

Alessandro Miceli

Trento University

alessandromiceli@libero.it

Social Workers and Private Practice in Italy Abstract

The current work consists in the attempt to provide an investigation of both the state of art and the development of private practice in the Italian social work context. The main purpose is to outline and analyze the factors which are opposing or furthering the development of private practice in social work practice. I want to discover why in Italy private practice in social work exists only in a small degree while in other professions (i.e. in psychology) it is much higher. In order to address those factors I will be looking carefully into the social work's professionalization process (Abbot 1988; Larson 1977; Wilensky 1964; Tousin 1979).

One of the reason of this gap might be linked to the fact that social work since ever has been considered as a profession with the only mission of giving aid within the social services belonging to the public sector. Trying to get a deeper understanding of its origins it is possible to notice that social work originated more in the civil society, depending on the social policy structure of the respective country. For instance in Germany the city administration launched a kind of social work service named "Elberfeld System" while in the UK and US private charities – in opposition to public services – gave rise to social work services like the Charity Organization Societies (Lorenz 2007).

Furthermore, one of the most important social work concern is enabling people to make use of social and community resources. For this reason, in a good society the responsibility for this function should be up to public as well as democratic institutions without any possibility to practice private practice.

On another hand, it might also be said that professional social workers are committed to social justice and challenging poverty and discrimination. Hence a direct concern with justice always goes beyond the mere private transaction. The possibility of social work commitment with social justice allows this science to go beyond the function to take care only of the individual in a private transaction and, henceforth, it is a factor that make the difference between social work and psychology. This means for social work a much more complex intervention compared with other professions difficult to be evaluated to clients at least in a short period.

The current small amount of Italian social workers committed in private practice might be due to the status of social work as a profession inextricably related to the status and standing of those people these practitioners work with. Too often social workers have been seen as professionals doing little more than supervising the deterioration of people's lives, without taking into consideration that professional practice is being performed serving in a cross day-to-day practice both middle and high-class citizens as well. This situation represents a clear distorsion in the representation of the profession at different levels and it can be associated to the European situation in which the discipline

does not represent the picture of a unified profession. Walter Lorenz considers it as an incomplete process of professionalization which affects social work (Lorenz 2006).

In order to investigate this subject, I would make a virtual journey through the story of social work professional institutionalization process. The methodological design for this study can be complicated, but I would limit my purpose so that I am going to make an attempt at answering the following research questions:

How can this lack of development in social work private practice be explained compared with other professions with which it comes in contact in daily practice (i.e. psychology)?

Can we get any hints of private practice by observing the social work's institutionalization process in Italy?

What are the main strengths and weaknesses which bring about private practice in Italy?

What are the implications of the slow development of private social work practice for the self-image of the social work profession in Italy?

Our data will be collected from different professional organisations and by administering semi-structured interviews to people which have been played a key role in the process of social work professionalization, such as different presidents of the National Professional Board, the Ministry who enacted the law in which is stated that social workers can perform in private practice, and social workers who are being involved in private practice in Italy. In analyzing the development of private practice it is also important to investigate professional discourses given that they are an essential part of the way in which professional boundaries are drawn and negotiation with other social and institutional actors are conducted.

This study will give the opportunity to identify the main factors which since the beginning have been opposing to a considerable degree of private practice in the Italian context. It might be really interesting to each social worker interested in private practice and, additionally, might give a useful contribution to all professional community to get a step more toward the comprehension of private practice in social field.

Key words: private practice, social work's professionalization process.

Bibliography

Abbott, A. (1988), *The system of professions. An essay of the division on expert labor*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press.

Larson, M. S. (1977), *The rise of professionalism. A sociological analysis*, Berkeley, University of California.

Lorenz, W. (2006), *Perspectives on European social work. From the birth of the nation state to the impact of globalisation*, Opladen, Barbara Budrich Publishers.

Lorenz, W. (2007), *Practicing history: Memory and contemporary professional practice*, in "International Journal of Social Work", 50(5), 597-612.

Tousin, W. (1979) *Le libere professioni in Italia*, Bologna, Il Mulino.

Wilensky, H. (1964) *The professionalization of everyone*, in "American Journal of Sociology", vol. 70, 137-158.