

The sociological and humanistic roots of Relational Social Work¹

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Abstract

The paper presents the original sociological inputs to emerging relational perspectives in Social work theory, practice, and education. The seminal contribution of the Italian sociologist Pierpaolo Donati is briefly presented. The basic idea emerging from Donati's view was the social workers are not simply gearwheels in western welfare states. They are facilitators or relational guides in societal coping processes.

Keywords

Relational Sociology – Relational Social Work – Civil Society – Social Agency – Welfare System.

Introduction

Relational Social Work (Folgheraiter, 2004a; 2007; 2011) is a social work approach that drew its inspiration, direction and scientific foundation from the relational conception of sociology and social policies developed in recent decades by Pierpaolo Donati.

RSW offers a theoretical framework to understand and utilize the dynamic relationship between those helping and those needing help. It uses concepts that are current social work issues, such as power and empowerment, partnership and participation (Morris, 2004). RSW, drawing on Relational Sociology, locates these concepts within social networks, rather than individual helping relationships — a shift that social work has at times struggled to achieve (Morris & Burford, 2007).

In this article, sociological basis and key-ideas of Relational Social Work (RSW) are briefly illustrated. Then, the role that RSW proposes for practitioners is explained.

¹ Due to its scientific value and the prestige of the author, this article has been selected directly by the editor-in-chief and associate editors, without being subjected to a single- or double-blind peer review procedure.

From Relational Sociology to Relational Social Work

Relational Sociology (Donati, 2011) is a paradigm introduced and developed by Pierpaolo Donati at the beginning of the eighties of the twentieth century (Donati, 1983; 1991a). The fruitfulness of the relational paradigm is proven, internationally, by the widespread use of various approaches related to the idea of relational understanding of society (Prandini, 2015). In particular, the prospect of Donati has won many awards, such as the translation of many works. Recently there was the publication of Donati & Archer's volume *The Relational Subject* (2015).

In three important papers (Donati 1980; 1981; 1991b), Donati's relational sociology has offered many ideas to figure out a Social Work that diverged from the then existing models, and has not yet exceeded them. This Social Work has proved itself to be able to offer practitioners coordinates of unprecedented novelty.

Public Sector Gears?

Already in those years, Donati saw a first alarm signal, even imperceptible but disruptive: the professional social workers were trapped within welfare bureaucracy, unconcerned of maintaining an essential relation to the civic society. Donati writes:

Social work's crisis can and must be conceived as rigid and exploitative progressive assimilation to the mechanisms of the Welfare State, meant as an ambiguous and contradictory disempowerment of civil society. (1981, p. 9)

Considering the Welfare State after World War II, Donati feared that social workers were reduced to become nothing more than public servants who supplied standard provisions, inside the framework of the public sector. In his words, the aim of the relational paradigm is to fully question a mere «systemic operator, or official of local and governmental, a social worker only as a Local Authority's or governmental civil servant, i.e. a gear of the public sector» (Donati, 1981, p. 15).

Positively, Donati glimpsed the possibility of a professional who «can belong from a legal and organizational standpoint to a pole (public sector) or the other (voluntary sector), and carries out tasks of continuous mediation between the two, for establish forms of cooperation and vital communication between them» (Donati, 1981, p. 15). Such a flexible role «cannot take place except if social workers have an high level of autonomy and accountability». (Donati, 1981, p. 16)

The subsequent history of Italian social care professions has partly followed - but only partly - these indications, also because the old welfare-policies were not practicable. The public sector has gradually lost centrality, disintegrating into a multifaceted organizational and swirling mix. We know that this welfare pluralization process does not always result,

in the neoliberal drift, in a virtuous impact on the destinies of the social care professions: for example uncertain employment conditions, e.g freelance; and of the reduction of the degree of autonomy due to proceduralism and managerialism.

However, the studies and the current experiences of RSW show that no less flexibility, no less autonomy and no less reflexivity but not least, on the contrary, much of it is released when the social workers are able to be actually reflexive practitioners instead of gears of a system.

The most interesting hypothesis — Donati argues — is that social workers [...] are called to be privileged, and therefore differentiated, subjects which act as mediators between the domains of everyday lifeworld and bureaucracy. (Donati, 1981, p. 15)

Services' users as co-producers of help

A second important issue that Donati's relational theory highlighted is the need to «engage services' users not as recipients, but as co-producers of helping interventions» (Donati, 1981, p. 16). Donati's criticism towards practices that at those time were current, unidirectional and paternalistic, is precise and direct:

Social needs have been addressed without the subject bearers of them could rearrange the meanings of these needs and their responses in a comprehensive and coherent manner. (Donati, 1991b, p. 16)

In a next step, he points the way:

It should be avoided in any case an intervention that treats the family as a passive recipient. In turn, the family must be viewed not in isolation but as a subject of primary and secondary groups (associations, cooperatives, groups of mutual self-help, etc.). (Donati, 1991b, p. 37)

These abstract prompts have become the reference point for RSW. Over the years, many experiences in various practice fields (child protection, addictions, disability, mental health) have suggested that clinical and caring interventions «work» to the extent that the services' users and families not only have a say in the helping processes (this is the minimum) but can also be real peers in the therapeutic relationship (see for example: Raineri, 2004; Donati, Folgheraiter & Raineri, 2011; Calcaterra, 2014a; 2014b; Folgheraiter, 2004b; Stanchina, 2014; De Stefani, Torri & Bertotti, 2011).

The human help emerges from the relations and not from technical treatments. Every person, no matter how miserable — miserable indeed precisely because, according to Pascal — can always be put in a position to act, little or as much, as a «practitioner», that is, to be able to help herself and others, in the logic of self/mutual help. The intuition that the helpee can give — and through this gets — help could perhaps play obvious and

trite, but the full understanding of the «principle of reciprocity» is deeply embedded in the idea of «social relationship» that Donati has taught us, brings us up to the apparent paradox that, then, the same social workers, bound in their statutory mandate to help, can only do so with assistance at an emotional and cognitional levels by the helpees (Folgheraiter, 2014).

Promoting social relations toward a common good

A third and essential issue identified by Donati deals with how a truly «human» help can be achieved. The helping process is seen as widespread action in a social network made up of different social subjects concerned to cope their life problems. The difficulties of human life can be mitigated (though not always resolved) favoring

a development of autonomous social networks that take care of their well-being. The aim is to promote common good and social relations that create specific communities or social groups (Donati, 1991b, p. 30)

Well-being — according to Donati — emerges from

an ongoing collaboration, an empathic and practical interaction between various subjects involved in problem solving processes. The social work task is to connect them, in order to increase the possible contribution by everyone, through shared actions. (Donati, 1991b, p. 37)

More generally, Donati says the social worker has to become a relational guide of groups from civil society (Donati, 1991b). Social workers, for their very role, are such precisely because they create «solidarity instead of individualism» (Donati, 1991b, p. 32).

This insight allowed RSW to develop important analytical distinctions. At each level of practice, the subject partner of the professional is never an isolated individual, nor an abstract collective. Neither is it a network of objectified ties (according to network analysis approaches) or blocks of multiple behaviors mechanized (according to the systemic approach logic), or packages of provisions of standards (as in the case management logic). It is rather «a coping network» that is a set of people interested in a shared concern and therefore motivated to figure out together how to deal with it in a synergetic way. A thoughtful human cluster that, precisely because of it is a «network», allows each person to remain «in their own identity» and at the same time to belong to an entity joined by shared aims and meanings. Although the coping network does not have ready-made solutions at the beginning, it is confident that the desired improvements arise by working together.

If the solutions to the life problems are not supplied by bureaucratic system or bought on social care markets, but instead they are self-produced, then the following

issue arises: how can a social worker seriously contribute to the arising of the solutions within the relations' networks? Donati's thesis is that the social worker has to become a relational guide.

What does this mean? What are the implications for social work practice? The following sections will try to answer these questions.

What does «relational» mean?

Relational sociology gives us a better understanding of what the «social» is in social work (Seeds, 1990) and how the social «works» to generate well-being.

In RSW view, the helping process is not built by professionals, nor it arises from those who only need help. The helping process is developed through the relationship between the two parts.

In others words, RSW does largely the same thing as Copernicus, when he understood that it was necessary to reverse the fundamentals of classical astronomy to explain celestial motion. He succeeded in this endeavor by recasting the role of the human observer, whom he ideally located outside the stellar system, and therefore no longer on an Earth conceived as the center of the universe. In the same way, RSW does not place professional expert, with his or her exclusive abilities, at the center of a «clinical» action (and «diagnostic» observation); neither does it center on the so-called help recipients envisaged by the famous «client-centered» approach developed by Carl Rogers (1951). RSW locates the crux midway between the professional social worker and his or her interlocutors based in «lifeworlds» (Husserl, 1959) — that is, in the human communities where people and families live and interact. The basic idea of RSW is simple: a close partnership and reciprocity between expert systems and the society. This idea is consistent with social work principles, primarily self-determination, partnership and subsidiarity.

So, as its name suggests, RSW considers helping (and the consequent well-being) as a process arising from well-intentioned social relations. This relational conception does not coincide with the well-known systemic approach of family therapy (Minuchin, 1974; Pincus & Minahan, 1973; Selvini-Palazzoli et al., 1978), which also emphasizes social relations but does so negatively and somehow mechanically (Seikkula & Arnkil, 2006) by viewing interpersonal relations as 'encysted' causes of social problems that must be repaired with specific action.

Nor should the relational approach be confused with «relational psychoanalytically informed social work» (Ornstein & Ganzer, 2005; Pozzuto & Arnd-Caddigan, 2006) which, as the name suggests, is based on a clinical matrix extraneous to the essence of the social logic of helping (Folgheraiter, 2012).

Social work has historical ties with clinical psychology and with the medical model. Clinical thought has undoubtedly enriched social work in conceptual and operational

terms. However, this powerful body of thought seems unable to grasp the essence of what «social» helping is. RSW shifts the axis from psychology to micro-sociology, using the concept of intentional free action as its cornerstone, what Giddens (1991), Archer (2000; 2003) and Archer and Donati (2015) call «social agency».

RSW provides a comprehensive explanation of how solutions to social problems arise from within them. This does not mean denying that social problems often have external causes, such as the structural characteristics of society that create inequalities, exclusion, poverty or conflicts; nor does it mean denying that social problems often have internal causes, in the personalities, characters or minds of the people involved. Social workers can be active in reparative/remedial work, but they must do so looking at the capacity for action of the people involved. Social workers can and must be active in the construction of «emancipatory politics» alongside with policy makers. But social work concerns itself with structural politics within the more general framework of «life politics» (Ferguson, 2001).

According to RSW, a social worker is effective when s/he realizes that possible improvements' in difficult situations emerge from the social relations involved. These improvements are not produced directly by specific and objective inputs (administrative techniques, procedures or standard provisions); rather, they are constructed by the fortunate encounter of free shared agencies directed to that improvement. RSW does not conceive action by solitary individuals who pursue their specific goals; it always conceives the free encounter of a multiplicity of actions, which find shared goals and establish synergies. These actions are often cognitive and verbal, and are therefore pure reflexivity constructed dialogically, in the sense of the narrative approach (Milner & O'Byrne, 2002; Parton, 2003). Exchange creates «relational goods»: beneficial phenomena, only produced through the virtuous encounter of two or more acting subjects (Donati, 2000; Donati & Solci, 2011).

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