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**Research about the meaning of social work
in the field of probation**

The paper will describe my PhD thesis research proposal generally concerning the meaning of social work. Therefore I'll present the motivations, the strategies of the research and some considerations about the method that I have chosen and the theoretical frameworks .

The main aspects will be the following.

I want to study the meaning of social work because this is often theoretically defined and rarely empirically defined. That's why a gap has been created between the academical definitions and the real social workers' representations about the meaning of their work. My purpose is to contribute to fill this gap. Another criteria is that the field research, if it is possible, may be in evolution and transformation. Political input which has been occurred in the last times let me to understand the relation between policy and the features of social work. This aspect is another important one and W. Lorenz points out as decisive to cope with professional social workers' challenges. So, in my opinion, an empirical recognition about this matter is useful to light the connection between political decisions and the meanings about the social work professions. To do it, necessarily I will focus on a specific field of social work. Hence, according to this intention I decided to focus my attention on the probation field in Italy.

With this case study I want to understand the ways that the social workers use to react to the evolution of policies and in particular to a policy presented in Italy in 2007 that tried to create new boundaries to their profession. According to this intention I want to focus on the action after the various draft acts (claims, professional reflections, new professional projects and so on). Hence I want to understand what are their proposals about that kind of policy, how their modus operandi would be changing, what are the representation of meaning that push them to react in that way.

Before starting the empirical research I need to select some topics and theoretical framework linking them to my goals of research. According to this intention I want to understand the link between state and legal punishment, between the welfare society and the evolution of the goals of the legal punishment, between the crisis of welfare state and the crisis of the penal system.

Some methodological consideration will allow me to trace the design of research. First of all, the kind of questions that I will consider are regarding both "what" are the subject's reaction and "How" they are expressed and argued, therefore I'll use a qualitative approach.

I'll have to develop a documentary research and I'll have to analyze the different kinds of acts and papers related with the event I want to consider. This preliminary study will allow me both to describe the case and to understand the matters; so it will be possible for me to build an

interviewing grid for focusing the reactions that I want to consider.

The subjects I want to consider are general and local managers, social workers and agents of penitentiary police. I'll sample the population in two different contexts: the central management offices and the local offices of probation. The criteria useful to choose the local offices will be both geographical and will concern the dimensions of the town in which they work. In this way I'll choose four offices. The preliminary study of documents will allow me to assess if it's convenient to insert also theoretical criteria.

The interviews allow me to consider the main matter I'm studying, then I'll broaden the problems through focus groups. This kind of instrument allow me to consider the impact of group dynamics and the specific representations of meaning of social worker for each office.

The qualitative outputs will be understood through contents analysis or other qualitative kind of analysis.

Hence I could present the paper broadening the above mentioned aspects and discussing the design of research proposal.