What Game Are We Playing? The Learning Relationship in Social Work Placement

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Abstract: The article presents the findings of a study carried out in Italy and aimed at exploring the learning relationship activated between supervisor and student in social work education placement. Through the analysis of some barriers and opportunities, the research aims to contribute to the debate on the topic and to improve future responses by all actors involved in the organisation of learning in the field (supervisors, students, university teachers, university tutors, social service organisations). Based on the scientific debate, the first part tackles some topics that make up the theoretical frame of reference useful to define the learning relationship and gives some contextual information on social work education in Italy. The second part presents the study design and the analysis of the answers to an online questionnaire administered in the last months of 2020 to 487 social workers who served as placement supervisors. The third part, finally, concerns the discussion of the findings and final conclusions.

Keywords: student placement, social work education, learning relationship, supervision

Introduction

Recalling a famous book by Berne, *Games People Play*, the title of the article refers to the concept of "relational game" proposed by the author to define "an ongoing series of complementary ulterior transactions superficially plausible but with a concealed motivation" (1964, p. 84), which characterise human relationships. Previously, Bateson (1955)[1] had addressed the theme of the game, elaborating the revolutionary concept of meta-communication to identify the communicative exchanges through which the interlocutors continuously define roles and power in the relationship. Crozier & Friedberg (1977) point out that full communication with the other is impossible: every relationship is strategic and involves a component of power, even if removed or sublimated. Accordingly, every time people activate repeated communicative exchanges they are participating in relational games, often unconsciously, and tend to respond to each other's expectations by applying tacit and frequently collusive rules. Goffman points out that in the ritual of social interaction, in order to save the appearances, "each participant is allowed to play the role they have chosen for themselves" (1967, p. 11), without generally being challenged. Accepting that mode of communication or tacitly proposing new rules, i.e. other relational games, depends on each of the participants.

In this vein, Kadushin (1968; 1974) analyses the variety of games most frequently activated in the supervision relationship in social work, the stratagems used and the possible counter-games. He specifies that the games concern certain types of recurrent incident in the relationship between supervisor and trainee, conditioned by a payoff for the parties.

The construct of relational game can indeed be useful to analyse the relationship between a supervisor and a trainee that develops during the field placement of social work students which is a crucial component in social work education all over the world. Together with theoretical preparation, and under the supervision of qualified social workers in an appropriate context, fieldwork training offers students the opportunity to develop professional knowledge, skills, and attitudes, so much so that it is traditionally considered "the most significant, most productive, most memorable component of their qualifying training" (Kadushin, 1992, p. 11). The main model of supervision is based on the one-to-one relationship between a trainee and an experienced social worker (Alschuler, Silver & McArdle, 2015), considered as a key figure in field training (Miehls et al., 2013). In different countries around the world, the experienced social worker is called 'supervisor', 'practice teacher', or 'practice educator', while students' field-learn-

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[1] Bateson, G. (1955). A Theory of Play and Fantasy, first published in Psychiatric Research Reports, 2, 39-51. The version cited here will be that found in Bateson (1972).

ing experience is denoted with terms like 'practicum', 'placement' or 'field setting' (Finch & Taylor, 2013; Doel & Shardlow, 2017; Fazzi, 2020).

The expression *learning relationship* is proposed here to highlight that training in the field should be mainly centred on the learning subject, i.e. a student who, through learning by doing modalities, actively participates in a co-constructed process (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) to develop knowledge and social work skills, in continuous interaction with the supervisor and other members of the organisation. In this respect, practical placement is also a path of socialisation to the profession, a situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1990) that develops in a specific organisational context, where the trainee is engaged in the acquisition of norms, skills and behaviours considered appropriate. Since the sixties of the twentieth century, studies on anticipatory socialisation (Becker et al., 1961, Sarchielli, 1990; Butler, 1996; Gherardi, 2006, 2014) have shown that what students learn during university practical traineeship is, first of all, a way to use language, to think and to assume ethically correct behaviours in terms of a professional identity to be developed. Therefore, despite being conditioned by the inter-organisational system composed of university and social services, the type of relationship that is established between trainee and supervisor is extremely important.

The study presented in this article explores some key elements of the learning relationship between supervisor and trainee in order to contribute to theorising on the topic and to improve future responses by supervising social workers. The study was oriented by a relational-systemic approach and, more specifically, by the concept of relational game. Based on this framework, the main research questions of this study were the following: What are the relationship colluding risks for supervisors in the learning relationship? Are social workers aware of such risks? And, during the Covid-19 pandemic, when a distance learning placement was activated, did this condition change the learning relationship? If so, how? To answer those questions an online questionnaire was administered to 487 supervising Italians social workers between October and December 2020.

In its first part, the article introduces main issues of the debate on field placements in social work education, gives some information on social work education in Italy, and outlines the theoretical framework of the study. The second part presents the research design and methods of the study, and highlights main findings of the analysis aimed to explore the supervisors' points of view on learning relationships established between supervisor and student during field placements. Finally, the third part discusses the findings and concludes highlighting both the contribution made by the study and further considerations for the development of field placements in social work education.

On the stage of practical training

There is an extensive research literature that has discussed the aims, perspectives, and limitations of field placements in social work education.

Much research has investigated how, through field experience, trainees test the connection between social work theories and practices (Doel & Shardlow, 2017; Hantman & Ben-Oz, 2014; Parker, 2006), grapple with social work methods and techniques (Beddoe et al., 2011), test themselves in their relationships with service users (Foote, 2015) and face their first ethical dilemmas (Banks & Nøhr, 2012) confirming that the supervisor, or practice teacher, is pivotal to these pursuits.

Many authors have also investigated the inter-organisational system between universities, agencies, and services in the area in order to identify which agreements and factors can guarantee the effectiveness of internships and student satisfaction (Bogo et al., 2020; Parker, 2006).

Other studies have focused on the rationale for the involvement of field instructors in practice education (Strydom, 2011); on interrupted or failed placements, examining not only students' perceptions and experiences, but also the power imbalances and deep emotional implications of failure for all those involved (Parker, 2006, 2010); and on the development of students' and practice teachers' critical thinking from analysis of mistakes made (Heron, 2007; Samson, 2016; Sicora, 2019; Joubert, 2020). Lefevre (2005) investigated how 72 students, who were undertaking a qualification programme in social work, perceived the supervisor-student relationship and the impact this has on the learning, development, and final evaluation of their placement. The research results confirm the need to pay attention to the affective and dynamic elements of the learning relationship in order to create a safe and trusting context within which students can take the risk of making mistakes during their placement. As Lefevre states: "this requires enhanced self-reflection and self-awareness, though, on the part of practice teachers in order that they sufficiently attune to the impact of their behaviour on the student and can realistically evaluate the nature of the process environment they are co-creating" (2005, p. 580). Kanno and Koeske also note that "with capable supervision providing helpful directions and positive feedback, they (students) might feel empowered and have a higher level of confidence and efficacy, resulting in better work performance and a sense of satisfaction in the field" (2010, p. 31).

Another strand of research includes contributions that have paid more attention to the radical changes that have taken place both in health and social services and in universities through the process of corporatisation and managerialism, in other words with the spread of formal procedures and the cut in funding that risk affecting the quality of supervision (Glober-

man & Bogo, 2003; Swift, Gingrich, & Brown, 2016; Campanini, 2007, 2020). Forced into rigid procedures and contingent work schedules, social workers struggle to assume the role of supervisors to the point of deciding to no longer offer their availability to supervise a trainee, because they are worried that they cannot perform this commitment to the best of their ability, or appear demotivated (Fazzi, 2020). However, in a difficult and fragmented situation exacerbated also bythe ongoing pandemic, the debate addresses the urgency for social work to aim for new horizons in which the professional and scientific community can move without losing its identity (Scholar et al., 2014; Sanfelici & Gui, Mordeglia, 2020) and continue to train future generations of social workers in the field (Fazzi, 2020). In the current scenario, many universities, without an ad hoc system for practical traineeships, tend to put pressure on social workers to accept to supervise trainees even when they are not motivated or seem unsuitable or untrained to play this role. The result of such improvised solutions is generally of little effectiveness with respect to the outcome of the placement and to the satisfaction of both the student and the supervisor.

To conclude this short review of scientific literature for the purposes of this study, most contributions:

a. highlight the importance of an inter-organisational learning system between universities, agencies, and social services in order to identify which agreements and factors can guarantee the effectiveness of internships and student satisfaction (Bogo et al., 2020; Parker, 2006);

b. confirm that the supervisor, or practice teacher, is pivotal to field experience, where trainees test the connection between social work theories and practices (Doel & Shardlow, 2017; Foote, 2015; Hantman & Ben-Oz, 2014; Beddoe et al., 2011);

c. identify the supervisor-student relationship as a the crucial factor in both achieving a successful placement outcome (Bogo et al., 2007; Sussman et al., 2007; Hemy et al., 2016) and recognising power differences in a way that is useful in solving placement problems (Walker et al., 2008);

d. underline how necessary it is to build training paths for social workers to become supervisors. In fact, being a competent social worker is not enough to be an effective supervisor as high-level continuous training and constant confrontation with the university and with other supervisors are necessary.

e. Timely, the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) jointly updated the Global Standards for Social Work Education and Training (2020), which aim at capturing both the universality of social work values and the contextual diversity that characterises the profession. While considering that the educational experience and policy framework in different

countries varies significantly, with regard to Practice Education (Placement), the document recommends to schools and universities clear and transparent policies and procedures for supporting students and the field instructors (through continuous training for supervisors) and evaluating the performance of the practice education setting.

Global Standards (IASSW& IFSW, 2020) constitute an important compass also for social work education in Italy, of which some specificities will be presented briefly.

Social work training in Italy

Professional social work in Italy started to develop fully after the Second World War and received both academic and legal recognition only after the 1980s, with the establishment of the first university diplomas for training and the institution of an official professional register (Campanini, 2007; Dellavalle, 2011).

The situation of services and social workers is similar to that of other countries, which have implemented policies of neoliberal austerity and rationalisation of social spending over the last fifteen years (Allegri, 2015; Garrett & Bertotti, 2017). Faced with cuts in resources and the worsening of working conditions caused by the increase in managerialism and bureaucracy, Italian social work is seeking new forms of social and professional legitimation. As regards training, since 2000, in accordance with the principles of the Bologna Declaration[2], Italy has introduced a national reform of higher education which establishes two levels of degree in all university departments. As regards social work, there are both bachelor's degree programmes (L-39 - Social work, 180 credits), and master's degree programmes (LM-87, Social work and social policy, 120 credits). The structure of the curriculum in social work has been defined at national level: out of 180 credits for the BA degree, ministerial regulations require a minimum of 15 credits for social work courses and 18 credits for field placement (Campanini & Facchini, 2014; Campanini, 2020). Based on a consolidated collaboration, especially in some areas of the country, the relationship between universities, services, and supervisors for the organisation of internships is regulated by special agreements, which define the relationships between the parties, the mutual commitments, and the insurance coverage of students.

The role of supervisor is carried out on a voluntary basis, but since 2016, social workers earn 15 training credits for carrying out the role of supervi-

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[2] The Bologna Declaration is a document drawn up by the ministers of education of European countries in 1999 to harmonise structures in higher education. https://www.miur.gov.it/processo-di-bologna

sor. These credits can be part of the total of 60 credits that must be acquired every two years in order to maintain professional registration.

At present, there is no standardised training for social workers who wish to act as supervisors. It is up to the individual universities to organise training programmes for supervisors together with the regional professional bodies. For Italian social workers, welcoming trainees into their service is also seen as an ethical duty. The ethical code, revised in 2020 by the professional Order of social workers, gives value to the role of the supervisor, who is recommended to take care of the construction of the professional identity of future social workers as much as possible in the service in which they work.[3] The intention is to call for a shared training responsibility of both the professionals who work in the integrated service system and, secondly, the institutions as future employers of qualified graduates.

The literature on practical traineeship is consolidated because field training has been considered a crucial element in social work training since its origins and the issues discussed correspond largely to those dealt with in the international debate.

Studies have focused both on the theoretical and methodological frames to be considered in the design of an internship system within social work degree courses (Campanini, 2007, 2020; Neve & Niero, 1990; Bisleri et al. 1995; Giraldo & Riefolo,1996; Gui, 1999; Dellavalle, 2011) as well as some tools useful to organise a practical traineeship that develops critical capacity in the student within the complex inter-organisational system in which he/she is placed (Raineri, 2003; Tognetti Bordogna & Decataldo, 2018; Novello & Soregotti, 2018).

It should be noted that most of the studies identify the relationship between supervisor and student as one of the crucial factors for a positive outcome of practical traineeship. Considering the most recent time period, some researches have investigated the training pathway of students in social work (Bressan et al., 2011; Tognetti Bordogna, 2015, a).

Some have studied the working conditions of Italian social workers in relation to their training (Fargion, 2009; Facchini, 2010). Others have studied the mutual learning that takes place between supervisor and trainee (Fazzi & Rosignoli, 2016). Some recent experiments are to be considered for future developments in social work education. Thus, university social work

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[3] See the Code of Ethics for Social Workers, Title VI, Art. 48: "the social worker engages in didactic supervision towards trainees, within the limits of the organisation in which he/she works. The professional, in this context, acts to: (a) foster the best integration of the trainee in his or her work group; (b) safeguard the trainee from situations that may threaten his or her safety; (c) reinforce in the trainee an awareness of the value of the deontological rules, of the Order and of participation in the life of the professional community; (d) stimulate in the trainee the development of a critical sense, undertaking to share his or her evaluations" (National Council of Social Workers, 2020, p. 18).

programmes can promote forms of experimental placements in contexts where social workers are not present. Through a form of supervision delegated to university tutors it is possible to promote new areas of work for social workers (Dellavalle & Rocca, 2020).

Experiments and research on service user engagement in social work education and innovation based on case studies comparing different countries show that such projects often encounter similar barriers, including the difficulty of each university in accepting the impact that the innovative proposals have had on students, teachers, social workers, and service users. For example, a high degree of intercultural learning and co-production has been found in social work research, and it is encouraging to discover the positive evaluation attributed by social work students (Ramon et al., 2019; Cabiati & Raineri, 2016). Experiments on reflective writing dedicated to students, which analyse mistakes made during the placement, reveal some benefits, such as the effectiveness of writing in developing critical thinking and enhancing students' emotional resilience (Sicora, 2019).

If the learning relationship activated between supervisor and trainee is so important, as the analysis presented up to this point has intended to demonstrate, however it is appropriate to consider that it is also characterised by mutual expectations, fantasies, projections and ambiguous and irrational aspects that, despite being unconscious, influence the final outcome for the two protagonists. Recognising them and being aware of them is important for the supervisor, who is responsible for the learning process in the practical traineeship (Cardinali & Guidi, 1988).

The game is serious

Based on the literature (Berne, 1964; Kadushin, 1968; Enriquez, 1980; Salzberger-Wittenberg et al., 1983; Cardinali & Guidi, 1988), the construct of relational game was used in this study as it is a clear, minimally invasive and suitable tool to identify the risks to which supervisors are exposed in the process of situated learning that characterises social work practical traineeship. In particular, a list of relational games proposed to social workers who served as supervisors has been constructed drawing on a relational systemic approach framework and particularly inspired by three contributions.

The first one by Isca Salzberger-Wittenberg et al. (1983) elaborated a typology of students' expectations about the teacher, thus highlighting how some emotional and relational elements affect the learning process. Some examples applicable to practical traineeship supervision are: *the supervisor as a source of knowledge and wisdom,* typical expectation of a student centred more on the rational part of learning than on the emotional-relational one, from which he/she tries to defend him/herself. *The supervisor as the*

one who helps and comforts, an expectation peculiar to a student who places him/herself as a requester of continuous affective confirmations, more than of constructive criticism and methodological indications. Finally, *the supervisor as an authoritarian figure*, who expresses the trainee's expectation to be guided through the prescription of rules of behaviour to be followed, running the risk of not developing critical capacity and autonomy in the development of his/her own professional style.

The second contribution by Enriquez (1980), elaborated a phantasmatic typology focused on the training process of psychologists, professional educators, and social workers. Between the desire for omnipotence and the fear of impotence, every supervisor can live with some ghosts. Among those most suitable for practical traineeship supervision are: the *trainer*, i.e. the one who offers an ideal form, risking overlapping or imposing their own form and depriving the trainee of the opportunity to proceed by trial and error. The ghost of the *therapist*, i.e. the one who heals and restores, who is moved by the desire and the need to make the trainee heal. They tend to read as pathology and disorder those characteristics of diversity or deviance that they encounter in the training process. In the continuous search for a "medicalised" explanation (Conrad, 2007), it risks blocking the development of critical capacity in the future social worker, thus going beyond the role of the trainer. Another type of ghost is the *maieuta*, i.e. the one who aims to bring to life and develop inhibited potentials. This kind of phantom does not try to impose his good form, but risks preventing the learner from being able to behave, at times, as "bad and undisciplined", i.e. to make explicit to such a good-natured and helpful supervisor those conflicts useful to recognise and overcome the mutual perturbing parts in the learning process. The phantom of the *repairer*, finally, refers to the one who, in order to respond to their own need for others to need them, takes on the task of repairing suffering and injustice with the utmost dedication. Again, the risk of acting unconsciously may imply feelings of threat and inadequacy when learners do not meet these expectations.

Common to all types of ghost is the risk of blocking in the trainee the development of the capacity to analyse the structural, organisational, and professional factors that make up the complexity of social work. This creates a double-bind relationship, as Bateson (1972) pointed out, in which one invites others to become autonomous and, when they try, devalues them.

The third contribution by Cardinali and Guidi (1988) elaborated a relational game typology focused on collusiveness risks in the relationship between supervisor and psychotherapists in training. The authors point out that 'collusion' is not definitively a negative concept: to collude means 'to play together' (cum-ludere = to play with). Like any other form of communication, however, it takes on a negative value when it becomes strict

and does not evolve towards more mature and dynamic relational levels. The list of games proposed by the authors includes: a) *there is no one like us*; b) *the creator and his creature*; c) *persecutor and victim*; d) *either with me or against me*; e) *the therapist's therapist*. Three of these games (i.e. a, d, e) were adapted to the social work context and included in the list used in the questionnaire, as will be presented in the next point.

What is the meaning of the studies presented here?

First, all typologies highlight the risk of self-referentiality that a supervisor runs when they do not pay attention to the relational dynamics present in the learning process. Moreover, the effectiveness of the three studies presented appears evident when the two polarities, referring to students and supervisors, are recomposed at a meta level in the conceptual framework of the systemic-relational approach, which conceives the relationship as the ordering principle of the structure that it connects (Bateson, 1991).

Finally, on an epistemological level, it is worth considering that typologies, as devices for classifying knowledge, are useful for attempting to understand complexity, but are not decisive, because, as Bateson (1991) indicates, they do not offer indications on the processes to be activated subsequently, that is, on *how*. The *how*, in the case of supervision, gives meaning to the continuous tension towards the construction of a meta dimension of the learning process in practical traineeship, through exercise, error analysis and awareness development. In conclusion, the three typologies proposed can be understood by supervisors as a stimulus to recognise the risks and potentialities inherent in their role, even when played with genuine intentions.

The study: design, methods and sample

This study used an online questionnaire combining both closed and open ended questions. The survey has been mainly oriented by a qualitative approach and used open ended questions to explore supervisors' views on the issue of the learning relationship established between supervisor and student during the practical traineeship of the three-year and master's degree courses in social work. The study was conducted from October to December 2020 in collaboration with the representative bodies of the professional community on the regional level. A cover letter by the twenty regional Councils of social workers explaining the project, the voluntary nature of participation, procedures to ensure anonymity and the link to the questionnaire were sent to registered social workers. Furthermore, the same information and the link to the questionnaire were published also within social networks groups reserved for social workers. The questionnaire was

pre-tested with a group of ten social workers and modified on the basis of their comments.

As already pointed out, the guiding research questions were the following: What are the risks for supervisors in the learning relationship? Are social workers aware of such risks? During the Covid-19 pandemic, when a distance learning placement was activated, did this condition change the learning relationship? If so, how? Derived from this main research questions the online survey included 11 questions divided into three sections:

1. personal information and information regarding the job position;
2. choice, within a proposed list of relational games, which relational game each supervisor believes they tend to play and brief description of the related measures adopted to counteract the risks deriving from it[4],
3. information on the distance learning placement during the Covid-19 Pandemic and, in case of activation of the placement, indication of critical and innovative aspects encountered, with particular reference to the learning relationship.

Open ended questions concerned the aspect of dealing with risks involved in the relational games as well as innovative aspects and critical issues encountered by supervisors during placements in times of the pandemic.

The survey was completed by a self-selected non-probabilistic sample of 487 supervising social workers, and responses are therefore not statistically representative of the whole population of Italian social workers, i.e. the 45,054 social workers registered in the Professional Register on 20 September 2020, of whom 93.3% (42,033) are female and 6.7% (3021) are male[5]. However, as represented in Table 1, the sample of respondents appears to be large, heterogeneous, and relevant. It should also be considered that there is no register of traineeship supervisors on a national or regional basis, and it is therefore impossible to establish *a priori* the number of those who, out of the total population of social workers, hold this role in a systematic way. To avoid this problem, a special question was included in the questionnaire, so as to ensure that it could only be completed by those who had serves as supervisor at least once during the last 5 years.

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[4] Which games do you feel you play as a supervisor? (max 2 choices); How do you act to face the risks involved in the relational games? (short answer, max 80 characters).
[5] Edited by the author based on Cnoas data, retrieved January 15, 2021, from https://cnoas.org/numeri-della-professione/

Table 1. Main features of the interviewees through the questionnaire. N=487

Gender	female	93.4%
	male	6.6%
Age	21-30	7.8 %
	31-40	21.8%
	41-50	32%
	51-60	28,3%
	60+	10.1%
Years of work experience as a social worker	3-10	21,7%
	11-30	60,4%
	31-35+	17.9%
Geographical area (Registration with Regional Association of Social Workers)	Northern Italy	64.1%
	Central Italy	14.5%
	Southern Italy and Islands	21.4%
Activity sector (public or private)	Unemployed	7%
	Working in the public sector	79%
	Working in the private sector	14%

Out of the total 487 answers collected, 93.4% (455) were provided by women and 6.6% (32) by men. More than 60% of the respondents belonged to the age group between 41 and 60 years. 60.4% had between 11 and 30 years of work experience, in other words they belonged to the group of professionals who are generally more active and willing to collaborate with universities for internships. The geographical area most represented is Northern Italy, 64.1%, followed by Southern Italy and Islands, 21.4% and Central Italy with 14% of the total number of completed questionnaires. In addition, 79% of the social workers who participated in the survey work in the public sector, 14% in the private sector and 7% were not working at the date of completing the questionnaire.

A typology of relational games: the proposed list

Based on the conceptual framework presented in the previous paragraphs (in particular Berne, 1964; Kadushin, 1968; Enriquez, 1980; Salzberger-Wittenberg et al., 1983; Cardinali & Guidi, 1988; Allegri, 2000) the author

created a suitable tool composed by eight types of relational games in order to identify the risks of collusion encountered by supervisors. Considering its importance, the proposed list is presented in this section.

The title of each game was completed by a brief description of the underlying relational mechanisms, useful for the choice that each social worker would make. The list of games was articulated as follows:

a. *I'll help you at all costs.* The supervisor tends to constantly offer help. The trainee always presents themselves as needing help. The risk is to create a strong collusive alliance against the service or the university, and to block the learning process and the gradual acquisition of autonomy by the trainee;

b. *we are so good.* The collusive alliance pact is built on the slogan "*I will be good to you and you will be considerate to me*". There is a denial of the supervisor's authority, who tends to create excessively friendly relationships, for fear of being rejected or because they are reluctant to take on their role of authority;

c. *who knows best*? There is a symmetrical escalation between the two roles, a continuous competition to demonstrate superior knowledge and skills;

d. a result of the overabundance of stimuli, an entropic effect is produced which kills the possibility of reflexivity useful for learning;

e. *the trench - welcome to hell!* This is a game played by both the supervisor and the group of service professionals, which tends to disqualify any attempt to connect theory-practice, action and reflexivity that takes place while working. The message can be: "*Welcome to Hell, leave out the university theoretical elucubrations and learn how to really work, here, in the trenches*";

f. *there is no one like us* "*If you find that I am an outstanding supervisor, I will find that you are an outstanding trainee*" and vice versa. Conflicts, failures and criticism are hushed up, so they cannot be stimuli for reflexivity and learning;

g. *either with me or against me.* The supervisor may give in to the temptation of sending the trainee continuous messages of inadequacy of colleagues, managers, the university system to which s/he imputes difficulties that instead depend on a deadlocked relationship with the trainee, who thus remains blocked in expressing doubts or criticisms;

h. *the trainee's therapist.* The supervisor may accept the trainee's request for a "therapeutic" relationship, or they may propose it themselves perhaps plugging a real need but slipping into a different context that is not their competence. The supervisor can also use this game when they feel uncomfortable with the trainee's congruent questions about social work that they cannot answer.

Findings and discussion

The presented analysis of the empirical material focuses on the second and third sections of the questionnaire, in particular on the data obtained from open ended questions relating to relational games and to the critical and innovative aspects found in the learning relationship during the distance learning placement activated during the Pandemic by Covid-19.

In an exploratory and qualitative perspective, empirical regularities were sought in the experiences of relational games that tend to be activated by supervisors, focusing on two specific aspects:

1. the relational game that social workers chose within the list proposed in the questionnaire and what they do to counteract the tendency to play it;
2. possible obstacles and innovations that characterised the distance learning placement during the first phase of the Covid- 19 pandemic among those who acted as supervisors during that period.

Drawing on the collected answers, the qualitative data has been analysed and organised thematically on the basis of a list of codes (template) designed a priori on the basis of theoretical concepts, but in an open form, i.e. modifiable, and allowing the classification of the same texts into different codes at the same level (King, 2004).

As Figure 1 illustrates, relational games chosen by the respondents were correlated with the years of experience of the social workers supervisors.

Figure 1. The game most frequently activated by the supervisor by years of experience
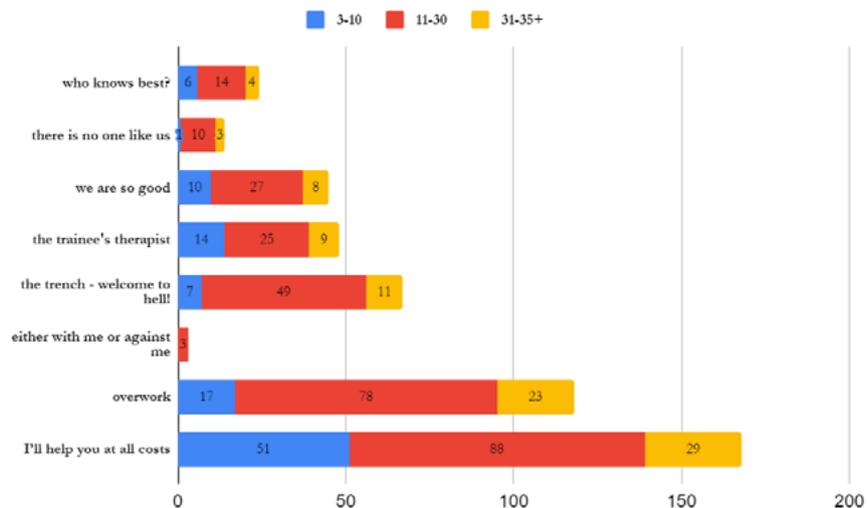
N=487; N3-10=106; N11-30=294; N31-35+=87.

I'll help you at all costs and Overwork were the ones chosen more frequently. The priority choice attributed to the game *I'll help at all costs* seems to confirm the tendency to activate an alliance based on the identification of the supervisor in the trainee, perhaps remembering their status as a student, who must be supported with all possible determination in the learning path.

This propensity is more evident in the group of less experienced supervisors, that is with 3-10 years[6]: about 50% in fact chose this option. In the group with 11-30 years of experience it was chosen by about 34% while it was chosen by about 33% in the group with 31-35+ years of experience. *Overwork* was chosen by 17% of the supervisors belonging to the group 3-10 years of experience and by just over 25% of the groups with 11-30 and 31-35+ years of experience. As specified in the description of these games, the risk is to create a strong collusive alliance against the service or the university, and the implicit pact of hyperactivity can block the learning process both because systematic opportunities for confrontation and reflection on what is happening are not guaranteed and because the gradual acquisition of autonomy by the trainee is slowed down. These findings seem to confirm the results of previous studies (Bogo et al., 2020; Parker, 2006) which pointed out the importance of an inter-organisational learning system between universities, agencies, and social services in order to identify which agreements and factors can guarantee the effectiveness of internships and student satisfaction.

In order to understand the meaning of this choice by participants and what measures supervisors activate to face the risks inherent in the games they have indicated, their comments must be considered.

In general, supervisors consider supervision as an implicit recognition of their professional status and experience as well as an ethical duty towards the professional community (Fazzi, 2020). However, they report the difficulty of matching the standards and priorities required by their service and the organisation of a placement which ensures that students observe and experience professional practice. Under these conditions, commitment to supervision must be continually negotiated with managers, a struggle reported by over 70% of participants.

Moreover, supervisors appear to be aware of the relational dynamics and the mechanism of identification in the student that they activate, but about 60% of their answers highlight the tendency to face this situation alone, as some of their statements show:

> I think about the real role I play and what I would have liked to find
> when I was a trainee (3-10);

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[6] Most universities require that social workers have at least three years' experience in services in order to be able to perform the role of traineeship supervisor.

> I keep in mind how I felt when I was a trainee and how and how much I have changed since then, while maintaining my passion for what I do (11-30);

> I used to identify a lot with the trainee. Now, I try to ensure weekly supervision sessions and I am much more aware of the learning relationship model that I activate, because it will leave an imprint in the trainee and will condition the relationships in his/her future work (31-35+).

The tendency just described decreases with increasing years of experience. More experienced supervisors, in fact, tend to plan supervision sessions (about 30% of participants in the 3-10 group and 60% in the 11-30 and 31-35+ groups state that they organise them every week), and to maintain a constant relationship with university tutors, especially in case of problems in the traineeship:

> I play I'll help you at all costs, but the trainee has to be proactive and I don't have to be the one to constantly stimulate them. They have to learn to manage their own anxieties (3-10);

> I suggest keeping in mind the role of each player, I schedule fortnightly supervision sessions and absolutely defend them, except in the event of unforeseen circumstances! (11-30);

> the last trainees I had were the age of my daughters. I struggled to maintain the right detachment, fearing a possible negative outcome. With a maieutic process I tried to bring out their inconsistencies (11-30);

> the supervision space and supervisor/university tutor meetings are fundamental because they help them to connect with their role. I defend them at all costs (31-35+).

Some supervisors use irony to counteract their own tendency to play the indicated games:

> I try to bring the relationship back to a professional level, ironically highlighting those parts of the role that were giving way to a confidential friendly relationship (3-10);

> I force myself to let the trainee walk on their own legs and talk to them about my tendency to over-protect, laughing about it together (31-35+).

Also relevant here is to highlight the correspondence with other studies which confirm that the supervisor is crucial to the field experience, (Doel & Shardlow, 2017; Foote, 2015; Beddoe et al., 2011).

Some participants pointed out that, in the current situation of social services, involving other colleagues in the working group can be useful both to promote the trainee's confrontation with other working styles and to enlarge the context, thus balancing the relational risks related to the learning process. Confirmation of this tendency can also be found in the game *The Trench - Welcome to Hell!* which was placed in third place by just over 20% of the group of supervisors with 11-30 years of work experience and by about 13% of the group with 31-35+ years, as can be seen from the comments regarding the ways in which the game was played:

> In this Trench/Hell, social work theory is valuable, but in the current social crisis any theory (and not only social work theory) is insufficient. The comparison with the other colleagues of the service in the training activities is essential to always refer to the theory-practice connection (11-30);

> In order to defuse the risk of playing trench, I analyse with the trainee every single action aimed at bringing about change; in this way I seem to better convey the sense of professional acting (31-35+)

> I try to grasp what the trainee sees with new eyes, which I no longer see (31-35+).

It should be noted that the risk of disqualifying the connection between theories and practices and the training role of the university is always present. On the other hand, 13% of supervisors with 3-10 years of experience placed the game *the trainee therapist* in third place. The devices activated by the social workers to cope with the related risks are interesting: in general, they look for confrontation with other supervisors or with colleagues of the same service (but they do not state how they organise it) or they encourage trainee's reflections in written form to establish a more balanced emotional distance. However, it seems evident that relying only on themselves is not decisive:

I refer the analysis of some dynamics to university teachers or to the traineeship support group (3-10);

> I suggest personal paths: if I observe something, I make it explicit (3-10);

> I want to improve, and I use the courses organised by the university for supervisors (3-10).

Learning in the traineeship during the pandemic

The third part of the questionnaire was built around three questions to collect information on whether distance learning placements were activated

during the Covid-19 pandemic and, if so, on the critical and innovative aspects found by the supervisors.

Thematic analysis of qualitative data gathered from open ended questions here also combined template and open coding (King, 2004) and focused on themes that obtained more occurrences related to years of experience of the social workers, as Table 2 illustrates, paying particular attention to the learning relationship.

Table 2 Critical and innovative aspects detected in the training during the Covid-19 pandemic. *N=487*

	Critical aspects of pandemic training				Innovative aspects of pandemic training			
OCCURRENCES	**YEARS OF EXPERIENCE**				**YEARS OF EXPERIENCE**			
	3-10	**11-30**	**31-35+**	**total**	**3-10**	**11-30**	**31-35+**	**total**
1 **Inter-organisational learning system**	4	21	6	31	0	4	2	6
2 **Relationship between the supervisor and the trainee**	4	10	1	15	4	5	2	11
3 **Time**	24	53	18	95	7	16	4	27
4 **Supervision method**	3	32	6	41	10	34	13	57
5 **Professional actions, working group, networking**	18	50	11	79	28	97	23	148
Total	**53**	**166**	**42**	**261**	**49**	**156**	**44**	**249**
0 **Internship not activated or not detectable**	**52**	**129**	**45**	**226**	**57**	**136**	**45**	**238**
Total				**487**				**487**

First, it was found that about 47% of the 487 supervisors did not supervise trainees between March and December 2020. The main reason was organisational confusion in their service, lack of authorisation from management, or lack of guidance from universities. All the reasons given related mainly to

the spring of 2020, when organisations were indeed unprepared to deal with the consequences of the pandemic.

Secondly, once the initial phase of displacement had been overcome, universities and services organised experimental forms of distance learning in online mode, above all to guarantee students' right to carry out their internship and thus to avoid excessive delays in their studies. In general, supervisors report a good alliance established with trainees, but there were also some critical aspects.

With regard to their own service, the main difficulties encountered concern the closed attitude of organisations to receive trainees. In the relationship with some universities, supervisors noticed an excessive rigidity on learning objectives or a lack of indications for alternative teaching solutions. In this respect, they report a feeling of loneliness and emptiness in the inter-institutional network built for the practical learning of students.

Interestingly, the critical aspects reported are mirrored by the innovative ones. The main positive elements that emerged from the survey concern a good level of collaboration established with university teachers and tutors, which allowed supervisors to experiment with supervision and case study sessions for small groups of students.

In addition to this kind of opportunities, the need to quickly organise teaching strategies useful in a distance traineeship led to the enlargement of the online collaboration network. This allowed not only the comparison and exchange of teaching techniques and tools, but also the participation to online seminars organised simultaneously by different universities as well as the access to hypertexts and webseries on social service to be used as simulations of professional situations to be analysed with the trainee. The prevailing perception was that of being part of an educational and professional community.

Both critical and innovative aspects on the online learning relationship are illustrated more in detail in the following sections.

"Out of sight, out of mind": critical aspects in the supervision relationship

With respect to the relationship with the trainee, the critical points pointed out by the supervisors concern above all the fragmentary character of the experience as well as the impossibility to fully experience the daily routine in a social service. This concerns both the formal aspects such as meetings, home visits, interviews, and the informal ones such as exchanges with other professionals or the coffee break, which are useful to comment and defuse difficult situations:

> seeing each other little and at a distance while the supervisor continues to work for the rest of the day risks filling the student with notions without perceiving the true essence of professional practice (3-10);

> the distance relationship with the trainee may limit the purpose of the supervision session. It was not possible either to get to know the area or to enter into the professional specifics in order to experience social work first-hand (11-30);

> there is a risk of giving so many stimuli and not having the time for reflection and sedimentation. Starting the traineeships during the pandemic was difficult as the work contexts are not inclusive towards students. I wonder why I do it (31-35+).

The supervision meetings, mainly dedicated to guide the trainee in self-reflection, also seem to have been less effective, confirming however, the importance of the relationship in the learning process.

In a uniform fashion among the three groups subdivided by years of experience, the supervisors report emotional detachment in the learning relationship, increased risk of passive attitudes on the part of the trainee, difficulty in introducing the student in direct relationships with the service users, increased emotional intemperance on the part of the supervisor:

> everything that happened outside the video call could not be experienced by the trainee, which created an emotional and learning vacuum. The commitment to show as much of my work as possible drained my mental energies. In the supervision meetings I could not analyse the non-verbal communication and the implicit aspects of our relationship (3-10);

> negative components of my character emerged, due to latent exasperation, which exploded in online meetings with the trainee. Sometimes I could not tolerate their need to analyse several times some important passages in social work practices (11-30);

> the problem was not only the physical absence of the person and the fact that they couldn't experience the traineeship, but also that I couldn't keep the trainee in my thoughts. In short, "out of sight, out of mind!" (31-35+).

Although these critical aspects were exacerbate by restrictions due to the pandemic, they also point to findings stressed by previous research which underline the supervisor-student relationship as one of the crucial factors in both achieving a successful placement outcome (Bogo et al., 2007; Sussman et al., 2007) and recognising power differences in a way that is useful in solving placement problems (Walker et al., 2008). Furthermore, these results highlight how necessary it is to build training paths for social workers to

become effective supervisors and the need of high-level continuous training and constant confrontation with the university and with other supervisors (Hemy et al., 2016).

"On the computer screen we are equals": innovative aspects in the supervision relationship

Experiencing social work in an emergency can be seen as an exceptional learning opportunity for the student. At the same time, innovative aspects pointed out by supervisors regarding the relationship with the trainee concern above all the discovery of new supervision methods, which require attention in order to be fully experienced and not to fall into communication traps:

> it is easier to organise, and guarantee protected online supervision sessions, without interruptions and disturbances, as can happen in presence (3-10);

> distance helps not to collude in the relationship (11-30);

> it is not true that the supervision relationship suffers from distance: if you know how to look and listen, you can perceive many aspects of communication (31-35+);

> the pandemic emergency has taught supervisors, trainees, and university tutors to collaborate more effectively (31-35+).

Thus, the possibility of organising online meetings with other services also allowed more professionals to participate and developed greater efficiency, eliminating interruptions of various kinds, as is more often the case in face-to-face meetings. This was an advantage for trainees, who were able to participate in many more meetings than those usually attended in person. In addition, during the pandemic the ability of social workers to share documents on online platforms increased, breaking down age-old resistance. The professionals' willingness to consider trainees as part of the working group increased, also due to their increased IT skills, which were considered as resources.

Some supervisors observed how the peer image on the PC screen influenced their way of considering the relationship with the trainee.

Finally, one of the advantages of distance learning has been the widening of the online collaboration network also between supervisors and between universities:

> surprisingly, participating in online meetings helps the trainee to break the barrier represented by the first acquaintance of places or people and enter more quickly into a relationship with the working group (3-10);

on the computer screen we are all the equals, even if we cannot look each other directly in the eyes. This situation increases the trainee's central role and my attention towards them (11-30);

the trainee was more familiar with technology than I was. She helped me manage the meetings with the families very well (11-30);

we, fellow supervisors, experimented with supervising a small group of trainees who rotated among some social workers. We participated together in online seminars organised simultaneously by different universities and thus tackled common problems with different strategies, creating one professional community (31-35+).

The supervisors: between resignation and pro-activity

Referring to the observations presented with respect to the type of relationship activated and the risks involved in these games, what we want to highlight is the tendency of supervisors to place themselves in two distinct and complementary polarities. This tendency is evenly distributed among the different groups of social workers divided by years of experience.

On the one hand, there are the "resigned" supervisors, i.e. those who feel oppressed by organisational procedures in their services, forced to keep together the commitment to respect the standards and priorities required by the service and the commitment to supervision, never definitively recognised by the organisation. On the other hand, it is worth considering that social workers are increasingly required to work as executors of tasks rather than as professionals endowed with operational autonomy, as is typical in periods of neo-liberal organisational reforms and rigid processes of service corporatisation.

This situation can also be reflected in the learning relationship activated in distance learning: longer periods of mutual acquaintance have also led to difficulties in delegating tasks to the trainee to be carried out autonomously. The prevailing consequence was the increase of administrative and bureaucratic tasks assigned to the student as opposed to the decrease of professional actions.

On the other hand, there were the "pro-active" supervisors, i.e. those who feel determined and are aware of the structural distortions in which they work but are willing to find solutions through collaboration and negotiation with the other actors involved in the process. The use of distance communication technologies was also considered as a tool to support exchanges and collaborative learning not only with the trainee, but also between supervisors and teachers, thus building virtual com-munities. These professionals have probably developed, over time, transversal skills such as curiosity, flexibility, desire to learn and experiment.

However, all the supervisors who participated in the research identified learning opportunities at the cost of an enormous commitment of time and energy, and often in the absence of adequate devices to activate online solutions.

Concluding remarks

The analysis carried out aimed to explore the learning relationship in social work training from the supervisors' point of view both by applying the relational games device and by analysing critical and innovative aspects found in the distance training activated during the pandemic. The exploratory nature of the presented survey does not allow to draw definitive conclusions. Moreover, since the research is exclusively based on supervisors' opinions, it did not include the evaluation of the impact on students.

This can be considered a limitation that could be corrected in future research focused not only on the point of view of supervisors and trainees, but also on that of the different actors that contribute to define this training device: tutors and university teachers, managers of service organisations, professional order.

To grasp the complexity of the phenomenon, it would be necessary to identify the mechanisms of feedback and mutual influence within which the learning relationship is placed. However, from the analysis of the empirical material some conclusive considerations can be drawn to reflect on potential developments in supervision and the learning relationship.

The first point to highlight is that the research findings confirm that the learning process in practical traineeship is situated and co-constructed through the relationship between supervisor and student within a specific organisation, as outlined in the introduction.

Besides, in the absence of standards and operational guidelines at national level, and respecting the teaching autonomy of each university, the agreements, the collaboration network, and the custom present in each inter-organisational system involved in social work education in different geographical areas of the country acquire great importance. Where flexibility, cooperation and lifelong learning characterise the relationship among supervisors, tutors, university lecturers and the regional professional order, it is possible to trace a more consolidated ability to transform constraints into resources, as in the case of remote placements during a pandemic.

The second result that emerges from the research is the discrepancy that many social workers revealed between the assumption of responsibility for supervision and improvisation in the exercise of the supervisor's function, often in hostile organisational conditions. Of course, it is not by chance that the relational games that were chosen more frequently were I*'ll help you at*

all costs, Overwork, The trench - welcome to Hell! and The trainee's therapist: they are all relational games that reveal the social worker's tendency to identify completely with the student's situation and to conceive the relationship between supervisor and trainee almost as a private matter between the two protagonists. Perhaps the situation could not be different, in the absence of a consolidated learning system among all the actors involved. In some ways, it can be said that in e-learning practical traineeship a digital translation of relational games presented in the research has been activated.

The third consideration that can be drawn from the survey is that practical traineeship, considered as a "situated" phase of the university training pathway, is an essential part that should be supported, planned, and monitored like all other educational activities. It is more and more evident that the initiative cannot be left to the individual social worker, who assumes the responsibility of training future colleagues. Under these conditions, it is to be expected that the number of social workers available to supervise students will rapidly decrease, thus penalising the whole educational process. There is also an urgent need to find solutions that make it desirable for social service organisations to take on trainees. For example, some experiments of negotiated internships with social services have led to student theses focused on short researches on the processes activated by the service, or on participatory evaluation activities with service users on quality and have been highly appreciated by the managers of the organisation.

To counteract the risks inherent in the learning relationship and to promote a virtuous university education system, it is necessary to proceed in at least two directions.

Firstly, it is important to promote awareness that supervision is an activity that requires skills and constant updating to be carried out successfully. As already stated, it is not enough to be excellent professionals to take on this responsibility. This awareness implies, for universities and professional associations, the organisation of training courses and permanent confrontation for supervisors.

Secondly, it is necessary to experiment with new supervision practices so that social workers work in a way that is compatible with their professional commitments without penalising the quality of students' learning. Some of the solutions tried out during the pandemic developed innovative aspects that could become permanent.

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