



Professional Project in a Neoliberal Environment and Evolution of the Meanings of Social Work: a Case Study in Italian Probation Field

Ruggero Capra, University of Trento

1 Introduction

In my PhD thesis proposal I want to contribute to the empirical clarification of the meaning of social work. This goal is rather wide and generic: therefore I have selected a theme and an event that I think could be useful for my aims. In the first paragraphs, I am going to explain the choices useful for building the research design. In the following ones, I am going to present some aspects of the field of research and my motivations, the theoretical frameworks, and the features of this case study. In the last paragraphs, I am going to deal with some initial results of my research. In particular, I am going to present the results of a documentary analysis that will allow me to better focus the core theme of my research. This step will allow me to go on with my research through interviews with some stakeholders. Moreover, this paper considers some comments from the International Supervisory Board of Tissa 2010.

2 Motivations and research fields

I have chosen the meaning of social work as a general research issue because this is often theoretically defined and rarely empirically defined. That is why a gap has been created between the academic definitions and the real social workers' representations about the meaning of their work. My intention is to contribute to filling this gap. To do this, I will particularly focus on a specific field of social work. Therefore, dealing with the field of my research, I have chosen the following fields:

- neoliberal policies
- action and reaction towards new kinds of policies
- control goals in social work
- probation in Italy

Regarding the first issue, one of the most important effects of Neoliberalism concerns economic aspects, such as the privatization of public services and the erosion of welfare state systems. This consideration orients most research to the economic field. On the other hand, Wagner and Zimmerman highlight different social aspects, like the emphasis on individual responsibilities of citizens. They also underline how rights receive less and less attention in the last two decades. I think that these considerations are important in addressing the ideologies of Neoliberalism.

Regarding the second issue, Neoliberal Policies have some important consequences also for the professional status of social work; in fact there is the risk that social workers take a passive and uncritical stance towards the transformation of social policies, accepting them

without critical reflection (Lorenz 2005). These considerations allow me to underline that the relationship between societal processes, policies, and the professional culture of social workers is crucial and this connection forms my actual research objective.

In dealing with control goals in social work, according to a lot of scholars, as for example Fargion, Raineri and Howe, the negotiation of help- and control-goals is, in all fields of social work, of fundamental importance for the professional identity. In particular, the mix of care and control is a controversial aspect and may be seen as a potential hindrance or promoter of the formation of a secure professional identity (Tissa 2010). Therefore, this matter is closely related to the meanings of social work. According to Raineri's efforts (aa.) both to decline and to study the different combinations of help and control functions, I think that one of the goals of my research may be to understand both declination and combination of these issues in a particular social working field. So my next step was to select one research field where the social worker is involved. Hence I am going to explain why I have chosen the probation field in Italy.

According to Garland, the evolution of sentencing policies seems to go in the same direction of neoliberal policies. The most important features of the evolution of sentencing policies are the decline of the rehabilitative ideal and, at the same time, the rise of different targets, such as retribution, incapacitation, and the management of risk. However, this direction may be empirically addressed and the correct application of an UK model ought to be confirmed in Italy. Alternative explanatory models of crime repression may be used and can contribute to an explanation of the features and the evolution of probation in Italy (Tissa 2010). Besides, Wagner and Zimmerman point out that neoliberal ideologies have important consequences on citizenship rights; therefore sentencing policies reflect the impact of neoliberal policies.

About control, I point out that normally, according to Raineri, these are not necessarily emphasized. They seem to have a latent function. Therefore, my study aims to demonstrate also that, in probation, social workers are poorly equipped to cope with the difficulty of linking together control and help functions, as the control function is less latent.

3 Theoretical framework

The framework has to be related to every topic I have examined above. Therefore, I have chosen to study the meaning of profession in society and the professional project to understand the reaction of social workers towards evolution of policies and how their professional identity is expressed.

I think that the sociology of professions is important for my goal. In fact, current studies underline the difficulty to reach univocally and universally shared definitions about the content and meaning of professions. They therefore focus on the processes that professions use to define themselves. Sociologists in particular deal with the professional project This concept was first presented by Larson (1977, p VII) as an attempt to translate one order of resources - special knowledge and skills - into another - social and economics rewards Using this concept allows me to study more specifically how professions act or react to the transformations of society. Professional groups are considered to be in competition with each other in different arenas where they try to obtain or to keep the best rewards. In this perspective I can study a profession as it expresses itself in a particular society. Hence, this view allows me to deal with the contemporary evolution of social work as a profession related to the transformation of society. Besides, according to important studies such as Larson's theory, it is possible to underline and try to explain the links among power, professional

knowledge, and professional culture. So, in this perspective, I can explain the behaviour of social workers in a particular context, trying to understand if culture and professional knowledge is used to gain or keep power.

4 Summarizing both case study and events features

Through the use of case studies, I want to understand how social workers position themselves to the evolution of policies, and in particular, to a policy presented in Italy in 2007 that tried to create new boundaries for their profession. I want to focus on the social workers' response to the various Acts drafted by the Italian Attorney General (as reflected in statements, professional reflections, new professional projects, and other forms of responses). I want to understand their proposals of defining their professional role in the light of that kind of policy and how their *modus operandi* is changing. The study aims to understand what kind of representation of meaning induces them to react in a particular way. This typology of responses and their significance for the definition of professionalism in social work can then be compared to the results of other studies that profile the current state of professionalism in social work in Italy and elsewhere (Facchini, 2010). This proposal allows me to investigate both the reason and the strategy to justify them. This output can be related to the framework previously quoted.

I am using a qualitative approach which uses concepts of grounded theory and institutional ethnography. I have developed a documentary research design and I have started analyzing the different kinds of acts and documents related to the key events I want to consider.

Now I want to deal with the general features of the event. The Attorney General proposed four different drafts between April and November 2007. In every proposal the goals were the same: he wanted both to introduce penitentiary police in the management process of alternative measure and to give them the task of control. There were thirteen labour unions involved in the negotiation process. Only seven of them participated actively. Together, they produced eighteen papers and two different proposals. Three labour unions disagreed with the goal of the Attorney General, and four agreed with his intentions but criticized some organizational aspects. During the negotiation process with them, the Attorney General modified some organizational aspects while keeping the same goal.

The social workers employed in the UEPEs (Ufficio esecuzione penale esterna, which is the office in charge of probation in Italy) took their own positions as labour union representatives or as groups of social workers. In both cases they were absolutely contrary to the Attorney General's proposals and sometimes they strongly criticized the labour unions that agreed with the Attorney General. They wrote thirty-four papers in April 2007, at the beginning of this event.

5 First results

Regarding the results, I have analyzed these documents and I have labelled every concept that they expressed. I have obtained one hundred ninety-seven labels. A lot of these are quite similar and their occurrence is very low. Hence I have created thematic areas wider than the first labels. I have defined the following thirteen thematic areas: concepts related to security representations and perceptions of the social workers' professional category; representations and perceptions of the penitentiary police's professional category; social work features; probation features; UEPEs features; basic statements against the Attorney's General proposal; changing process; strategy to support their own position; strategy to defend their own position

(above all using a different kind of knowledge); economic goals; features of professional social workers' help; and concepts related to the control function.

I think that all these themes are important for my research. Here I am going to deal with the following ones:

- Basic statements against the Attorney General's proposal
- Use of knowledge to support their own positions
- Concepts related to control

6 Basic statements against the Attorney General's proposal

The policy of the government is considered superficial, not serious, not scientific, built for particular interests, showing conservative statements, demagogical, and so on.

The label usually underlines the incongruence between the data and the kind of policy that the Attorney General wants to start. Since the data about alternative measures are positive, there is no reason to change them.

Moreover, the social workers consider the Attorney General's purposes both as a part of a wider project previously decided (four documents) and, above all, as a basic changing process upsetting the operative reality.

7 Use of knowledge to support their own positions

Altogether, there are eight references to professional or academic knowledge. They are sociological arguments; references to methodology of social work, to eminent experts, to specialized literature, and so on. Two documents are based on empirical knowledge. The references to professional knowledge are short and infrequent in the document. On the other hand, juridical references are longer and more frequent than the previous ones.

8 Control related concepts

This topic is defined in the various documents through thirty-two labels. According to the previously quoted scholars, control is usually a latent function; therefore it is not declared. On the other hand, here control is described in a lot of different ways; therefore this is considered the core theme to explain the action of social workers in the UEPEs. I think this is central for my research, and here I am going to explain the motivations. Why a latent function is so strongly expressed?

Although the features of this particular event may influence the selection of the topics, I think this is not the only reason. In fact, I think that social workers may choose topics closely linked to their professional core theme to explain their statements. The labels describing control function can contribute to clarify some professional project features. The control functions are described in different and opposite ways: it depends on the actor performing them.

When control action is performed by penitentiary police, it is described as negative, without content, uneconomic, not useful for security, and so on; on the other hand, when it is performed by social workers, it is both positively depicted and closely related to the function of alternative measures. Moreover, social workers highlight how it helps to responsabilize and rehabilitate criminals.

9 Following steps and conclusions

This is the present state of my research. Starting from here, my next step will be interviewing the stakeholders, trying to analyse both the content of their answers and their narrative structure. In fact, the latter may reveal some features that I will try to relate to the professional project of social workers. The initial documentary research shows two different professional project options of a social worker: he/she may try to gain or to maintain power; or, he/she may think that social work only makes sense when care and control are being left together in one hand (Tissa 2010). In this case the professional project is closely linked to the professional values.

The following research steps will be useful both to understand and to give consistency to these different positions. This goal will allow me to answer the following question: what justifies social workers to define their own work field? In addition, my proposal is both to define the different kinds of care-control mix, and to describe how they are declined in Italian probation. This may offer the choice to compare the Italian situation with other ones. Moreover, I think that this description will allow me to understand if the close link between care and control hinders or helps the formation of a secure professional identity (Tissa 2010).

References

- Cipriani R., Ossicini Ciolfi T., e Pittaluga M.**, Eds, (1995), Euroroma La Goliardica, Roma
- Facchini C.** (2010), Tra impegno e professione – Gli assistenti sociali come soggetti del welfare, Il Mulino, Bologna
- Fargion S.** (2009), il servizio sociale storia temi dibattiti, Laterza, Roma
- Ferrario F.** (2000), Le dimensioni dell'intervento sociale, Carocci, Roma
- Folgheraiter F.** (1988), Teoria e metodologia del servizio sociale. La prospettiva di rete. Milano, Angeli
- Howe D.** (1986), An Introduction to Social Work Theory, Gower, Aldershot
- Larson. M.S.** (1977), The Rise of Professionalism. Los Angeles University of California
- Lorenz W.** (2005), Social work and a new social order; Challenging neo-liberalism's erosion of solidarity. Social work and society 3(1), pp. 93-101.
- Raineri M.L.**, (2007) Interventi di controllo, Lavoro sociale, 7(3), pp 415-423
- Wagner P. and Zimmermann B.** (2004), Citizenship and collective responsibility. On the political philosophy of the nation-based welfare state and beyond', in Lars Magnusson & Bo Stråth, eds. 2004, A European social citizenship? Brussels: PIE – Peter Lang.

Author's Address:

Ruggero Capra
University of Trento
Doctoral School in Sociology and Social Research
Via Verdi 26
38100 Trento
Italy
Email: rugero.capra@email.unitn.it

