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Being able “to look up”. Parenting in poverty and the social work intervention¹

Mara Sanfelici, Luigi Gui²

1. Background

The aim of this article is to explore how social workers represent the experience of parents in condition of economic precariousness and their role in supporting them. How do the social workers understand the condition of low income parents? How does this influence their way of working with these families? Which are the challenges they face and how do they tackle them?

There is an extensive literature showing the consequences of living in condition of economic precariousness for all family members. Financial strains make it difficult to access the basic essentials, so that pressure on family relationships may easily be a consequence (Bywaters *et al.*, 2016). In case of severe poverty, children and parents can be subject to poor nutrition, poor housing, inadequate heating, and clothing, with consequences on both physical and mental wellbeing.

Scholars agree that economic disadvantage and income precariousness significantly influence the present and future life of children and their potential for development and future social inclusion (Cooper and Stewart, 2017). Poverty can have both direct and indirect consequences for the wellbeing of children and parents. Not all children experiencing poverty will face abuse and neglect, but the interaction of poverty with other risk factors can increase their chances of maltreatment (Bunting *et al.*, 2018). Parenting capacity can be undermined by higher degrees of stress and disadvantage. Research has shown a disproportionate number of poor families in contact with social services departments (Gordon and Gibbons, 1998); however this increased referral rate could be caused by the higher probability that people with less resources have access to public welfare.

It is not possible to generalize the ways in which different low income families experience the challenges related to a lack of resources and how they manage the task of caring for their children. Structural and cultural changes, including the transformation of family structures, the changing relations among gender and generations, the impact of the labour market transformations and of welfare policies on family life, are processes in which parents and children interact and face different challenges.

In Italy family poverty is a widespread phenomenon. In 2019, almost 1.7 million households were estimated to be in absolute poverty, with an incidence of 6.4%, and higher rates in the southern regions. Households with children were more often poor, and in more severe conditions (ISTAT, 2019). In particular, households with minors in absolute poverty were over 619 thousand, with an incidence of 9.7%. Citizenship plays an important role too: absolute poverty for households composed by nationals with minors was 6.3%, while it affected nearly one household out of three in those entirely composed by non-nationals (31.0%) (ISTAT, 2019).

Extensive literature is available that analyzes the social and economic policies against family poverty and the welfare measures that try to tackle this condition. In the last decade, in Italy there has been a progressive reduction of the national fund for social policies, consequent to the austerity measures after the 2008 financial crisis. While the need for social protection has increased, the economic and institutional resources for the social sector have been progressively reduced (Lumino, 2019), leading to talk about a form of «subtractive recalibration» (Ferrera, 2012). Saraceno and Benassi (2020) analyze in detail the social roots and characteristic of the poverty regime in Italy, a country historically characterized by extensive territorial differences with regard to economic functioning, administrative capacity and political cultures. The limited role of the state is explained by a combination of variables, that characterize the Italian social model: the pivotal role of family solidarity, a highly categorical social security system, and the delegation of social assistance to local governments and charities, within a weak national legal framework (Saraceno, Benassi, 2020). To compensate for insufficient and decreasing state funding, regions and municipalities have to use local taxation to finance social services. Since this capacity depends on the local economy, poorer areas are penalized, even if needs are greater. As regard to per capita expenditure for social services, the poorest region in southern Italy, Calabria, with a 38.8% of relative poverty, is able to spend 22 Euro for each resident, while Emilia Romagna, a norther region, with 5.6% of relative poverty, can spend 160 Euro for each resident (Saraceno and Benassi, 2020). The recent introduction of a minimum income scheme seems to perform well as a strategy to address poverty and social exclusion, even if its implementation has been negatively influenced by institutional and organizational flaws (Jessoula *et al.*, 2019). In general, Italy appears to be particularly slow in modifying the framework of a traditional familistic welfare model. Welfare arrangements heavily rely on family solidarity, in a kind of forced familialism, that exacerbates gender division of labour in the family, particularly in low income, often single-earner, households (Saraceno and Benassi, 2020).

Concerns have emerged not only about the redistribution of resources, availability of monetary transfers, and quality of services, but also about the way in which people in precarious economic conditions are recognised, represented and included in the definition of policies to tackle challenges related to social injustice (Busso *et al.*, 2018). More or less explicit assumptions in public policies and the services through which they are implemented may foster negative

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views. Social judgements have been made about who are the 'deserving poor' (Cousins, 2013) or whether parents in poverty are adequate ones (Campion, 2005). Scholars have highlighted how current approaches to child welfare do not effectively address inequalities, focusing more on individual risk and protection and ignoring contextual factors; not rarely structural inequalities and poverty are not just ignored or obscured, but have been used as a further source of blame (Morris *et al.*, 2018). In particular, the use of individualised discourses to refer to families' problems have limited the complexity needed in the explanation of multifaceted causes of poverty, with an exclusive focus on individual deficit and responsibility (Featherstone *et al.*, 2018), and little attention to social determinants and process of oppression and discrimination. Moreover, the contemporary mainstream discourse on the so called "intensive parenting" (Hays, 1996) identifies rules and prescriptions for "good parenting", more attuned to the material and cultural condition of middle-class families, but assumed as the normal standards for all, leading to a high risk of blaming families not in line with this way of performing parenting.

Parenting in poverty is an under researched topic in Italy. This article's aim is to fill in this gap, exploring the social workers' assumptions and representations about this phenomenon, and their role in the helping process with low income families.

2. Method

This study is part of a wider national research that analyzes and compares the ways in which parents and social workers represent parenting, the responsibilities linked to it, and how they make sense and interact with mainstream discourses that emerge in the contemporary society, and in the social policies as well. In particular, this paper discusses the first results emerged from the analysis of interviews with social workers, involved in the helping process with low income parents. The overall research, guided by a qualitative method, has an exploratory and inductive element and it does not claim to be comprehensive, but to highlight possible accounts and assumptions that influence the conduct of practice in social services.

This study was carried out using a purposeful sample of ten Italian social workers, employed in different geographical areas of the country, more specifically working in the following regions: Friuli Venezia Giulia, Emilia Romagna, Lazio and Calabria. The sample included only social workers, with at least five years of field experience in working with parents. Six interviewees were employed in public services, either specialized in child protection or for the general population; four were working in services organized by third sector organizations, both non religious and catholic, and two of these were residential settings for families and children.

The grounded theory method (Charmaz, 2006), coherent with the interpretative paradigm chosen in this study, is guiding the process of sampling, data collection and data analysis. The results of this first exploratory stage of the research allows us to have a range of experiences from which to uncover the first theoretical insights, necessary for the second phase of the study.

In this stage, ten in-depth interviews were administered, using open-ended questions to stimulate reflections, following the social workers' own leads, rather than anticipate responses and encouraging the description of concrete examples from their professional experience. The interview covered five broad areas: a) representation of parenting b) representation of parenting in poverty c) representation of the social worker role in the helping process with low income parents 4) perception about challenges and strengths when working with families, both at the professional level and within the wider welfare system 5) theories or methodologies they apply in practice, if any.

The first phase of theoretical sampling and interviewing was completed between March and June 2020. The analysis of the interviews, the code processing and the writing of numerous memos have made it possible to gradually shape the first theoretical categories, presented in the following paragraphs.

3. Findings

3.1 Poor parents, poor parenting?

Despite the evidence that the lack of resources, rather than cultural deviance, is responsible for many parenting practices associated with low-income families (Sherman and Harris, 2012), several scholars highlight the tendency of professionals to blame the parents themselves for their shortcomings (Morris *et al.*, 2018). In our exploratory study we found mixed results.

Almost all the interviewees were able to highlight the relationship between socio-economic conditions and the difficulties that parents experience. Only one, when prompted by the interviewer, answered that the issues of parents living in poverty are not generally linked to their economic conditions, but due to individual characteristics and behaviours.

In narrating their experience with low income parents, the majority distinguished between families in «chronic conditions of poverty» and those challenged by a situation of precarity for a more recent time, often due to critical events. The social workers described how both these situations may easily have consequences on performing as a parent or lead to «poor parenting».

The interviewees explained how in some cases the condition of poverty is a consequence of not forecasted events, such as trauma, accidents or a serious disease, and the parents' difficulty to cope with them. Also the

condition of lone parents with poor and precarious jobs, or that suddenly became unemployed, leads to a daily struggle; earning money to respond to the basic needs of their family members becomes the main focus, with the risk to neglect other tasks connected to parenting. Some parents seem to have no physical or emotional strengths or simply time left for their children, after extenuating turn shifts at work.

In certain areas of the country, where the issue of migrants' labour exploitation is more apparent, some social workers mentioned the association between an oppressive system that leads to the denial of rights and its consequences on families. In particular, they highlighted the difficulties of immigrant parents, working with irregular jobs, with no power on contracting for their rights, whose only chance is to go to work and leave their children unattended.

The workers highlighted that «it is a question of different opportunities, more than of parenting», when the parent is able «to perform parenting tasks, but it is almost impossible to do it». They saw how multiple causes of stress intertwine, challenging the parents' coping capacity, and how this may easily lead to a situation in which the parents are «so focused on their problems as adults, that they are no more able to see their children», with consequences on the quality of parenting.

«The parent who somehow, for different reasons, because he lost his job, because he had a sudden bereavement, because he has an illness, he totally loses sight of his parental function, and with all these external events, many families are in such serious difficulties that become so self-centered on their suffering, on their problems as adults, that they can no longer see their children. And even this means no longer being able to perform the parental role in the best possible way». (I2)

Different representations and explanations emerged, when the interviewees specifically referred to the condition of parents in «chronic poverty», in the vast majority of cases described as the most challenging when performing casework. Similarly to what other studies found (Morris *et al.*, 2018), two of the interviewees attributed this condition more to individuals' flaws and lack of capacities, while the majority went beyond the individual, however often with a tendency to focus on a «culture of poverty» (Lewis, 1959).

One of the ways in which scholars have explained factors implicated in causing poverty is that the family itself can be a significant conduit of low-income status, by virtue of values and practices that certain families engage in (Harrison and Huntington, 2000). These parents are described in this literature as having no proper role models, more likely to live in communities where benefit dependence and antisocial behaviours are widely accepted, and sometimes lacking work ethic. The process of intergenerational transmission of poverty seems to perpetuate these individual and collective beliefs and behaviours.

The discourses of some interviewees seemed to refer to similar accounts and assumptions. However, this approach risks to categorise and objectify the poor, if this condition is not analyzed taking into account the social and cultural processes and mechanisms that lead to marginalization, disadvantage and oppression. An interviewee associated these characteristics more frequently to people from other countries, with flawed cultural norms of child rearing. In some of the interviews these parents are described as people with «low education», «no aspirations», no expectations for their future and that of their children, not being able to see beyond «the limits» of what they know, with no interest in being helped to overcome a situation that hamper the wellbeing of their children.

«They show affection anyway, but it's an affection, I repeat, limited to a minimum of parental functions, so not all the functions that characterize and build the dimension of parenting, but only some are important to them. And they don't question themselves, because it's okay, it's right like it is, they don't have any future expectations, because for them the important thing is to make the day. Then if there are things that can compromise the future of their children, they don't think about them at all. At least that's what I found. They do not recognize the daily and future problems of their children, they do not recognize all the needs that are not only needs related to food, but there is much more». (I7).

On the contrary, other social workers highlighted the link with the broader structural condition of disadvantage and exclusion, and its consequences in the everyday life of parents, rather than describing a kind of a cultural deviance from standards. Their discourses focus more on lack of support, lack of material resources to provide to their children the kind of opportunities and the stimuli they need for their wellbeing.

Moreover, they describe specific contexts of extreme harsh conditions of marginalized groups, left alone to cope with different kinds of poverty: «income poverty», «poverty of gut», «cultural poverty», «poverty of stimuli» and «poverty of words». These parents were not offered the possibility to have access to education, had less power to interact with other social groups and institutions, and risked to perceive themselves as powerless. A social worker described extreme poverty as a «condition of obscurity», that «does not allow to see» which are our own rights to leave in dignity and the minimum condition for wellbeing, in which sometimes even sufferance for material deprivation or physical or emotional neglect or abuse are taken for granted.

Social class differences are explicitly mentioned by two interviewees and linked to consequences on parenting. They highlighted different opportunities, status and power recognized to different groups, with low income parents obliged to adapt to services and goods of lower quality («series B services for series B children»), finding more difficulties to have access to resources necessary to meet the needs of their children, and being treated as "second class" families, both in the society and in the interaction with public services.

3.2 The need to «raise awareness»: different ways of approaching diversity

Hays *et al.* (1996, p.8) describe current ideal parenting methods as «child centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor-intensive, and financially expensive». It is widely argued that parenting has intensified in recent decades (Smyth and Craig, 2017) and that the adherence to intensive parenting standards is often presented as the right choice for the children's wellbeing. However, the tasks associated in the mainstream discourses on intensive parenting are more attainable for middle-class parents, and certainly challenging for those who have less time and lack financial resources.

Several scholars have highlighted that public services, in their role as protector of children and provider of aid to poor parents, tend to turn a critical eye towards the parenting practices of low income families (Sherman and Harris, 2012). The interventions seem to have the aim of re-socializing poor parents, to better conform to middle-class standards (Swift, 1995), with the consequence that these parents are more frequently subject to surveillance over their parenting practices.

Similarly to other studies (Morris *et al.*, 2018), we found that some social workers involved in our research, even when they explicitly recognized the link between economic hardship and parenting challenges, did not take into account this factor in their practice with families. Different variables seemed to interact, leading to obscure or avoid to consider poverty when performing social work practice.

A first element seems to be connected to the way in which psychological theories were used to inform practice, in particular when the social worker was guided by a more directive approach to the helping process, in which the professional is assumed to be as the only expert of the assessment and the "right" solution (Fargion, 2013; Folgheraiter, 2007). The discourses of the interviewees were clearly influenced by psychological theories on parenting, both acquired in their education process or included in common sense discourses on parenting. Some interviewees explicitly referred to authors from the psychological field and listed a series of «complex functions» that are required to be an «adequate parent». Early psychological research and theories have been criticized for the use and reproduction of dominant ideologies about ideal families, and for being confined to a limited population of parents, particularly the values and behaviours of white, north-American middle-class ones (Phoenix, 1986). More recent psychological theories and approaches recommend adopting an ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), both in the assessment of risk and protective factors that influence parenting and in explaining the condition of poverty. However, from our study emerged that not always the broader context is taken into account in the assessment process, when it is more focused on tasks that parents need to perform no matter what, since they are thought to be "the right way" to promote the wellbeing of children and mainly as a parent's responsibility.

One factor that seems to influence the actual possibility or capacity to assume a broader view seems to be the workers' approach to diversity and the capacity to take into account different perspectives and values. Several interviewees described a more challenging work, when the social workers needed to interact with a different worldview on child rearing and parenting. When the same perspective was shared with the family, the helping process resulted in a more satisfactory experience for both the parents and the workers. On the contrary, in several interviews the social workers described difficulties in the approach with families, particularly those in chronic and more severe conditions of poverty, circumstances in which the view of the parents was far from the mainstream representation of parental functions listed in the literature for "expert" and the ideal parenting method, clearly synthesized by Hays (1996).

What changes among the interviewees is their way to interact in the helping process with these families. Some professionals assumed that their perspective on childrearing was the "right" one. Not conform to their standard was the view and behaviours of parents, described as not able to recognize the importance of school education and «cultural stimuli», as uninvolved or unassertive with schools and other institutions, as not aware about the need to provide structured play time, and in more complex cases not even adequate physical and medical care. These professionals stressed the importance of their task to «raise the awareness» of parents about their flaws, as well as resources. According to them, this is the first step to work with experts of social work, education and psychology, with the aim to learn the right perspective on child rearing and the way to do it. However, this approach seemed to lead to behaviours that were described as avoidance, resistance, closure, opposition, lack of willingness to change what parents considered to be "normal". This approach seemed to be built on the opposition between "them" and "us", leading to cultural clashes related to different worldviews.

«[I say] «they love in their own way», because according to them the kind of care they give to their children, and everything that is not provided, such as an education to rules and school education, is fine (...). And in these circumstances you have to make them understand that parenting is characterized by a series of very complex functions, which include not only the ability to satisfy material needs, but also the educational needs and involves a series of dimensions that go beyond ensuring food (...). It is almost a situation in which... for them the normality is the one they live. They are not aware of their negligence and there is no desire for change, because according to them we are the ones who have gone further and they are the ones who live a situation of normality (...). The problem is that the lack of collaboration on the part of the family and the lack of awareness of the problem leads them to close themselves off, not to collaborate and then we go ... it is a self-fulfilling prophecy, when I am forced to make a report [to the judge], so I actually become the threat they thought I was.

(...)Everything depends on this, if I [as a parent] become aware of the problem, so I realize that what we are talking about is the reality of facts, I collaborate to the project and we avoid the child apprehension, but if I do not become aware of the problem, I have almost the presumption of being right, I see the service as an enemy (...), any kind of intervention is unsuccessful, because they think that we are mad at them». (I5)

Other social workers seemed more able to include in their assessment both protective and risk factors within the family and in the broader social context, being guided by a different approach to the social work intervention.

First, they highlighted how behaviors are not objectively functional or dysfunctional, but rather more or less advantageous in particular contexts and times. One explicitly said that parents in chronic poverty were «creative» in being able to «make do» with what they had, describing their reliance on public and informal aids, not as a way to «exploit» or «instrumentally use» the system, but as a possible strategy to cope with the scarcity of resources, in absence of alternatives. Ambiguity characterizes some of these narrations, when the workers described at the same time their difficulty to deal with assumptions and behaviours that continuously lead to rely on the use of public funds, however recognizing how this attitude was a possible response in a system that exposed parents to suffering and oppression.

A different reasoning process, open to consider and interact with diverse perspectives and views of what is 'normal', led to orient the task to «raise awareness» in the social context in which parents interact, considering change as a collective responsibility. Different strategies are described as attempts to tackle difficulties experienced by families, going beyond a more re-educational approach. For some workers the main focus was on empowering networks that generate resources in the community, useful to provide more opportunities and support. Other social workers identified their task in mediating and promoting the interactions among different perspectives of parents, schools and other agencies, as a way to understand each other's needs and find possible solutions together. Two professionals described their work in trying to mediate and promote a change in the organizational culture of the social service agencies, where they recognized bias and prejudices that unknowingly lead to institutional forms of oppressions of poor families.

Two social workers explicitly referred to a view of parenting as not only «an individual task», but «a collective responsibility», since the opportunities for parents and children depend also on the broader socio-economic and cultural system. These professionals identified as a strategic intervention their work in the community, not only as an instrument to activate and empower formal and informal networks, but also as a way to promote reciprocal knowledge about what being a parent means for different people and promote mutual solidarity and support, a way of being together in a shared effort to promote child and family wellbeing.

Other interviewees mentioned community social work and group work as something that should be done to be concretely effective in working with low income families and avoiding a residual approach to the intervention, but listing several reasons why it was impossible for them to actually engage in these activities.

In the next paragraph we are going to show which are the variables in the organizational context and wider social context that seem to influence these different ways of doing social work, dealing with low income families.

3.3 Dealing with precarity in precarious conditions

Studies highlight how social workers are facing rising levels of precarity, both in their own professional lives and the service users' lives (Pentaraki, 2017). These scholars argue that, traditionally in the western countries, social workers have been more likely to deal with the phenomenon of precarity through the lives of service users but, in a more recent time, this condition is being experienced by social workers as well, not only in their professional lives, but also in their personal one. Scholars show how during the last decades the welfare state has faced reconfigurations along neoliberal lines, social spending cuts and outsourcing of public social services, with consequences on professionals and the quality of the intervention (Lorenz, 2008; Pentaraki, 2017).

In the Italian context different variables seem to interact. A recent survey (Sanfelici, 2019 b) showed that the rate of stable contract varies greatly among regions, with the social workers in the south of Italy being much more likely to have temporary contracts. Moreover this study found that the higher rate of professionals with temporary job contracts is among social workers employed in services to support low-income individuals and families. A recent law has introduced a national minimum income measure, increasing the number of social workers involved in actions against poverty. However this reform is being implemented differently among regions, with consequences also on the working conditions of the professionals.

In addition, studies have highlighted the longstanding disparities among Italian territories in the availability of social services for children and families, with the southern regions in more difficult conditions, even if they are supposed to deal with higher rates of poor income families. A stratification of new issues related to the global financial crisis and longstanding problems in the more oppressed areas of the country seem to intertwine, with negative effects on professionals and services.

These critical issues are frequent in the discourses of our interviewees, as variables that impacted on their work with families, with disparities among areas of the country.

In the narration of the workers employed in the centre and in the south of Italy the scarcity of resources actually available to support families - both the availability of material resources and human resources - was a recurrent topic. Link to that, was the frustration that came from assessing needs related to poverty and not being able to provide any concrete answer.

Especially in the centre and in the south of Italy, one of the main concerns was the instability of the workers' job positions, that caused a sense of precariousness both in their own and professional life, and seemed to influence also the interaction with the service users and the quality of the provided services.

«Even if we are crushed by workload, because we are ten social workers in an area of almost 200.000 residents, so in condition of... we are anyway trying to look up a little bit (...) and try to work not only on casework (...). But with the fact that we are such a few to handle so much... the big dilemma is this: either you do a lot of things, not well done, ok? Done, but not well done. Or

you do a few things, well done. And unfortunately you realize that, in reality, we are asked to do many things, not well done». (I4)

«The problem is not being able to work in integrated professional networks, but the fact that you often do not have the network to work with and to count on, or when it is there, it is a temporary one, so there is a very limited capacity to plan for the future, you cannot guarantee project for the future, and you need to explain to the family that today you can support them but tomorrow, when your contract will be ended, there will be no one else, or maybe someone else, after a while, with who they will need to restart with from the beginning».(I6)

Our interviewees in the northern areas reported different views about the availability of resources to help people. For some social workers, enough resources were in place, but not adequately organized and not coordinated in an efficient way, risking to create disparities and waste of public funds. Other professionals highlighted the consequences of recent cuts in public welfare provision, and the growing influence of a merely economic perspective in orienting decisions, obscuring or diminishing important tasks in the social work helping process.

«In my opinion there are enough resources... The issue it is how they are organized. That is, banally, even talking only about monetary transfers, and other kinds of support, there are thousands of different applications (...) They are extremely fragmented and a family has difficulty in keeping up with everything, so they come to the service to ask: you tell me what is the application I can submit! And even I have difficulty in keeping up with them». (I1)

«Very often the decisions about which interventions will be activated are purely economic, if there is the budget or there is not, which is right because if there are funds it's ok, if there are not funds we cannot... on the other hand, it makes me sad, because there is no longer the possibility for a social work assessment, a real one, but only a mere economic calculation. But I understand that if you cut, the state cuts everywhere, you have to consider this as a matter of fact» (I4)

One of the social workers in the north explicitly referred to mainstream assumptions that leads to avoid to tackle or to obscure inequalities related to poverty, embodied in social policies and translated, more or less consciously, in social work practice. The risk is that social workers themselves are asked to perform a supervising, pacifying or controlling role (Reisch and Jani, 2012), leaving the causes of oppression unchanged. She also highlights how this translate into dilemmas in the services that focus on child protection only, with the risk to prioritize children rights without acknowledging that children's rights are interwoven and inseparable from those of their parents and family (Featherstone et al., 2016)

From the north to the south, common topics were the fragmentation of services, a bureaucratic approach, «a resistance in the organization in accepting non-standardized solutions», that obstacle more creative and more flexible interventions to respond to emerging needs of families. More generally emerged as a critical issue a perspective within the agencies that seems to assume a residual approach, in which the social services are meant to respond with monetary transfers or material service provisions. According to the vast majority of the interviewees, a broader view that includes working both at the case level and at the community level, investing on prevention, is needed. At the same time, a more holistic approach that includes working with the community seems more a choice of the single professional, if there is time left, which is not recognized, not promoted, sometimes contrasted with a scarce recognition and awareness of the professional role.

However, when the social workers try to and are able to overcome these obstacles, the gains are evident. What works is the effort to see from the point of view of the people with less power, understanding their perspective, by «staying with» and «being seen and recognized» in the community, trying to «look up», see the broader picture of the condition of the territory, create possibilities of interaction of different views, trying to influence politician and the management for a cultural change.

4. Discussion and conclusion

Our study highlights the interconnections among ways of representing parenting and poverty and the interpretation of the social work role in helping these families.

A minority of the interviewees viewed problems related to parenting in poverty as something generated in the individual-private sphere only. Some of the social workers recognized the impact of poverty on parents' lives, however they seemed to focus their assessment and intervention on the family context only, without addressing more complex roots of family troubles and the macro-causes of poverty. Other recognized the importance of working in the territory, trying to involve institutions and communities, highlighting at the same time a series of structural and cultural obstacles that hampered the efficacy of their work.

Referring to a study of Morris *et al.* (2018), Saar-Heiman and Gupta argue that «paradoxically whilst families living in socially deprived circumstances are much more likely to come to the attention of child protection services, tackling poverty and inequality is often not seen as the 'core business' for social workers, instead the assessment of risk and parenting capacity is» (Saar-Heiman and Gupta, 2020, p. 1170). Tackling the root causes of poverty would mean to assume a different approach, that implies also the capacity and the possibility to perform a political role in social work, advocating for structural and cultural changes, both within the social service agencies and in the society (Barrucci, 2015). Social workers are required by their professional mandate to be involved in social policy-shaping processes to promote social change and social justice. Nevertheless scholars identified barriers that limit social workers' engagement in policy practice, and «the question remains as to how, and under what circumstances, these barriers can be overcome» (Nouman *et al.*, 2019).

The narratives of the social workers are useful to understand from their point of view how translating ideals and values into practice is not a straightforward task.

From our data it is apparent how the capacity to recognize structural and organizational issues that cause discrimination and oppression does not necessarily translate into action to contrast these processes. More frequently poverty and its consequences, as well as structural problems in the welfare state, are considered as unchangeable matters of fact, as something «too big, to tackle» (Morris *et al.*, 2018). Organizational constraints and various system pressures, such as resourcing issues, budget cuts and excessive standardization of service provision, as found in other studies (Barrucci, 2015), seem to lead to a condition where social workers are no more able «to look up», and the only choice left is to focus on the immediate and temporary solutions for problems. The majority of our interviewees recognized the importance of an action at a broader level, at least in the community where they work, but in most of the cases it is mentioned as something they should do, but it is not possible to do. Overwhelming caseloads often impose the need to choose if they want to invest adequate time on individual casework, or neglect this task and work more in the territory (Gui, 2018).

Barrucci (2015) highlights how the effort for a change cannot only be attributed to social workers, since their activity is interwoven and regulated by institutional and policy frameworks, oriented by different assumptions. Our study confirms that the tendency in the social services is to operate in conditions of scarce or highly fragmented resources, limited budget and a general approach more keen to respond to problems, than to invest in social services and social work as strategic assets for prevention.

As it is for the service users, also when interpreting representations and ideas of the professionals on the field, the effort should be to overcome individual blame, and search for broader explanations to understand and think about possible co-constructed solutions in contextual and interactional ways. The accounts of professionals on the field about their challenges and more or less effective solutions are very useful to guide this common effort (Nouman *et al.*, 2019).

One interesting result is that the scarce capacity to plan and invest in the future - a characteristic that several social workers recognized (and sometimes criticized) in parents in chronic poverty - was described as a condition experienced by professionals as well. The precariousness of their job positions and more generally the scarcity of resources lead to living in a condition of constant uncertainty, for the present and the future, and may cause feelings of powerlessness, and acceptance of difficult conditions as taken for granted.

Both poverty of the families and poverty of resources dedicated to them within the welfare state system are interconnected issues; they should not be considered as background factors, but seen as variables that influence in various ways the decisions made everyday by workers.

Authors have proposed the introduction of an anti-poverty paradigm in social services (Saar-Heiman and Gupta, 2020), to improve the recognition of the impact of poverty and policies that increase inequality, and to orient the everyday practice. Our findings suggest that some of the basis to go in this direction are already in place in Italy, others need improvement.

The first step is that all social workers should be able to recognize processes of oppression linked to poverty and marginalization. Towards this end, social work education needs to offer the critical resources necessary for social workers to understand the dynamics and mechanisms that build precarity, both in their own and service users' lives. Another fundamental competence is the capacity to overcome processes of "otherness" and incorporate a diversity approach (Sanfelici, 2019a). This allows to see from other perspectives as the basis for the engagement and a real co-construction of ideas and solutions, closer to what in the literature is described as an «exchange approach» (Fargion, 2013). Working in the community reinforces this process and helps to generate resources, as well as possibilities to create alliances to ask for rights and justice-based services.

Other actors in the public welfare services need to be considered responsible for these changes (Nouman *et al.*, 2019), clearly defining social work and social services mission and priorities, allocating concrete and appropriate resources to empower more vulnerable groups (Chiodo, 2017), and to invest on prevention through social policy and adequate funds to support families (Polini, 2020). Professionals should be encouraged to develop innovative interventions that integrate the personal, community and policy advocacy levels and promote service users' participation not as a slogan but in the services' design. The local level is fundamental to interpret emerging needs and building participation, but state level regulations are needed to guarantee equality in access to quality services.

Improving research about the quality and contents of social work education in Italy, as well as the condition of the profession in both public services and third sector organizations could help to shed light on the variables that influence the quality of the interventions to help low income parents in Italy.

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