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Open Essays and Researches

The Role of Professional Competence in Welfare Services Development. A Contribution of Luhmann's System Theory

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Abstract. Over the last few decades, professionalism has changed profoundly, and traditional approaches have now become insufficient to understand its developments as mono-dimensional. During the 20th century, many professions have been employed within organizational contexts, causing a bureaucratization and standardization of many professional activities. For some professions, such as that of social worker, the professionalization process has been traditionally considered strictly linked to organizational development. Organizations have become one of the main places in which professional practices take place, and professionalism can no longer be considered a «third logic», contrasting with the market and bureaucracy (Freidson 2001). The paper proposes a systemic point of view on the professions' analysis within organizational contexts, according to which professional competence plays a pivotal role. The study focuses on social services, and particularly on local systems of measures against poverty, via the findings of a case-study conducted in Italy. Professional competences assume a key role, as their exercise is currently affecting the redefinition of contents and strategies of social intervention, in the delicate balance between consolidated settings (locally developed in a heterogeneous way) and an orientation towards administrative re-centralization at a national level, within a common community framework.

Keywords: professionalism, Systems Theory, social services, professional competence, street-level bureaucracy.

INTRODUCTION

Sociological debate has always recognized a key-role for the professions in the development of modern Western societies. Democratic States have entrusted to them the protection of public interest in many relevant social issues. Over time, issues on the structure of the professions and their development have followed a recursive trend: firstly, debate focused on the identification of constituent elements of a “profession”, then on its procedural

dimensions, and finally on the combination of both, in a unique analytical perspective which considers the “professional system” as a whole (Abbott 1988). Similarly, the term “professionalism” has taken on different and contrasting meanings. Until the 1970s, the main theoretical (functionalist) perspective had considered it as referring to a normative system of values; during the 1970s and 1980s it was interpreted as an ideology for control and in the 1990s there was a return to viewing it as a normative value (Evetts 2003).

Professions are also considered as «vectors of the institutional democratic project» as, if professionalism operates in a coherent way, it introduces and develops the institutional design of democratic society (Prandini 2013: 70). It can be said that the professions represent the *trait-d'union* between the statement of fundamental individual rights (right to health, to defense, to information, to social assistance) and their effective protection.

In recent decades, some scholars have outlined the limits of traditional approaches to the analysis of the professions, in that they had been constructed upon lines of enquiry that presuppose a one-dimensional analysis (Sciulli 2008; Olgiati 2010; Burau, Andersen 2014), while in empirical experience we find intertwinement and overlapping among (apparently) contrasting trends (Olgiati 2010). Burau and Andersen (2014: 266) use theoretical triangulation «to reduce or counterbalance the shortcomings of a single approach, and, thereby, increase the ability to interpret the research findings at hand».

The paper aims to provide a new contribution for understanding the role of the professions within organizational contexts, through the lens of System theory. The proposal does not contrast existing contributions, rather it pays particular attention to the key role of “professional competence” in organizational development, a neglected point in the theoretical debate.

The empirical analysis concerns the Italian welfare field, where definition and contents of “welfare” vary from one country to another, as they depend on cultural specifics and regulatory frameworks. The definition of social intervention areas and ways of intervention is a social construct deriving from the locally defined character of the problems and their related institutionalized responses. Particularly, the current redefinition of the Italian welfare field is taking place around the delicate balance between the heterogeneous social services structures consolidated locally and the re-centralization of administrative action on a national, EU oriented level.

It is argued that the ways in which social workers are exercising their professional competences in local public organizations are crucial in the current redefinition of the nature of the social services and in their related intervention strategies.

THEORETICAL DEBATE

Professions, professionalism and organizations

The (liberal) professions originally developed through the exercise of specialized practices, independent of any type of authority. Since the end of the XIX century, the professions have also been increasingly employed within different organizational contexts (both of public administrations and private enterprises), with relevant implications for professional development, which in hierarchically bound contexts takes on quite specific forms (Aronowitz 1973; Reed 2007).

Organizational structures have a significant impact on professional practices, leading both to a social and cultural fragmentation of professional groups, and to the internalization of new values and technical performances typical of “office workers”, so that professionalism can no longer be considered a «third logic», different from those of market and bureaucratic managerialism (Freidson 2001). In recent decades, debate is also seeking to analyze the mutual implications of professions and organizations, with many scholars arguing that organizational impacts profoundly affect professional practices.

Recently, Evetts (2006; 2011; 2014) and Noordegraaf (2007; 2011) have distinguished the traditional ideal type of professionalism (now called «occupational professionalism»), characterized by working autonomy and self-government in terms of the definition of ethical codes and criteria for professional practice, from a new ideal

type of «organizational professionalism», characterized by rational forms of authorities, working practice standardization, regulation and attribution of responsibilities from outside professional groups. In view of this, the term “hybridity” has also been used, which relates to the coexistence of different combinations of strands of professionalism and organizational principles (Faulconbridge, Muzio 2011). However, the difference between occupational and organizational professionalism is not entirely shared by scholars, as many public organizations are complex professional bureaucracies (e.g. hospitals, universities) involving different groups of workers, whose outputs are not standardized and measurable. Organizations are subjected to many external pressures, which are observable through the lens of professionalization dynamics. To some extent, professional projects (Larson 1977) have become «organizational projects» and professionals are also affected by organizational elements in their expertise legitimacy (Muzio, Kirkpatrick 2011).

Therefore, relationships with the wider world, with organizational logic and other professionals have now become essential factors for professionalism, which in changing organizational contexts allows for the establishment of new links among working levels, street-levels (Lipsky 1980), clients and organizational practices (Noordegraaf 2007). Moreover, organizations represent crucial contexts for professional identity development, in that they enhance forms of corporate professionalism that redefine themselves as internal organizational issues (Muzio, Kirkpatrick 2011). Since, moreover, it has been observed that institutional boundaries are also conditioned by development and changes in professionalization projects (which reflect the key role of the professions in society), the attention is again on the role of the professions in broader political, social, and economic development. If professionalization is one of the ways for giving order, structure and meaning to distinctive areas of economic life, then it can be considered as a subset, a specification of the broader institutionalization process (Muzio *et alii* 2013). However, the organizational context is not the only one influencing professional development. We also have to consider: scientific and technological progress (since, favouring the changing of existing services, they require different competences and professional actions than those established); the development of new occupational groups; market internationalization and the consequent loosening of professions from state anchoring (Cassese 2002; Kuhlmann 2006; Sandri 2007; Olgiati 2010).

For some professional groups, professionalization processes have traditionally been considered as strictly linked to organizational development. Lipsky (1980) used the term «street-level bureaucrats» to describe social workers, teachers, police officers, judges and others, who work within public bureaucracies and have direct relations with users. He believes that they have a certain discretionary faculty in taking decisions, and a relative autonomy from management, so that they are able to affect public action locally. Caria and Pereira (2016: 122) agree with his assertion, arguing that

professions are closer to bureaucracies when: (1) at various levels of the hierarchy, the decisions need to be supported by knowledge and values derived from the abstract knowledge of which professions are one of the main social agents and (2) the techniques and means used in the various levels of the hierarchy need to be supported in specialized technical work, derived from both the re-contextualization of abstract knowledge and the tacit and experiential knowledge learning through practice.

This view confirms the need to pay attention to «professional competence» as a strategic element in understanding professional development and its contribution to broader organizational development. Many believe that professional competence is crucial for survival in a labor market where there is no longer any standardization process: «highly differentiated systems require individuals capable of autonomy and endowed with formal (detectable and certifiable) and reflexive potentialities (linked to the ability to re-define problems in relation to the available resources)» (Palumbo, Startari 2013: 58).

Professional competence

The debate on professional competence originated in the United States in the 1970s (Consoli 2002; Duccoli *et alii* 2009) and mainly developed in the fields of psychological and educational disciplines. Professional competence

was initially considered a personal attribute; hence, within organizational contexts «successful personal competences are used as elements structuring jobs and organizational processes; the role is made explicit by competences which, once identified, are required of all human resources who exercise similar activities» (Maraschi *et alii* 2011: 49). This perspective refers to micro-sociological approaches that focus on individual interactions and meanings given by people to their actions in relation to those of others, so that social phenomena are the result of individual actions, attitudes and behaviors (among others: Mead 1934 and Blumer 1969).

Afterwards, closer scrutiny was devoted to the organizational dimension, according to which initiatives to orient organizational work are critical, insofar as they define organizational patterns, strategies and professional areas to develop in line with company directives. This approach is in conformity with the sociological theories of rational choice, such as those of Weber (1922) and Taylor (1947), that focus on formal structures, jurisdictions and organizational communication, so that the contribution of individuals is valid only insofar as it complies with organizational rationality (Bonazzi 1999).

Both these perspectives highlight the complexity of professional competence, which cannot be defined a priori, as it is situated: it results from the combination of technical and practical knowledge. The first of these is procedural, and theoretically traces causal chains of situations, objectives and the means to achieve them; the other is produced in specific organizational contexts and connects technical knowledge with the concrete issues that one is faced with (Bourdieu 1980; Schon 1983; Vino 2001). However, both these approaches are insufficient to understand the contribution of competence to professional development and to that of society in general, since they show the limits of the sociological perspectives to which they refer: the individual approach mainly pays attention to the individual construction of competence and neglects the effects of its exercise, whereas the rational-organizational approach suffers the limits of rational choice theories, according to which decision-making takes place within a limited ability to elaborate possible alternatives, and is unable to adopt behavior that is fully rational.

Competence has also been viewed as a symbolic value, a synthesis between individual patterns and the social construction of organizations. It can be especially observed during a critical event (Crozier, Friedberg 1977), and is relevant for the re-definition of distinctive organizational elements, as it makes more explicit the jurisdictional conflicts that characterize organized working contexts (Abbott 1988).

SYSTEMS THEORY'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE DEBATE ON PROFESSIONS

The Luhmannian application of System Theory tries to analyze how social order is established and stabilized, observing the emergence of social structures. Luhmann uses

conceptual instruments suitable for a general theory of social systems (interaction, associations, organizations, society) capable of taking into account the complexity and contingency of the social world, the uncertainty that intrinsically structures interaction, and is celebrated to the maximum degree in modern functionally differentiated societies [...] starting from the level of the relationship between Ego and Alter, conceived as a co-evolutionary unit of system/environment, in which each is environment for the other in the situation of double contingency, of mutual non-transparency, an experience they reflexively live, and where 'being depends on a selection that implies the possibility of not being and the being of other possibilities' (Luhmann 1976) (Condorelli 2020).

Given the definition of «society as communication», systems are communicatively constituted contexts of meanings, differentiated only by the operative logic of their communication. At the operative level of first-order observation, systems are fluid and event-based. Luhmann assumed that systems in general consist only of events, operations that, once they have occurred, immediately vanish and are replaced by others. Systems only exist by continuously generating the elements of which they are composed. As a second-order observation, there are mechanisms for systems' self-reflection and identity representation (Atzeni 2017).

A system is seen as a whole consisting of parts (or subsystems), which are linked to each other in specific ways. As a whole, the system becomes more than just the sum of its parts. Furthermore, a system cannot be fully understood if the subsystems are analyzed separately (Von Schlippe, Franck 2013).

With the lens of systems theory, it can be said that the peculiar development of modern Western societies has favored the enhancing of professional services as one of the main functional differentiation processes. In particular, professional systems have developed through a progressive elaboration of double contingency, within which various actors (workers, organizations, customers/users) have defined their roles in mutual interdependence, favoring the consolidation of social expectations around certain working practices, towards which reciprocal behaviors have been oriented, over time.

As a social system, the «professional system» is also based on a “sense”¹, consisting of symbolic processes providing guidelines and ways of decision-making. However, as a conception of the world, which includes the difference between system and environment, the model itself is inexpressible, so it is rather the meanings that can be expressed about the model that make differentiation possible (the codified attribution that delimits its boundaries). With reference to professional systems, communicative codes which allow the reproduction and differentiation of the system from the outside concern the binary code: *this pertains to me/it doesn't pertain to me*. This makes reproduction of the system, through the recursive definition of the issue possible, based on its pertinence (or not). This binary code also contributes to understanding the dynamics of jurisdictional conflicts, to the extent that various professions define the same issue requiring expert action as their own, rather than considering it as not pertinent or delegating it to others (Abbott 1988). The inclusion/exclusion criterion depends, in fact, on the means for defining the system (and its related environment), whose observation perspective is a choice of the system itself².

System reproduction occurs through events which dissolve as soon as they occur, to be replaced by others. However, they can create structures, which are relationships among (basic) elements, a selection of selections (of elements) defining long-term forms of meaning, allowing a quick and not accidental connection between system elements.

Regarding the professional system, the long-term forms of meaning, generated by a selection of relationships among the basic elements, are professional competences. These operate recursively, linking system operations to each other according to expected ways (expectations), thus reaffirming the system borders' reproduction (Addario 2009). Their function «is not so much the replication of specific behavior patterns [...] but it is the recursive system reproduction through always different and yet interconnected elements» (Addario 2012: 15).

As structures, competences have communication opportunities towards which the system can orient itself. These are operational possibilities reducing complexity, thus allowing what can happen in the next communication. The peculiar operational possibilities available for competences are the professional practices. Professional practices assume competence, but they are merely an event which actualizes their use. Professional practices are possible within the professional system producing them, in accordance with the schemes operating in it. They guarantee the link between “before” and “after” through a reflective and circular process and, over time, they will produce changes in competences. In turn, competences will determine a re-orientation of professional practices.

Competences, acting recursively, allow professional action through the exercise of certain practices in specific circumstances. However, alternative actions remain within the system as possibilities to use later. As structures guiding the system's development, competences also guarantee the re-actualization and re-virtualization of exercised practices, including the possibility to act in a different way than in the past, even in similar circumstances.

Like all social systems, a professional system develops in a specific direction allowed by the environment, particularly where external stresses are framed as stimuli that modify, over time, both its own jurisdiction and relationships with other professions, organizations, customers/users.

¹ «According to System Theory, ‘Sense’ can be defined as the medium of social reality: a universal medium of the systems of consciousness and communication that enables the reduction of the world's complexity (the environment of the systems)» (Toth 2015: 126).

² Systems are «free to decide how to include and to exclude [...] they must be able to decide who and how to include and who to exclude, according to their own needs» (Cevoloni 2012: 115–116)

A systemic reading of welfare organizations

According to Systems Theory, a welfare system may be considered as a part of the functional differentiation of state organization, where (local) social measures and their management as organizational sub-systems are functionally differentiated (Luhmann, De Giorgi 1992). These produce self-descriptions and reflexive theories, providing specific orientation to their own functions and performances (Cevolini 2012: 95). Thus, a variety of self-descriptions are established which have a specific meaning only within the system that produces them.

Each country carries out identification and regulation of criteria which define the (sub)welfare systems that take place within their own political-institutional system, and these relate to the different issues pertaining to “social questions”. Resulting objects and their specific contents concern the various bureaucratic organizations’ activities, which address various issues according to the meaning of their own institutional mandates.

Mutual relations among the various organizations involved in the same system, then, can be interpreted as interactions within a double contingency process, oriented to the emergence of a new order of shared meaning. Throughout the course of this process, professional practices have a decisive role in decision making which directs the sharing of meanings in system development. It can be said that organizations communicate through decisions which, by marking a difference between past and future, make a certain development possible. Decisions, then, as premises for subsequent decisions, contribute to reducing uncertainty and orienting specific developments for the system and its boundaries.

However, organizations are also made up of *routines*, to do with consolidated structures, making decisions easier and faster. As a linked sequence of decision-making premises, an organization can go forward only if it can take decisions despite residual uncertainty. «The organization can put itself, so to speak, in a situation in which it isn’t aware that it doesn’t see the uncertainty it does still not see. This is what happens when a routine is efficient [...] through routines the organization may decide to decide, and it uses itself to produce a ‘blind spot’ to observe the only selected option. Routines are both conditions and results of this mechanism» (Addario 2009: 95). Since *routines* are «recognizable, repetitive patterns of interdependent action carried out by multiple actors», they structure work and are a basic necessity, serving to carry out complex work in organizations (Feldman *et alii* 2016). If, due to particular external situations (i.e. a critical event) the organization can no longer «put itself in a state of not knowing that it doesn’t know» (Luhmann 1965), as the future can no longer be considered a forward projection of a known current state, then we are in a situation in which «we have a problem, but there is still no solution or, in any case, a decision that can serve as a solution» (*ibidem*), and therefore the organization cannot decide through *routines*. Recent studies pay explicit attention to exogenous events which affect organizational routines, such as new governmental regulations, knowledge and technologies dealing with client demand, budgetary restraint, etc. (Nigam *et alii* 2016). All these events require professionals to adapt their way of working (Kuiper 2018). The systemic point of view contributes to understanding the way in which a new equilibrium is defined between the organization (through its professionals) and its environment (the exogenous events that affect consolidated routines).

THE ITALIAN WELFARE SERVICES FROM A SYSTEMIC POINT OF VIEW

In Italy, welfare organizations were progressively consolidated throughout the development of the institutional system of the republican state, dating from the second half of the last century. Social services were regulated by presidential decree n. 616/77, which defined *social services* as an organic area of functions attributed to the regions (art. 117 of the Italian Constitution), without further specifications of their contents. The prolonged absence of a national law on social services favored the persistence of a weakness in the legal content of social services. During the 1980s, the regions drew up local regulations on the matter, favoring an extreme heterogeneity on the nature of social rights, and their satisfaction in the different geographical areas (Pennisi 1998). Social services and related management patterns were developed according to the dispositions of the local authorities responsible for the functions of social assistance.

Over the 1990s, the unsustainable cost of existing social services, which were also increasingly obsolete, saw the emergence of social changes and consequent hardships. Over time, an increasingly evident gap has arisen between holders and beneficiaries for various social services in the different geographical areas, due to the different local resources and organizational policies.

In Italy, in 1990, a series of administrative reforms also began, informed by the principles of New Public Management (NPM). These reforms have favored the gradual introduction of results-oriented managerial ways and the gradual overcoming of a traditional Weberian model (founded on institutional centralization and hierarchical relationships), through a network system among different public administrations which operate in the same sector, to ensure better coherence and interplay among levels of public intervention. In this perspective, street-level bureaucracies are modern organizations controlled by managers, permeated with the language of management, where there is concern for what is produced rather than for the process (Evans 2011).

The initiation of a reform process in public administration oriented to NPM principles has also affected (regional) social services and social worker roles. Until then, in many Italian regions (including Sicily), the social worker had been a street-level bureaucrat who, in their work with the needy, used a set of services defined elsewhere (at the regional level). The first, important change in the set-up of social services was national law n. 328/00 (on the implementation of an integrated system of interventions and social services), which emphasized local areas as strategic solutions for effective social planning. In new governance, local social services offices had a key-role in defining local social policies and related services planning. Thus, social workers needed new managerial and planning competences and methods with persons in need, increasingly oriented towards shared intervention with other local institutions and associations.

Over the last twenty years, welfare organizations have changed greatly. The economic resources assigned to social services, consisting of new national and EU financial sources, have been increasingly available, and this has favored new integrated approaches to social services management. This has produced both inter-institutional and multi-professional intervention on new and complex social issues, rather than on traditional needs. The new funding criteria have centralized access procedures to welfare services at the national level, while supporting a certain discretion in defining interventions, locally. They have also favoured the development of new professional competences and integrated management patterns among local institutions, according to common aid objectives. In a complicated process of policy implementation, the new EU approach enhances the role of professionals directly interacting with citizens, taking relevant decisions on their requests on the basis of an institutional mandate, using a certain degree of discretion (Saruis 2018).

Assuming that different kinds of organizations have specific qualities and comparative advantages in dealing with people in need, social aid has gradually differentiated, and now involves various organizations that define social aid according to their own specific horizons of meaning, purposes and self-descriptions (Villadsen 2008). The content of social aid is no longer definable *a priori*, but is rather defined by a wide range of actors who collaborate, overlap or compete with each other, fostering the debate on social services content, management pathways, beneficiaries and access requirements.

Current regulations on welfare services have generated a complex management system for local assistance, which can be observed as a combination of functional organizational subsystems, each of which guided by its own institutional mandate. These subsystems cooperate with each other out of a common interest towards particular users that, however, each defines as "users" on the basis of different horizons of meaning. The street-level bureaucrats can be considered as the focal point between the system (more and more complex and organized in sub-systems) and its environment. But the ability to make new opportunities effective depends on different professionals' ability to exercise competences capable of generating reflexive mechanisms concerning used procedures, beneficiaries, connections and communications among actors, issues and tools.

But if different local organizations define aid differently, what kind of shared intervention can they perform together? How is professional competence exercised in common integrated intervention which involves the different meanings of aid?

To understand the contribution of professional competence in the development of local welfare organizations, it is necessary to conduct analysis at a detailed level with reference to a specific social measure. We will analyze

the local system of measures to combat poverty in Catania (the second largest city in the Sicilian Region), paying attention to the *Carta Acquisti Sperimentale* (CAS), the first social measure carried out with the new EU approach oriented towards integrated action among local organizations.

Social measures against poverty in Catania

In Sicily (a southern Italian region), expectations of social workers have focused on their role regarding social services provided by r. l. 22/86 (on the reorganization of social services in Sicily). Despite organizational and decision-making possibilities conditioned by budgetary decisions taken elsewhere, r.l. 22/86 has conferred the principal role in managing services to street-level bureaucrats (SLWs), which «represent their organizations' interface with citizens» (Saurius 2018: 31) with high discretionary power «in determining the nature, amount and quality of benefits and sanctions provided by their agencies» (Lipsky 1980: 13). The use of discretion, however, is «influenced by the legal, organizational, cultural, social and economic context in which the SLWs are embedded. Changing conditions can introduce new pressures and implicit and not immediately evident modifications, and produce unintended risks and opportunities for both citizens accessing services and SLWs» (Saruis 2018: 32).

In the early 1990s, economic resources were adequate for all measures provided by regional law n. 22/86, which favoured a flattening of social workers' roles in the area of functions related to services listed. High workloads had relegated to second place the strengthening of professional practices and innovative operating methods. Similarly, professional roles were consolidated according to the various institutional mandates and their relative regulations in local organizations, so that expectations on social worker's roles solidified around different institutional tasks, mainly those relating to individual aid.

The new governance introduced by law 328 presupposes competences on planning and social services management, never before explicitly required of social workers. More recently, new national and EU regulations have been developed with innovative criteria, contributing to radically change the consolidated governance of local social services.

The CAS is the first Italian measure in a series of new integrated measures against poverty, a reform aiming to re-centralize administrative action. It goes beyond the traditional distinction between cash and in-kind services, in that it contemplates both a monthly allowance and professional interventions for all members of beneficiary families, aiming to favour their social inclusion through a range of measures. CAS was established by D.M. 10/01/2013 as an experimental measure, and was tested in the 12 Italian cities with populations exceeding 250,000 inhabitants. It was carried out from June 2014 to June 2015.

In Catania, there were 604 beneficiary families of CAS. All the families took a monthly allowance (in proportion to the number of members) and half of them (the experimental group) also had a helping plan agreed with the social worker. More than half of cardholders (58,1%) were parents of families with at least 5 persons, so the allowance was often the maximum monthly amount of 416 euros, and almost all of them had families with at least 4 persons, where the sum was at least 331 euros per month).

THE EMPIRICAL STUDY

Within the consolidated routines on social services, CAS made it possible to observe the key-role of professional competence in regard to a “critical event”, in that the new organizational pathways required links among services and professional actions different to those previously consolidated. The choice of CAS was mainly due to the following two reasons: it is the first measure providing for an integrated system in which local institutions (up to that moment considered functionally responsible for mutually extraneous issues) are encouraged to dialogue with each other towards the identification of a shared understanding of social aid. The specific strategy adopted in Catania made the CAS an emblematic measure in which the “holder/no-holder” communication code varies from that of

“beneficiary/no-beneficiary”. The choice to select CAS beneficiaries by public notice rather than choosing between known users, as done elsewhere, meant that many families with these needs (and thus, holders of the right to the measure) responded to the notice, so the budget was sufficient for approximately 2/3 of eligible applicants.

Steps and methods

In order to appreciate the background within which the CAS was implemented, we think it appropriate to describe, firstly, the local characterization of social needs (the kind of social demand) in order to understand the ways in which the incoming request for aid is decoded and classified by social workers, who are the *trait d'union* between people and the social assistance system. Secondly, the existing institutional responses (provided by the social services); the effectiveness of social interventions carried out in Catania, over time (through the evaluation of the results achieved by social workers). The analysis was carried out according to the areas identified by the European Commission (Recommendation [C (2008) 5737]) as strategic for favoring the active inclusion of people excluded from the labor market: work, housing, training.

For each issue, we held two focus groups in which all the social workers of the local Social Services Offices 1 and 5 took part (n. 10 social workers for each office). Social Services Offices 1 and 5 are the offices of city areas with major social deprivation and poverty. Each focus group was mixed with n. 5 social workers of Social Services Office 1 and n. 5 social workers of Social Services Office 5, to favour the comparison between the areas. Focus groups were carried out in April and May 2016.

When the new governance introduced by CAS was consolidated in this new measure, we carried out an analysis through in-depth interviews with social workers who, with different roles, were involved in CAS management and implementation. Interviews aimed to understand practices, ways and (inter-) relations among institutional levels, professionals, local actors and beneficiaries. We interviewed: the social worker with the role of manager of the office for social inclusion, which was the interface with the Welfare Policies Ministry; the chiefs of all local social service offices (for a total of n. 5 social workers); n. 2 Social workers who took charge of beneficiaries, for each Social Services Office (for a total of n. 10 social workers, appointed by the office chiefs).

In-depth interviews were carried out in June 2016. The analysis criteria were:

- Communication and information processes on new governance to implement (between ministerial level and the local office for social inclusion; between that office and the five social service offices in the several areas of Catania; between social workers and beneficiaries);
- Innovative contents of plans for helping beneficiaries;
- Communication and collaboration with other public offices (for health, for work, for training) and non-profit organizations.

We also took into account a sample of beneficiaries, interviewed to understand their perceptions of the whole measure and their future prospects at the end of the allowance. On June 2015, n. 50 beneficiary families had been interviewed with a semi-structured questionnaire, out of a total of 302 families who were beneficiaries of both the allowance and the helping plan (the first 10 beneficiaries who went into each local social service office for the final practices of the measure, on the day established for the interviews).

Findings of the focus groups

On the characterization of social disadvantage it emerged that users of social services offices mainly carry out irregular and unskilled work, and have low levels of education. The main requests for aid concern the various types of social allowances for basic goods and services (e.g. purchase of foods, bill payment, ...), often associated with requests for other services for their family members (mainly children's playgrounds, pre-schools, nurseries, home services).

Request for work is often not explicit but emerges during the talks. Many users decline both the opportunity to attend training courses for learning working skills and any low-paid jobs or those perceived as too tiring.

Despite the increased requests for allowances, in recent years there has been a decrease of users, due to the drastic reduction of the economic subsidies provided. This has affected users' expectations of the social assistance system, leading to a change in requests, sometimes induced by social workers themselves:

Nobody comes anymore, people don't come because they know that we can't give many things anymore. Somebody comes for a health aid, to go away with something [...]. Sometimes it is ourselves who, not being able to help them in any other way, tell that we can help them with the purchase of drugs.

On institutional responses, it emerged that the marked fall of economic resources has led to a widening gap between holders and beneficiaries of social provisions, which for many users are now acquired rights. The reduction of social services' quantity and types has also led to a change in the mutual relations between users and social workers, who are forced to redefine their professional practices and methods:

We often just listen [...]. Social needs have increased and we have difficulties in dealing with new situations. Listening is certainly a large part of our work. We also try to support users in their job search through informal channels as word of mouth and advertisements in newspapers and web. But we think it is more important to listen to them.

For social workers, the drastic contraction of budgets has been a reason for frustration and discomfort in relationships with users. However, it has also given them a professional value that they had probably never had before. In fact, despite those who say: «if you don't give money any more, what are you doing?» there are also those who, although not getting the requested allowances, continue to come to the office for support, in a problematic period of their life.

Focus groups reveal consolidated working practices without regular collaboration with other local institutions. Rather, the increase in demand for basic needs has led to the development of “informal procedures” between social public services and the local volunteering organizations, to ensure the rationalization of available private resources, consisting of coverage of basic necessities and small contributions for bill payment.

On results evaluation, social workers said that, over time, only few users have achieved real social reintegration, due to a widespread lack of resources, both economic and in terms of working opportunities, which makes it difficult to implement an effective intervention. Furthermore, many users seem to lack any interest to make an effort to improve their living conditions, thus becoming independent from aid.

Despite poor results, proposals for new strategies to favour effective interventions are emblematic of consolidated expectations concerning the provisions of r. l. 22/86 for social workers. They have emphasized the need to refinance social allowances provided by r. l. 22/86, despite awareness of ineffective results, which was mainly due to the fact that many users had no interest in changing their situations.

Within this framework, considering that CAS management is based on an entirely different logic from the consolidated ones, how had CAS been implemented? How did the exercise of professional competence (and professional practices) contribute to forming outcomes?

Findings of in-depth interviews

Findings of interviews offer many useful points to the current public debate on social policies. However, we shall limit our analysis to contents relating to social workers' roles in CAS management, in accordance with our premise.

On interview content, we carried out a thematic analysis using the software Atlas.Ti. It was possible to summarize the main findings that emerged in 15 semantic codes, related to some relevant issues for the understanding of social workers' roles in CAS implementation (see picture 1). In turn, the semantic codes have been aggregated into the following 4 thematic areas:

- *technical orientation to system development*: an overall view of social workers about CAS, its aims and functions, theoretically;
- *CAS evaluation*: social workers' judgments on CAS procedures and effectiveness;

- *technical role*: ways in which social workers have concretely realized CAS (this concerns professionals' contributions to the achievement of certain results for beneficiaries);
- *communications/networks*: communicative pathways between social service offices and other local institutions, to implement an integrated intervention on CAS.

The analysis shows a local system of CAS management which tends to coincide with tasks assigned to the Social Inclusion Office, whose working routines are mainly without any regular cooperation with other public offices (despite the fact that CAS regulations provide for the implementation of a network among the various local institutions). Furthermore, a certain separation emerges between the functional area «Social Inclusion» and other municipal offices with which it shares the management of other social questions (i.e. housing issues). Over time, the ways in which relational dynamics consolidated within the “Family and Social Policies” department have not favored an adequate exchange of information, nor the effective sharing of operational procedures among the offices of the various functional areas. This has often fragmented the interventions of the various (sub)systems.

The thematic area with the greatest number of references is that of «technical role», directly related to the social worker's institutional role. The semantic code that most of all characterized this is *organizational autonomy*, which mainly concerns the sharing of institutional and organizational practices within the social service offices. Another relevant semantic code is that codified as *beneficiaries not in need*, as CAS's target has questioned the consolidated expectations of social workers concerning social services users: the specific requirements to obtain the measure led several professionals to define CAS as «mere welfarism», a «scattered intervention» which «not all beneficiaries needed»³.

One of the main problems was the identification of intervention objectives. The target was different from the traditional one [...] What kind of commitment could we get them to make? There were not many commitments to agree on. So we focused on school attendance for children, which is easy to verify, even if there was not an effective problem of school drop-outs. Obviously, money was for families with some problems, but the requirements excluded many people with significant social disadvantage.

Most of them were new users. One requirement was having lost their job recently, but in this area many people live in illegal ways (illegal work, occupation of houses...) and this has excluded most traditional users of our office who, in many cases, are in greater need. We worked with a different target.

Moreover, there have been various difficulties in formulating intervention contents, mainly due to the lack of stable relationships with other local institutions:

It's also difficult finding commitments for users to make, because when you don't have relations with enterprises that can ensure a job, what commitments can you make them take on?

Overall, interviews highlighted operators' awareness about a skewed approach to social services among many traditional users. But analysis has also shown their orientation to be based on professional competences and established practices in this sense. The main consequence is professional action which, at a reflexive level, has quite a marginal impact on the different and more effective development of the system and its communication structures.

Within “technical roles”, doubts have also been cast on established procedures, above all that relating to individual plans of assistance. Moreover, most social workers (those who weren't involved in the local planning of CAS by the Manager of the Office for Social Inclusion), assumed a mere executive role, a fulfillment of obligations, also regarding helping plans. In turn, beneficiaries' involvement has also been mainly “formal”, as helping plans were often considered a requirement to have the allowance, rather than an opportunity to change their conditions.

The absence of integrated actions with other local institutions and the lack of regular controls on the progress of interventions is also confirmed by documents on helping plans. Despite the personalization of interventions provided by CAS legislative provisions, standardized plans emerge, especially with regard to beneficiaries living in the

³ CAS was in favour of people unemployed up than 36 months, but traditional services' users are mostly made up of people who have always carried out irregular work activities, mainly in city areas with a greater social disadvantage.

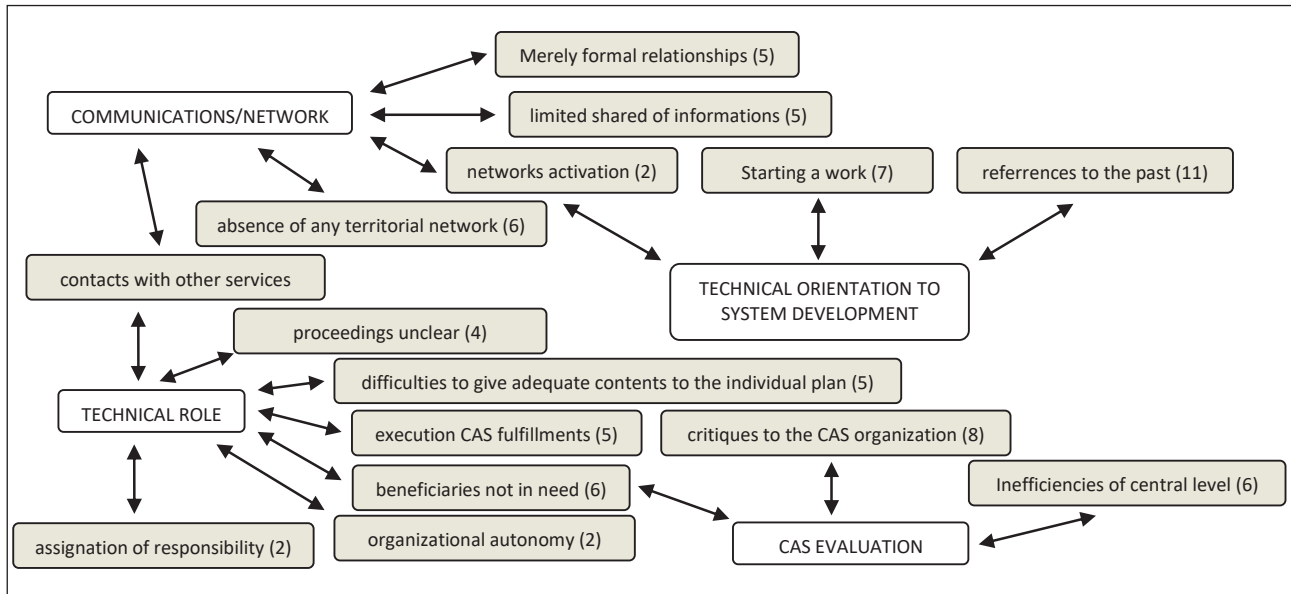


Figure 1. Thematic analysis: connections between themes (in capitals) and semantic codes (in small letters). The number in brackets indicates how many times interviews' text was traced to that code.

areas with the greatest social and economic discomfort. For these reasons, the semantic code *beneficiaries not in need* is one of the main reasons why the theme “CAS evaluation” has assumed a negative connotation.

All social workers are fully aware of the need to develop a stable network among local institutions for realizing an effective integrated intervention. They have also highlighted a clear responsibility on the part of the manager of the social inclusion office in the activation of institutional networks among local organizations (public and non-profit), which share themes and intervention objects.

However, the most frequent semantic code is *references to the past* for all issues, especially with regard to *minimum income* (a measure introduced twenty years ago) and *social utility works* as measures to reintroduce, despite the fact that social workers are aware that these measures have never produced the expected results.

For minimum income it was different. We [social workers] had the task of verifying and evaluating users' actions and we could suspend payments. That measure produced several utilities: many people attended school,... But minimum income wasn't a perfect measure: work placement didn't go well.

Sample of beneficiaries

Cardholders were mainly 30- to 40-year-olds, with a lower level of secondary education, mostly parents of families with at least 5 persons, thus they often received the maximum monthly amount of 416 euro.

All interviewed persons took a positive view of the CAS, in that the monthly subsidy allowed them to do their food shopping and to pay bills regularly. Most of them said that concrete objectives had not been established in their helping plan, and only 11 respondents met the social worker during the year sometimes, mainly for information. Few interviewed persons had been in contact with other local actors (mainly Caritas or voluntary associations for food aid and other essential goods).

Like social workers, beneficiaries have also spoken about CAS as a “temporary solution”, highlighting the temporary nature of its benefits. Some of them even compared CAS with the minimum income. Interviewed persons think that social workers were able to help them on several questions (such as the children's integration in several educational activities), but not for working questions.

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The analysis shows that the background within which CAS has been implemented was not favourable towards the development of an integrated intervention among the various local institutions.

Social workers of social services offices were not involved in CAS planning and this did not favor their full understanding of the measure's rationale, which aimed to inhibit the initiation of a vicious circle for families left without work, with difficulties to re-position themselves within the working system. The lack of a clear view of the CAS' aims among social workers, and their consequent "formal" adherence to CAS procedures also conditioned beneficiaries' approach to professional intervention, which was often perceived as a chance to obtain money rather than as an opportunity for effective social re-inclusion. After the signing of a helping plan, many beneficiaries no longer went to the Social Services Offices or if they did go, just paid a single visit. Meetings with the social worker to follow progress were held rarely. Professional interventions mainly concerned job searches, but this was often a mere invitation to enroll in the Employment Center.

Social workers are aware of local system limitations, with regard both to a consolidated organizational culture preventing effective communications among offices on common intervention issues, and to the lack of network collaborations, beyond personal relations between social workers and no-profit organizations, which allow them to stem emergency situations. Awareness also emerges regarding the system's distortions of many user expectations, who misrepresent the real aims of social services, a fact to which, however, social workers appear to have adjusted.

The ways in which professional action was carried out, too bound to consolidated practices, did not facilitate the desired redefinition of new balances within the local organizational system, to combat poverty through the development of shared intervention among various local institutions. Rather, it made it possible to highlight the fact that taking decisions through routines is prejudicial, to the extent that it becomes "automatic", and assumes the effects of professional action *a priori*, neutralizing the structuring function of professional competence. The new regulations on poverty put local organizations «in a state of not knowing that it doesn't know» (Luhmann 1965), therefore the organization cannot decide through *routines*.

From a systemic point of view, an organization's development occurs through subsequent events which determine its future orientation. In the events' succession, "time" is a key element, as it allows us to define the relative stability of mutual relations. However, if the awareness of system weaknesses does not give rise to an innovative use of professional competence (to structure new or innovative practices and courses of action), time loses its relevance as, over time, the system crystallizes itself around the repetition of actions which are less and less in line with the issues it faces. This also causes failure in the reflexivity of social systems and the annulment of the strategic function of one's own communication structures (in this case, professional competences), as a determinant shapes events (practices and professional pathways of action). In other words, if, over time, through varying measures and related regulations, street-level bureaucrats always move from the same starting point, then their action is less and less suitable to deal with the issues for which they were introduced.

CAS management as a mere formal fulfillment has made difficult the development of an innovative governance in the management of local measures against poverty making, once more, ineffective the results of the institutional responses to social needs. It was necessary to wait for the subsequent measure Sostegno all'Inclusione Attiva - SIA (decr. Interm. 26/05/16) in order to witness the slow beginnings of new actions and communications among the local institutions involved.

CONCLUSIONS

Complexity and uncertainty connote contemporary society theorized by Luhmann (1984), which is committed to reduce them through emerging processes of differentiation and self-organization (Condorelli 2020). Within this scenario, professional social work is called «profession of uncertainty» (Fargion 2013) in that social workers act in a complex and changing environment, open to various interpretations. Moreover they act at the cross-point

(the street-level) where the demand and supply of welfare interventions (and their transformations due to changing risk profiles) meet, «the street-level workers have to manage their everyday tasks and simultaneously ‘absorb’ these changes, in a complex process that affects learning and practices» (Saruis 2018: 35).

Along with these continuous changes, new social regulations against poverty, promoting closer collaboration among local actors, represent significant challenges for local welfare organizations, which have to merge around a unique system for coordinating their actions, despite the fact that they come from different backgrounds and employ different definitions of social aid. The gradual improvement of their governance, now stabilized in its essential components, is an important opportunity to affect the established routines of organizational practices.

Researchers focus on organizational routines as a source for coping with complexity and change, in that traditionally routines have been considered crucial for how organizations accomplish their tasks (Kuiper 2018). But local systems against poverty can no longer «put themselves in a state of not knowing they do not know» (Addario 2009: 95), since not only can the future no longer be considered as a forward projection of a current known state (see above), but the recent past may not be viewed simply with reference to established habits, especially because of the awareness of their limitations among professionals involved.

In a second level observation perspective, the mutual relations among local welfare organizations can be considered as interactions within a «double contingency» process, moving towards the definition of a new emerging sense (see note 1). Local welfare organizations (and professionals within it) need «to find ways to organize collaboration and create new routines that are connective» (Kuiper 2018: 23) towards the stabilization of a new, shared, sense of social aid. «Put differently, the recognizable, repetitive patterns of interdependent action carried out by multiple actors’ need to be reconfigured to routinize collaboration» (*ibidem*). To this end, professional competence has a crucial role in that, as a “structure”, it orients definition, choices and pathways to implement new (or innovative) professional practices (system’s operational possibilities) and courses of action, which contribute to taking organizational decisions. Such decisions, as premises for subsequent decisions, contribute to the recursive redefinition of the system, also favouring the emerging of new communicative events (see above) and the consolidation of new and more appropriate routines, thus reducing the uncertainty and orienting a specific systemic development and its boundaries, also towards the development of a more complex system.

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