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# Evolutionary Roads and New Roots for Social Work Crossing Professions, Practices and Policies

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# Contents

Community organizer in a poor neighborhood on the South Side of Chicago, working with people to help improve their lives.

# 4 Theoretical Pillars

1. **Deprofessionalization of social work**

→ Austerity and managerialism in welfare policies and social services (Trappenburg & van Beek, 2019; Tognetti Bordogna, 2015; Abbott 2014; Albano & Dellavalle, 2013; Rogowski, 2010; Roose et al. 2010; Fargion, 2009; Randall, 2008; Lymbery, 2001).

→ Crisis of care and individualization process (Busacca, 2019; Fraser, 2016; Paci e Pugliese, 2011).

2. **Social Work in Post-Pandemic Welfare: Responsible, Territorial, Generative**

→ The relevance of context and territorial dimension in public policies and welfare policies (Bifulco et al., 2022; Pavani & Cellini, 2022; Maino, 2021; Ascoli & Campedelli, 2021; Barbera, 2020; Rodriguez-Pose, 2017; Barca, 2009).

→ Hybridization of third sector (Reggiardo, 2022; Coule et al. 2022; Cappellato & Cataldi, 2021; Dodge et al. 2021).

3. **Community (social) work, not only in welfare policies**

→ A broad vision of professional action, looking at practices and profiles of social, educational and health workers (public services and third sector) engaged in social innovation practices and programs/policies place-based (Gilboa & Weiss-Gal, 2022; Battistoni et al., 2021; Fargion, 2018; Twelvetrees, 2006).

4. **Policy practice and "Political soul" of social work**

→ Responsibility, engagement in policies and radical practice (Bečević & Herz, 2023; Gal & Weiss Gal, 2018).

→ A working method that enhances the social capital of local communities, connecting the resources of people with those of the institutions (De Leonardis, 2022; Gal & Weiss-Gal, 2020; Gallio & Cogliati Dezza, 2018).

# Social Services, Social Work and Deprofessionalization

*Social work in public sector have been affected, starting from the last decade of the 20th century, by the diffusion of New Public Management, in context of austerity*

<span style="color:red">**What happened**</span>

- Formalistic-procedural dimension directly involves the professions that operate in social services (social worker as case manager).

- Reduction of autonomy in favour of standardization and procedural rationality ("technocratic bureaucracy" (Dominelli, 2004).

    → **De-professionalization**: conflict between the management needs of the organization and the social service methodology.

<span style="color:red">**There is a social worker's professional project?**</span>

- Crisis of care and dismantling of inclusive care.

- Repoliticization of social work.

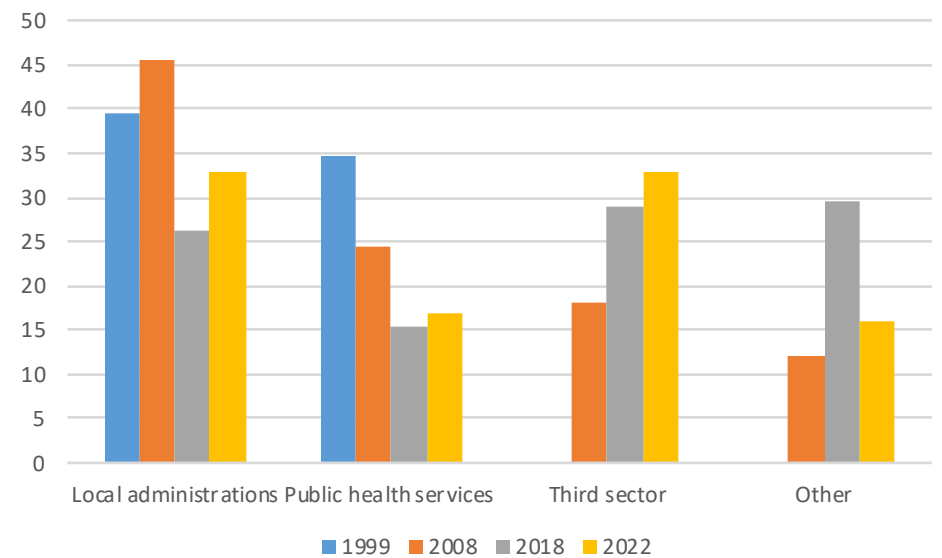    → **Expanding roles** for social workers.

# Policy practice and the 'political soul' of social work: an unexplored policy discourse in Italian debate

**Social work in Italy: unequal and fragmentated social assistance**.

Problems and perspectives for social work practice (Campanini, 2010):

1. Generalist approach vs specialization ➔ Is working by targets/specific groups a perspective?

2. Case work vs group vs community work ➔ How does community (social) work affect social policy?

3. Burocratic vs professional attitude ➔ How to overcome the «supermarket style» of social work?

4. Passive attitude vs responsability and political engagement ➔ Is there a real policy engagement, in policy practices? How to build a radical social work perspective, overcoming the traditional field of social services?



Graphic 1 – Distribution of social workers by sector

Source: own elaboration by Bertotti (2021); CNOAS, 2022

# Method and framework (of an explorative research)

→ Objective: explore social work in third sector animated by emerging professions

*Enabling Conditions of Policy practice and Community Social Work in Place-based and Development Policies*

**Three pillars to define the "political soul" of social work**

**Situated State** → Where the quality of the institutions makes the difference, the political soul of social work affects local welfare systems in context.

**Frontier innovators** → The lack of a strong political mandate/context, community (social) workers promote a culture of social services with radical practices, methods and approaches.

**Trespassing** → Overcome the paradigm of competences; overturn the construction of public problems with the coexistence of different disciplinary categories for individual and collective action.

→ 10 in-depth interviews + thematic analysis

- 7 Professionals of social work involved in third sector: social worker, youth worker, ex local administrator, project manager, managers of social cooperatives.

- 3 Academics (social work and sociology fields).

→ Items

1. The contents of social work and its evolution.
2. Public action and territorial work, from a community perspective.
3. Territorial community work, social work and community manager: differences and contaminations.
4. The political soul of the social worker in territorial community work, in institutional and policy practices.

# Early fundings

What does it mean to «inhabit» the political dimension of social work, in a territorial and community perspective?

A framework at a glance

1. Overcome the "performance logic" considering social services as "places of action-research".

2. Social work from a community perspective has a transversal function: not a single profession but new languages in different professions.

3. Risk of community rhetoric, but (also an) opportunity to recognize different professional figures who work together to address social, collective problems.

4. It is not the technique (methods and tools) that gives political value to community social work but the ability to connect social needs, social relations and institutions ➔ e.g. the Community Manager build development strategies that involve communities, policies and policy choices.

5. Policy practice and political soul of social work require engagement in decision making processes (not only welfare policy), to make changes in policies and people lives.

# Rethinking social work in between. Cross-professionalizing social work?

Table 1 – Professional characteristics increasing, decreasing and transforming

| Characteristic of profession | Professionalization | De-professionalization | Cross-professionalization |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Paid occupation | From charity work to occupation work (early twentieth century) | From paid occupation to self-help, family help, volunteering | From volunteering to community (social and territorial) work and social entrepreneur |
| 2. Specialized knowledge | Development of special schools, research related to professional object | Work performed by occupational groups with less or no training | Different educational field, overcoming competences and working with ongoing professionalism |
| 3. Professional autonomy as individual professionals and as professional group | Acquire room to manoeuver for workers; establishment of disciplinary boards | Development towards street level bureaucrats answering to the government | Development towards street level workers working with the government and third sector |
| 4. Service ideal/ethical code | Establishment of code of ethics in which profession formulates its mission | Orders, emphasis on targets and established goals | Participation in decision making processes, to turn practices in (different) policies |

Source: own elaboration by Trappenburg & Van Beek, 2019

# Research perspectives

«The need to talk about and address social problems as political problems is imperative in both discourse and practical action. Social work needs to build a political agenda of its own»

(Bečević & Herz, 2023, p. 12)

Community social workers are engaged in policy practice BUT there is a professional field of social work (in third sector) which impacts on policies and policy practices.

### Three topics

- **Exploring how community (social) work effect policy**, policy practice and change social work: what learnings for social workers and organizations?

- **Emerging professions inside policy practice and community social work** in development policies and welfare policies: is there a cross- professionalizing social work?

- How to **strengthen the ability to politicize social problems**, in (radical) social work and in policy making processes?

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