The value of social worker–trainee relations in pandemic time from Covid–19

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Abstract

The health emergency posed a real challenge for field training for social work students. Social workers supervisors and interns have been called upon to develop together, even more so than in the past, their ability to critically reflect on the role, characteristics, functions, theories, principles and methods of social work in light of the important and sudden transformations of the environment in which the processes of helping individuals, groups and communities are developed. The study came about from the need to understand the strengths, limits and potential inherent in projects of field training in which the trainee carries out their activities in person, but in a scenario characterised by profound transformations and alterations of the traditional work context. The contribution proposes the results of a survey carried out within the framework of the degree course in Social Sciences and Social Service at the Ca' Foscari University. The research was conducted through the use of qualitative tools and involved university traineeship tutors, supervisors and students engaged in in-person practical training during the second and third Covid-19 pandemic waves. It highlights some processes through which during the health emergency the relational dimension of social work was reformulated while retaining its central role.

Keywords

Social work education, field education, information and communication technologies, social work, Covid-19.

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic came as a real shock to our country because of its unexpected nature and unpredictable dynamics, especially in the first phase. At the same time, the serious situation of health, economic and social emergency that was emerging required us to overcome as quickly as possible the feeling of initial bewilderment and to work towards the construction of an effective system of responses to the old and new needs

of the population. This scenario obviously involved the social service community and the universities (Sanfelici et al., 2020). Both have had to deliver their services remotely, through the use of technologies, the use of which had not always been mastered. It has thus become necessary to make a considerable effort in approaching new tools, the effectiveness of which goes far beyond the mere knowledge of the techniques involved in using computer supports, but implies an overall revision of the system that characterises the traditional experience of teaching and working in the places where the profession is practiced (Dellavalle, 2020).

The health emergency posed a real challenge for field training for social work students. The students who did their practical training in this historical phase had the opportunity to observe institutions and supervisors struggling with drastic and sudden reorganisation operations. The transformation of the work context has led to real forms of environmental displacement (Gui, 2020). Students witnessed a significant increase in requests for help related to long-standing social needs, often exacerbated by the pandemic scenario, and others arising from new situations of distress closely linked to the economic and social health consequences of the spread of Covid-19 (Caritas italiana, 2020). They saw the emergence and implementation of measures and services to combat poverty and social exclusion specifically designed for the pandemic period. Interns, like social workers, have also had to cope with a number of limitations on their professional actions resulting from the social emergency measures needed to limit the contagion. In this respect, the relationship between social worker and user, a central component of social work, was the one most affected by the restrictions. Although social work in the context of emergencies has been known for a long time, and in some territories even widely experimented, never before the pandemic had they found themselves intervening in a context that deprived them of their primary working tool: the relationship (Folgheraiter, 2020).

For professionals who are also involved in training as university tutors or supervisors, the advent of the pandemic has led to the need to rethink their role in the light of the specificities of the context. They also had to deal with a different image of themselves as trainers, sharing with their students, much more than in the past, the dimension of discovery, the need to acquire new knowledge and to give space for creative reflexivity.

This context, also in light of the results deriving from the evidence of many scientific works published at national and international level on pandemic internships (Sanfelici et al., 2020; Mc Fadden et al., 2020), has in many cases resulted in quality training experiences. In addition, aspects have often emerged that it is desirable to make the subject of further reflection with a view to the continuous improvement of educational paths in field training, including outside the pandemic scenario.

Students during these pandemic years had the opportunity to observe aspects such as the adaptability of organisations and professionals to unforeseen events and the different responsibilities of the professional in an emergency context.

The pandemic provided a context in which supervising social workers and interns were called upon to develop together, even more than in the past, their ability to reflect critically on the role, characteristics, functions, theories, principles and methods of social work.

One of the areas in which this reflection has found ample space is undoubtedly related to the use of modern communication and information technologies in the management of the professional relationship with the various key players in the helping process. With regard to this complex issue, the relationship between tutor and student has in many cases been an opportunity for the coming together of different skills, attitudes and experiences, has taken on some features of self-mutual aid processes and has determined an extension of solidarity and intergenerational support between professionals. Some technical skills and computer knowledge well mastered by the «born digital» trainees met with reflections of an ethical nature raised by instances and ethical dilemmas well known to the tutors, thanks to their training and experience, giving an important boost to the knowledge and application of these tools in social work and promoting a significant circularity of knowledge.

Based on this observation, which has emerged with insistence in internship theses, dissertations and in the dialogue between university tutors and supervisors, this paper offers a reflection on the use of modern information and communication technologies in social work in times of pandemic. More specifically, we focus on the role played by the relationship between social worker intern tutors and interns in promoting the necessary spaces of reflexivity around the theoretical, methodological and ethical implications that derive from the use of these channels for the construction and accompaniment of helping processes and how these have been spaces of training for both the professional and the intern.

Social work in the face of new technologies: ethical and methodological implications

Technological progress provides a plurality of tools that can be used and potentially enrich social work. The extent to which this will happen in the near future depends to a large extent on the work that will be done to adapt these tools to the objectives and values underpinning professional action.

The contribution of technology, far from being limited to the transformation of analogue and physical objects into digital ones (computerised social records, use of email, etc.), in fact, contributes to the redefinition of subjective practices arising from the use of technologies (Dif-Pradalier & Greppi, 2018; Rollins, 2020). The Covid 19 pandemic was an important opportunity to continue conducting research and develop professional skills on this topic (Allegri & Di Rosa, 2020; Fiorentino et al., 2022; Sanfelici & Bilotti, 2022).

In the international scientific community, it is now widely accepted that the Internet and new information and communication technologies (ICT) have contributed significantly to opening a new season for professional social work. However, further reflection is needed to understand their role in social intervention services and, more specifically, in social services (Parton, 2008). They make it possible to work in new contexts and in new ways.

Modern ICT also has a greater impact on the structure of the labour market and the employment conditions of professionals. This is an issue of considerable importance, which is not explored here, but which can significantly influence the characteristics of social work in high-tech contexts (Ferrari, 2014).

New technologies have also paved the way for new working spaces (Lamendola, 2010). This refers in particular to online counselling (Barnett, 2005; Chester & Glass, 2006), video counselling and cybertherapy (Mattison, 2012).

These are tools that encourage greater proximity and individualisation of intervention. They can also be used to help professionals with bureaucratic tasks, leaving them free to devote more time to the design and implementation of interventions.

The use of big data makes it possible to compare the life course of an individual with a very large number of similar cases in real time and offers a variety of stimuli for interpreting need and assessing possible interventions. At the same time, however, this tool, if not properly used, can carry with it the risk of stigmatising the subject and encouraging mechanisms of reification of needs because there is a risk that research and evaluation activities of new aspects, not included in the previous case studies, are not sufficiently valued, and that reflection on the consequences deriving from specific combinations of discomfort factors present in complex situations, frequently related to aspects related to individual biographies and the specific characteristics of the reference contexts, is not promoted as it should be (Goldkind & Wolf, 2015).

Gamification defines new frontiers in the field of user participation in professional help (Faherty, 1983). Through the use of rules derived from the world of video games and through playful dynamics, it is possible to convey specific messages and promote the transformation of certain behaviours within predefined objectives. It should not be forgotten that in this type of approach, the focus on the user and his/her activation are the essential elements, also in order to avoid manipulation practices and limitations to the user's capacity for self-determination. How to promote these aspects is a matter of ongoing study. A similar reasoning can be made with regard to the use of mobile technology. It makes it possible to break down traditional spatial and temporal barriers even when working with users. If on the one hand, this makes it possible to structure interventions in which the institutionalised dimension of care is less noticeable, on the other hand, the use of these technologies requires careful professional training in order to preserve the boundaries between the operator and the user, which are necessary for the successful implementation of the support process.

Further frontiers of social work are undoubtedly represented by robotics, where more and more jobs are being recorded, especially with reference to care work for the elderly (De La Fuente Robles & Del Carmen Martín Cano, 2019).

The use of these new and versatile tools in social work raises a number of ethical questions. One thinks of aspects related to the management of confidentiality and privacy, the possible conflict of interest, defining the boundaries of the professional relationship and the proper management of the emotional dimension of social work (Reamer, 2013; Ryan & Garrett, 2018). With regard to these sensitive issues, some national social service organisations are promoting a deepening of the contents in their codes of ethics. In the United States, the *National Association of Social Work* and the *Association of Social Work Boards* established guidelines specifically dedicated to the use of technology in social work in 2005. In recent years, a growing number of national and international organisations, including the National Professional Order of Social Workers, have been fruitfully exploring and launching initiatives for the training and updating of professionals.

The new technologies pose a major challenge to social service work also in methodological terms. Technological tools are constantly changing, becoming more and more performant and contributing to reshaping the professional social worker-user relationship, reinterpreting the role and meaning of tools and working methods that have been used for a long time. In the use of new and advanced working tools, it is therefore essential to be able to recognise and value aspects that can constitute a resource and act to limit the risk of possible distortions in social work. One thinks of the risk of depersonalising the care relationship, the danger of turning man into a machine, reducing social workers to executors of totalising computer systems. Research by Fang et al. (2014) shows that new technologies permeate social work and contribute significantly to defining its characteristics. According to the authors, this happens through the introduction of new communication styles that contribute to rethinking roles and collaborative problem-solving processes. To support this new relational style, new boundaries in the relationship need to be defined, for example, through increased contextualisation and through the adoption of more dynamic relational constructs.

Then there are further elements of reflection related to the characteristics of the technologies used. In this regard, a further aspect for reflection is linked to the possible new forms of unequal treatment of users linked to the *digital divide* arising precisely from the processes of digitisation of interventions. Some technologies may be an obstacle to the use of services, particularly by those who cannot access the devices, or who do not have the knowledge to use them. In this sense, the digitisation of some social service functions, if not properly thought through, can turn into a factor of social exclusion.

Although the use of ICT is growing in all areas of work and in people's daily lives, national research on this topic lags behind international thinking. More recent and systematic studies include the national survey on the use of ICT in social work carried out by Di Rosa et al. in 2018. The research revealed a scenario in which, albeit with territorial

differences and some local experimentation, the use of the most modern digital working tools and e-social work was still very limited. The relationship with the citizen-user is the area in which the use of technological aids is least developed. It is most widely used in basic and continuing education. There was also a steady growth in new forms of informal aggregation between professionals, through the use of tools made available by the Internet. A set of exchanges considered useful to strengthen the sense of professional community and to promote the circulation of knowledge, also thanks to the greater possibility of comparing and re-elaborating experiences deriving from work in the field.

In the European context, and even more so in the Anglo-Saxon world, the role of social work in the digital age has been studied in depth since the end of the 1990s, giving rise to numerous conferences and a flourishing scientific production (Rafferty & Steyaert, 2009). Services adopting new technologies are more widespread and there is no lack of studies on the application of particular tools to specific areas of intervention.

Although each geographic institution has its own characteristics and working models cannot be transplanted uncritically from one context to another, this literature (Campanini, 2006) constitutes an important baggage to extend the reasoning on the use of ICT also in the Italian scenario where the smart dimension of the social service has been requested for some time. A significant impetus towards reflection on the role of ICT in social work was undoubtedly provided by the long period in which social services were forced to work in a context of health emergencies.

The need to limit contagion and the consequent strict social distancing measures envisaged in living and working contexts have led to a significant acceleration in the use of these instruments, giving rise to a dense debate in scientific and professional circles. Some important elements of this debate have become an integral part of the content of social work students' internship projects.

The research path

The research carried out with the students, university tutors and internship supervisors of the degree course in Social sciences and Social work at Ca' Foscari University of Venice came about from the need to understand the strengths, limits and potential inherent in projects of field training in which the trainee carries out their activities in person, but in a scenario characterised by profound transformations and alterations of the traditional work context: state of emergency, social distancing, use of new work tools, etc.

The need to guarantee the continuation of teaching activities during the long period of the health emergency has translated into a need for knowledge, triggering a learning process both for the internship tutors and the organisational apparatus of the university and social services, and for the students. We wondered about the ways in which it is possible for a trainee to observe and experience social work in practice, without the physical

presence of the interlocutors, in a new and unexpected work context, even for the social services that host them.

Before moving on to the presentation of the stages and research tools, it may be useful to briefly reconstruct the scenario in which the training activities were carried out in the field over the course of the months of the health emergency.

With the advent of the pandemic, the internship activities of the degree course were suspended for a few months and gradually resumed with the end of the first lockdown, starting in May 2020. Despite a significant number of restrictions still in place, and the context in which social work was operating, it was deemed appropriate for the degree course to promote face-to-face internships.

The traineeship teachers of the degree course carried out an intense work of contact and comparison with the territorial social services aimed at finding work sectors and social workers available to take on the role of tutors for students. Once a suitable group of professionals was identified, tutor-student pairings were made, also taking into consideration the specific training interests of the trainees.

The students therefore shadowed their supervisor when carrying out daily activities. This choice meant that the student approached the use of remote working tools with the times and ways of professional social workers. The hours spent at the institution concerned alternated tasks involving smart working, meetings and remote multi-professional teams. They experienced helping relationship with service users in light of the protocols and restrictions in place.

One of the main objectives of the training projects formulated in this period was the delicate way of reorganising the social services in the belief that this could constitute, with targeted accompaniment, an important growth opportunity and the chance to put to the test, in a practical way, the theoretical knowledge, the methods and the ethical and deontological background learned during classroom study.

The traditional moments of debate between students and supervisors, tutors and lecturers brought to light a plurality of themes and relevant issues that are particularly significant for understanding the nature and characteristics of social work in a pandemic context. One of these is the use, often for the first time, of new communication technologies to manage professional relationships in contexts where it was not possible to meet in person.

The numerous implications of this change for social work have given rise to the desire to monitor the educational repercussions of this transformation through proper research. More specifically, we wondered how these changes impact the student-supervisor relationship, and which emotional experiences they raise with respect to the management of the support process in these terms, also in light of what has been studied on this topic.

Returning to the path of the research, the study was carried out using a qualitative approach. The decision to use qualitative tools is linked to their specific characteristics in

terms of formality, directivity, depth and structuring (Corbetta, 1999; Della Porta, 2010). The experimental dimension of the observed activities make it particularly important to be able to grasp the subjective perspective of the interviewees. Indeed, through this, we can reconstruct certain conceptual categories, the meaning attributed to the work context and the reasons underlying the actions carried out.

More specifically, the research involved eighty students enrolled in the three-year degree course who carried out their internship from May 2020 to March 2021 and twenty-six social workers, and was carried out through the use of questionnaires and semi-structured interviews addressed to students and semi-structured interviews and focus groups addressed to social workers tutored at university and in work contexts.

The key stages of the research, the profile of the actors involved and the tools used are presented below.

- Administration of a structured questionnaire for students aimed at reconstructing some fundamental characteristics of their student profile, of the course of study and internship, information related to the type of activities carried out at the institution, the number of hours and the type of work carried out through the use of new communication technologies and some first impressions of this type of experience.
- Carrying out of twenty qualitative interviews with students who had reported in the questionnaire that they had used the remote working tools in a relevant way. To ensure a certain homogeneity of the observation contexts, it was decided to interview only students involved in local social services: health and social districts and municipal services.
- Conducting ten interviews with supervising social workers aimed at reconstructing their experience as trainers and with reference to the remote management of the professional activity. Social workers were selected on the basis of the number of traineeships followed during the pandemic period and the fact that the professionals had also carried out a path of collaboration in the preparation of degree theses, also related to issues of a methodological and ethical nature of social work during the health emergency. In all cases, these are social workers who work in local social services related to municipalities or health companies. The average age of the supervisors interviewed was forty-eight. The interviews were conducted in the form of an open conversation. This made it possible to introduce insights into the initial outline from time to time on the basis of the answers provided by the interviewees.
- Creation of a focus group with the internship tutor social workers who work within the degree course, aimed at collecting their points of view with respect to the strengths, difficulties and potential of the internship projects in their delicate work of accompanying the relationship between students and supervisors engaged in the territorial services.

Findings and discussion

The students' perspective

The students who answered the questionnaire are almost all enrolled in the second or third year of the Bachelor Level (76%), aged between 21 and 23 years, while the other students are enrolled in the first or second year outside the course (24-25 years). Almost all the respondents are female; there are four males. Only five of the people interviewed already hold another degree.

From the processing of the data collected with the questionnaires, a very heterogeneous picture emerges with respect to the use of new communication technologies. In some contexts, such as in some services dealing with child protection and in others related to the provision of services for the elderly, they were used very little (33%), while in others their use was more significant (67%), as in the case of the contrast with poverty, disability and mental health. Also in this second case, in some contexts, remote work was used almost exclusively for communication with other colleagues and, more generally, to manage the network of institutional resources present in the area (76%).

In other cases, however, remote connection, which took place mainly via video call, was also used in the management of the support relationship with the citizen users and their informal relational context (24%). In all situations, the students report that an in-person relationship is always preferable to a remote one where possible, when it comes to the relationship with the user.

There are many reasons for the differences in the use of the online connection in the different contexts observed. Some reasons that arose from the research:

– availability or not of suitable spaces to allow the meeting of other people in person at the company concerned due to the health protocols in force (36%);
– the need to make work flow more smoothly in the light of the new organisation of work which, in some institutions (including those other than social work), provides for some staff to work remotely;
– the need to deal with users who are not able to go to services and for whom a home visit cannot be planned.

From the interviews a picture emerges of high levels of satisfaction with the experience carried out, especially thanks to the spaces for interactions with the supervisors and the fact of being (and having been) perceived not only as observers, but also as key players within the complex and unexpected scenario in which they carried out the practical internship.

Reflection on professional action mediated by the use of new communication and information technologies is considered one of the most relevant aspects of comparison and exchange. Some of the interviews reveal the presence of a strong bond of solidarity

from which, in some cases, interesting avenues of thought and action have emerged. Indicative of the role and challenging dimension of the theme is also the fact that some female students chose it as the topic of their dissertation. Here are some excerpts from the interviews that can help to better contextualise what was said.

> Dealing with this new frontier of social work was really nice. I had never studied this subject specifically, but having to use these tools made me realise how important the theoretical work done in the classroom is, as well as one's own ethical and deontological knowledge. I experienced important ethical dilemmas and the best thing is that I was able to do it with the social worker in a context of ... «equality», in the sense that we shared, in some respects, the context of displacement and each of us contributed with what we knew. I felt like an active part of the training path and useful for the service I was working in (Francesca, trainee in a Municipal Office — area of social inclusion).

> The use of technology to conduct an interview, perhaps in an urgent situation, is certainly better than having no contact at all, but it raises so many issues related to confidentiality, ethical aspects, and methodological aspects. My tutor and I spent a lot of time talking about an interview. We discussed, exchanged with each other and with other colleagues. All of this was very formative for me. I really enjoyed feeling useful and being referred to as supportive and helpful in reflecting on the care process, on the role that certain digital aspects could have on the relationship. It was a very difficult time, with a lot of responsibility for the social worker and at that moment we really felt like a resource for each other, each with their own strengths and weaknesses (Giovanni, trainee in a Municipal Office — area of child protection).

An important aspect that emerges from the interviews is the fundamental nature of the relationship with the other, even at a time of strict social distancing. The relationship dimension of work, which during the pandemic did not find space in the traditional spheres, has been reconstructed in others, including in work with actors new to the traditional ones.

> One of the most beautiful and important jobs I did during my internship was to reconstruct the network of key players with whom social services would have to work to implement the different care processes in Covid-19 times. It was a lot of work in terms of finding contacts, meetings, planning interventions, etc. but which, even according to my supervisor, could not have been done so quickly without the use of technology. I believe that, as is commonly said, new technologies are inherently neutral tools. It is then up to the discipline and the profession to work to take advantage of the positive aspects and to avoid contexts where they can be debasing of professionalism and harmful to people. This study work is definitely necessary (Sabrina, trainee in a Health District — dependency sector).

> I have had many team meetings with other professionals using the online method and I think, overall, it has been an interesting experience. My tutor identified a number of advantages that I also share: the possibility of talking to each other more often and thus doing coordinated work, greater finalisation, and optimal use of time. [...] At the

same time, however, I think I also missed out on some things: getting to know my colleagues from other services well, seeing them and interacting with them in person would perhaps have been better, I would have grasped more aspects of them individually and their relationships. What is lost online? Informal conversations, introductory spaces, the all-round discussion of cases, detached from the specific objectives of the meeting. My tutor emphasised that it was precisely in these moments that useful aspects for work and for the quality of relations between colleagues often emerged (Giulia, trainee in a Municipal Office, poverty and housing problem).

Those who managed part of the relations with the users in online mode report the priority need for deepening, study, reflection, thematisation of the limits, risks and opportunities of the use of this tool.

My social worker tutor happened to have interviews with families that needed to be done to monitor and accompany them even during the pandemic and in an emergency context. It was really very tiring and a dilemma to work with these tools without careful and thorough preliminary training. This pandemic has displaced everything and everyone, but now, for the future, we need to be prepared (Martina, trainee in a Municipal Office — area of child protection).

The supervisors' standpoint

The supervisors, regarding their didactic role, report an experience of fatigue and at the same time of fulfilment and comfort. More specifically, the fear of returning to the role of trainer in an unprecedented context of emergency and one that is particularly weighted with committments and responsibilities, is underscored.

I had many fears and doubts when I decided to do an internship project in a pandemic. I really had a lot of work, a great deal of responsibilities, many cases where action had to be taken, and new services to activate, all in an organisation that was radically changing. [...] it was a taxing experience, but one that nourished me. At a time when in-person relationships were no longer possible, this was someone with whom I talked constantly, a reference point to develop their and my reflection. Young people also have a different idea and a good deal of knowledge about the limits and pitfalls deriving from the use of new technologies. I think it was a relationship that enriched us both (social worker in a Municipal Office — area of child protection).

I don't know if it is a coincidence, but probably not, that the female students I was following in these extremely turbulent months seemed to me to be very involved, active, proactive, and capable of developing critical reflection. Probably this attitude is also due to the different relationship that has been created between us, to the possibility that we had to break down some aspects that cast us into predefined and separate roles of teacher and student (social worker in a Health District — elderly and disability sector).

I hope I have been helpful to my student. She was for me. The exchange nourished me. Obviously very tiring, but vital (social worker in a Municipal Office — area of poverty and social inclusion).

What emerged from the university tutors' representations

Also the university tutors were forced to review their teaching methods and this was the subject of a great deal of discussion in the group. In this regard, the teachers reported that they found the online mode a tool that could intensify the number of meetings and teamwork. They found the same thing in the relationship with the supervisors rooted in the services with which it was possible to talk frequently, even about critical issues that developed from time to time in the individual projects. The online meetings also allowed the supervisors to participate more diligently in the evaluation of the internship.

At the same time, they thought it would be helpful to return as soon as possible to in-person meetings to carry out the ongoing processing of the internship experiences.

> Remote working has strengthened our group identity. We talked more, we discussed often and at length about many issues. I think this was also possible because, in reality, we already knew each other very well and remote working helped us to create more opportunities for meeting.

> A really positive aspect of this difficult work period was being able to have more contact with the supervising social workers. It seems like a paradox, but that is the case. Probably we all needed to exchange views, to listen to each other, given the situation, and the remote connection made it possible. I believe this is something that could be kept in the future, at least for situations where it is not possible to meet in person. The teaching has certainly benefited from this.

> In my opinion, the in-person group work with the students was particularly important and it is not easy to recreate that online. I want to emphasise the role and importance of in-person meetings. The moment of the meeting, being in a circle, narrating one's experience, observing the non-verbal language of the various participants... All this allowed for an exchange of views, greater sharing between the tutors and the students and between the students themselves. I believe that, in this historical moment, this type of exchange for the trainees was easier to create with their supervisors, also because they had been almost always working physically together.

Conclusions

The need to limit infections and the consequent strict social distancing measures in everyday life and work situations have led to a significant acceleration in the use of new work tools, as in the case of ICTs, giving rise to an intense debate in scientific and professional circles. The impact of the pandemic on social work, however, has also involved other spheres of professional action and has forced, more than in the past, the scientific world and the professional community to carefully reflect on the role and characteristics of the aid relationship in social work, with reference to theoretical, ethical and methodical

aspects. Some important elements of this debate have become an integral part of the content of the internship projects of social work students.

The results: of the research of this exploratory study show a context in which the internship has confirmed and strengthened its role in the development of the profession and, more specifically, provided an opportunity to develop discussions and knowledge in view of a time when Italian social work will also be more open to the use of new communication and information technologies. The trainees were attentive and interested in experiencing these new work frontiers. Discussion with their tutors helped to strengthen knowledge of the profound implications of the use of different social work tools and the development of a critical and reflective attitude towards their work.

More generally, the research materials show a training context that, despite many difficulties and with a high investment by all the actors involved, has proved able to convey content relevant to the training of future social workers. From supervisors and students it is clear that the health emergency, among its many effects, has also promoted the building of a strong bond of solidarity and knowledge exchange between tutor and student; an aspect that has contributed to making the trainee feel active and proactive in carrying out the work.

Everyone strongly feels the need not to relegate what they have experienced and learned exclusively to a limited historical period, or to work in an emergency context, but to continue working to understand what can be preserved and further developed with a view to its application even in a non-emergency context.

In this regard, the interviewees show a strong need for training on these issues in university courses and in continuous education and that directly calls the various institutions in charge of training in the field.

The relationship dimension of social work was undoubtedly particularly compressed during the period of the pandemic and some relational dynamics were experienced less than in the past (fewer face-to-face interviews, fewer home visits, less physical proximity with others). In the same way, from the rubble of the pandemic, new and different forms of relational resources were created: in particular, between supervisors and students and between the various professors and professionals involved in teaching. The awareness of the fact that the student is a resource was also strengthened in all those involved in the training process.

Also the new generation of interns, bringing their own specific knowledge, similar to what happened in the 1960s and 1970s (Neve, 2008), when the trainees carried out significant research work and gave a significant contribution with their work in the field and their reworking of the definition of spaces and working methods for social work, have made and are continuing to make significant contributions, thanks to their engagement with a competent professional community, to enrich the reflection and practices around the spaces and the ways of using the latest remote working technologies. Based on what emerges from the case study discussed in these pages, the activities of trainees present

during the Covid-19 emergency were not weakened thereby. The students, rather, found themselves to be confirmed as an important resource that can accompany a potential for innovation within a social service that is continuously changing, in step with the times but, at the same time, attentive and determined to preserve the constituent and professionalising elements of the aid process, such as the quality of the relationship with others. In this respect, a further research effort emerges as desirable, partly underway already, on a national and international level to construct an accurate map of the practical training experiences that arose during the pandemic. This may favour the production of new forms of knowledge to better valorise the provision of practical training offered to the professionals, both today's and those of the future, the fruitful outcome of the meeting of academic training and professional community spheres and between individuals with established age, experience and professional perspectives from social and institutional contexts that are in constant transformation.

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