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Relational dynamics, reflective practice and lifelong learning in social work

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Abstract: In the field of social work, the relationship is one of the central elements of the helping process, requiring professionals to develop complex cognitive, emotional, affective and behavioural skills. In turn, these skills require social workers to develop reflective capabilities and to focus on university-based and lifelong learning.
Building on this premise, the article presents the results of exploratory research aimed at analysing, from the perspective of social workers: a) the fundamental elements enabling the development of a good relationship with the people accessing services; b) the importance of reflection in relation to both the quality of their professional practice and their self-awareness; and c) the related training needs.
The objectives were pursued using a qualitative research methodology based on an interview combining semi-structured and in-depth interview techniques, addressing 50 professionals working in the municipal social services in the Veneto region (northern Italy).

Keywords: Social Work, Reflective Practice, Helping Relationship, Lifelong Learning

The social worker's relational skills

In professional social work, the relationship is a central element of the helping process. This is a dialogical relationship, a process of social construction and, therefore, of mutual influence (Folgheraiter, 2007; Folgheraiter & Raineri, 2017), developed in the narrative exchange between the social worker and the person accessing services. This kind of professional relationship has a direct impact on an interconnected set of results, and its quality is as important as the method of intervention in determining the outcome of the helping process (Howe, 2017).

Relational aspects involve complex skills linked to the cognitive ability to understand the service user's needs, the emotional and affective ability to understand the feelings and moods of another person and to develop sufficient self-knowledge and self-awareness and, finally, behavioural abilities linked to a wide range of methodological and technical and practical skills specific to social work (Bissolo et al., 2015; Cellini & Dellavalle, 2015).

Despite the absence of a complete and unequivocal classification of these skills and competences (Cabiati, 2017a), the centrality of empathy, active listening, emotional self-awareness and emotional intelligence is widely recognised (Morrison, 2007; Ferguson, 2018), these concepts being closely interconnected and interdependent (Pattaro, 2024).

The literature makes it clear that all the skills referred to above play a key role in the work of the social worker. If they are not developed properly, the risk is that the practitioner will be unable to implement effective measures and to cope effectively with the stress of professional practice (Ruiz-Fernández et al., 2021). Relational skills are frequently associated with effective decision-making, with maintaining the motivation for change of the person accessing services, and with developing a relationship of trust, all of which positively impact the effectiveness of the professional intervention. From this perspective, the quality of the relationship established determines the entire helping process (Folgheraiter & Raineri, 2017). With regard to the well-being of the professional, it is also worth noting that good relational skills can foster adaptability and resilience, as well as positively influence personal satisfaction, good quality social relationships and work performance (Grant & Kinman, 2014).

Whatever the definition of these skills, it is a recognised fact that they all involve a complex set of reflective skills on the part of social workers (Howe, 2017).

Although the concept of reflectivity also resists unequivocal definition, it may be broadly defined as a disposition to pause and think about a particular topic, situation or problem, in order to develop a deeper understanding of it before making a critical assessment. This process requires a wealth of

theoretical and methodological knowledge acquired during training, applied to the fieldwork, shared with other professionals, and enriched with experience and lifelong training. Reflective professionals, therefore, are those who adopt what Schön (1983) calls "intelligent action", guided by "knowledge-in-action" and "reflection-in-action"; in other words, those who learn to take a more critical stance on their "normal" way of looking at the world and themselves, thereby questioning the assumption that their perception of external realities allows them to grasp, almost automatically, the most intimate nature of things.

In this regard, several authors have also spoken of "critical thinking" (see Cabiati, 2017b for a review) in social work as a form of proactive and reactive reflection, based on self-assessment, which results in a well-reasoned response, allowing for different points of view and fostering humility, integrity, perseverance, empathy and self-discipline (Gambrill, 2013).

In a social context increasingly characterised by complex and open-ended situations and problems, often imprecisely defined and shaped by ever-changing cultural, social, psychological and organisational dynamics (Pattaro, 2024), social workers are required to be strongly committed to their professional growth. This is a process in which lifelong learning, personal and shared reflectivity, and supervision are closely interconnected, with a view to maintaining, updating and developing skills and competences, consolidating professional identity, and supporting self-learning and self-knowledge.

Although in practice there are obvious difficulties both in developing a single, unambiguous definition of, and in measuring, these methods of thinking, whether critical or reflective, the results of some empirical research show that the skills related to reflectivity have a self-protective value in terms of personal satisfaction and psychological and physical health (Kinman & Grant, 2011). Lifelong learning also has a positive impact both on the personal growth of practitioners and on the improvement of professional practice, fostering the development of dynamic intervention models responsive to the needs of the social environment (Jivanjee et al., 2015).

Moreover, as some international studies show (see Cabiati, 2017b for a review), there is a connection between social work practices and lifelong learning, particularly as regards the defensive attitudes that professionals may adopt in response to their anxieties and concerns, as well as to a misperception of their skills (Banks, 2008).

Given this complexity, although the issue of lifelong learning and its relevance to helping professionals has been discussed by many authors, there is a substantial lack of specific, up-to-date empirical research in Italy addressing these issues directly. Moreover, also at the international level, few studies have focused on the social worker's point of view (Jivanjee et al., 2015;

Cabiati, 2017a), both in general terms and with regard to the relational and emotional aspects of their profession.

From a sociology of education perspective, this study aims to contribute to broader debates on lifelong learning, socialisation and the development of professional identity. Social work is indeed a field continuously constructed through practice, peer exchange and reflective processes (Wenger, 1998; Mezirow, 2009). In this sense, the relational and emotional dimensions of the profession are not merely technical aspects, but represent genuine sites of learning and professional socialisation, through which social workers develop, negotiate and consolidate their professional identity over time.

The study

The social service relationship therefore stems from an awareness of the complexity of the interrelation between social worker and person accessing services, which combines relational and emotional aspects that, if not properly addressed, could undermine the professional relationship and, consequently, the outcome of the helping process.

Building on these assumptions, this research forms part of a broader project aimed at analysing the communicative, relational and emotional aspects of the profession based on the perceptions and opinions of 50 social workers working in the municipal social services sector.

Objectives and tool

This research aims to explore the opinion of social workers with regard to some key dimensions of relational dynamics:

- the key elements that enable the positive development of the helping relationship with the people accessing services;
- the importance of the reflection process in relation to the quality of the professional practice;
- and, finally, aspects that should be integrated into the training programmes concerning the development of relational skills and emotional management.

To pursue these objectives, a qualitative research methodology was therefore adopted, which does not define response categories *a priori*, but rather aims to construct them from the representations provided by the interviewees. To this end, an interview guide combining semi-structured and in-depth interview techniques was developed – a flexible instrument that grants respondents ample freedom of expression, designed to elicit the conceptual frameworks of the participants while considering their perspective and the uniqueness of each account (Patton, 1990). At the same time, this approach

allows the researcher to focus on the most significant aspects of the topic under exploration (Bichi, 2007).

Professionals working in the municipal sector were specifically targeted because this sector represents the gateway to the provision of social services, an area where very different life situations can be encountered, requiring in-depth theoretical and technical knowledge and often a wide range of social work skills (Bertotti, 2016).

Using a snowball sampling procedure, 50 interviews were conducted with social workers engaged in the Veneto region of Italy between 2019 and early 2020[1].

The interviews, audio-recorded and transcribed, were subjected to thematic analysis (Riessman, 2008) following an inductive approach. In the first phase, the transcripts were read repeatedly to become thoroughly familiar with the data. In the second phase, initial codes were generated independently by both researchers and then compared and discussed to ensure inter-rater consistency. In the third phase, codes were grouped into broader categories and themes, reflecting recurring patterns of meaning across the interviews. Categories were developed incrementally, through a constant comparison process, and were refined through ongoing dialogue between the two researchers. The use of Weft-QDA software supported the systematic organisation and retrieval of coded segments, facilitating transparency throughout the analytical process.

Several limitations of this study should be acknowledged. The exploratory and qualitative nature of the research means that findings cannot be generalised beyond the specific context of municipal social services in the Veneto region. Moreover, the snowball sampling procedure may have introduced a selection bias, since participants were recruited through professional networks and may share similar views and experiences, potentially resulting in a more homogeneous sample than would be desirable. The study also focuses exclusively on social workers employed in municipal services, which represents only one of the many professional contexts in which social work is practised.

[1] The snowball sampling procedure was initiated by contacting a small number of social workers known to the researchers through professional networks in the Veneto region. Each participant was then asked to suggest further potential participants matching the inclusion criteria (i.e., being a qualified social worker currently employed in municipal social services in Veneto). This chain-referral process continued until theoretical saturation was approached and the target sample of 50 interviews was reached. It should be noted that the data were collected between 2019 and early 2020, prior to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in Italy and the consequent national lockdown (March 2020), which profoundly affected the organisation of social services and the professional working conditions of social workers.

Within these limits, however, the findings do highlight certain emerging categories regarding the role of the relational dimension in the profession, as seen through the narratives and perspectives of social workers concerning their direct experience with the people accessing services, thereby offering a situated, qualitative contribution to a field that remains underrepresented in the empirical literature.

Participants

The social workers interviewed comprised 46 women and 4 men with an average age of 40 (range: 26-60). For the purposes of data analysis, respondents were divided into four age groups: up to 35 (n=17), from 36 to 45 (n=17), from 46 to 55 years (n=11), and over 56 (n=5)[2].

Regarding qualifications, most of the respondents (27) held a Master's degree in social services, 11 held a Bachelor's degree, while the remaining 12 (mainly from the older age groups) held a higher education diploma in social work.

The professional backgrounds of the respondents were fairly homogeneous, with experience mainly in the municipal social services sector.

Finally, the social workers carried out their professional practice in municipal social services characterised by different organisational structures: 12 worked in municipal services not differentiated by user group or area of intervention; the remainder worked with adults and older people (22), adults and children (9), and children and families (7).

Results

For a good enough relationship

A specific area of the research examines the helping relationship between social worker and people accessing service, paying particular attention to aspects that foster its positive development (*With regard to the professional relationship with the people accessing services, what, in your opinion, are the aspects that favour the development of a good relationship?*).

Upon analysing the answers provided, it becomes clear that the consensus, shared by the professionals, is that listening skills, a clear and transparent attitude towards the person accessing service, and a welcoming and non-judgemental approach are of key importance.

First and foremost, the main factor in determining the development of a good relationship is the ability to listen.

[2] The proportion between men and women reflects the extremely large prevalence of women among members of the professional association (roughly 93.4% of women vs. 6.6% of men - CNOAS, 2023), confirming the clear, traditional, and virtually consistent predominance of women in this profession over time.

> *…showing a desire to listen* […] *also from an emotional standpoint; that is to say, going beyond the words, grasping the feelings and emotions hidden behind the person's words…* (Int. 9, woman, age: over 56).

Analytically, these accounts point to a form of participatory listening, strongly connected with the concept of empathy, embedded in a non-judgemental, transparent relationship that safeguards the otherness and the uniqueness of the person, thereby modulating the distance from (and closeness to) the person accessing services (Pattaro & Pavesi, 2023). In this sense, for social workers, listening means approaching the relationship with a mind as free as possible from pre-established schemas. This freedom may be sought by listening carefully to oneself, to one's inner responses and to the signals deriving from one's cognitive schemas, through constant reflectivity (Cellini & Dellavalle, 2015).

> *… non-judgement, listening, clarity – clarity about limits, about what can or cannot be done – and, in any case, closeness… the fact that the message sent, the perception given, is that that person [the social worker] is there for you, to help you (Int. 43, woman, age: over 56).*

Moreover, according to the respondents, listening is strongly linked to the ability to make the other feel welcome:

> *… welcoming people by giving the impression – which is more than an impression, it is a fact – that what they have to bring to the table has value […] I believe it is important to convey a sense of utmost respect and to make sure users feel they are in a safe space where they can share what is often a very painful and serious experience (Int. 35, woman, age: from 46 to 55).*

From an analytical perspective, in its dynamic, processual and relational sense, the initial welcome is the time when the social worker and the person accessing service first get to know one another, but also the moment at which information is first collected and transmitted. It is fundamental not only from a relational point of view, but also from a methodological standpoint (Fargion, 2013). Indeed, it carries a significant political value, representing the condition whereby social rights – defined by regulations, standards and forms of local governance – take shape and materialise (Bianchi & Kolar, 2015).

Trust too is mentioned by many of the respondents, initially spontaneously and then in greater depth as a result of a specific question (*Within this relationship, what role do you think trust plays?*).

Although the answers to the direct question are fairly diverse, three prevailing themes emerge around which most respondents converge: the importance of trust, the slow process of building it, and the importance of reciprocity.

Indeed, all the respondents described trust as a fundamental aspect lying "*at the basis of all relationships*" (Int. 22, woman, age: up to 35), although some point out that building trust is a slow process, sometimes with an uncertain outcome, which requires investment and commitment on the part of both the professional and the person accessing service.

A relationship of trust also entails reciprocity, calling on all the parties involved to commit to it. This issue of reciprocity is often mentioned by the respondents to emphasise both the feeling placed by service users in the social worker and the professional's confidence in service users and in their ability to change. Such trust, therefore, relies on "*you yourself believing in what you are doing… Conveying the message that you believe in the process… the user* [then] *says: this person actually believes in it, perhaps we can do this, perhaps I can do it*" (Int. 26, woman, age: up to 35).

In addition to identifying several important and positive aspects, the respondents also focused on the complexity of the relational dimension of the profession, linked to two issues in particular: the difficulty of being non-judgemental in the helping relationship, and the frailty of the relationship of trust.

A first tension emerges from these accounts: with regard to the issue of non-judgement, some of the professionals highlight certain intrinsic difficulties, especially in situations where the words or actions of the person accessing service conflict with their own cultural and value models, or come up against and clash with their own prejudices. Hence the reflection on the need for continuous work on oneself, to move beyond one's own perspective in order to understand and accept (in what can be a long and sometimes arduous path) other ways of interpreting reality.

> *I thought I was a fairly free person with little to no prejudices; instead, I understood that I am full of them […] I have learned to recognise them and even now, whenever I meet a new person, to understand to what extent my assessment is influenced by prejudice rather than knowledge. To me, this is very important (Int. 16, woman, age: from 46 to 55).*

A second issue concerns the fragility of the relationship of trust. Trust is a decisive aspect and, as we have seen, unanimously recognised as central to building the helping relationship. However, it is also an extremely fragile asset, "*…so delicate it can die at any moment*" (Int. 10, male, age: from 46 to 55). These accounts suggest that there arises a certain insecurity on the part of the social workers, along with a critical reflection on their own work and the consequent need to constantly call themselves into question.

The value of reflective practice

The difficulties highlighted are almost consequentially linked to the issue of reflectivity and its influence on the daily practice of the social worker,

which is specifically addressed through the question "*In general, do you believe that a failure on the part of social workers to reflect on the critical issues of the helping relationship could impact the quality of their professional practice?*".

Within social services, reflective practice – understood as "the ability to stand back and look critically at one's own practice" (Pierson & Thomas, 2002, p. 396) in order to fully understand its implications and develop useful knowledge to improve it – is recognised as the most effective bridge connecting theory and experience, social needs and services provided (Sicora, 2010).

In this regard, the accounts of most of the respondents (45/50) clearly confirm this assumption, as is the idea that a failure on the part of social workers to reflect on the critical issues linked to the helping relationship could, indeed, affect the quality of their professional practice.

> *…in my opinion, it is impossible not to reflect. That is, one should always reflect, precisely because of the repercussions that each of our actions and gestures have on people, on the work, on everything (Int. 33, woman, age: up to 35).*

Analytically, these accounts point to a continuous process through which it is possible to recognise and bring to light the implicit assumptions that shape the way the social worker interacts with the person accessing service. Moreover, this process surfaces the knowledge that guides professional choices of interpretation and action, prompting reflection not merely on what one does and how, but on the conceptual assumptions that implicitly underpin professional conduct (Sicora, 2012).

> *… For me, reflection is not [only] an exercise in introspection…in my values, my ideas, my idealisations; for me, reflection means combining experience, for example with similar cases, etc., and the theoretical framework… (Int. 27, woman, age: from 46 to 55).*

The risks associated with a lack of reflection are therefore recognised as operating on various levels:

- from the risk adopting a purely bureaucratic role, falling into "*significant automatisms*" (Int. 8, woman, age: from 36 to 45), proposing "*standard interventions*" (Int. 24, woman, age: up to 35) and becoming a mere "*service provider*" (Int. 23, woman, age: over 56), "*because this makes you work on a performance basis and with a paternalistic approach*" (Int. 44, woman, age: 36 to 45);
- to the risk of self-referential thinking, caused by "*a tunnel vision and an inability to change opinion*" (Int. 22, woman, age: up to 35), leading to "*sterile, ineffective work that does not take into account a fundamental aspect of social work: the other*" (Int. 28, woman, age: from 36 to 45);

- to the undermining of the helping process, with a strong appeal to the principle of responsibility, because *"this does not just mean getting the project wrong, but being unable to help people and therefore negatively affecting their life; failing a person who is already in a disadvantaged position, perhaps in a weakened state, is not something to be taken lightly"* (Int. 21, woman, age: up to 35).

While the consensus on the importance of reflectivity is unanimous, certain challenges emerge in terms of being able to implement it properly. In this regard, a widely recurring issue concerns the dimension of time (and its shortage) in daily practice.

However, this issue is viewed very differently by the respondents.

Some (very few) tend to dismiss it rather quickly, lamenting a lack of time to reflect and laying the responsibility for poor or sporadic professional reflection entirely at the door of the organisational dimension of the work, their attitude poised between resignation and self-acquittal for any resulting professional shortcomings:

> *If you have this [little time], how can you reflect? I mean, when can you reflect, at night? […] Yes, you do it, but fast, because you don't really have time to sit and think (Int. 40, woman, age: from 36 to 45).*

Others, however, while noting the difficulty that the 'time issue' entails, are very critical of the oversimplified, if not superficial, considerations and attitudes taken in this regard by some colleagues:

> *…colleagues who spend more time saying how many things they have to do and how they haven't got enough time to do it all… Sometimes I might call someone to tell them something and they keep me on the phone for 4-5 minutes telling me that they haven't got the time…but in those 4-5 minutes I could easily have told them what I had to say! (Int. 43, woman, age: over 56).*

From an analytical perspective, these positions raise more profound considerations concerning the management of space and time for reflection seen as one of the critical issues relating to the organisation of services. Time and quality of the professional practice are, in fact, two interconnected dimensions that are hard to separate. However, due to the increase of bureaucracy and the concomitant and constant reduction in resources, they risk being ever-more sacrificed, both in terms of the time spent building a relationship with the people accessing services and in terms of the space – even mental – granted for reflection (Fazzi, 2015).

To overcome this problem, some respondents reason on the qualitative dimension of the limited time at their disposal, a challenge that is sometimes unrecognised or even opposed by the organisational powers that be, and on trying to find a way to carve enough time out for themselves and 'defend' it,

optimising and reorganising it in order to create the conditions for an effective and collaborative relationship with people accessing service. Thus, reflections emerge that combine constructive criticism of the institutions and their demands with the need to question one's professional practice:

> *…when habit and standardisation come into play, we convince ourselves that reflection is unnecessary. […] In this case it is important to stop and take more time, because very often what the local authorities require of us is action; physical, concrete, material action; the production of results. This can cause – it can generate – serious errors (Int. 42, male, age: from 46 to 55).*

Reflecting further on what instruments can be used to develop and strengthen the necessary reflectivity, three key themes are identified: first of all, communication with colleagues; then, professional supervision as a means of support; and, for a smaller number of respondents, lifelong learning.

Moments of communication, sharing and informal support among colleagues – including those from other helping professions – are regarded by many respondents (17/50) as an opportunity to learn and improve by collectively examining thoughts and actions. These considerations suggest that this process of reflection and communication helps, on the one hand, to feel less alone in tackling the challenges of everyday working life and, on the other, to learn from one another and improve one's professional practice (Ingram, 2015).

> *…create moments…among colleagues to re-elaborate, discuss, analyse, reflect (Int. 47, woman, age: over 56).*

The second issue concerns the importance of supervision (13/50) as a tool enabling the reflective and critical analysis of methodological, technical, ethical and emotional aspects of social work with the guidance of an expert (Kadushin, 1992; Allegri, 2023).

> *…I often reflect on the interviews I have conducted, the words I have used, etc., especially when things don't go as I would have expected. I wonder if I was effective, if I acted correctly. Sometimes I can identify my mistakes, and sometimes – to be honest – I can't. For this reason, often there would be a need for supervision, not only for managing emotions, but also for managing our working method, which isn't always infallible despite our experience and age* (Int. 16, woman, age: from 46 to 55).

Finally, some respondents (7/50) regard lifelong learning as playing a strategic role, considering the time devoted to training as an opportunity to reflect on the strategies used to really understand difficult situations and to think through the necessary actions and possible solutions.

> *…lifelong learning and supervision. Reflectivity must be practised, but it must also be learned; there should be someone who teaches us to develop it and also to maintain it, because then, over time, it evolves, things evolve, things change (Int. 28, woman, age: from 36 to 45).*

What sort of lifelong learning?

The subject of lifelong learning is then investigated almost as a logical continuation of the discourse on communicative and relational skills and on the reflectivity of social workers.

When asked, *"With regard to the topics we have discussed, what elements would you integrate into the lifelong learning of social workers?"*, an absolute minority of the respondents (2/50) struggle to free themselves of the rationale of 'doing':

> *…They should work on the field, full stop […] Taking a three-year degree, specialising, taking a short specialisation degree: all of this is far removed from the real world. At least, that is my experience (Int. 7, woman, age: from 46 to 55)*

Such positions, in very general terms, reduce social work to the sole dimension of experience and still resist recognition within a profession that has sound theoretical and methodological bases and a solid scientific approach. Admittedly, such positions are much rarer than they used to be, but they confirm an ongoing – although in our case very marginal – gap that is hard to eradicate entirely (Segatto, 2018).

Most respondents, instead, regard lifelong learning first and foremost – as also emerges from other research (Cabiati, 2017b; Pattaro, 2024) – as an opportunity for growth, not just professionally but also personally. Such education aims to strengthen strategic competences in relation to the challenges that social workers are called upon to face throughout their career and in different professional contexts, thereby enhancing their cognitive, relational and emotional resources.

In this regard, the social workers consider it useful to focus lifelong learning particularly on aspects relating to relational dynamics, self-knowledge, effective communication and emotional management, as part of a process aimed at maintaining, updating and developing skills and competences (Schön, 1983):

> *…pathways for greater self-knowledge […] at the very least, short pathways for greater awareness and self-knowledge (Int. 27, woman, age: from 46 to 55).*

Within these desired pathways, the predominant issue is that of emotions and the need to increase the ability of social workers to tackle them in their daily professional relationships with the people accessing services.

> *…from the point of view of lifelong learning, which is requested of us and is in fact really important, many of the opportunities offered concern bureaucratic issues…procedures…which, by all means, is useful, but there are few courses focusing on this subject [communication and relational skills], which for us are the order of the day. Especially when we start out, after university, we are not ready to deal with the crying, the despair, the depression, and everything else users bring to the table…the fear… Specific training concerning these issues would be really useful (Int. 44, woman, age: from 36 to 45).*

Although there is still very little research in this area, the importance of this issue has been increasingly recognised in recent years, especially in relation to emotions as a source of information and knowledge (Morrison, 2007; Sicora, 2022; 2024), with positive effects on evaluation and decision-making processes (Ingram, 2015; Grant et al., 2014; Kanasz & Zieliska, 2017), on flexible negotiation skills, and on the development of greater confidence, optimism and cooperative attitudes among professionals (Grant *et al.*, 2014). Furthermore, reflection on how to deal with the emotional impact of social work (Moesby-Jensen and Nielsen, 2015; Pattaro and Zannoni, 2021), thereby contributing to the well-being of social workers and the quality of their interventions (Grootegoed and Smith, 2018; Sicora, 2022; 2024), is extremely important. This represents a significant step towards the conceptualisation of emotions as a fully-fledged tool in managing the helping relationship – a skill not only necessary in this profession, but constitutive of the relationship itself (Pattaro and Zannoni 2021; Sicora 2022; 2024).

The answers of about a third of the interviewees also raise the issues of peer exchange among colleagues as an opportunity for learning and of professional supervision as a particular form of lifelong learning, provided it meets certain conditions (Burgalassi and Tilli, 2018). Professional supervision, in the form of educational supervision, aims to enhance the knowledge, skills and competences of social workers (Kadushin, 1992; Burgalassi and Tilli, 2018) through reflective action that enables, starting from a critical issue, the implementation of professional practice.

> *… often there would be a need for supervision, not only for managing emotions, but also for managing our working method […] it is true that supervision is rarely seen as a lifelong learning opportunity, but I like to look at it from this perspective too (Int. 16, woman, age: from 46 to 55)*

These accounts suggest that, in addition to supervision, the usefulness of developing more or less informal pathways of shared reflection among professionals is also recognised, with a view to achieving transformative learning (Mezirow, 2009), whereby social workers can act as a coping network of professionals based on the principle of reciprocity (Cabiati, 2021).

> *...the possibility of meeting with colleagues...not necessarily within the context of supervision, creating working groups [...] I am not talking about a group of mutual self-help, but of a professional group that discusses the thoughts or emotions that one member brings to the table so as to build something useful (Int. 37, woman, age: from 46 to 55)*

From this point of view, the group becomes an important tool – also from a lifelong learning perspective – that can serve as a peer learning network through a pathway centred on shared experiences, mutual support and shared knowledge.

To (not) conclude...some ideas for future social work education

Lifelong learning appears to be regarded as extremely important for the communicative and relational aspects of the profession, alongside and in support of the central issue of reflectivity.

In this regard, the interviewees' conception of lifelong learning is in line with the results of other studies (see Cabiati, 2017b for a review), not merely as a resource for keeping up to date, but also – and above all – as a psychologically supportive and intellectually stimulating context, as well as an opportunity for critical reflection in order to improve the social worker's professional practice (*ibid.*).

However, in a working context where continuing education faces numerous barriers, including time constraints, financial costs, personal commitment and heavy workloads (Cabiati, 2017b), it is important to draw on the needs expressed by professionals and their personal motivations so as to implement the necessary resources and opportunities (*ibid.*).

Indeed, research shows that projects aimed at developing the reflective capacity, communicative skills, empathy and emotional awareness of social work students yield positive results in terms of emotional literacy and relational skills, as well as from the perspective of the psychological well-being of future professionals (Grant *et al.*, 2014; Reith-Hall & Montgomery, 2022; 2023; Sicora, 2022).

Attention to these areas needs to be maintained and deepened over the course of a professional career, particularly with a view to strengthening the strategic skills required to meet the daily challenges of the social work role.

While there seems to be widespread interest and motivation towards these issues among the respondents, there is also a high demand for educational pathways capable of reconciling theory and practice, allowing for an exchange of experiences and promoting collaborative and participatory methods and techniques. This finding is consistent with other research (Asano, 2019; Pattaro & Zannoni, 2021; Pattaro, 2024), highlighting the desire among social workers for lifelong learning that allows them not only

to analyse situations using up-to-date tools, but also to reassess themselves, thereby facilitating a reassessment of the processes and contents of the professional experience and, at the same time, fostering collective forms of learning capable of promoting internal innovation within organisations.

Drawing on these insights, the findings of this study also invite broader theoretical reflection. Framed within the sociology of education, reflectivity, supervision and peer exchange can be conceptualised not merely as professional tools, but as interconnected learning processes. Reflective practice functions as a form of experiential learning (Schön, 1983; Kolb, 1984), through which social workers make sense of complex situations and transform their professional experience into knowledge. Supervision, in turn, can be understood (also) as a structured educational relationship (Allegri, 2023) that supports professional growth and critical thinking. Peer exchange, finally, resembles what Wenger (1998) describes as a community of practice: an informal yet powerful learning environment in which shared experience becomes the basis for collective knowledge construction and a driver of organisational innovation. Taking these processes into account is therefore indispensable for imagining and building a form of lifelong professional learning that is both embedded in practice and oriented towards continuous transformation.

This calls for a shared commitment: from professionals, to invest in lifelong learning as a professional responsibility and as an opportunity for personal and collective growth; from educational institutions, to foster a genuinely reflective professional culture through both initial and continuing education; and from organisations, to embrace continuing education not merely as an institutional responsibility, but above all as a strategic investment in the quality of services and in the well-being of practitioners, including through tools such as professional supervision and multidimensional lifelong learning pathways.

In conclusion, while this study does not claim to offer generalisable findings and presents certain limitations – as discussed in the methodology section – it contributes a situated and theoretically grounded perspective on the learning dimensions of social work practice, and points to several directions for future research. Future research employing larger and more diversified samples, and extending the analysis to other settings – such as residential care, healthcare or third-sector organisations – would be needed to corroborate and expand upon the themes identified here. Further studies might also productively explore the organisational conditions that either enable or hinder the development of reflective learning cultures within social work settings. Lastly, comparative perspectives – across different welfare systems, professional cultures or national contexts – could shed new light on the ex-

tent to which the dynamics identified here are specific to the Italian context or reflect wider trends in the profession.

Author Contributions.

Although the article is the result of a close collaboration between the authors, the individual contributions may be detailed as follows. Chiara Pattaro is credited with defining the research project and with writing sections: *The social worker's relational skills; The study; The value of reflective practice; What sort of lifelong learning?* Arianna Brunello is credited with writing the section: *For a good enough relationship*. The final section – *To (not) conclude… some ideas for future social work education* – was jointly authored.

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