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PROFESSIONAL SOCIAL WORK GOALS IN A NEOLIBERAL ENVIRONMENT: A CASE STUDY IN THE FIELD OF ITALIAN PROBATION

The field of probation offers a significant opportunity for a case study on developments in professional identity in social work. In the last three decades the culture in the justice sector has been changing: it is characterised both by a decline of rehabilitative ideals (Garland 2001 ; McShane and Williams, 1994; Melossi, 2002), and by the rise of criminological theories in the direction of an "ecology of fear" (Melossi 2002). This signifies both the sweeping turn and the great distance from previous approaches. Moreover, according to Melossi (2002), the present theories consider the offender both as "unfriendly" and as a person that must be punished instead of being in need of care.

These new tendencies emphasise the individual responsibilities of the citizens. Following Wagner and Zimmerman (2004) I hypothesise that this phenomenon is linked to the erosion of the welfare state and its origins are related to neoliberal tendencies in society. Hence the probation sector permits simultaneously the study of the decline of the rehabilitative ideal and of the rise of its replacement objectives such as retribution, social control and the management of risk.

Moreover the probation field can provide important information both about the change of current ideals held by social workers and about the neoliberal policy impact on the welfare state. Hence I can study how social workers act on or react to these societal transformations. Besides, according to the evaluation of Lorenz (2005), I think through this research I can evaluate how social workers may be at risk of taking a merely passive and uncritical stance towards the transformation processes of social policies.

More specifically, through the use of case studies, I want to understand how social workers take position toward the evolution of policies and in particular to the policy presented in Italy in 2007 that tried to set new boundaries for their profession. The Attorney General proposed four different draft proposals between April and November 2007. In every proposal the goals were the same: he wanted both to involve the penitentiary police in the management of alternative measure to imprisonment and to give them the task of social control. The social workers employed in the UEPEs (Ufficio esecuzione penale esterna, which is the office in charge of probation in Italy) took position to this change as labour union representatives and as professional groups of social workers. In both cases they were absolutely opposed 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 alone, the beginning of these developments.

I want to understand how their proposals defined their professional role in the light of those policies and how their *modus operandi* was changing. The study aims at establishing what kind of representation of meaning induces them to react in a particular way. Through these questions I will understand how these factors had an impact on the definition of professional boundaries between social work and police in the justice context.

Moreover I have hypothesized that behind all this lies the wider issue of whether the "dual mandate" of social work (care and control) hinders or promotes the formation of a secure professional identity.

The 'protest' I found and analysed in those responses can hypothetically be interpreted in two different ways: in one sense it is simply a question of power in that a field of influence is being taken away from them and they need to share part of their responsibilities with another 'profession', i.e. the penitentiary police. In another sense it could mean conceptually that they maintain that social

work only makes sense when care and control are being left together in one hand.

I want to answer to these questions and I want to test my hypothesis through a clear theoretical framework derived from theories about professional processes and about criminology. Concerning the first I will consider how the different conceptions of a professional project, first formulated by Larson (1977) and reformulated by others (Freidson 1986, 2001; Laffin / Entwistle, 2000; Mann 1986, 1993), could provide answers to my case study.

Concerning the second I will consider how the narrative representations of social workers could be understood through different theoretical schemata that link together words such as crime, rehabilitation, risk management, supervising of offenders, etc in particular patterns. In this way I want to capture the implicit theories about crime and intervention that social workers use daily.

As for the design of my research, I have conducted content and discourse analyses of documents and of interviews according to the principles of grounded theory. More specifically I have analysed proceedings of seminars and papers dealing with the background and process of introducing penitentiary police to the probation offices; the first results were backed up by interviews with social workers to understand their interpretation of this event.

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