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Professional project in a neoliberal environment and evolution of the meanings of social work: a case study in Italian probation field

In my PhD thesis proposal I want to contribute to the empirical clarification of the meaning of social work. For this purpose it is important to use a clear theoretical framework. 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):

“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 then to deal with the contemporary evolution of social work as a profession related to the transformation of society. I have chosen political evolutions as a primary focus, in particular neoliberal policies. These 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 the actual object of my research.

Although one of the most important effects of neoliberalism concerns economical aspects such as the privatization of public services and the erosion of welfare state systems, Wagner and Zimmerman (2005) 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 to tackle the ideologies of neoliberalism.

Following on from these basic considerations I hypothesise that there is a linkage between these political transformations and sentencing policies as Garland (2001) points out; in particular the decline of the rehabilitative ideal and, at the same time, the rise of different objectives such as

retribution, incapacitation and the management of risk have their connection to these ideologies. For this reason, I have chosen the field of probation as the subject of my case study on developments in professional identity in social work.

Further reasons are that in the probation field social workers apply a combination of goals oriented both to help and to control. The negotiation of these two dimensions is in all fields of social work of fundamental importance for the identity of the profession (Fargion 2009, Raineri 2007, Folgheraiter, Ferrario, Howe, Cipriani R, Ciolfi T e Pittaluga M., 1995, Marzotto 1995) but probation can serve as a paradigmatic area in which the contrast is particularly pronounced. Even though control goals are normally not necessarily emphasized they seem to have a “latent function” (Raineri 2007). 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”.

More specifically, through the use of case studies, I want to understand how social workers take position 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 parliament (as reflected in statements, professional reflections, new professional projects, and other forms of responses). I want to understand what their proposals of defining their professional role are in the light of that kind of policy and how their *modus operandi* was changing. The study aims at understanding 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, C. 2010, Tra impegno e professione – Gli assistenti sociali come soggetti del welfare, Bologna: Il Mulino)

Before starting the empirical research I intend to select literature on studies concerning relevant topics and theoretical frameworks linking them to my goals of research. In particular, I want to understand the link between concepts of 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.

As for the design of my research. First of all, the kind of questions that I want to consider are regarding both “what” the subjects' responses are and “How” they are expressed and argued. Therefore I am using a qualitative approach which makes use of concepts of grounded theory.

I have developed a documentary research design and I have started analyzing the different kinds of Acts and documents related with the key events I want to consider. During the preconference my intention is to show these first results that will allow me to define the interview grids for further steps of my research.

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