

Book review

Facchini C. (ed.) (2010), *Tra impegno e professione. Gli assistenti sociali come soggetti di welfare* (Between commitment and profession. Social workers as subjects of the welfare system), il Mulino, Bologna (Italy) - Price 28.00 €

Subject

In the contemporary debate about welfare reforms, the practitioners who carry out interventions in everyday life tend to be forgotten. This book reports the results of a national survey on Italian social workers. Quantitative indicators are supported by qualitative information collected by means of in-depth interviews. The main objective is to analyze how social workers perceive their occupational situation, their professional functions, and emerging needs, from the perspective of both services and clients.

Authors

Carla Facchini, editor of the book, is Professor of Sociology of the Family and coordinator of the Social Work degree course at the University of Milan (Bicocca).

Content

The first part of the book examines the educational and occupational resources available to Italian social workers.

In chapter 1, C. Facchini and S. Tonon focus on the former. The motivations of students are value-oriented: their main objective is to achieve self-fulfilment by helping others; economic aspects are secondary. In regard to academic education, a larger number of bachelor students are deciding to continue to the master level: this process is due, not to a greater need for lifelong learning, but to greater difficulties in finding a job.

In chapter 2, C. Facchini stresses that it is not easy for the present generation of students to find occupations consistent with their educations, especially in the south of Italy, where local welfare systems have fewer resources. This difficulty is particularly evident in the case of women. Many academic institutions have consequently had to change their organization, even reducing the places available for students, in order not to create further unemployment.

Chapter 3, by M Cacioppo and M.P. May, concerns employment. The ways in which students find jobs are changing: public open competitions are diminishing, while flexible contracts are increasing in both public and private agencies, especially in the centre and south of Italy. Voluntary services and work experience placements are becoming increasingly useful in obtaining a first, albeit unstable, job. Moreover, high levels of turnover also create problems for services, which have to deal with greater difficulties in ensuring high-quality performance.

The second part of the book describes the contractual and organizational profile of social work in Italy.

B. Fiore and R. Puccio (chapter 4) deal with contractual conditions, which are becoming increasingly precarious. The majority of contracts are open-ended, but flexible contracts are dramatically increasing, especially for younger people, in both the public and private sector.

C. Facchini (chapter 5) points out that the majority of Italian social workers are active in local municipalities, which since the last national reform have had greater responsibility in local services. A lower percentage of social workers is also to be found in the national health system. The public sector is stronger in northern regions than in southern ones, where social workers are employed more frequently in non-profit agencies because of the public sector's scarcer resources.

New social and health needs oblige social workers to seek integrated solutions in collaboration with other practitioners. A. Campanini and V. Riva (chapter 6) show that this methodological challenge

is faced jointly with psychologists, doctors and educators, although collaboration with the first two categories is impeded by the different background and the higher status and power of doctors, especially in health services. In the meantime, the lack of resources is reducing the number of cases that can be coordinated by interprofessional teams. Therefore, new criteria for the selection of clients are necessary.

Career advancement is relatively slow for social workers, and especially for women. M. Tognetti Bordogna (chapter 7) reports that it is more rapid in the public administration, where the organization is pyramidal and more complex. Managers and coordinators are satisfied with their professional education, even if they do not have much time for in-service training. They are less satisfied with their professional relationships with top managers, especially when these have different degrees (in medicine, law, etc.).

A. Campanini examines lifelong learning (chapter 8). Italian social services do not pay much attention to this dimension of social work owing to a lack of both means and time. This problem is particularly serious among young social workers.

The third part of the book analyzes how social workers perceive their professional identity.

In chapter 9, B. Fiore takes a gender perspective. Male and female social workers do not have different motivations, although the latter stress a closer connection between self-fulfilment and helping others. Moreover, female social workers exhibit a closer match between educational training and occupation role.

P. Trivellato and W. Lorenz (chapter 10) emphasise that the professional identity of social workers differs from that of other free professions in the openness to other disciplines of their body of knowledge and in the value set on helping others. In fact, Italian social workers think that relational skills, such as listening to others or team working, are most important; also organizational skills are considered relevant. Moreover, a value-oriented professional identity protects social workers against burnout: they are subject to intense stress due to the contemporary difficulties of welfare systems, but at the same time they are used to heavy workloads.

S. Carboni (chapter 11) examines how social workers promote the autonomy of citizens. Their working time is devoted mainly to relationship with clients. Hence, they have few opportunities to develop broader reflection on their methodology. However, social workers – especially younger ones – trust in their capacity to respond to the needs of citizens, as well as to accomplish their empowerment. Greater difficulties are instead observed in prevention.

F. Ruggeri (chapter 12) concludes the book with a qualitative investigation of the relationship between social work and social policies. A first difficulty concerns the increasing complexity of social problems, which require new preventive and organizational models. However, the lack of means (both money and personnel) can strengthen a bureaucratic and self-referential approach in social workers, who may implement a residual welfare model and not strategies to activate the entire community.

Critical discussion

The survey reported in the book was carried out before the current financial and political crisis of the Italian public welfare system. In order to increase cost efficiency, local and regional welfare systems are increasingly outsourcing social services. The budgets available are very low, and at the same time the assignation rules are increasingly stringent. In many situations, the objective of the welfare system cannot be activation, but only the reduction of deprivation. Consequently, social workers are facing not only less autonomy in professional decisions but also a lower possibility to establish trust relations with citizens. The risk is that of a de-professionalization of social work, which is often undertaken by administrative staff with only generic skills).

European relevance

The lack of resources for the welfare system is a problem that concerns the European Union as a whole, albeit with different approaches, resources, and cultural backgrounds. This book could

provide the basis for a comparative investigation which covers not only welfare policies but also practitioners, as active participants in the current debate.

Davide Galesi
Prof. for Comparative Social Work
University of Trento (Italy)