early 90s onward it had been, in fact, the new reality of the emerging third sector to play an increasingly important role as a substitute against quantitative and qualitative shortcomings of the public system and to attract strong expectations of development and innovation (Borzaga 2009, Thomas 2004). At the same time, processes of decentralization and regionalization devolved responsibilities for policy development and administration of services increasingly down to regional and local levels and, thus, closer to the levels of social work practice. In these new scenarios of vertical and horizontal subsidiarity social work was, on the one hand, finding new occupational fields in the third sector. On the other one, its functions in the public sector were progressively moved towards functions of governance and control of an increasingly pluralistic system of services (Fazzi 2005, Bertin/Fazzi 2010). These trends were connected to hopeful expectations of development also within the professional community.

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The view on the emerging scenarios of local welfare were characterized by positive interpretations of their driving forces of subsidiarity and the active involvement of civil society. Within this climate social work was hopig to overcome an often distorted and stereotyped view of the profession and to gain a stronger and more proactive role in local social policy development and inplementation (Rizza 2001). The culmination of these processes was the approval of Law 328/2000 (*Legge quadro per la realizzazione del sistema integrato di interventi e servizi sociali*) providing a national framework for the realization of an integrated system of social services. Awaited for more than hundred years, the new national framework assumed not only a historical but also a strong symbolic and cultural value for social work in Italy by explictly attributing to the social professions important tasks not only in the management, but also in the planning and evaluation of integrated services and interventions (Dal Pra Ponticelli 2001, Rizzi 2001, Fazzi 2010). As Facchini (2010) highlights, the variety of areas of intervention and target groups, of problems addressed and tasks to fulfill makes social work a leading actor for the definition and arrangement of the local welfare (Facchini 2010)[1].

However, ten years of its approval the impact of the reform seems to be rather poor compared to the expectations initially associated to it. As Gori (2010) highlights, the main reasons for these disappointing results are usually not attributed to the Law itself but to its weak implementation and inappropriate modes of application due to the devolutionary reform of Title V of the Italian Constitution and the political choices of the center-right governments. Anyway, according to Gori the reasons of the poor results are to be identified also in the weaknesses of the law itself which set too generic goals, allocated few resources and draw too little attention to the regulation of its implementation processes. With the exception of the introduction of the area plans (*piani di zona*), the impact of the national framework on the local welfare has not shown concrete results. Anyway, Gori emphasizes the meaning of the experience of the Law 328/2000 pointing out its both technical and political indications and suggestions for further social policy development, also in terms of roads not to follow and errors not to repeat. The challenge is according to Gori to learn from these experiences and to

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[1] Beside the recognition by the national framework Law 328/2000, it was in these years that social work education in Italy was established at the bachelor's and master's level ranking social work education as a full academic course of studies and giving to social workers - at least formally - the possibility to continue their studies on the PhD level.

translate findings into action (Gori 2010). However, considering the current economic, political and social circumstances in Italy these challenges seem to be rather arduous. Fazzi (2010) points out significant political shifts during the last decade and the suspension of the promising climate of change initially associated to the reform process also by welfare professionals. First and foremost Fazzi emphasizes the change in the Italian political landscape to center-right governments (with the brief interruption of the second Prodi government). While the center-left had foreseen a system of governance marked by a strong role of the public sector and had therefore provided investments aimed at strengthening the role of public services particularly in the fields of planning and coordination, the center-right is pushing much more to the liberalization and the outsourcing of services. This approach has found its expression in a number of policies and political statements, such as the introduction of the social card, the reduction of the National Fund for Social Policies and other social funds (Misinai 2011) and the freezing of the definition process of the essential levels of social assistance (*livelli essenziali di assistenza sociale*). The programmatic orientation of the center-right government is summarized in the White Paper on Welfare by Minister Sacconi which evokes - under the euphonic title "The good life in an active society" (*La vita buona in una società attiva*) - the involvement and the responsibilization of civil society as antidote to the bureaucratic immobility of the public system and the establishment of a system of welfare called „of opportunities and responsibilities" (*Welfare delle opportunità e delle responsabilità*). Against the background of the shrinking support from national politics and the cuts in social spending (Granaglio/Marano 2011) it's easy to grasp what the real consequences of this ambiguos political rethoric might be. The priorities of national politics and the problems in public finance, especially after the economic crisis, have led to a heavy decline of state social spending which has its inevitable consequences in the retrenchment and downsizing of initiatives and services, primarily those provided directly by local authorities, which themselves are under increasing cost pressures (Fazzi 2010, Misiani 2011). Social spending is also directed increasingly into cash for care policies placing emphasis rather on citizens' role as consumers than on the development of services. Another important factor is the changing social and cultural climate within which welfare services are shaped and within which, eventually, social workers have to do their job. The climate of confidence and the legitimacy to support a strong welfare state as expression of the values of inclusion and solidarity is being increasingly replaced by a climate of distrust and the questioning of the welfare state and its aims of universalistic social policies (Pasquinelli 2011, Fazzi 2010). This legitimacy crisis of the welfare state is expressed not least

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as indifference or even hostility towards social service users and also towards social workers (Fazzi 2010).

The significance of these changes is not limited to the transformation of external conditions to which social work can simply adapt. Taken together they have to be seen as a deeper process that makes the reference points and thus the framing within which social work as a profession has developed increasingly uncertain. In this sense, social work is confronted with a broad horizon of open questions which touch the heart of the profession and its identity (Fazzi 2010). If social work has to be developed through a dialectic relationship with *praxis*, the future of the profession might depend on the responses that social work is capable to give to these open questions and on the elements that are set as qualifying for its identity (Dal Pra Ponticelli 2010).

Which perspectives for the future of social work?

In the current scenarios social work is running several risks. Faced with shifts that render social work practice increasingly complicated, even by questioning its legitimacy, social work might become increasingly acquiescent and adapt itself to political orientations, even if they are contrary to fundamental social work values. This risk is closely connected to the one of an increasingly detached and aseptic professionalism (Dal Pra Ponticelli 2010). In a climate of increasing difficulties and distrust, social work might run the risk of hanging on the defence of its professional status, also by surrounding and representing itself with symbols of power which have weight in society. In this light, it's not only the managerial culture in social work to be critically analyzed, but also the evidence based practice movement that claims the objectivity of knowledge and its use in practice (Nothdurfter/Lorenz 2010). The need for

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greater accountability and the strengthening of the relationship between research and practice have undoubtlessly their positive aspects, but the risk is to defer the central questions about the future of social work into a context of supposed neutrality and hence outside from a political discourse. Within this trend social work risks to abet processes of deviation and deprofessionalization marginalizing a critical and reflexive professionalism (Fargion 2009) and thus dissolving, eventually, the specific of the profession, namly being a *social* profession.

As previously stated with reference to Lorenz (2006, 2010), the area of social work interventions must be the social arena, in which the public and the private sphere meet and where social relations and bonds of solidarity have to be negotiated. A „practice of social citizenship" as Lorenz (2010) suggests it can not be limited to look at the micro level of a helping realtionship between the social worker and her or his clients, but it must stress at the same time the importance of the public sphere and its responsibility for the solution of social problems, even more when the State is gradually backing itself out from this obligation. This approach to social work differs not only from a neoliberal position that denies the importance of ‚the social' but also from the conservative and communitarian evocations of the community in which individuals have to be integrated by adapting to its values (Lorenz 2006, 2010). Discussing the specific of the profession, Dal Pra Ponticelli (2010) underlines the ability and duty of social work to assume different forms of responsibilties, as definied also by its code of ethics. If the reference to professional ethics should go beyond eloquent rhetorics, social work must assume also its political responsibility, perhaps even more when this kind of engagement seems to be particularly difficult (Dal Pra Ponticelli 2010). Being part of public or private welfare services and in most cases being situated right on the their frontlines, social work can not but feeling part of how social policies are able or not able to reach their goals and to respond to peolpe's needs. In this sense, as pointed out by Campanini (2009), the role of the profession can not be the one of a passive adaptation or alignement to changing political strategies in social policy development, even less when they are likely to collide with the social work values. On the contrary, social work is required to constructivly engage and participate in the processes of social policy development informing them from the bottom up and from a specific professional and ethical point of view. One of the main objectives for the further development of social work has to be, hence, the restoring and strengthening of the political dimension and responsibility of the profession (Dal Pra Ponticelli 2010). This requires that

social work has to be well prepared on two levels, on the one hand on the level of analyzing and understanding policy frameworks in order to contextualize social work practice in a broader context, on the other on on the level of competences and practical skills in order to defend and strategically use the spaces of autonomy and professional discretion in daily practice. This seems to be essential to develop an up to date professionalism that matches with the challenges of social work practice and to enable social work to participate to a greater extent in an interdisciplinary dialogue and in the processes of policy development. This idea about the development of the profession poses a series of questions regarding both the working conditions in practice and social work education and training. As Dal Pra Ponticelli (2010) points out, we must ask whether the importance of social work's political responsibility is sufficiently taken into account, from the theoretical point of view as well as in practice and whether there are needed more efforts to develop this dimension both in basic and in further social work education and training.

Understanding policy frameworks

Against the background of paradigmatic changes in all Western welfare systems, the analysis of how political strategies become institutional practices - and thus determinant for professional practice - and how they are able to achieve their goals and to respond to social needs, is becoming a central focus of research. In fact, comparative social policy analysis is paying increasing attention to local implementation processes and in this context also to the role of those who work on frontline of welfare services where policies become concrete and meet people's needs (Kazepow 2010). This perspective is increasingly important also for social work research, although it has – at least in Italy –still to be developed in a more systematic way. Lorenz (2005) highlights the ambiguities of central paradigms in social policy development pointing out that policies must be carefully assessed in their practical application to track their real outcomes The main phenomena that characterize policy development are often presented by discourses that employ semantics apparently very familiar to social work and seemingly in line with its basic principles. But social work has to avoid to come to blindfold

and acritical arrangements with political strategies and shifts in policy development. The current changes not only in welfare arrangements but also in its support and legitimacy reveal that social work can not occupy any longer a space taken for safe and granted. The analysis of the consequences of political and social changes becomes thus essential for the future of social work, for reorienting social work practice as well as for informing policy development from below (Lorenz 2010).

One of the main paradigms of policy development is e. g. the principle of subsidiarity in both its vertical and horizontal direction. The processes of decentralization and regionalization as well as the major participation of the private sector, not only in the management and delivery of services but also in social planning and local policy development, have doubtlessly many advantages and bring the arena of policy development closer to the level of social work practice which itself has always stressed the importance to be rooted in the local and social proximity or - as the German debate points out – in the *Lebenswelt* of people (Thiersch 2009). In this sense, the closer proximity to the citizens, the pluralization of actors and the stronger role of the local level in policy development are, on the one hand, in line with the most central aspirations of the profession. On the other one, however, it must be always taken into consideration - and the Italian case shows it very well - how responsibilities of decision-making and management are redistributed, which resources are available to the various levels, which are the standards to be guaranteed and how the specific potential of different sectors and actors are recognized and integrated. In the absence of a necessary framework, the implications of these trends are likely to burden responsibilities and costs to the local authorities and to re-privatize social risks calling in the responsibilty of the civil society which in turn risks to express itself in more defensive and localistic ways and hence to perpetuate processes of social exclusion. These phenomena of development can thus not be interpreted only as changes in the organizational arrangements of services within which social work can develop new tasks and skills. They must be rather analyzed and understood in their deeper social and political significance to grasp the impact they have on the mandate and the future of the profession.

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Another main tendency of policy development, related to the first one, is the shift towards the paradigm of activation as normative point of reference for the role of the state and its interventions (Barbier 2005, Dahme/Otto/Trube/Wohlfahrt 2003). Moving from a paradigm of social protection towards a paradigm of activation (Villa 2007), state intervention aims to enable individuals as well as the community and to make them responsible for their own protection against social risks. Accordingly, the orientation of policies is shifting away from de-commodification towards responsibilization (Olk 2009) and the development of ‚activation' measures. This paradigmatic shift is accompanied by increased obligations and needs a system of control in which frontline practitioners play a crucial role. However, social work must question the narratives of activation and maintain a critical distance to these developments for not being reduced to an operational arm of activation policies. In fact, from a social work perspective the paradigm of activation is highly ambiguous and problematic. Helping people help themselves has always been one of the key principles of professional social work. However, in the actual context of social policy development the phenomenon of activation bears a different meaning. While social work has always to be carful not to create dependencies, it has to ask what the purposes and risks of activation measures are and which conditions individuals, families and communities need to be active and able to organize themselves. In its negative side, the paradigm of activation might also mean that people in need or social distress are further burdened by the responsibility for improving their condition, and this, above all, for the purpose of cutbacks in social spending.

It is therefore increasingly important to focus on the relationship between policy development and social work practice in order to critically analyze the role that social work assumes within political strategies. As Lorenz (2010) points out, these new policies do not work automatically but their internal ambiguities allow considerable discretion in their implementation. The issue of professional discretion has, in fact, emerged as a key element in the international debate on the relationship between social policies and professional practices (Evans 2010). Evans and Hardy highlight the two ways of conceiving the relationship between policy and social work practice and thus the role of professional discretion. "There are different ideas about the way social workers work with policy. One emphasizes policy as fixed, clear and precise rules which practitioners simply need to know and follow. The other portrays policy as more complex and sees practitioners as making sense and practical use of it at ground level. A central idea here is

that of professional discretion, in terms of both the freedom to make decisions and the exercise of judgement this decision making involves" (Evans/Hardy 2010, p. 98). The idea that policies are not unambiguous instructions to execute in practice, but much more complex processes in which the interpretations and actions of those responsible for their implementation determine the ways they are transformed into practice, has found its most important expression in the street-level bureaucracy approach by Lipsky (1980). Lipsky describes how street-level bureaucrats must find workable versions of implementing policies in their daily practice which is usually characterized by large numbers of cases to follow, the scarcity of both information and resources and the need to make concrete decisions within limited time. According to this approach the use of professional discretion is a determining factor for the outcomes of policies. Lipsky shows how organizations seek on the one hand to control frontline practitioners through various forms of bureaucratic control but how they have, on the other one, to leave descretional spaces, even tacitly accepting possible distortions between official policy strategies and real solutions. This is not only due to the impossibility of total control over frontline practitioners but rather to the awareness that the implementation of policies needs discretional spaces for finding "real-world solutions to getting the job done." (Evans/Hardy 2010, p. 108). There are different ideas on how practitioners should use their discretion to make policies work in practice (Evans/Hardy 2010). Some ideas underline the importance of understanding the ‚spirit' of policies and the need of a realistic political sense of practitioners to distinguish between core policy goals and less important or more flexible aspects of their implementation. An idea which is important from a professional point of view emphasizes the importance of professional ethics to guide those involved in ‚politics on the frontline'. According to this idea professionals do not stand outside the policies, but nontheless they should be free to make decisions oriented by their own professional ethics. In this sense, policies should not be realized through the strict adherence to rigid procedures, but their transformation into practice should be mediated by an ethically-oriented professionalism. Such a perspective shows the difference between a defensive practice that denies any possibility of discretion and a professional practice which claims areas of discretion in order to influence the implementation of policies on the basis of its professional mandate and values.

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One of the critiques of Lipsky's approach had been that it doesn't distinguish explicitly between street-level bureaucrats in general and professionals in a stricter sense. Although Lipsky himself speaks often about ‚professionals' and refers to professions such as social workers, teachers, doctors or lawyers, his approach is general in the sense that it emphasizes the common characteristics of frontline practitioners and their use of discretion in public services. However, studies that have adopted Lipsky's approach show the major discretional spaces of professionals in a stricter sense and the importance of an ethical obligation in professional discretion (Kelly 1994, Evetts 2006, Evans 2010, Evans 2011). Another critique questioned the applicability of Lipsky's approach in the context of social services, arguing that discretional spaces of social workers were replaced and suppressed by a managerialist culture (Howe 1986, 1996). However, there is evidence that despite an increasing managerial culture social workers do still have spaces of discretion which elude managerial control (Baldwin 2004, Evans 2010, Evans 2011). The numerous references to Lipsky not only within social work but also in a broader debate on the implementation of social policies show that his approach still provides a valuable key to understand the role of practitioners in the context of policy implementation. Returning to Lorenz, who identifies the point of encounter between *System* and *Lebenswelt* as the arena within which every form of professional social work has to unfold, can be stated that discretional spaces in social work do not only persist but that social policies depend on these spaces of discretion and mediated encounter between abstract political strategies and people's needs to get real results. The functioning of services and their quality do not depend only on the macro aspects defined by legislation and organization, but they are also determined by the micro-processes of mediation which in turn depend for sure on circumstances and available resources, but also on cultural patterns and values of professionals and thus on their attitudes, evaluations, and ways of working (Evans 2010, Gui 2008). These considerations may apply even more in a context like Italy which is traditionally weak on the side of implementation and monitoring (Facchini 2010).

Implications on professional identities and social work education and training

Against the background of profound changes in the social welfare systems it has been pointed out that social work must return to focus more explicitly on its own social and political character and critically analyze its role and the use of professional discretion in the implementation of policies. This perspective poses a series of questions on social work's identity as well as on social work education and training which should prepare future social work professionals to an increasingly varied range of tasks under increasingly uncertain circumstances.

Despite its framing in a particular national context, the social work debate in Italy reflects the main tensions which underlie the development of social work and its search for identity and which have been widely discussed in the international debate. In a qualitative study involving focus groups throughout the country, Fargion (2008) highlights the presence of these themes in the self descriptions Italian social workers give of their profession A central theme concerns the tension between the individual and the social dimension of social work. Fargion points out that Italian social workers do not describe the focus of their interventions in psychological terms but their descriptions are rather characterized by a holistic approach and a type of need's asessment which considers the person in relation to her or his social environment. Anyway, the main focus remains on the individual dimension and little attention is given to the structural nature of social problems and the political dimension of the profession. As Fargion writes, "(i)nterestingly, constant references to social dimensions and professional planning are not matched by an equally strong awareness of the structural nature of social problems and of the political dimensions of the profession. (...) (R)eferences to the so-called 'social justice language' are not frequent. (...) References to social policy, and even more to politics, are fairly rare, apparently suggesting a lack of attention and a limitation of Italian social work. Despite the focus on the social aspects and on a holistic approach, this also suggests a lack of attention to issues of power and oppression (...). Focusing on the social aspects, then is rather linked to technical and methodological choices about the nature of social work interventions" (Fargion 2008, p. 212).

The most recent and detailed picture of the profession in Italy is given by the results of a research project coordinated by Facchini (2010) and conducted on a representative sample of

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Italian social workers. The research project was aimed to give a description of the current situation of social work in Italy and it draws a general image of the profession which seems to reflect new trends and growing uncertainties due to changes in policies and organization of services only in a very limited way. The results confirm a number of problematic but well known issues regarding both modells of identity and education and training. Anyway, a careful reading of the results and their discussion still leaves a glimpse of some new trends that open some questions about social work's identity in Italy. Despite the plurality of positions and professional careers, there is evidence for a substantial homogeneity of values and professional identities among Italian social workers which is detectable on the one hand through the motivations to become a social worker, on the other one through the interest attributed to different dimensions of social work as well as through the abilities and skills deemed to be central to this profession. The findings confirm that the helping relationship with social work clients is the central element not only with regard to concrete tasks in practice, but also in terms of social work's identity. The direct relationship with clients is seen as the core of the profession and at the same as the component most able to give professional satisfaction. On the one hand, the homogeneity of values and conceptions of social work's identity is without doubt a strength of the profession and it constitutes the central reference point that holds together different ideas about social work's role and identity. On the other one, the strong focus on the helping relationship might risk to neglect other important dimensions of social work such as the governance and organization of innovative services, social work reserach and the evaluation of interventions. Despite the homogeneity of social work's identity in Italy, Facchini and colleagues (2010) raise some hypotheses on the effects of ongoing processes of change and on the possibility of a pluralization of the models of professional identity. A first and very concrete impact is given by the increase of fixed-term contracts and the growing precariousness of young social workers. Increasing employment insecurity and the strong turnover tend to scale back on investment in training by both social work professionals and organizations. This trend could have negative consequences on the expertise and skills of social workers as well as to the quality of services. But the changing face of welfare leads to think about deeper impacts also on the models of social work's identity. As Facchini (2010) argues the prevalent identity of social work was shaped by the traditional structuring of welfare services and the predominance of professional tasks related to direct client work. Due to the increasing outsourcing of services and the shift towards major functions of governance of the public sector, the concrete tasks of professional social work,

especially in public services, might change as well and shift from direct client work towards increasing tasks of coordination, planning and evaluation. According to Facchini (2010) these new tasks might require major competences related to social planning, networking and contracting and to the coordination and evaluation of services. These kind of competences had traditionally been given a limited role in social work education, at least on the Bachelor's level. Finally, Facchini (2010) raises the hypothesis of a double differentiation of the profession in the future, identifying a first possible divide between practitioners with more traditional careers and practitioners who continue their studies immediatly after the bachelor's degree end enter social work practice directly on the management level without any or little previous experience of direct client work and with different ideas about the role of the profession. A second divide could be given by a growing gap between social workers employed in the public sector and those working in private nonprofit organizations. While the functions of social work in the public sector tend to be increasingly seen in terms of management and control in formal and bureaucratic contexts, social work in the nonprofit sector might be much more associated with the common ideas about the profession, such as direct client work in less structured and less bureaucratic contexts as well as community work.

This hypothesis, advanced time ago by Fazzi (2005) and addressed also by other authors (e. g. Borzaga/Tortia 2006) has been confirmed by a reserach project conducted by Fazzi (2010) on a sample of 200 social workers in the regions of Central and Northern Italy, half of them working in public services, half in nonprofit organisations. Fazzi analyzes and compares the general profile, the working environment, the professional autonomy and the job satisfaction of both groups. The findings show a situation of great uncertainty in the public sector. The most felt dimension of this uncertainty is due to the economic situation and the increasing difficulties in financing welfare services. The dominant feeling of social workers is that they have been increasingly deprived of their power to influence decisions on the allocation of resources. A second dimension of uncertainty in the public sector is related to the effective tasks and possibilities of social work in practice. The increasing instability and shortages of public services provoke an increasing gap between what social workers should do according to regulatory and organizational frameworks and what they can do in practice. Finally, there are also growing uncertainties related to the mandate social workers have to feel responsible for. Traditionally, the institutional mandate of welfare services reflected the spirit of an expanding

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or at least stable welfare state and a broad consensus about its central principles of social justice, universalism and social inclusion. As Fazzi (2010) points out there are clear signs that the basis of welfare legitimacy on which social work is based becomes weaker and that the growing influence of populist political positions on the local level is imposing pressure upon welfare services and increasing discriminatory restrictions of services and interventions. Fazzi (2010) also highlights the shrinking professional autonomy of social workers in the public sector. Even in this case one of the main reasons is given by increasing cutbacks in spending which often hit the most innovative areas of social work and lead to contractions of the workforce in welfare services, despite the increasing social demand. Another important factor for the reduction of professional autonomy is given by processes of bureaucratization and the importance of technological applications which are often connected rather to the needs of management and control than to real opportunities for improving the effectiveness of professional interventions. The rise of a management level promoting a managerialist culture and the growing expertocratic sectoralisation in needs asessment are additionally marginalizing a social work perspective traditionally characterized by a holistic approach and a global view to the persons in their social environment. Finally, also the turn to cash-for-care policies tends to replace professional relationships between social workers and clients by marketlike relationships between consumers and providers. With respect to social workers' job satisfaction in public services, Fazzi (2010) shows that the greatest dissatisfaction is expressed by those social workers who attach greater importance to the social and political nature of the profession, represented mainly by respondents with longer seniority in the field. On the contrary, younger respondents are dissatisfied mainly by the precariousness of their employment seeming at the same time to have a more therapeutic approach to social work which leaves largely inconsiderate the social and political significance of waht they do in practice. With respect to the nonprofit sector, Fazzi (2010) highlights that social workers of nonprofit organizations can be divided in two main groups depending on their careers. A first group is given by young social workers who haven't found a job in the public sector yet and who are often working also in non classical social work positions while waiting for a placement more congruent to the professional profile of social work. In contrast, a second group consists of social work professionals who have a longer professional career and very often also professional experiences in the public sector and for whom the fact of working in nonprofit organizations is often a clear choice of preference. Obviously, also the context of nonprofit organzations is affected by cutbacks in public spending. However, nonprofit organizations are

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affected more indirectly and the impacts are mediated and in part counterbalanced by the notable ability of many nonprofit organizations to raise funds in an autonomous way and independently from the public sector. The context of the nonprofit is also less structured and much more flexible compared to the public sector. Although more structured business models have been developed also in the nonprofit world, they seem to produce less coercive contexts. Additionally, managers of the nonprofit sector are less likely to promote a rigid managerialist culture leaving more space for professional cultures and maintaining a better congruence between the original mission of the organisations and the rationale of daily practice. This greater flexibility of nonprofit organisations is likely to appreciate much more professional autonomy and innovative impetus from below and it allows often even to respond to the needs of people who find themselves excluded from access to public services. It is, hence, not surprising that there is a greater perception of professional autonomy among social workers of the nonprofit sector. Reasons for this fact are to be found also in a significantly lower level of bureaucracy as well as in lower levels of political pressure and intrusion to practice. Moreover, the status and recognition of professional work seems to be higher in the nonprofit sector also thanks to a culture wich acknowledges forms of knowledge and languages often considered as inefficient or redundant in the public sector. Fazzi (2010) shows that social workers in the nonprofit sector are on average more satisfied with their job than their colleagues from the public sector. The main factor of satisfaction is identified in a working climate which is less stressful and more likely to create commitment and to sustain professional autonomy and culture. These positive elements are able to compensate for possible disadvantages such as lower wages and less favourable contract conditions for empolyees. The picture pointed out shows situations of growing unease for social work in the public sector and the opening of new and often more advantageous operational fields in the nonprofit sector which require – according to the author – both the redefinition of some of the profession's characteristics and the development of new competences and better skills in fundraising and in strategic and personell management. Fazzi (2010) argues that this has to be taken into account also in social work education and training in order to integrate competences and skills traditionally associated to social work with new competences and skills needed in the changed system of social services.

So what are the challenges for social service work education and training? On the one hand, the hypothesis of an increasing diversification of the areas of social work practice and a pluralization of the models of professional identity leads to demand further and more diversified competences and skills to be provided by social work education and training. On the other hand, it seems important to look first and formost at some problematic issues that social work education is showing in general. In the research project conducted by Facchini and colleagues (2010), a substantial part has been dedicated to education and training. By analyzing the motivations for the choice of a social work degree is emphasized that the access to the profession is connected to strong values and solidaristic motivations. This strong solidaristic dimension and the homogeneity of motivations that lead to social work are doubtlessly a characteristic trait of the profession and elements to be acknowledged, but they give at the same time some reason of concern. They hint at an image of the profession characterized rather by personal predisposition and aptitude than by the achievement of knowledge and competences as the results of an academic education. Such an idea of the social work profession might not necessarily imply that social workers are capable of fully understanding the link between the tasks of micropractie and a wider social and political context (Facchini/Tonon Giraldo 2010). Another persistent problematic issue of social work education is given by the risk of an imbalance and a lack of integration between the theoretical and the practical dimension of social work education (Facchini/Tonon Giraldo 2010, Campanini, 2009). The big challenge for social work education is, on the one hand, to provide a good theoretical background that strengthens social work as discipline and enables it to take part an interdisciplinary scientific debate and, on the other one, to provide concrete competences and skills future professionals can apply in practice. Anyway, the simple request for a further diversification of competences to be acquired during a study program already in danger of being fragmented and, with regard to the three years degree, perhaps too short to provide an adequate preparation for social work professionals, seems quite problematic. It might risk to focus rather on the acquisition of techniques - those associated with direct client work in the undergraduate and those of management in the master's curricula - than to the understanding and reflection of what has to be the real core and centerpiece of social work education. As Lorenz states, "(t)he point of professionalising social work is not to carve out a special territory within which a separate, impenetrable structure can be erected. Rather, social work has its proper place and function in the way it engages with existing structures, practices, agencies, cultural and political traditions and academic dicourses. However, this engagement

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(and indeed 'interfering') introduces an element of distance, of critical reflection for which structures of training, of accountability of quality control have to be created. "(Lorenz 2001, p. 23). In this sense, the challenges for social work education do not end in the transmission of supposedly ‚neutral' competences and technical skills, but the central challenge is to provide a deeper understanding of the social and political conditions from which social work can never be disconnected, and within which every professional social work has to unfold, in the public sector as well as in private social services. Hence, policy frameworks can not be considered as a dimension far away fom practice, but their understanding becomes essential for the use of those discretional spaces on which the implementation of policies eventually depend. The relevance of this dimension is stressed also by the Global Standards for Social Work Educaton and Training, defined by the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), which refer explicitly to a critical understanding of the impact of socio-structural inequalities, discrimination, oppression and social, political and economic injustices, to the knowledge of social welfare policies and social work's role in policy planning, implementaion and evaluation and to a critical knowledge of the origins, purposes and development of social work (IASSW/IFSW 2005). This is the core around which social work education has to be developed, declining it in the multi-dimensionality of the profession and overcoming the gap between theory and practice. As the Italian situation points it out very clearly, the changing face of welfare requires serious reflections on the future development of social work as profession and discipline and and the rethinking of social work education as an organic project that brings its social and political significance back to its center. This approach makes clear that social work can not develop by retreating or withdrawing itself from what is going on in social policy. The further development of social work will rather depend of its openness to engage with ongoing social and political processes. As Lorenz states, "(i)t is its paradigmatic openness that gives this profession the chance to engage with very specific (and constantly changing) historical and political contexts while at the same time striving for a degree of universality, scientific reliability, professional autonomy and moral accountability" (Lorenz 2001, p. 12). In this sense, it has not to be excluded, that around what should be the core of social work education can develop diversified competences and maybe even different ideas about social work which can still find their common denominator in the values and founding principles of its specific professional identity.

At the same time, however, this perspective makes also very clear that the future of social work does not only depend on the efforts from inside the profession and discipline. The ‚social' nature of social work implies that the profession itself depends one the spaces in which its particular *modus operandi* can be made explicit and in which the *social* professions can work as such. If these spaces were going to be closed the future of social work - as we know it - might be a bleak one.

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