



## **Dictionaries as Representations of the State of the Social Professions - Some Preliminary Observations from an Italian Perspective**

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Italian social Work has experienced in the last decades a boost in terms of greater visibility and legitimacy making it emerge from the shadows where it had lingered for forty years and more. The process of regulating social work education through ministerial decrees in line with other disciplines has resulted in a three-year degree in 'Sciences of Social Work' ('servizio sociale', first level degree), a Master's Degree in 'Planning and Management of Politics and Social Services' (second level degree), and study programmes at doctoral level. Linked to this, there has been the drawing up of a professional register, of a code of ethics for social workers, and a regulation for professional confidentiality. Hence, we can affirm that, by sociological criteria, social work has become today a recognised profession.

However, there are still problems in terms of a clear disciplinary profile. In fact, social work as an academic discipline in Italy belongs to the official classification of Sociology (SPS/07) as far as examination regulations are concerned. That means on the one hand that there is a significant link with a recognised academic discipline which promotes a useful dialogue between social work and sociology. On the other hand, it is also evidence of a lack of recognition of social work by the Italian academic world and indicative of an assumption of a weak theory basis.

Furthermore, the limited possibilities to undertake social work research and to develop a theoretical foundation for the discipline have been caused by the marginality to which lecturers in social work are often being relegated. In fact, the majority of them used to teach within private and state schools of social work while those still existed, and when they now obtained time limited teaching contracts within the university did not gain access to research funding and were in addition employed full time by social service agencies. It is not surprising, therefore, that the first publications on methods and theoretical models of social work were delivered by Maria Dal Pra Ponticelli who was the first, and for long time the only, full professor of social work in Italy.

In spite of these obstacles, by the 1980s Italian publications on social work began to appear in conjunction with the introduction of training courses within the university. A variety of publishers developed specific book series focused on social work themes. This development resulted in books being published on wide ranging themes of theoretical and methodological relevance as well as more specific books concerning the use of social work techniques or reflections on different and problematic areas of the role social workers.

Further academic impediments were removed when Professor Giuliano Giorio of the University of Trieste launched the first doctorate programme in Sociology, Theory and

Methodology of Social Work that opened a breach within a seemingly intransigent situation. Currently, there are three courses of research doctorates at Trieste, Rome, and Sassari (bearing in mind the distinction between research doctorates, equivalent to the PhD level, and the 'dottore' title which is Italy gets awarded with the first academic degree). There are now at least one full and three associate professors trained in social work in Italy who represent the discipline at those levels and five assistant professors (*ricercatori*). Furthermore, more new posts open to public competition are going to be established and we hope that as soon as possible we can obtain a sufficient number of full professors to guarantee a specific contribution to Italian degree courses comparable to other European countries in accordance with the guide lines provided by EASSW and IFSW.

The latest step in the direction of a full academic profile has been the publication of an eagerly awaited Dictionary of Social Work by Elisa Bianchi, Maria Dal Pra Ponticelli, Milena Diomede Canevini and Silvana Giraldo, which has as its objective to document and publicise essential knowledge of and about social work. The realization of the Dictionary was made possible by AIDOSS, the Italian Association of Teachers of Social Work. It represents a significant reference point for the theoretical and deontological elaboration of the social work profession and has shown a vigilant presence in the delicate process of academic recognition.

The Dictionary, developed under the guidance of Maria Dal Pra Ponticelli, gives expression to key aspects of the story, practice and contemporary context and relevance of the profession and therefore is also a guide for the future. It is the result of a concerted effort by professors, experts and professionals drawn from different generations and practice backgrounds. It is a work that is dedicated specifically to the discipline of social work but includes also references to neighbouring disciplines which contribute to and enrich the understanding of the characteristics of social work itself.

In the development of the Dictionary special attention was paid to all the different areas that characterise social work such as its history, code of practice, theory, epistemology, methodology, social services organisation and social policy. Each member of the scientific committee was commissioned to coordinate one of the areas mentioned above. Patiently, although through sometimes heated debates, the different entries and cross-references were defined and the most appropriate authors were identified.

The publication of the Italian Dictionary of Social Work provides the opportunity of also looking at the European dimension of Italian social work in order to define its position within the other European countries. This raises some of the following questions: Is social work recognized as an autonomous discipline? Has social work developed its own original epistemology and knowledge base that render it capable to enter into dialogue with the other sectors of the human sciences? Are there suitable research approaches that permit the development of a theory base for practice? One possibility to obtain answers to these questions arises from the EUSW Thematic Network 'European Platform for Worldwide Social Work,' set up in 2002 by the University of Parma and coordinated by myself, with the collaboration of 50 partners from all European countries, including those considered at that time newly eligible for participation in EU projects.

The improvement of information about educational frameworks, about organisational aspects of social services and the professionalisation of social work, and the enhancement of the debate on fundamental aspects of social work within the European countries are the current goals of this network which now, after three years, involves more than 100 partners and is still

expanding its international links. It seeks to give answers to some of the following questions by highlighting common and divergent aspects: What constitutes the criteria for a qualification of social work? What is the role of social workers? How and in which context does their professional training take place? What are the pertinent theories?

The process of making valid comparisons is always limited by cultural differences reflected in linguistic and conceptual differences on fundamental topics (i.e. identity, state, citizenship, as well as politics and welfare systems). Only by immersing oneself in the specific culture of a country in which all these aspects are grounded and which gave rise to specific forms of practice can we hope to comprehend the more specific arguments related to theoretical and methodological aspects, characteristics of practice, and professional techniques of social work. This parallels the process by which we came to find common ground in writing and coordinating the Dictionary where we also had to mediate between different meanings and yet had to give contributors the freedom to present arguments and contents from their particular perspective. This necessity to define one's starting points in all their relativity, given that societies are constantly changing, to therefore respond to continuous social transformations and new social challenges, arises in more than just one particular country. This is a topic which also emerged with all clarity in our book 'European Social Work - Commonalities and Differences' (Campanini and Frost 2004). In this book, each one of the 24 countries belonging to the Thematic Network illustrated and presented, according to a common framework, reflections on the characteristics of social work within their specific context.

Many authors have stressed, furthermore, the fact that social work practice has to be supported by research to foster the development of a theoretical basis and the knowledge of methodology and techniques of social work intervention within particular social contexts in order to render this practice innovative. Research of this kind has the objective to conceptualise different theoretical models and their usefulness and efficiency in social work practice (the so-called 'evidence based practice' or 'best practice models'). Although many authors underlined the importance of practice-based research within the academic context as basis for the legitimacy of the discipline, this objective has yet to be achieved. It seems that a multi-disciplinary approach is best suited to further these goals and would consolidate the autonomy of social work as a scientific concern once mutual diffidence and fear of 'colonisations' has been overcome.

The first annual meeting of the new thematic network EUSW, that took place October 2006 at the University of Calabria, gave occasion for a small research project to highlight some interesting aspects concerning the existence of social work dictionaries in the different countries. This topic was not taken expressly into account in the publication mentioned above (Campanini and Frost 2004) it. While in the USA the Social Work Dictionary, edited by R. Barker (2003), has reached the 5<sup>th</sup> edition, the situation is quite different in Europe. The first edition was published in 1987, on behalf of the National Association of Social Workers, and was defined as a milestone in the development of social work dictionaries. The volume contains more than 9000 entries that catalogue terms, concepts, organisations, historical figures and values which define the profession. A specific section is dedicated to the chronology of the historical development, within the USA and in the wider world, of social work, welfare policies and types of intervention.

Considering the European context, The Encyclopaedia of Social Work, edited by Martin, was published for the first time in 2000 in the UK. The book has the appearance of a concise guide containing 450 entries relevant for social work compiled by 250 among the most famous

authors of the field. The Encyclopaedia is usefully accompanied by 'The Blackwell Companion to Social Work', published for the first time in 1997 and updated in 2002. It comprises 23 chapters dealing with the most significant issues in social work. 'The Blackwell Companion' is considered one of the most valuable tools for students and professionals engaged in training and in the implementation of the services.

The Dictionary of Social Work, edited by M. Thomas and J. Pierson, counts as one of the best known and widely used works. Also in this case the entries are generally concise and the choice of entries is wide and geared to operative dimensions.

In France there is a dictionary, edited by M. Jaeger (2004), consisting of 100 entries regarding key concepts related to social assistance and action. Each entry includes a precise definition, some historical remarks, the main cross-references to administrative and legal aspects, as well as a bibliography.

Ander-Egg, a Latin American author who has authored 27 books on social work, edited the unique Dictionary in the Spanish language (Ander-Egg 1995). It was published for the first time in 1967 and has since reached its 5<sup>th</sup> edition. This is particularly significant since it refers also to concepts derived from other disciplines such as psychology, sociology, anthropology and economy. In this way, it has been possible to collect terminological modifications that characterise social work nowadays. Together with this Dictionary, the author published a reference book (Ander-Egg 2004) which found use among students, practitioners and volunteers.

In Germany, there are many such publications, but the most widely recognised is the one edited by Otto and Thiersch (2001). It has over 2000 pages with 198 entries arranged in alphabetical order to facilitate the reader and with a preface that offers a sort of a conceptual map. It has now come out in a second edition, 17 years after the first one, and this demonstrates the consolidation of the theoretical basis of social work in the light of sociological, anthropological and social policy dimensions.

The only Dictionary available in the Scandinavian area was published in Finland and offers both a description of terms and their translation into English language. The Finnish Terminology Centre (TSK), together with the National Centre of Research and Development for Welfare and Health (STAKES), starting from the supposition that the concepts relating to social work lacked clarity, promoted the production of a small Dictionary. Social Work was considered both as 'professional activity oriented to welfare of people and communities, as well as a means to prevent, reduce and eliminate social problems' and as a 'discipline that studies social problems and develops the social work activities and methods that have to be used to train Social Workers' (Termino 2/2003). Only 25 entries have been inserted in this first attempt of a definition. (available on the following website [http://sty.stakes.fi/NR/rdonlyres/0C799961-C977-45DE-B0F6-7C92DA1D38B9/4014/http\\_\\_\\_wwwstakesfi\\_oske\\_terminologia\\_sanastot\\_sost.pdf](http://sty.stakes.fi/NR/rdonlyres/0C799961-C977-45DE-B0F6-7C92DA1D38B9/4014/http___wwwstakesfi_oske_terminologia_sanastot_sost.pdf))

Regarding the ex-communist countries, the Slovakian (Striezenec, S. 1996) and the Czech (Matousek, O. 2003) Republics were first in moving in this direction. The experience under the soviet regime during which the existence of social problems was denied and social work considered not necessary, has made it urgent to develop a shared definition of the terms associated with social work.

The Austrian experience appears particularly interesting and was born by the necessity to find an internationally shared set of common concepts. Full professors and students together, under the guidance of the Professional Association of Social Workers, have just been moving in this direction. The dictionary is of modest dimensions and published privately.

All the experiences illustrated until now cannot be regarded as exhaustive since they are the result of a cursory overview.. Through the internet I hope to be able to launch a deeper level research of gathering information on this topic and to make it available on a website. All information concerning dictionaries would therefore be most welcome and can be sent to my e-mail address given above.

It emerges also that in addition to the need to arrive at definitions of key terms within each country, there is the necessity to develop more multilingual dictionaries to communicate and translate in a more exact way the terms related to social work beyond those that already exist and which will also be collected on the aforementioned website.

As the Italian experience shows, it is difficult to define clearly the meaning of terms relating to the social work area: 'Social work' is not the same thing of 'servizio sociale'. Equally, the term 'social worker' includes a variety of professional activities that vary from country to country. In Sweden for example, it was felt necessary to distinguish a graduate in social work from other 'social practitioners' by referring to the former using the term 'sozionom'. Furthermore, there are still problems in clearly defining and understanding the exact significance of terms like bachelor, baccalaureate, master, diploma, degree, second level degree, and this despite the fact that the Bologna Process should have brought greater clarity a uniformity to this terminology.

The UE financed a recent attempt to develop a multilingual glossary through a project called 'EUSODA' (EU Social Data Base) with the participation of partners in Berlin, Bologna, Huelva, Lisbon and Vienna. The Europe-Institute for Social Work, founded by lecturers of the Alice Salmon University of Applied Sciences for Social Work and Social Pedagogic and directed by Jürgen Novak, was involved in the evaluation process of the key terms selected. The glossary (<http://socialeurope.de/>) contains the most commonly used terms in social work and social services translated into eleven languages (English, French, German, Hungarian, Italian, Polish, Portuguese, Russian, Serbo-Croatian, Spanish and Turkish). Although this was a praiseworthy initiative, the translations of some terms are unsatisfactory, at least in relation to the Italian language.

Another glossary builds on the work of the EISS publication, *Glossary of Social Care Terms*, 1995, and includes new phrases and expressions within the social care field and aims, where possible, to represent these in five European languages (English, French, German, Italian, Spanish): <http://www.kent.ac.uk/eiss/publications/index.html>.

The original glossary has been extended and developed as an on-line working document as part of the EQUAL transnational partnership between ACE National (UK) and F&M Power (Austria). The range of languages used has also been extended thanks to LUMSA University in Palermo. Also in this case it is necessary to pay attention to the fact that the varying social welfare systems across Europe are reflected in the language used and it is not always possible to be totally accurate in translation.

I wish to conclude this paper with the considerations taken from the Finnish Centre of Terminology and STAKES that I personally underwrite.

Defining concepts relating social work is definitely a challenge. 'From the terminologist's viewpoint it is difficult to write definitions for social work concepts because the terms look like standard language words and because the concepts are so basic, abstract and bound to values. Sometimes it is difficult to recognize a term because it appears to be so self-explanatory. The concepts of social science are usually very abstract, and people understand them from their own viewpoints' (Terminfo 2/2003).

How can it become possible to develop a universal definition including every subject within the concept if the concept itself is so tightly linked to values and to personal interpretations?

The Finnish authors conclude that in this kind of Dictionary (and perhaps not only for this one) it appears to be particularly relevant to identify and declare the point of view from which the proposed definitions were developed.

I strongly believe that this is the concern any one of us, as member of the editorial staff and as authors of the Italian Dictionary in Social Work, has also tried to accomplish.

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### **Further Links**

<http://www.tsk.fi/en/index.html>

[www.socialeurope.de](http://www.socialeurope.de)

[www.eusw.unipr.it](http://www.eusw.unipr.it)

[www.termipankki.fi/fi/ti/ti203\\_teksti.html](http://www.termipankki.fi/fi/ti/ti203_teksti.html)

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