Introduction.
Frail Lives. Risk and vulnerability: educational practices and social interventions

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In the last few years sociologists have frequently used the concept of vulnerability to define the precarious circumstances affecting an ever-growing number of individuals and families, whose causes lie beyond those traditionally dealt with by the welfare systems through proven intervention practices. The social positions that used to be taken for granted are now undermined by the financial crisis, which means that events once considered natural (the birth of a child, an illness, the aging process) may suddenly lead to the poverty threshold; besides, the complex issues affecting today's families often find them unprepared or lacking the necessary resources (competence, know-how, time, money) to manage their new situation.

Vulnerability can be regarded as a direct consequence of the onset of the so-called risk society. As it is well-known, several contemporary sociologists see risk as a typical feature of our time: each action or decision presents some form of hazard; the number of factors to be considered when trying to forecast events and make them risk-free is apparently infinite. Survival in a risk society depends on finding suitable resources to meet

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challenges at different levels of complexity: the continuing tension between challenges and resources is inevitable; their possible combinations are endless and several solution may be effective. Moreover, the financial crisis has prevented increasing numbers of people from accessing some essential resources. Risk is, in itself, a situation of uncertainty; it invites vulnerability in the absence of some basic requirements and the discernment necessary for choosing among different options. What is certain is that traditional interventions and services are now inadequate: the management of new forms of discomfort can no longer be delegated to experts but requires the activation of persons and communities to devise new solutions. This change, however, will only be viable through the creation of new competencies, that is, by expanding educational practices and turn them into instruments enabling people to confront the risks affecting their everyday life.

As some steps have already been taken in this direction, it is important to detect and study the practices which have proved most innovative and effective.

The main educational task at hand seems to consist in empowering people to meet challenges: this is inevitable in any action aimed at promoting welfare, even in a condition of vulnerability. Accordingly, this volume focuses on specific areas in order to indicate those challenges likely to produce vulnerability in persons and families, as well as highlighting some empowering practices.

The contribution by Lucia Boccacin analyses some practices aimed at the creation of mixed partnerships, among the public, private, and third sectors. The most effective partnerships are those based on actual relationships between partners. In fact, the studies reveal that the crucial element in a partnership is not its structural configuration, but the relationship itself: that is, the outcome of on-going processes of dialogue and mutual learning leading to the realisation of non-prescriptive, sometimes original, solutions.

Donatella Bramanti's contribution analyses LifeSkills Training, a program for preventing substance abuse, as implemented in the Lombardy region, Northern Italy. The results are encouraging, as they show the development of better skills in managing the teacher-class relationship, as well as an increased ability to listen within the parent-child relationship.

The purpose of Stefania Meda's study is to explore the challenges faced by second-generation Egyptian adolescents in Lombardy (Northern Italy) in the socialisation process developing within their families and community. The paper shows that the socialisation process of adolescents of Egyptian origin takes place within a network of concentric relationships (primary to secondary, to friendly, etc.) that are transnational (family in Italy and Egypt, friends in Italy and Egypt) and contribute to the transmission of cultural and ethical contents as well as the building of personal and social identity.

Luca Pesenti's paper highlights that current public policy approaches to poverty need rethinking and partnerships must be created with private actors capable of mobilising social and educational resources to confront complex issues. The problem of poverty is tackled from a multidimensional perspective, assuming that appropriate responses are those aimed not only at obtaining financial support but also at strengthening social relationships and individual skills. In this context, education is considered a set of possibilities for individuals to develop and realise their capabilities.

Laura Ferrari and Rosa Rosnati present their investigation on a form of vulnerability currently affecting a growing number of people: the construction of ethnic identity by foreign adolescents adopted in Italy. In recent years in fact, in Italy, as in most Western countries, the phenomenon of international adoption has steadily increased, involving additional challenges for interracial adolescent adoptees e their families. Bearing this in mind, and on the basis of the data obtained, the authors suggest some practical applications for pre- and post-adoption parent-training programs.

All contributions to the first part of the volume stress the need for the people affected by the issues at stake to actively participate in intervention practices and mobilise social networks by forming partnerships at different levels.

This is what motivates the inclusion, in the second part of the volume, of William Doherty's article on an innovative intervention model based on the direct involvement of citizens and their families in trying to solve the problems they perceive as the hardest. Doherty provides an overview of the idea of the citizen professional and his personal development through this way of working with communities. He sees the traditional professional expert and provider/consumer models as inadequate for tackling the

complex problems affecting health care, human services, government, and education. The paper also illustrates the principles and main strategies of the Families and Democracy Model through several community projects.

Inspired by Doherty's model, the present author finally proposes a critical analysis of participative approaches through an in-depth study of the sociological theories (by Archer and Donati) underlying their evidence-based effectiveness, to highlight their educational value. Thus, Citizen Professionalism and The Families and Democracy Model are described as participative or community approaches, whose specific features include the strategic role assigned to families for the solution of social problems.

Thus, Doherty's models can be seen as paradigmatic, as they show that all interventions based on empowerment and participation perform an educational task: today people need to learn how to be citizens with a cooperative attitude. In fact, whilst market competition has boosted individualism, an excess of State welfare has encouraged citizens to delegate their every decision and action to professionals or experts. Challenging vulnerability, instead, should be the joint enterprise of both families and experts: only in this way could the complexity of a risk society appear as an opportunity rather than a threat.