Relational Social Work

Lost (twice) in familiar territory. Reflecting on the supervision in social work practice education across (multiple) boundaries

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Abstract

Social work education aims to prepare professional and competent practitioners through academic programmes and practice-based education. Practice-based education is a crucial factor in social work education and represents the critical transition point to the professional practice. It is through the field placement that students develop professional skills and learn how to use the theories learned in the classroom and to apply them to actual practical situations.
This paper examines, as an autoethnographic study and through the lens of self-reflection, the author's experience of being an external practice teacher in an international environment and context. It describes some of the complex challenges the author have faced in the supervisory relationship with an (inter)national student engaged in practice-based education. The learning from the case will be used to draw some general conclusions and their implications for social work education, in general, and the operationalisation and the practice of reflective approaches, in particular.

Keywords

Social Work placement, reflexivity, supervision in Social Work, experiential learning, practice teacher.

The problem I have experienced

In February 2021 I was approached by the School of Social and Political Science at the University of Edinburgh for supervising an Italian student in her placement, the student was attending the Master of Social Work (MSW). Because Covid-19 lockdown and the restrictions, the student — who was in Italy and could not go back to Scotland for completing her course — was at risk of not completing the MSW first year. The Director of Practice Learning and the MSW Programme Director were open to the possibility

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for the student to attend her placement in Italy but within the conceptual and practice standards of the Scottish social work education system. I was offered the role of practice teacher (off-site supervisor).

I accepted the offer and after the first meetings I started to feel I did not have the knowledge and the instruments the role required: the normative role (facilitating and supporting the student's learning: that is the role's «comfort» zone) seemed not matching the expected role (supporting the student's learning within the Standards in Social Work Education: that is the role's «discomfort» zone). This gap put me in an uncertain terrain in relation to the specific competences required by that specific national and educational context. My familiarity with the role started to blur and the learning gained from previous experiences seemed no longer useful in «navigating» the new context: that present could no longer be a projection of the past. The difficulty to interpret the context (and its ambiguity) increased my sense of bewilderment (discomfort) to such an extent that I felt «estranged» and incompetent in relation to the task.

Faced with the risk of incompetence I had two potential ways out in front of me: anchoring in my own «comfort zone» as the «place» in which I could feel well with myself and with my own abilities but where the main risk was to comply with the task in a very bureaucratic manner; or moving towards and staying with the «discomfort zone» where any certainty is put aside, the doubt is let in and there is an active engagement with critical (and discomforting) processes that challenge loved convictions and assumptions, especially those that have been modelled by dominant modes and cultures. My main «risk» was to learn from learning from experience.

Short methodological note

The case study here presented is the re-elaborated experience of the role of practice teacher I took. Re-elaborating meant give sense and meaning to the messy and ambivalent flux from the lived experience through self-reflection. As Weick says (1995) sensemaking involves the retrospective development of plausible meanings that rationalize what people are doing or have done.

Self-reflection is a process of self-analysis, self-evaluation, self-dialogue and self-observation (Yip, 2006). Under appropriate conditions, i.e., supportive environment where an expert colleague takes the role of supervisor (Calderhead, 1989), the self-reflection can be very constructive, resulting in self-enhancement in both personal and professional development. Firstly, self-reflection generates new perspective and insights towards practice (Boyd & Fales, 1983), the practitioner frames and reframes his/her thinking, searches for alternatives and synthesizes new idea, knowledge and ways to deal with the problems and difficult situations (Parsons & Stephenson, 2005; Atkins & Murphy, 1993). Secondly, self-reflection helps the practitioner to resolve conflicts or discrepancies due

to uncomfortable feelings and sense of difficulty in facing his/her practice (Boyd & Fales, 1983; Schön, 1987; Atkins & Murphy, 1993).

The methodology applied to support self-reflection is the autoethnography that combines features of autobiography and ethnography (Ellis et al., 2011).

The attention given to self-reflection is not new is social sciences — the use of biography and autobiography have found large methodological space — however with autoethnography a complex attempt has been developed for using the individual as a tool for understanding a more general reality (Petrosino, 2015). In other words, the researcher's experiences, self-examination and self-exploration can produce relevant data (use of self as source of data).

Autoethnography is an approach for researching and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyse (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno) in which the experience is located (Ellis, 2004; Holman Jones, 2005). It is one of the approaches that acknowledges and accommodates subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher's influence on research (Ellis, 2004), for this reason it is the most radical form of ethnographic reflection. It dissolves the distinction between the researcher and the field (Marzano, 2001): the focus is on the ethnographer's experience, whose life is ethnographic material to be analysed and to be narrated (Colombo, 2001). The observer becomes the leading character, becomes the first-person narrator (Petrosino, 2015) breaking the ethnographic account's classic schemata because it introduces his/her own reflection.

From the process point of view («to do autoethnography»), the autoethnography takes from the autobiography and gives value to the retroactively and selectively thinking about past experiences (Denzin, 1989; Bruner, 1993; Freeman, 2004), the so called «epiphanies», that are remembered moments perceived to have significantly impacted on the person's life experience (Denzin, 1989; Bochner & Ellis 1992; Zaner, 2004). From the ethnography takes instead the researcher's engagement with the research's context (who becomes participant observer) for better understanding it (Geertz, 1973; Maso, 2001; Goodall, 2001).

From the product point of view («to write autoethnography»), autobiography illustrates new perspective on experience — or epiphanies — and it is written with an evocative and aesthetic texts by using techniques of «showing» (Adams, 2006) which are designed to bring the readers into the scene (Ellis, 2004) in order to «experience an experience» (Ellis & Bochner, 2006); an ethnography produces a thick description of a culture (Geertz, 1973; Goodall, 2001) whose purpose is to facilitate the understanding of it by inductively discerning patterns of cultural experience — feelings, stories, and happenings — as evidenced by field notes, interviews and artifacts (Ellis et al., 2011).

As Ellis and colleagues (2011) pointed out the forms of autoethnography differ in how much emphasis is placed on the study of the others, the researcher's self and the interaction with others, traditional analysis, and the interview context. Following their

typology, it is possible to say that the form which better fits with the experience here described is what they call «personal narratives». Personal narratives are stories about authors who view themselves as the phenomenon and who write evocative narratives specifically focused on their academic, research, and personal lives (Goodall, 2006; Berry, 2007; Tillmann, 2009). It is true that these often are the most controversial forms of autoethnography for traditional scholars, especially if they are not accompanied by more traditional analysis, but as Ellis argues «personal narratives propose to understand a self or some aspect of a life as it intersects with a cultural context, connect to other participants as co-researchers, and invite readers to enter the author's world and to use what they learn there to reflect on, understand, and cope with their own lives» (2004, p. 46).

Autoethnography and self-reflexivity: a posteriorly research design

Whilst reflection in action (Schön, 1983) — also thanks to role consultation (Krantz & Maltz, 1997) — has helped, the understanding of emerging processes and dynamics in the supervision's «here and now», for making the supervision relation an effective educational and pedagogical environment, the time for self-reflection came at the end of the experience, as an introspective stage where critically rethinking and reworking the experience was employed in order to produce new knowledge.

The research design has been, thus, developed posteriorly.

The research questions that have generated the self-refection are three: (i) why I felt «estranged» in a familiar and known context? (here context is intended both as the social work education practice that is my professional domain and as the Italian culture of social services); (ii) which factors have determined this experience of «strangeness»? (iii) what can this experience say about the supervision process in social work?

The design approach and stance are interpretative and social constructionist within which the autoethnography is located.

Several data collection methods were used: field notes (Newbury, 2001), working notes (Miller, 1995), reflective journals (Bagnato et al., 2013), recording of supervision sessions, daily logbook.

The data analysis method is centred on reflexivity, here intended as «reflexion on the reflexivity process».

The importance of practice learning in social work education

The quality of a social work education capable of graduating social workers with robust ethical standards and competencies is highly dependent on the quality of their field experience.

Practice learning is universally acknowledged in the literature as the profession's «gate-keeper» because it conveys core social work skills, knowledge, and values to graduates and it will contribute to train them as competent and professional practitioners (Bogo et al., 2002; Wayne et al., 2010). Training professional and competent practitioners requires not only the learning of the knowledge base for practice but also providing organised and structured opportunities to learn to integrate theory and to apply it in their practice (Raskin et al., 2008; Wayne et al., 2015). The opportunity to learn by «doing» (Chui, 2009) results in a «more profound and lasting impact than classroom teaching» (Bellinger 2010, p. 2453). This has also been noted by Bogo who highlights that «National accrediting bodies [...] recognize the importance of the field experience» (2015, p. 317), and further reiterated by Sicora who argues that «field education is an essential component of any social work program» (Sicora, 2019, p. 64).

Social work practice placement is a critical experience for the social work students' development of practice skills and professional identity (Parker, 2006; Elpers & FitzGerald, 2013; Joubert & Webber, 2020). It is an «experiential learning» (Goldstein, 2001) based on the learner's active involvement within a real professional context (Raineri, 2003; Morley & Dunstan 2013) where students are offered the opportunities to observe and undertake practical tasks, to link theory and practice and to receive supervision and to think critically about their emerging knowledge and skills (Walker et al., 2008; Bogo, 2015; Roulston et al., 2018).

The theoretical conceptualisation of learning in social work field education has moved from an apprenticeship model where the student followed and copied the expert social worker to a model where the student is seen as an active participant in his/her learning experience (Barretti, 2007). Although it has not yet been conceptualised as such, this model is closer to what is known as «legitimate peripheral participation» (Lave & Wenger, 1991). This model conceptualises the learning not just as located in the practice (narrow meaning) but is a learning that is integral part of the practice (generative meaning). This process is characterised by a specific participation regime (legitimate) that allows the students, as novices, to actively and legitimately contribute to the services' tasks and not to be overwhelmed by responsibilities, fears of making a mistake and of the consequences of a failure (peripheral). Taking active part, the novice students gain the needed competencies to carry out tasks that are increasingly more difficult, in the same way they can gain new and higher responsibilities whilst every activity makes it possible and available several positions that are continuously negotiated on the basis of the acknowledgement of the achieved expertise by the student — from novice to advanced beginner and to competent (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 2005).

The supervision models and the role of (off-site) practice teacher

Supervision plays an essential role within the placement; it is a key learning site for students where their identity as a social worker matures and where learning and professional development occur (Jasper & Field, 2016; Cleak et al., 2016). Its importance is recognized by professional accrediting body and in the literature (Cleak & Smith, 2012; Ben Shlomo et al., 2012; Bogo, 2015).

Ford and Jones (1987), writing specifically about the supervision of social work student, when describing it state that

> By supervision, we meant planned, regular periods of time that the student and the supervisor spend together discussing the student's work in the placement and reviewing the learning progress (p. 63).

More generally, supervision supports social work students for: (a) critically reflecting on practice issues and (ethic) tensions, (b) untangling their thoughts, (c) exploring the connection between their personal and professional self, (d) learning to practice, and (e) developing skills for practice (Hooyberghs, 2012). Bogo (2015) emphasises the importance of receiving feedback and debrief in supervision as well as the opportunity for the student to experience a positive learning environment, collaborative relationship, and opportunities to practise as key elements the quality of field education.

Drawing on key concepts from clinical practice, supervision in social work field education was historically based on one-to-one supervisory relationship undertaken by a qualified social worker employed in the placement agency (Cleak & Zuchowski, 2019). This model emphasises and reinforces the idea that professional growth and development are achieved through the traditional coaching relationship and experiential learning (Hicks & Maidment, 2009; Noble, 2011; Cleak & Smith, 2012; Cleak & Wilson, 2012; Hay et al., 2016). Many studies report that this approach is so important for the students' learning that a supervisory relationship that is problematic might impede the students' engagement with the learning (Bogo, 2006; Bennet et al., 2012).

Current practices in field education show the effectiveness of a range of supervision models in enhancing the student's experience (Cleak & Zuchowski, 2018). In addition to one-to-one supervision, external supervision, group supervision, rotational supervision, and co-supervision are consistently used as alternative to one-to-one (Cleak & Wilson 2012; Maynard et al., 2015; Sussman, 2007; Arkin et al., 1999; Regehr, 2013; Vassos, 2018; Cleak & Smith, 2012; Coulton & Krimmer, 2005).

As Abram et al. (2000) have highlighted some definitions of social work supervision distinguish the administrative, educational, and supportive functions of supervision (among others, Kadushin, 1992) and there is no consensus that all of these functions should be carried out by one person in the field agency. In some cases, one person (who is an employee of the agency but sometimes not a social worker) may have the primary responsibility

for administrative supervision of the student placement; this person is usually identified as the on-site task supervisor (Marshack & Glassman, 1991; Pawkak et al., 1980) who is directly responsible for organising the workplace and the agency's facilities, ensuring the correct and effective implementation of agency policy and procedures (Kadushin, 1992), assigning work to the student, responding to crises, and reviewing and evaluating the student's performance (Abram et al., 2000). Sometimes, when a non-social worker operates as the on-site supervisors, another person (often a qualified social worker or a faculty member who is not employed by the agency providing the placement) may provide secondary supervision (Marshack & Glassman, 1991). This qualified social worker, who has the responsibility for the educational direction of the student's placement, is referred to as the off-site supervisor (or practice teacher). According to Abram and colleagues

> He/she functions essentially as a MSW [*Master of Social Work*] field instructor without any administrative responsibility for direct supervision of the student. Thus, his/her responsibilities or tasks include guiding the development of the learning agreement, structuring learning opportunities that enable students to compare their practice experiences, integrating and reinforcing knowledge acquired in the classroom, introducing new knowledge and technologies [*understood as methodologies*] that may be particularly relevant in the field setting, collaborating with students on their professional growth and development, and expanding knowledge beyond the scope of the practicum setting (2000, p. 175).

So, practice teacher (or off-site supervisor) is primarily accountable for reflective learning, direct teaching, and assessment of the student's learning. He/she works alongside the social work student, identifying and providing opportunities for learning, personal growth, and self-reflection (Parker, 2010). Throughout the practice-learning period, the mutual engagement between practice teacher and student aims to identify any areas of particular strength, difficulty and competence. It is unsurprising that the literature reports the role of practice teacher as central to student learning (Furness & Gilligan, 2004; Lefevre, 2005; Bogo, 2006; Kourgiantakis et al., 2019).

The supervisory relationship within the relational social work approach

The approaches to supervision that can be found in literature tend to give to the supervisor the role of detached «expert» who owns all the knowledge and competencies to support and to facilitate the learning of the supervisee within an asymmetric supervision relation. Assuming that the supervisor indeed commands knowledge and have specific competences, these approaches do not fully acknowledge the circularity of the relation that from the supervisor goes to the supervisee and vice versa. To assume the circularity of the relation means that the process of supervision is not created neither by the supervisor

nor by the supervisees, rather it develops through the relation of both parties. In other words, the supervisee is not a passive receiver but a co-producer of the mutual learning.

The circularity recalls the principles of reciprocity, empowerment, experiential knowledge and participation that are the fundamentals of the relational social work approach (Folgheraiter, 2004; 2007; 2017). Relational social work is a theorical and methodological framework that uses the relation between two people, who helps and who is needing help, in order to better difficult situation. The ability to «face» (Folgheraiter, 2011) difficult situations does not come from a technical, procedural and standardised knowledge exclusively in the hands of the expert, but it emerges from the relation itself in which the hypothesis or coping strategies are dialogically co-constructed.

Appling the principles of the relational social work (like empowerment, peer facilitation, reflexivity and auto-evaluation, and involvement) to the supervision relation in placement helps to think and to build the supervision relation with a high degree of reciprocity between supervisor and supervisee.

The reciprocity principle, cornerstone in the relational social work approach, becomes here the key in the construction of the supervision relation as a learning self-help relation. The reciprocity principle assumes that a person can receive helped only if s/he can give help to who give him/her help (Folgheraiter & Raineri, 2017); this means that everybody contributes equally to the relation, everyone simultaneously gives and receives. In this way, the relational approach maximise the reciprocity in the supervision relation because, in a dialogical and open climate, the supervisee in the relation with the supervisor not only develops the interpersonal competences and the human qualities that will help him/her in the professional life, but the supervisor too learns from the supervisee to better his/her abilities in helping him/her to develop his/her learning pathways (Corradini, Landi, & Limongelli, 2020). It is the acknowledgment of the mutual influence, and it is the shared mission in which different objectives — to become a social worker and to support the learning to be one — culminate in one joint aim (Cabiati, 2017).

The relational approach also offers a different perspective to the role of practice teacher. As it is highlighted in the literature, the role of the practice teacher is central in guaranteeing the supervisee's learning and his/her progress. This approach adds to the debate and the contribution to practice is intending the practice teacher as a «relational guide» (Folgheraiter, 2011; Cabiati, 2017) that means assuming a function of facilitation rather than just a prescriptive «educational» style; it means not just transferring knowledge and standards rather encouraging and supporting the student's agency. As a relational guide, the practice teacher is responsible for creating a learning space in which discussion is facilitated, students' expression stimulated and the in-depth exploration of their feelings encouraged. In a such learning space students do not assume a passive attitude but they are invited to take the responsibility for co-building their educational path (Corradini, Landi & Limongelli, 2020), they are encouraged «to be collaborators in the project of helping themselves to become social workers» (Cabiati, 2017, p. 75).

The Scottish context

Social work education in Scotland is provided by eight HEIs and is governed by The framework for social work education in Scotland (Scottish Executive, 2003). This framework, which has been developed for enhancing the quality and the standard of social work education in Scotland, defines the guiding principles underpinning professional social work and the standards that students must demonstrate to achieve for being professionally qualified.

Social work education programmes in Scotland prepare social workers to work in changing and challenging environments and in complex situations. They are designed to improve services standards by producing social workers capable to act effectively in these demanding circumstances, through their competence to work across a wide range of settings, confidence in what they know and can do, commitment to continuous change and responsiveness to change in a positive way. To achieve this the students must learn to reflect critically on, and take responsibility for, their actions.

Three are the main dimensions of professional development that Scottish social work education programmes promote that can be represented as follows:

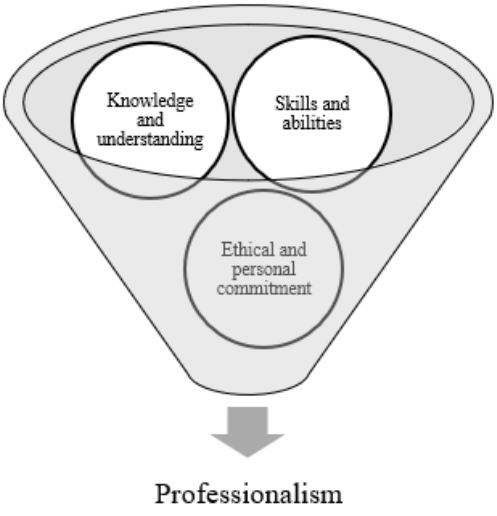

Fig. 1. The three main aspects of professional development (Adapted from Scottish Executive, 2003).

These aspects emphasise that they are the cornerstones of the social worker's identity and practice and are linked to each other and one cannot exist without the other two. These three linked elements make up the social worker's professionalism.

In relation to field education, it is highlighted that:

> Practice is an essential element of the new qualification. Development of the students' skills and abilities is based on the fact that practice is a *setting* for learning, *a way* of learning and *an essential part* of the learning that student must complete» (Scottish Executive, 2003, p. 19).

Standards in Social Work Education (SiSWE), included in the framework and revisited in 2018, set out the knowledge, understanding and skills that social workers need to acquire, and act as a basis for the continuing professional development. They specify what students need to learn to do, what they need to be able to understand, and the competencies they must have when they complete their training. Social work programmes embed the standards throughout the taught courses and the students are assessed against the SiSWE, they have to demonstrate their knowledge and skills through academic and practice learning.

The supervisory relationship as learning relationship

The experience here presented and discussed is one of a supervision that has involved me, as practice teacher, and a social work student. It is an experience that can be summarised as «bewilderment» (De Martino, 1977) — the expression De Martino used is «spaesamento», feeling lost/out of place. Bewilderment is the feeling of «crisis of presence» (De Martino, 1977) that is the existential experience of losing, or fearing of losing, the reference point(s) that allows to feel and finding oneself at the center of one's subjective world and that allows one to give and make sense of the subjective experience. It is the experience of losing what is anchoring one's «presence» in the world and feeling the meaning of the world disappearing, it is the experience of losing familiarity of a context that has, all of a suddenly, became unrecognisable and it is destabilising: it is «feeling of not being at home whilst being at home».

Felt lost: the complexities of providing off-site supervision in social work practice learning

When I accepted the offer to take the role of practice teacher, I had in mind that in order to fulfil my role as practice teacher I could rely on the Italian conceptual framework for practice learning that I had experience of. Therefore, my understanding was that the role of practice teacher was corresponding with the role of academic tutor in the Italian system. The tasks and responsibilities of the academic tutor are to identify the students' learning needs, to «guide» the students in accessing the agency providing the placement,

to support and to guide them during the placement, to evaluate the competences learned during the placement, and to pay particular attention to the relational and ethical and professional spheres (what can be called «the role in the mind»).

My sense of familiarity with the role (the assumption that there were strong similarities between the two countries) started to end when in the initial meetings with the Practice Learning Staff from the University of Edinburgh I was introduced to a different role both in terms of process and contents. My (Scottish) role started to appear less standardised and rooted in administrative tasks and more oriented towards educational and pedagogical domains. Particularly when it came to the Social Work Scottish Standards that included quality control of the process, the contents, and the outcomes (what can be called «the real role»).

> [...] Once a student's assessed preparation for direct practice is confirmed and a placement has been identified, students are expected to make arrangement with their practice teacher for a pre-placement meeting. [...] This culminates in Working Agreement about the nature and content of the student's placement experience. [...] An Interim Report, at the half-way stage of placement by the practice teacher, is required on order to evaluate progress, identify issues to be worked on and any concerns about the student's progress at this stage. Feedback from practice teacher encourages students to reflect on their progress toward meeting the Standards. [...] The practice teacher's Final Report is based on assessment throughout placement from range of resources, including supervision meeting, reflective journal and the student's self-evaluation. Meeting the required Standards is the main criteria by which students are finally assessed (Professional Social Work Practice 1, Course Handbook, University of Edinburgh, 2020).

I started, then, to feel a sense of bewilderment and discomfort created by the realisation that a role familiar to me started to become «foreigner» to my experience and, above all, source of an anxiety generated by a situation of uncertainty (lack of understanding) and ambivalence (lack of clarity) due to local cultural difference (Scotland), organisational difference (the University) and professional difference (Social Work Education). The role not only required the knowledge of the Scottish Social Work Education Standards and the ability to evaluate, by the student, the achievement of the required learning, required competence and the development of an ethical awareness embedded in the standards, but also the ability to conceptually «translate» and connect the Scottish social work culture, models and practice into the Italian the social work culture, models and practice.

The absence of a recognised and agreed Italian standards for the social work education increased the sense of «incompetence» that I felt: I was lacking the framework that could have helped a process of sense making; also, the Global Standards for Education and Training (IFSW, IASSW, 2020) could not help. They were too generic to guide me in the «translation of ideas». I had a strong feeling of being a «foreigner» at home.

The need of certainty and risk avoidance, very often, dismisses the significance of anxiety and the appropriateness of the «not knowing» stance in situations of professional complexity. Anxiety has a profound effect on our ability to think, to feel and to act (Ob-

holzer & Zagier Roberts, 1994). It would have been easy to get caught up in looking and following apparent similarities and fail to recognise the many diversities between the two approaches, models and practices steaming from two very different cultures. Heuristics and bias in condition of uncertainty can lead into systematic errors (Kahneman, 2015).

From this point of view, reflective learning was a way for ensuring that the anxiety did not become an overwhelming experience that paralysed or detracted the main task, instead it was a «place» where anxiety could be acknowledged, thought and worked with. This meant for me to shift from the «knowledge as product» paradigm — having a set of information, or formal knowledge, to be used in practice — to a «knowledge as process» paradigm — where the emphasis is on the cognitive process through which understanding is created (Sheppard, 1995). In other words, rather than simply applying general principles to individual case I had to commit myself to a process of «reframing», that is create meaning (i.e., to interpret the SiSWE in the light of the Italian context) and meaning for action (i.e., to understand their practical application) (Schön, 1983, 1987).

An effective and successful placement requires a high level of reflexivity and awareness for both the practice teacher and the student. The «perimeter of complexity» within which I was asked to take up my role required to pay attention to three professional development aspects: (i) knowledge and understanding, (ii) skills and abilities, and (iii) ethical and personal commitment. This is represented in the framework for practice social work education in Scotland as follows:

Fig. 2. Professional Social Work Practice (University of Edinburgh, 2020).

These three aspects are intended and expressed as the corner of an equilateral triangle, each of the component parts having equal «weigh» and importance. It was clear to me that each one of these components relate to the main functions of my role — educational function, support function and assessment function.

I call this space the «perimeter of complexity» because I did not feel comfortable with the idea of a symmetrical triangle as a representation of how the three main aspects of professional development are interconnected. The key challenge for me was understanding how to manage the relationships among these three aspects in the practice level of the placement. I then reframed this perimeter as a dynamic field in which a spiral of cyclical phases takes place. Iterative and recurrent phases of experience, reflection, assessment and plan occurred for achieving, with the active involvement of the student, a quality level of the understanding, in the use and application and evaluation of SiSWE. Through the reflective learning — here understood as a process of thinking about and exploring an issue which is triggered by an experience (Boyd & Fales, 1983) — I have understood that if (rational) knowledge and understanding are privileged over experience the triangle become unstable; in the same way, if doing happens without (awareness of) feeling learning become reactive, not reflexive, and the triangle is out of balance again. The risk is that even if knowledge and understanding, skills and abilities and ethical commitment are interconnected, actually they are disconnected and separated in the student and practice teacher's experience.

If at the beginning I felt «lost at home» through a process of «translation» (knowledge and understating as thinking, skills and abilities as doing, and ethical commitment as feeling) I was able to make sense of what was my task, how to take up the role, and how to manage the supervisory relationship. This allowed me to reframe the triangle and to create a more «customized» operating space in order to comply with the required Standards.

As the following figure shows, the internal triangle is the «customized» space of reflexive practice that allowed me to stay in the supervisory relationship through constant and recursive supervision cycles.

Twice stranger: the social work student's experience in (inter)national placement

The first time I «met» the student was when I read her Student Profile Form for Placement. This document spelt out the student's training pathway and it included the self-evaluation of her learning needs. The first (online) meeting had the main objective to meet her and, after listening to her experience, to understand her expectations from the placement and from the supervision and her learning and professional development needs. I treated this as an «entry and contracting» (Neumann, 1997) meeting. Our first meeting produced a Working Agreement in which, within the key identified areas of professional and methodological learning, we identified and agreed (i) the activities the students should undertake for meeting each single area of the SiSWE and of the ethical principles of social work; (ii) the arrangements for weekly supervision; and (iii) the sources of evidence to be produced and to be used to assess the student's progress.

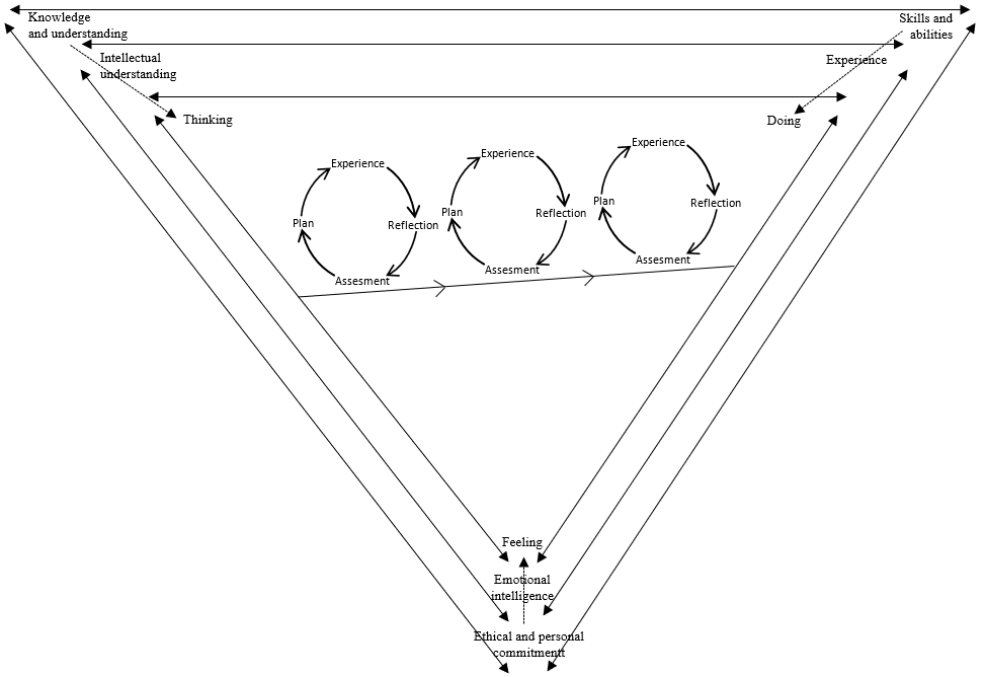

Fig. 3. The practical space for supervision (author's elaboration).

Several tools were used for evaluating the learning, they have been chosen taking into account the suggestions provided by the ethnographic literature (Schatzman & Strauss, 1973; Corsaro, 1985), they are: observation notes (detailed descriptions of lived events and actions — being seen or listened — that the student has lived), methodological notes (student's questions and reflections on how to tackle the difficulties on the practice learning), theoretical notes (appropriate attempts to develop the more theoretical meaning from one or more observation notes), emotional notes (bring into focus the emotions and the feelings that emerge during the experience — particularly in settings with high vulnerability). To these tools the logbook, as a tool established in the placement in social work education, the supervision meetings and a direct observation, as established by the University of Edinburgh as part of the placement, this was done observing the student having a meeting with a service user were added.

Each session followed the Kolb's model of experiential learning (1984) which has provided a powerful practical framework to make sense of and to learn from experience.

From the first meetings with the student, after the signing of the working agreement and before her starting of the placement, I released that, like mine, the experience of the student too was strongly challenged by the feeling of «being foreigner» and being «twice as foreigner»: as Italian studying in Scotland and as student from Edinburgh University

carrying a placement out in Italy. On one hand her experience of being an international postgraduate student without a previous experience of social work had already put her on unfamiliar ground with the Scottish context and with the discipline of social work (the student is a law graduate who after a volunteering experience in an NGO in Cyprus decided to becoming a profession in social work with migrants); on the other hand, the placement to take place in Italy gave her, from time to time, a feeling of bewilderment because her previous background did not involve learning of and being educated to the Italian culture of social services (the volunteering experience in an NGO has not given her the professional and organisational tools for understanding and working in service of second level Italy).

> In my past volunteering experiences, I had few possibilities to have direct contact with service users. [...] I would like to enhance my knowledge and skills in the field of services for people in forced migration [...] interviewing techniques, nonverbal and verbal communication [...] organisation functioning. I would like to enhance my self-awareness to eliminate the influence of personal biases in working with forced migrants and seek intervention strategies that are congruent with their identities and culture. Furthermore, I want to develop my ability to maintain professional boundaries, sometimes I felt I am too involved in the situation [from student's reflexive self-assessment].

It was clear that two were the key areas of learning: (i) professional, in the sense of developing and enhancing the knowledge and the practice of social work in this field (e.g., reflexivity as a core competence for acquiring an increased level of emotional intelligence in working with these service users and for addressing her perceptions of the difficulties faced by service users that are shaped by their upbringing; (ii) methodological, in terms of skills for all the practical activities of social work (e.g., interviewing, counselling, mapping resources, professional decision making, inter-professional and inter-organisational collaborations).

In her emotional experience this feeling of being unfamiliar morphed in a sort of «chaos» for which, to paraphrase the language of complexity theory (Stacey, 1996), all her points of reference fall through and the knowledge was to be built and developed «by doing».

> Anna seems worried. The solution of completing her placement in Italy reassures her cognitively, however emotional she looks exposed to a high degree of uncertainty. Her life course in recent years is projected abroad, she had done many experiences abroad and repositioning in her native culture worries her. She fears not understanding and making mistakes. She does not know the Italian second level service provision system, it is her first year in the Scottish Master, she is familiarising with the social service environment, but her professional identity is not complete. She assumes that the profession does not change a lot in different contexts however she realises that contexts influence the profession. Her main worry is that she will not be able to reconcile Italy and Scotland [from practice teacher filed notes].

The challenge for the supervision was then not just to provide support and direction in relation to the aims of the placement, but how to set and develop a safe «holding environment» (Winnicott, 1965) where the student could develop the needed sense of safety that allowed her to explore her (potential) ability to identify, understand and manage the emotional content of the placement experience. As Hawkins and Shohet (2000) argue

> The supervisor role is not just to reassure the worker, but to allow the emotional disturbance to be felt within the safer setting of the supervisory relationship, where it can be survived, reflected and learned from (2000, p. 3).

The main dimensions of the learning and the professional development that have determined the supervision's agenda were: self and role (professional identity and boundaries, professional methodologies, core mandates of social work and ethical tensions, emotional intelligence); organisation (organisational practices, organisational processes, organisational culture; inter-professional work); community (engagement with community resources; engagement with people who receive services; inter-agency collaborations); socio-political and socio-cultural context (understanding the context of the locality in which social work practice takes place; understanding European, national and local legislations; understanding social and economic factors contributing to vulnerability across the life span).

Fig. 4. The four levels of supervision (author's elaboration).

The prerequisite for working on all these dimensions has been the student accepting her position as «novice», this has allowed moving the focus from performance to situated learning. This change in perspective, that the student achieved through a «labour of love» on self-reflection and the shared reflexion in the supervision meetings, has freed her from an (persecutory) idea of evaluation that made she experience each single situation as something where to perform through the standards, and if that situ-

ation were not perceived as translatable into the standards was ignored, thus limiting and penalising the learning.

The complexity of these areas could be managed gradually and progressively resolved within an experience of «not familiarity» only via a supervision where the reflexive approach (Schön, 1983) and the experiential learning approach (Kolb, 1984) informed both the content and the process of the relationship. As Kolb states experiential learning is:

> The process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experiencers (1984, p. 41).

Experiential learning emphasises learning as a process not only as an intellectual activity, but an activity that also includes emotional and bodily reaction where reflection is an essential aspect. Schön in this regard asserts:

> In reflection-in-action, doing and thinking are complementary. Doing extends thinking in the tests, moves, and probes of experimental action, and reflection feeds on doing and its results. Each feeds the other, and each sets boundaries for the other (1983, p. 62)

Reflexivity (knowing-in-action) and experience (learning by doing) became then the two trajectories of the supervision. They allowed the development of the student's ability to cope with the unique and uncertain — often conflicted — situations of practice related to self and role, organisation, and community. From the student's reflective notes and supervision meetings recording:

> At the beginning I could not establish how to relate in an appropriate manner to the service users. I was excessively identifying with them, or I felt pressurised to rush towards an immediate solution for the service users. To a point that when the service user was silent, I could not cope with their silence [...] until I understood the meaning of the silence [...] Working in the field, on myself and during the supervision meetings I understood that an appropriate relation depends on the role awareness, it has been difficult resisting to the service users' wishes [...] I still remember a dilemma I had with one service user... Dave was almost reaching the end of his asylum seeker project, what should I do? Putting myself in his shoes and thus be certain that he was ready for the situation or keep working with him for his self-realisation in a way for which he was then ready to live in the context that was new to him when he left the project? Being supported to think critically has steered me toward the professional duties and responsibilities [...] not crossing the professional boundary but supporting the service user's autonomy and fighting the social injustice being fully aware of the role boundaries.

> [...] it is as if everything is reflexivity...also when you work with others. I have learned a lot from the diversity in the group that was operating the service... social worker, cultural mediator, psychologist, teacher of Italian language, social educators... it was very useful to see the different viewpoints particularly when making decisions. However very often I found myself in the middle of their conflicts and it was difficult understanding which position I should take in certain circumstances, you can be active and take side, or in

a passive position being manipulated. The supervision is helping me in understanding that being focused on the task is a way for not supporting what my practice teacher defines «anti-task».

Working with the services in the community has been at the same time beautiful and difficult. Perhaps more difficult than beautiful... encountering and, at times, clashing with diverse ways of doing has wrong footing me, thinking how to help these people is completely different from the Local Authority, the Health Authority, or the job centre. Taking from granted that other agencies know what you do is not good, you realise that when you go in others' agencies offices we do not understand each other for a variety of reasons. Sometimes you experience walls, sometimes less resistance [...] what I have learned is that you do not need to gut react, but perhaps asking yourself what impedes them to understand each other and what should be done for understanding each other [...] the supervision has planted in me the idea of the negotiation of meaning among agencies [...].

Kolb's learning cycle assisted the student in transforming her concrete experience into coherent knowledge by going through the four stages of the cycle: (i) *concrete experience*: she learned from feelings related to a specific experience; (ii) *reflective observation*: she learned by watching and listening; (iii) *abstract conceptualization*: she learned by thinking; and (iv) *active experimentation*: she leaned by doing.

The intertwining of doing, watching, feeling and thinking allowed the student to move from the experience of «chaotic» feeling to the awareness of «complexity».

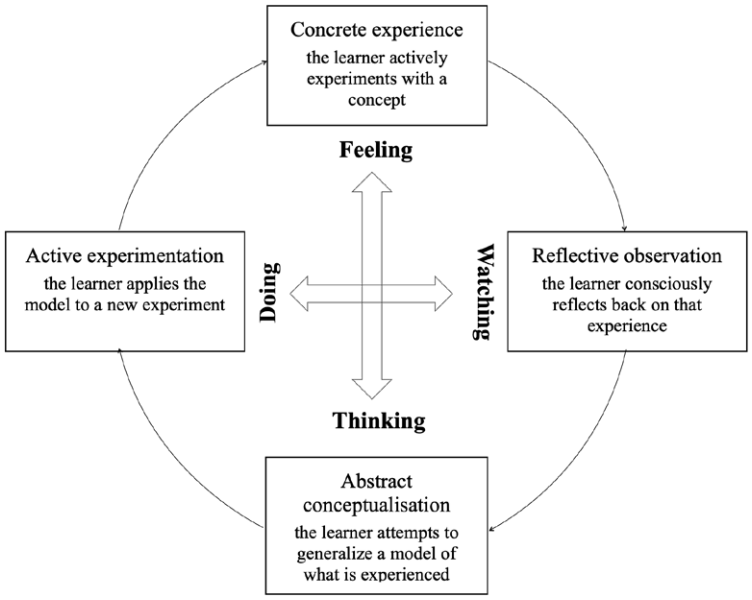

Fig. 5. Four stages of the Kolb's experimental Learning Cycle (Kolb, 1984).

However, the experiential learning does not rest only on the student's shoulders, it lies on the uniqueness of the relation that is constructed between the practice teacher, the student and the field of study. Therefore, the experiential approach places the «issue» to be learned at the centre of the learning space that is experienced by both the practice teacher and the student.

This has implied that for every single experiential learning cycle — that is experiencing, reflecting, thinking, acting — I, as practice teacher, had to take up and juggle a dynamic expression and fulfilment of my role: sometimes I was a facilitator — here I would support the student in verbalising her experience and reflecting on such an experience; sometimes I was a coach — here I would support the student in using and applying her knowledge in order to achieve and to meet the standards of the required professional development level.

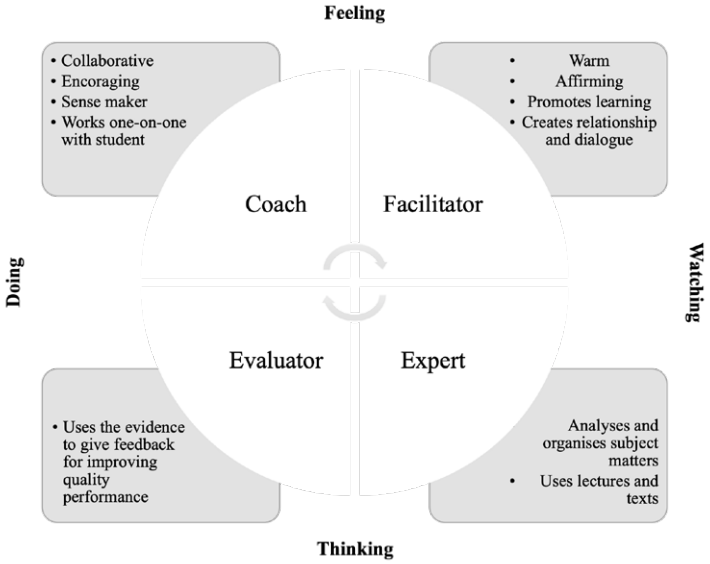

Fig. 6. Practice teacher around the Kolb's learning cycle (adapted from Kolb & Kolb, 2017).

Through the dynamic and flexible transition from one role to another in the supervisory relationship, as experiential and reflective learning, the student found the «holding environment» (Winnicott, 1965) that allowed her to move, safely, from the «panic» (due to the unfamiliar feeling) to the «discomfort zone» (Senninger, 2000), where she felt uncertainty and anxiety but was most likely to learn. The discomfort zone is the learning zone where the challenge for student was to know the unknown, to live out the curiosity and make new discoveries. This slowly expanded her comfort zone by making her more familiar with what was unfamiliar.

Setting up an environment that was intellectually and emotionally supportive has encouraged the student's development preventing her to end up in a «flight/fight» position (Bion, 1971) of «freezing». The process of emotional and professional development and growth could be represented as follows.

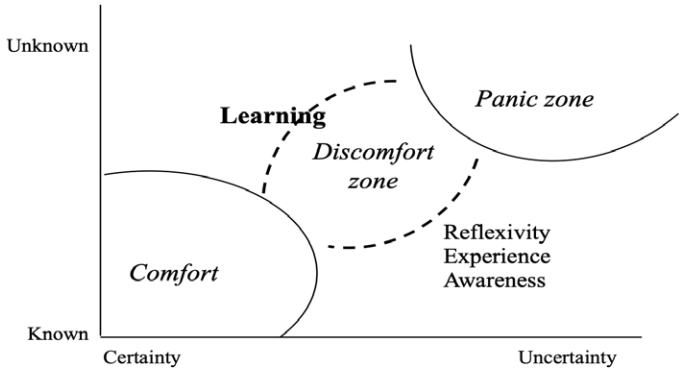

Fig. 7. The learning zone in supervision relationship (author's elaboration from Stacey, 1996).

The sophisticated dynamic equilibrium the student and I were able to develop among these three areas of the supervision has allowed the student to develop a holistic set of competencies and abilities.

Conclusions

The learning in a supervision relation is definitely not a one-way system. The supervision relation is co-constructed; practice teacher and student learn together through reflecting on and from the experience.

This article has explored the complexity of working in a supervision relation for social work practice education where several levels of «foreignness» were present at the same time.

The conclusive reflexion on this experience calls forth the competences that are required to work in uncertain contexts like those with strong cultural, contextual, organisational, and professional differences.

One clear learning is that complex and not familiar situations require an extended «listening» phase; an active listening that takes into account who is talking and involves those who talk and those who listen. For an effective «listening» the role of the practice teacher should not be taken with element of rigidity that is the routinisation of one's actions, if this is the case the listening remains on a superficial level. A superficial listening

(a small «feeling» corner of the supervision's space) by the practice teacher can risk the active participation of the student who may perceive that his/her viewpoint and experience are not listen to and understood. The student my feel disempowered.

The experience discussed in this article seems to strength the position that active listening generates a reciprocity that allows for one's understanding to influence the other's and vice versa, and that one learning cycle influences the next.

Hinz et al. (2022) use the expression «being relational» to point the attention to a component of the active listening: the active listening is not only giving direction and showing understanding, but it is being relational. Being relational means being emphatic, respectful, and not judgemental. This is consistent with the relational social work approach through which we can consider the relation of supervision a reciprocal experience, shaped by the awareness that together, supervisor and student, they are «co-creating» the relationship, its content and its processes. It is the learning space (metaphorically) big enough to allow the student to move freely (life space for psychological movement in Lewin's terms) and at the same (metaphorically) small enough to make sure that freedom is «safe» (in Winnicott terms).

Alongside the ability to listening, an essential competence for working «across boundaries» (cultural, social organisational and professional) is awareness (Stapley, 2002). In the supervision relationship the (search for) awareness has brought to the fore three interdependent levels of experience: the dynamics of the «given role» and the «taken role»; the transition from the supervision in the mind to the real supervision (Hutton et al., 1997; Armstrong, 2005); and the transition from the operational contract to the «psychological contract» (Neumann, 1997; Schein, 2001). These three levels helped creating, with the student's active involvement, a «safe container» for her training and professional development. Each one of these levels have required a reflexive work aimed at: (i) making explicit the mental representations of the task that as practice teacher I had to attend; (ii) «de-mattifying» the assumptions taken for granted that have determinate my expectation from the role at the beginning; and (iii) development of the practice competences of emotional intelligence (Goleman, 2016).

To this end a learning, among others, that this experience of supervision has produced is the awareness of the importance of the role consultation for the supervisor (supervision of the supervisor). Drawing on my experience of regular meetings with the role consultant (supervisor) the day after the supervision meeting with student, this is helpful on two accounts.

In relation to the role content (the feeling of «strangeness» here described), moving from the comfort to the discomfort zone is neither obvious nor predicted, not painless. It demands a helping process («role consultation») by which the supervisor and the supervisee scrutinize and attune the supervisee's behaviour in an understanding of the role, including its conscious and unconscious determinants, to enhance the supervisee's effectiveness in relation to the demands of the organisation (Krantz & Maltz, 1997). Within

this dyadic relationship reflection and analysis of the role are undertaken through a process of experiential co-learning in order to understand the realm of the role and the context, the organisational system within which the role is embedded and expected to function (Krantz & Maltz, 1997).

In relation to the content of the supervision, to argue for reflective learning in supervision is beneficial for the students for learning from the mistakes (Ruch, 2000) and of the emotional health and resilience (Grant & Kinman, 2014; Ingram, 2013), it is also a demanding «relational labour» for the supervisor in enhancing student's emotional health and resilience (Grant & Kinman, 2014; Ingram, 2013). We can then say that the work of the supervisor is emotionally demanding because is his/her responsibility to generate a safe and supportive learning environment (Roulston et al., 2018) where empathy, sensitivity, and warmth are the relational characteristics that supervisor need to have

> The «safe», «encouraging», «constructive» and «nurturing» environment provided by the supervisor allow students to feel trust and safety, enabling them to open up, question, take risk and acknowledge their difficulties without being judged (Lefevre, 2005, p. 572).

Taking the position expressed by Ronald Heifetz e Marty Linsky (2002) when they explore the nature and function of leadership, the «adaptive challenge» that this relation of supervision has accepted is a «labour of love». It means that it was not just a technical labour of direction and support for achieving the standardised professional competences and development but a process of sense making that has challenged what supervisor and student thought, felt, and acted through an experimentation, a discovery and mutual adaptation.

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