«The inclusive side of citizenship»: implications for social work research

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Abstract

In this article, we examine the relationship among citizenship, the life experiences of vulnerable groups and social work. Based on experiences in social work research, we explore how social work research can promote an inclusive social work practice.
Social work research can serve to support democracy, if it is aimed to increase the possibility of the people's voices being heard, to gain increased awareness about their situation as well as increased ability to demand changes.
Starting from three ongoing PhD research projects, in this article we discuss three diverse ways of engagement through which social work research can play a role in building democratic processes. To tackle this issue, in these three research projects, we focused on vulnerable persons and social workers, and interviewed them about their experiences.
Our researches highlight that social work research can provide participants with the opportunity to actively contribute to wider public discourse regarding the citizenship of vulnerable persons. Specifically, here we refer to a practice research framework, which is strongly related to social work practice, in order to improve its quality, and based on a constructivist approach (Pain, 2011). In this kind of social work research, key points are the collaboration between academics, practitioners and service users and a strong attachment to social work values (Pain, 2011).

Keywords

Citizenship, participation, social work research, vulnerable groups, advocacy.

Introduction

In this article, we examine social work research as a democratic space, wherein researchers can act ethically, and maintain the principles of social work practice as a guide for their work. In particular, this article highlights that social work research, similar to social work practice, can be aimed to change, not only in terms of available knowledge. In particular, social work research must respond to practice-driven needs to inform social work practice and policy, and improve people's experiences of social services (Pain, 2011; Uggerhøj, 2011; Fouché, 2015).

According to Folgheraiter (2018), social work research must fulfil the purpose of understanding situations at an idiographic level, noting, when people face existential problems, how they cope with them and how social workers can help them in the coping processes. This type of insight requires the researcher to be open to a co-constructed knowledge production process, wherein the perspectives and life experiences of participants are at the core of the research question.

Social work research can be considered an inclusive process, wherein participants are vulnerable persons to whom the researcher must lend their voice. Therefore, it may be useful to have a framework that takes into account their condition of exclusion and the relationship between their experiences and social position as citizens, which is often marginalised.

Scholars involved in social work research may offer vulnerable persons a chance to participate, thus allowing them to contribute to strengthening more inclusive and democratic processes, thereby increasing the possibility for vulnerable persons to be heard and not experience feelings of powerlessness. According to Hermans and Roets, social work researchers «have a constitutive commitment to pursue human rights and social justice» (2020, p. 915).

Therefore, a framework based on citizenship is valuable for supporting and legitimising the human agency of each person (Lister, 1998, 2007). Moreover, this leads us to use a framework that embraces anti-oppressive and anti-discriminatory instance, inspired by the principle of partnership (Dominelli, 2004; Thompson, 2016). In fact, participation is a key value of citizenship (Hermans & Roets, 2020), understood as «the capacity, entitlement and obligation to participate as a full and equal member within the economy and the political system» (Hermans & Roets, 2020, p. 915). Thus, social work research can promote the understanding of vulnerability as a lack of voice, power and recognition.

Comparatively, on a methodological level, it is useful the reflections on participatory research proposed by Aldridge (2017); these reflections present diverse means for promoting participation that advances the recognition of the marginalised population. The four steps identified by the author, illustrated with a figure (Aldridge, 2017, p. 32), go from participants as research object to participant-led research, passing through participant as subject and participants as actors in research; every step is linked to a different

outcome, from a tokenistic participation to emancipation, passing through recognition and inclusion.

In his model, Aldridge enhances participatory research as an approach to research particularly useful with vulnerable and marginalised people, in order to promote «issues of voice» (2017, p. 27). Also, from our perspective, interestingly the author underlines that any participatory framework is based mainly on principles, rather than on rules, which are designed to «ensure greater equity» and «engagement in dialogue with participants» (2017, p. 27). This reference appears especially relevant because it allows to connect social work research with a broader framework through which we can see vulnerable and marginalised people by reason of its ethical dimension. As a result of this connection, we include our reflections within the paradigm of citizenship.

As will be shown in the conclusions, our three researches deal differently with the issue of participation of social workers and service users in research: only one of them applies a participatory approach, but all three use qualitative methods in order to focus on the participants' experience; putting in the spotlight people's point of view is expected to provide positive outcomes for vulnerable people as citizens, as mentioned in the introduction.

The research presented in this article started in 2020 and has thus been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, due to the imposed restrictions on people's participation. Therefore, we have not always directly engaged with people in the way we had assumed to be possible in the original research design. In fact, because of the repeated lockdown periods (still ongoing), the possibility of movement of researchers and people involved has been restricted; some social services are closed and carry on their activities partially and remotely. Therefore, research tools have been modified to be able to use them remotely, but not in all cases allowed to reach people anyway, because they are not accessible to all (i.e., homeless people). Consequently, we think that the inclusive potential of these researches has been negatively influenced by the pandemic.

Citizenship as a guiding concept for research

Democracy is a suggestive and powerful word; while discussing democracy, we immediately think about other similar ideas, such as rights, citizenship, and social inclusion. Many social workers perceive these concepts to be close to themselves, their practice, and the philosophy of their work. Despite the common agreement around this understanding, efforts are required to transform them into reality.

Democracy recalls the issue of citizenship, as participation and opportunity «to be a part of», and ensuring our voices are heard in society. Therefore, the principle of «parity of participation» by Nancy Fraser is an essential factor of fulfilling the possibility of «all members of society interacting with one another as peers» (2005, p. 76).

From this perspective, structural and institutional frameworks the society do not allow for fully equal participation in social interactions. According to Fraser et al. (2004), as noted in Boone et al. (2018), there are «institutionalized patterns of advantages and disadvantages that prevent some people and groups from participating in terms of parity, and institutionalized patterns of cultural value that create status hierarchies, which impede parity of participation» (p. 2387). According to Fraser, this inequality requires a politics of «redistribution and recognition» of common citizenship: distribution of material resources «such as to ensure [...] independence and voice» and of «institutionalized patterns of cultural value [which] express equal respect for all participants and ensure equal opportunity for achieving social esteem» (Fraser & Honneth, 2003, p. 36).

Participation is a core value of social work theory and practice (IFSW, 2014) and is closely related to citizenship (Lister, 1998); the connection between these two concepts shows how citizenship is related to human agency. Frequently, social exclusion is experienced in terms of the denial of the full triad of one's political, civil and social rights, and also of the possibility of participation by marginal and vulnerable groups (Lister, 2004, 2005). In this context, placing citizenship at the centre of reflection on social work research is meaningful due to the potential of exclusion that is also present in research. In contrast, we aim to strengthen and develop reflections about the potential of inclusivity (Lister, 2007) in the concept of citizenship for social work research and practice.

The inclusive side of citizenship arises on one side from the human rights framework and on the other side from recognition of human agency.

Human Rights framework is worthwhile not only for social work practice, but also for research with several implications, compared to how research can promote social inclusion and social justice (Hermans & Roets, 2020).

In our perspective, citizenship is closely related to human rights: human rights are a cornerstone of citizenship rights, and ensures a universal form of citizenship, that extends beyond any borders (Bauböck, 1994). Indeed, according to Ife «human rights is a universalist discourse, based on ideas of a shared humanity and global citizenship» (2012, p. 2).

In this sense, the concept of citizenship makes real and concrete the Human Rights perspective: citizenship implies citizenship obligations, «the obligation for people to exercise their rights as citizens in a strong, active society, and the obligation to create the conditions in which others are able to do the same» (Ife, 2012, p. 174). So, we can see Citizenship as a way of interpreting more abstract principles.

The recognition and protection of human rights are based on the principle of dignity as an «inherent feature of the human being that establish the equality among human beings, the universal entitlement of human rights and their inalienability» (Pariotti, 2013, p. 195). So, the recognition of this common citizenship drives us to refuse any form of exclusion and marginalization because of our shared humanity.

If Human rights and citizenship expressed itself in term of participation, these are intertwined with the concept of power (Lister, 2004). On one hand, power within the relation-

ships (such as those in society, in services and between service users and social workers) affect how rights are exercised. On the other hand, these rights help (and this is particularly important for marginalised groups) to challenge power imbalance, thereby challenging marginalisation as a barrier for exercising one's citizenship (Lister, 1998; Ife, 2012).

Participants involved in the current research (juvenile offenders, people with intellectual disabilities, people in extreme poverty) do not require additional rights, compared with those who are universally recognised, but instead require specific protection from the risks they face due to their physical, social, legal conditions.

Look at the human rights framework helps to reinforce the inclusive side of citizenship but is not sufficient.

Citizenship can have different meanings: can be explained as a legal status to indicate its related rights, or in term of belonging and equality (Marshall, 1965) In this article, we embrace Lister's perspective (2008) which suggests the idea of citizenship as a synthesis of these two primary positions. In this perspective, the concept of citizenship is based on human agency. As we mentioned, citizenship promote the exercise of the rights as citizens and the belonging to the same humanity. Therefore, citizenship as participation is a manifestation of human agency and citizenship as rights enables people to act as agents (Lister, 1998).

This conceptualisation of citizenship is particularly important in «challenging the construction of marginalised groups as passive victims while keeping sight of the discriminatory and oppressive political, economic and social institutions that still deny them full citizenship» (Lister, 1998, p. 6). Therefore, citizenship is not only a result, but also an ongoing process involving people and their voices in their social and political lives.

This is also true in social work practice and research; social workers and researchers must recognise and promote citizenship, not only as a result of helping relationships with service users, communities and marginalised groups, but also through the process of involvement and advocacy. In fact, both result and process impact the knowledge production in social work research.

 These considerations provide a starting point for reflecting on the importance of citizenship as a concept for promoting inclusive knowledge and practice, as well as understanding how social work can reinforce this democratic capacity.

Agency and empowerment as core values in social work research

The meaning of citizenship as a manifestation of human agency, related to the right to participate, allows us to highlight the connection between this theoretical framework and the principles of social work research, especially with reference to empowerment.

Agency can be conceptualised using different perspectives. From a social work perspective, it can be described as one person's potential for gathering their skills to

cope with difficulties and satisfy their needs (Folgheraiter, 2017). As the author claims, this concept has three levels of capacity and action: to be self-sufficient, achieve self-realisation and be able to help others.

The idea of agency has been developed in an interesting and innovative manner (Sen, 2001). This approach focused on the opportunity for a person to fulfil their personal goals and respond to their expectations and wishes. Therefore, this concept can be considered to provide agency as self-realisation. This perspective considers assets and resources, only some of the facilities people need to experience fulfilment. Sen (2001) developed a fundamental distinction between capabilities and functionings. Capability refers to the opportunities for people to use their assets and resources (what people are free to do). Functioning refers to the achievements of a particular condition, based on the possibility of the realisation of that condition, determined by the capability set (what people actually do).

According to Sen (2001), using assets to fulfil personal goals depends on several factors, not only the possession of the relevant resources.

These factors, known as conversion factors, are individual, social, familiar, economic, cultural, political and institutional. The underlying idea of this approach is that several causes may influence the relationship between incomes and benefits derived from them, such as people's heterogeneity, environmental differences, social conditions and avail-ability of social services. Therefore, according to Sen's perspective, freedom is related to an individuals' capability set. Another important notion in the approach is individual choice, which refers to the effective opportunity for deciding which alternatives must be used between different possibilities. Choice is linked to the substantive content of freedom (Bellanca, Biggeri, & Marchetta, 2011; Dubois & Trani, 2009).

The framework offered by the capability approach becomes significant because it highlights the connection between Sen's reasoning about the notion of conversion from capabilities to functionings and the helping processes wherein social workers are engaged.

In fact, social workers operate in the same symbolic space wherein the conversion process — the interaction between the environment and the individual — is also deter-mined (Mitra, 2006; IFSW, 2014). Therefore, helping relationships can facilitate the exercise of freedom when social workers aid vulnerable persons in expanding their opportunities (also known as their capability set) to help them to achieve their desired functionings and realise themselves. In helping processes, people's and social workers agency become entwined in a participatory process.

However, participation represents a controversial issue: it is often cited as a funda-mental principle of the social work profession, but both the meaning and the application of participation in everyday practice are not so obvious and not even intuitive. People may face several barriers to participation. For example, participation may be affected by a lack of assets, symbolic resources, processes of othering, lack of information and insti-tutional barriers that lead to difficulties accessing services (Lister, 2004). These barriers

compromised political and social participation, as well as participation in the helping and decision-making processes related to one's own life situation (Lister, 2004).

The issue of participation is related to the way power is distributed among social groups and institutions. Therefore, it is related to the dynamics of social and political exclusion. According to critical social work perspectives (Dominelli, 2004; Thompson, 2016), society is divided between those who have and have not; the oppressed groups and individuals are led to accept their status as outsiders through dominant ideologies that depict the existing social order as being fair.

According to a classical sociological definition (Weber, 1968), power can be exercised through intentional acts aimed to assert our will on others. Also, it can be exercised through the construction of meanings. Power includes the prerogative to define, name and represent, and include or exclude certain individuals or groups (Foucault, 1978).

So, a social work researcher must be aware about the barriers to participation that are derived from disparities in power in social relations and must be able to recognise them to engage in putting people in the position to participate.

Also, power concerns researchers because they are in the most powerful position to influence practices and policies through results. As Uggerhøj affirmed, «[social work] research [...] has a special obligation to promote awareness of different interests» (2011, p. 68), but also becomes involved «in dynamic, complex and ever-changing practice, knowledge and context: the ongoing construction of society of which social work is a part» (2011, p. 69). Therefore, social work research can negatively or positively impact people's lives and influence the way social services and social workers work.

As Foucault noted, «where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power» (1978, p. 95). No one is separate from the power dynamics; therefore, no one can keep it in check (Hoy, 2005; Weinberg & Banks, 2019). According to Hoy (2005), power is always relational and never one-sided, thus allowing space for resistance. Resistance, unlike resignation, can lead to hope for change.

In the context of social work, resistance is characterised by opposition to policies, laws or practices considered unjust, to act against them (including refusal to act) on the part of practitioners (Strier & Bershtling, 2016). Recent studies have focused on resistance by social workers. Here, we are interested in what Hoy deems «ethical resistance» (Hoy, 2005, p. 8). In comparison to political and social resistance, which are considered to affect change at a macro level, ethical resistance focuses more on the individual level and following Levinas (1989), is characterised by being «the resistance of the powerless». Therefore, in our perspective, there is a link between this concept and reflections about research questions in social work. Resistance to difficulties is an interesting research object for a social work researcher to understand how to help people in their action of resistance. Moreover, a parallelism is noted between the resistance of social workers and social work researchers in the ethical dimension. In research, or social work practice,

the researcher, who has power, should adopt an attitude of resistance to the dominant discourse, the risk of tokenism, and the «temptation» of using others' words to confirm his/her own ideas. The attention to power dynamics is «a key ethical issue for social work practice research» (Pain, 2011, p. 553) as in social work; it implies a conscious and reflective use of the researcher's power throughout the research process.

The reflection about power in social work practice and research leads to shifting attention from the individual agency, which is considered an intrinsic possibility of the individual to exercise their freedom of choice, typical of the liberal vision, to empowerment. Empowerment refers to the process of acquisition and increase of power by individuals (Adams, 2008); social workers can promote this change thus creating opportunities for participation in decision-making processes related to their interests and problems.

So, participation in social work means that both people and social workers can equally contribute to the representation of their situation, existing problems and paths of improvement, taking decisions together regarding the actions that must be taken.

Participatory dynamics contribute to accomplishing empowerment processes as a result of the relationship between social workers and service users. Empowerment can be defined as social workers intentionally giving power to people to facilitate the balancing of the contributions of each person (Folgheraiter, 2004) in helping relationships and increase people's agency.

This deliberate transfer of power by social workers to service users can also require acting advocacy. Advocacy can be exercised on distinct levels, in support of specific individuals or families and discriminated or marginalised groups, but also on a political level, to ensure increased equality in social policies and an increasingly inclusive society (Williams, 2009; Boylan & Dalrymple, 2009).

We are also interested in the micro level of social work practice due to its strong connection with the perspective applied in our research. From this perspective, advocacy consists of helping people to highlight their perspective and speaking in support of their concerns or needs (Weafer, 2003). Advocacy aims at ensuring people's voices are considered during decision-making processes that affect them (Boylan & Dalrymple, 2009). The purpose and desired result of advocacy actions is the increased power of vulnerable persons (Dalrymple, 2003). At the micro level, advocacy can improve knowledge about service users' concerns and interests, which is useful for promoting change in policies, thereby combining the distinct levels (Dalrymple & Boylan, 2013).

These reflections about the emancipatory potential of social work, which is expressed in the potential to expand people's capability set and agency, can be explored through research. Even during research processes, researchers can intentionally lend power and voice to people to promote empowerment and awareness among participants and offer a co-constructed public image of vulnerable persons through the dissemination of results, and thus exercise their power to help people. Moreover, the meaning of advocacy as a way to expand knowledge is relevant for social work research, as seen in the research presented.

This highlighted connection between research and social work principles, as empowerment and advocacy, calls for reflection on some ethical issues related to involving people in research and using qualitative methods.

Food for thought on the ethics of social work research

The three research projects presented in this article were conducted with the intent to highlight and promote issues of «voice» and emancipation in qualitative research. As suggested by Walmsley and Johnson, qualitative research techniques, such as case studies, focus groups, interviews and stories offer the opportunity to increase power for participants; they also note that «not all qualitative research are concerned with empowering those who take part in it» (2003, p. 32).

Qualitative research methods facilitate closer working relationships with participants, with the intention of extracting data to reflect this important human dimension in research. According to Snellen (2002), in social work research, empowerment refers to helping people take control of their lives, discover their possibilities, ensure their voices are heard and fight situations of inequality and oppression. In social work research, this intention is a key factor and must be oriented to ensure the improvement of support practices for people's agency, thereby promoting trajectories of hope.

Some studies (Kvarnström, Hedberg, & Cedersund, 2012) have indicated the risk that social workers may put in place a paternalistic participatory approach that instead of creating open spaces for participation, seeks to obtain the consent of service users on their own choices. Therefore, to promote co-constructed knowledge, based on shared power, participation and citizenship, there is a need for a research framework that does not disregard data from the «voices» collected and does not use them instrumentally from the researcher's perspective. If the research is not a mere collection of objective knowledge, but inter-subjective knowledge, the entire research process (not only data processing) requires precision and perspective.

Social work research is particularly exposed to a specific ethical sensitivity because it deals with vulnerable subjects to examine the practices through which their suffering can be addressed and mitigated (Raineri, 2019).

As social work researchers, we must keep in mind that our research differs from that of other social scientists because we are also social workers. We must remember that we request participants to partake in our studies and initiate the researcher-participant relationship. Therefore, we must take responsibility for the quality of the relationship and assure that our research does not cause harm to those who agree to share their life experiences with us (Landau, 2008).

These responsibilities are linked to research ethics with relation to the aims of social work and the methodological orientation of research with those directly concerned. An

interesting factor in this context is the proposal of Yassour-Borochowitz (2004) to incorporate «mutual dialogue» in all stages of data collection, which begins with requesting the consent of participants, goes through the interview, and ends with sharing interpretive insights with them. This mutual dialogue may lead to an effective clarification of the nature and duration of the relationship, the expectations of participants and the potential benefits that may result from the study. In our opinion, with this framework, social work research can provide renewed focus on the researcher-participant relationship, thereby promoting relationships of trust that contribute to the knowledge of social work and simultaneously promote democracy and justice.

Being citizens in research: three experiences of social work research

Advocacy and Legal aid for people experiencing extreme poverty: The experience of the «Avvocato di Strada»[1] organisation

Extreme poverty and social exclusion are considered clear violations of human rights (UN, 2012; Krumer-Nevo, 2015) and are increasingly included in the wider debate about citizenship rights, democracy and social inclusion (Lister, 2004). Poverty and social exclusion involve a growing population in Europe, thereby contributing to inequality and social injustice (Fondation Abbé Pierre & FEANTSA, 2020).

This situation translates into the denial of full citizenship, through the denial of fundamental rights and lack of recognition.

This research focuses on a non-profit organisation called «Avvocato di Strada», which is involved in protecting homeless people, victims of trafficking, people in extreme poverty and immigrants, through legal aid and advocacy in Italy. In this organisation, lawyers and social workers serve as volunteers to provide information and defend their rights through legal aid and advocacy.

The organisation aims to provide legal aid to socially marginalised people as well as homeless people and promotes an inclusive and conscious culture. This organisation focuses on two areas: at the individual level, the organisation provides legal aid to homeless people, and at the political level, the organisation seeks to promote knowledge regarding human and social rights through lobbyism, conferences and trainings. Although the two levels are intertwined and equally important, the primary activity of the organisation is providing legal aid, which is ensured through offices by volunteers in specific areas of the cities.

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[1] «Avvocato di Strada» is an independent non-profit organisation established in 2000 by a group of lawyers and currently operates in 52 cities in Italy.

Despite the legal nature of this organisation, volunteers must often face various demands that show the difficulties of the most vulnerable people to enjoy their rights and access the welfare system. Most of these vulnerable people, due to their social exclusion, do not have the resources to demand their rights or do not have knowledge regarding the law, services and welfare system.

The current research uses a qualitative approach. Data were collected using participatory observations and semi-structured interviews were conducted with a sample of volunteers involved in 5 different cities. A total of 25 volunteers were interviewed. Observational data were gathered through periods of immersion (March 2019-February 2020) in two locations in the city of Milan. The objective was to observe the activities made by volunteers. The data analysis is ongoing.

The aim is to provide in-depth insight of this significant arena, thus showing how the mission of organisation is translated in practice and the complexities related to these practices. This organisation provides a privileged point of observation about people's resistance against the suffering, stigma, denied dignity and recognition, and difficulties related to poverty and homelessness, because it is a context wherein people fight and request help for their rights.

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the possibility to engage people in poverty and homeless in the research path, by restricting the inclusive potential of this research. However, the context of research is a privileged point of observation about resistance outside the welfare system by volunteers and citizens, and this issue is significant in social work research.

Then, this knowledge is relevant on account of recognize the people's resistance and their agency, challenging the construction of marginalised groups as passive victims, increasing awareness about their situations as well as increasing ability to demand changes.

As suggested by practice research framework, this data can also inform policy makers and social services about «non-take-up» of rights and services, denial of rights, obstacles to accessing to services for most vulnerable people.

By choosing this association as point of observation, unlike social services, aim to give a «discordant voice» on welfare system. Then, this stresses the ethical resistance of the researcher, who adopts the point of view outside of the system to better understand the needs and the difficulties of people living in poverty, moving next to them, where the resistance takes places.

In this sense social work research can contribute to realizing democracy, by promoting practices that reinforce the inclusive side of citizenship through a full and equal participation of everyone in the society.

Qualitative methods (participant observation and semi-structured interviews) were chosen to highlight a practice and knowledge that often remains hidden. Moreover, the observation is intended as a way of moving closer to the organisation's activities to understand and consult volunteers and homeless people about their activity, experience in

the welfare system and care from a position of closeness, after sharing this proximity for a long period. Therefore, these methods facilitated closer relationships with participants and have allowed to share their experiences and to giving depth to their perspective.

This research also sheds light on the example of active citizenship, wherein volunteers support people when their rights are threatened, thereby promoting increased awareness about their rights and an inclusive community.

This research can provide useful and sensitive knowledge, as well as the potential to connect political and practical dimensions of social work related to wider challenges that affect our society, thereby inspiring social workers, volunteers and policymakers. It's also an example on how social work research and knowledge can contribute to democracy and justice.

Participation of young people with intellectual disabilities in social services

This research explores the participation experience of young people with intellectual disabilities (aged 18-35) while developing their own life path. In particular, this research addresses questions about the role of social workers and intends to understand how social workers help young people with intellectual disabilities to make decisions for themselves, becoming involved in active advocacy and respecting self-determination, which are core principles of the social work profession. It is possible to reflect on some issues in this article, despite data collection and analysis remaining ongoing.

The right to participate is enshrined in the UN Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities (2006). It implies that people with disabilities have the right to participate in society as well as the right to be heard during decision-making processes about themselves (Sherlaw & Hudebine, 2015). In the context of social work practice, this indicates that they must be involved in expressing their wishes while planning social interventions and selecting services for themselves. However, it is not easy for social workers to ensure the participation of people with disabilities in this process, because it requires them to alter their perceptions regarding people with disabilities and challenge the structure of welfare services, which are often aimed to provide personal assistance in daily activities, and not to help them realise themselves in a broader sense.

This research aims to increase the knowledge about the participation experiences of young people with intellectual disabilities and understand whether social workers can change their practice to ensure increased participation.

In this research, the capability approach is considered a theoretical framework. The relationship between social workers and young people with intellectual disabilities is considered in relation with the potential for the latter to exercise their freedom of choice, thereby increasing their agency and helping them to achieve self-realisation.

Methodologically, the research starts from the perspective of young people with disabilities on two levels: first, involving some of them as co-researchers through a participatory approach to research, and second, directly questioning young people with intellectual disabilities as participants in focus groups, in the data collection phase. In the field of disability studies, we talk about inclusive research, and refer to research directly involving people with intellectual disabilities as co-researchers (Walmsley & Johnson, 2003). Based on the literature, this idea of research can be considered increasingly effective for ensuring that the perspectives and experiences of people with disabilities are adequately represented in research regarding the results of which beneficial policies and interventions are planned (Embregts et al., 2018). This approach seems to be the closest and most useful for fulfilling the goal of understanding social work research, as mentioned in the Introduction section.

Both the levels of direct involvement of young people with intellectual disabilities aim to put advocacy into practice as a way of expanding knowledge.

The collaboration with young people with intellectual disabilities as co-researchers is aimed at building together some steps of the research process in an accessible manner. The research group includes one academic researcher (PhD student) and three young adults with intellectual disabilities; the group has worked on the topic of search, starting from the life experiences of the co-researchers and their experiences with social workers and social services. This dialogue regarding the research question has allowed us to focus on the significant points to explore in data collection through the focus group. Moreover, the group has worked on the accessibility of the research, to ensure the opportunity for focus group participants to participate consciously and richly. Guiding questions for the focus group, the letter of presentation of the research project and the informed consent were written together in an accessible language. Notably, writing the guiding questions allowed to decline the abstract idea of participation in daily aspects of life, related to the potential for young people with disabilities to choose.

Moreover, the co-researchers expressed their desire to participate directly in data collection, being present during the focus group; therefore, training on group facilitation has been conducted. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, only one co-researcher was able to experiment directly in co-conduction. Currently, eight meetings were conducted with a total of 27 young people, both in the person and through video calls.

The second phase of the research project addresses the questions to social workers of public services; the research group is now working on tools, methods and contents to ask them about.

Because data analysis is ongoing, it is impossible to discuss the results. At the end of each meeting, we are collecting the feelings and thoughts of co-researchers to highlight the effects of participation in the research process. Often, in their words, we note terms, such as «proud», «happy» and «feeling well/able». Carefully, these feelings are brought back to what is affirmed in the literature about the positive effects of

experiencing the role of co-researchers for people with intellectual disabilities (Abell et al., 2007; Frankena et al., 2015), with reference to promote empowerment processes through research.

Referring to the theoretical notions set out in this article, collaboration in research with marginalised people — as people with intellectual disabilities are — requires the academic researcher to lend power in decision-making processes to co-researchers, building a peer-to-peer relationship; also, the researcher has to listen both to co-researchers' and participants voice, recognising that they have important knowledge to share with professionals, crucial to reach more meaningful outcomes both in social work practice and research. Lastly, talking about participation of people with intellectual disabilities in the dissemination of research results, both as co-researchers and as focus group participants, allows to promote a positive image of them, as capable and self-reliant.

The challenge of adopting a participatory approach is based on enabling people to participate, because it requires constant attention toward — and reflection on — this aspect, respect for people's time and availability and to find each time the method to accept and fulfil their needs and intentions, even when research requires other times or priorities. In this experience, these aspects may be considered a type of ethical resistance, particularly against the risk of tokenism, that have been mentioned above.

However, due to the involvement of people with disabilities in the focus group, the results are expected to be useful for social workers in their everyday practice, but also for the participants themselves, thereby increasing their awareness of their current situation, for example, about their relationship with social services, offering an opportunity to reflect on their future expectations.

Therefore, a positive impact of participating in research is expected both for co-researchers and participants. This is also expected for social workers who will be involved, but we want to focus on the effects of the involvement of vulnerable people. As stated in the Introduction section, social work research can offer an experience of inclusion to people who may have experienced exclusion and thus support a more democratic debate regarding relevant topics for people with disabilities, and ensuring their voices are heard. With respect to this point, it is believed that stimulating a reflection by young people with intellectual disabilities regarding their experience with social services can increase their consciousness about their rights and protagonism as citizens.

Co–construction of the idea of successful help practices in juvenile criminal justice

This research aims to observe the co-construction of the response of justice against juvenile offenders, which takes place within the communities where crimes occur. The starting perspective is a theoretical framework wherein justice can create opportunities to

correct the mistakes of a growing person, thereby strengthening collective responsibility, instead of only punishing and limiting individual action (Dominelli, 2004).

The literature review particularly focused on research in the field of co-production community justice (Weaver, 2011), child friendly justice (Council of Europe, 2011) (referring mainly to the Italian context), Anglo-Saxon Diversion and American Juvenile Probation. The perspective of the social work research (Folgheraiter, 2018) has been adopted due to its aim of enhancing the experiential knowledge of the people and communities with whom social services can co-produce answers regarding justice also promoting democracy and social inclusion (Lister, 2004).

The ethical framework that supports the co-production of social work research regarding vulnerable or marginalized groups may be a person-oriented ethical research framework, as opposed to the researcher-centred approach. This ethical framework proposes five practical indications: 1) respect for the holistic personality; 2) recognition of the lived world; 3) individualization; 4) focus on researcher-participant relationships; and 5) empowerment in decision (Cascio & Racine, 2018). These guiding signs apparently support decision-making and key choices relating to the nature of social work research.

On this way the research examines successful help practices in juvenile criminal justice in the context of the Piedmont Region in Northern Italy and has thus far involved approximately 50 participants, including justice and social workers, young offenders and their families, lawyers and juvenile magistrates, and social workers in the Piedmonts' territory who welcome children into their associations, cooperatives, parishes or other entities during their probations.

This ongoing research regarding the Italian juvenile criminal justice has two aims:
1. To deepen knowledge regarding the factors that lead to a «good» community justice experience of activities of social utility (AUS) (Dipartimento giustizia minorile e di comunità, 2019) for professionals involved, as well as the judiciary, juvenile offenders, their families, the people who care for them and the communities where the crime is committed.
2. To explore the processes through which the social worker acts by accompanying the child and their family to facilitate a smooth experience.

Data are collected using focus groups created by grouping the actors in a homogene-ous manner based on their role and experience (young offenders among themselves, as well as social workers among them…), to co-build a framework that describes the positive aspects for each of the perspectives of the protagonists of this path. In the second phase, data collected will be analysed in a second-level focus group with a mixed composition, including a representative of each role with which the previous focus groups were con-ducted, to address the analysis of the first data in a participatory manner and to avoid the «temptation» to use the words of others to confirm their ideas (risk of tokenism).

With reference to the introductory theoretical framework in which power is iden-tified as something that can define a phenomenon, and thus attribute meaning to an

experience, this research promotes a process of co-constructing meanings in a choral way. The challenge to the imbalance of power as an obstacle to the exercise of citizenship (Lister, 1998; Ife, 2012) is carried out in this research through a power of the researcher that gives voice to the various protagonists and builds a collective meaning in a dynamic sharing with their active contribution.

To examine the success of community juvenile justice practices, it was considered important to attempt a co-construction of the significance of success for each of the protagonists, thus building sessions to collect the meanings assigned to success from every perspective, in a manner and context protected by the focus group methodology.

The focus group is a qualitative research tool that, because of its collective nature, produces data which are both informative and relational. This tool enhances the interaction between participants regarding the examined topic, not only underlining the contributions that the group provides in terms of content, but also noting the choral construction of the data (Wilkinson, 1998).

The first level of data collection is still in progress, but according to Dominelli (2004) it is believed that to contribute to the debate regarding the interpretation of crime, it is crucial to promote changes in individual and social perceptions.

In this research process, the response of the community when a crime is committed is not considered a good *a priori* strategy but is aware that the community may be afraid and feel insecure when deviant acts occur. It is interesting for the researcher to try to understand and to reconstruct, when it occurs, a process of democratic response that can promoting social inclusion and social justice (Hermans & Roets, 2020), as well as criminal justice.

The first results of this research indicate that the relationship that is created between a minor offender and the part of the community that welcomes him can favour less the perception of a more democratic and inclusive justice through paths of personal growth; these activities are considered successful when they are also useful to minors who have committed a crime, as well as to society, because in some cases it helps them to reflect considerably and deeply, but nevertheless helps them to develop an emotional attitude of contact with the «other».

Another aspect underlined by the co-construction process of the definition of success underlines the key role of the availability of local authorities that understand how to welcome juvenile delinquents. The added value of hospitality is indicated not only in ensuring the structure and staff of an association is available for promoting a welcoming and accompanying path for adolescents in difficulty, but it is a concept of hospitality that interprets a community that not only delegates to the judicial institutions the path of empowering a boy who has committed a crime, but also feels like taking a sliver of responsibility (community empowerment).

This research may promote a reflection on the good practices of juvenile criminal justice, not only with the contribution of the perspective of social workers and justice

practitioners, but also attempting to include the perspectives of juvenile offenders and their family members, who in this type of context, are often forced into silence due to guilt and shame, on the edge of democratic action. Social work research can thus promote a concept of justice based on the active citizenship of those who can actively support the action of justice, and those who can actively support people by giving them a voice.

Conclusion

The three research projects presented in this article show three different methods for considering the topic of citizenship as active participation in the construction of knowledge on social work practice issues through social work research.

According to the notion of capabilities, as effective opportunities for achieving self-realisation, social work practice can provide people with more opportunities to change their situation and become free from individual conditions of oppression and marginalisation. We discuss how this goal can be achieved through empowerment and advocacy, and why it is necessary to involve people directly to promote the expected change, also wished by them. A more inclusive social work practice can be the basis of a more democratic society wherein citizens are increasingly aware of their rights and are increasingly active in contributing to the public debate regarding social issues, as well as through the sharing of power by social workers with service users.

Similarly, social work research can contribute to strengthening this democratic process, thereby enabling the participation of vulnerable people, and listening not only to the institutional voices, but also leading to ethical resistance and relying on the recognition of common citizenship.

Despite the participation limitations caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, this research contributes to the understanding on building democratic processes in the research because they are aimed to bring marginalised people from the margins to the forefront:

– challenging the current idea about citizenship that reaffirms the universal nature of the right to receive help through a research that aims to share a space of proximity to highlight a practice and knowledge often hidden from a position of closeness, thereby sharing this space of proximity;

– giving voice to young people with intellectual disabilities and their knowledge derived from lived experiences, working with them as co-researchers on the topic of participation;

– supporting the construction of shared meanings between professionals, judiciary, juvenile offenders and their families and communities.

Referring to the participatory model proposed by Aldridge (2017), these researches are located between the second and third steps. Participants are subjects and actors and are actively involved in both ways because their subjective experience is considered

necessary to produce knowledge. Recognition and inclusion as outcomes of research, as represented in the model, are expected as the initial steps for transformation in social work practice in the respective fields of research (social services for people with disabilities, juvenile offenders, homeless people and severely marginalised people).

Social work practice requires research with deeper insights about the experiences of service users to shape professional practice and ensure more meaningful social interventions.

Furthermore, social work research can guide the development of an increasingly sensitive practice, particularly with marginalised people.

More broadly, this can produce transformative knowledge that can trigger definitive change legitimising everyone as agents and co-builders of the content of this change.

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