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**Ethical dilemmas and decision making
in the changing scenarios of child and family services**

Child protection services are characterized by the task of constantly balancing the need for protection of the child and the need to help parents, with the mission of evaluating and treating the situations where problems of family life and parental behaviour create risks for children's lives, in order to achieve a better standard of living for children. In their daily work, social workers have to make decisions that take into account different levels of judgement and evaluation, in situations where there is a structural ambivalence and no clear evidence of the 'right way' to act. Viewed from an ethical perspective this uncertainty raises perennial questions about 'what is right' and "what is good" and professional and organizational cultures should contribute to helping practitioners deal with those dilemmas.

In Italy, the child protection system developed during the 90's more thanks to a professional movement from the bottom than an institutional national policy (Italy never adopted a unique national children act). This system has been established upon two basic principles: 1. Intervention must follow a sequence of steps (from assessment and protection of the child to evaluation and treatment of parental resources) and 2. The interaction of child services with the Juvenile court, the only body which has the 'legitimacy' to take action to protect children and limit parental authority. Social services have undefined statutory obligations and power in order to refer and to support the child and the family after the court order. In the 90's these principles allowed Italy to develop its child protection system akin to that of other western European countries.

So, in this field, professional decisions about what is in the 'best interest' of the child are linked to what happens in those two macro areas: the organization of Welfare and the Judicial system. The first years of 2000's are characterized by deep changes in both these areas as well as enormous changes in the lives of families facing new challenges due to migration, divorce and family violence as well as poverty and social exclusion processes, and changes in the role of parents and the representation of childhood.

Regarding the welfare system the changes are related to the reduction of spending, managerialism, subsidiarity, privatization and a new organization of the services (separation between social and health services, localization). The role of Justice is related to a liberal view and the new demand for more guarantees and justice for people involved in legal proceedings.

My research proposal follows the hypothesis that those changes result in an incongruity between the explicit mission declared and the real condition of the context of child and family practitioners, and that this leads to a discrepancy between professional culture, the values and the criteria that social workers use to orient their actions and the role expected implicitly or explicitly. It is possible that an ideological position of defence of 'the family' is supporting this contradiction. It is possible that this incongruity increases the complexity of the 'normal' dilemmas faced by children and family services, and gives rise to some ethical implications.

Following recent studies about ethics and professional orientations, the goal of the research is to explore:

- a. the impact of macro changes of Welfare, Justice and family lives on the practice of social workers involved in child protection services
- b. how social workers deal with the 'normal' or 'new' dilemmas arising from those changes

I will present the preliminary results of an empirical study based on in-depth interviews with 32 social workers practicing in different service organizations (specialized and non specialized), with different levels of seniority, in a urban and non urban context.