Social work, people in poverty and social exclusion: Co-construction of work reintegration projects for people in poverty

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Abstract

This article presents the results of research on the Informa Lavoro (Job Information Desk), which operates in a social context in the Friuli Venezia Giulia region. The service is aimed at people living in poverty or at risk of social exclusion who have already begun a broader process of assistance with social services, seeking to address the needs and problems that led them to the service. The research analyses, based on the voices of the protagonists, the cross-cutting factors present in various successful and unsuccessful interventions. The results show that building a relationship based on trust, reciprocity, participation and the co-construction of support projects together with experts by experience and the people who support them in facing difficulties, especially in difficult times, is one of the key elements for improving or escaping from a situation of poverty and/or social exclusion.

Keywords

Poverty, Social exclusion, Participation, Relational social work, Successful and unsuccessful cases.

Introduction

Why talk about poverty and social exclusion? What can and must be done to help people improve or escape from these situations? These are the questions that led a social service operating in the Friuli Venezia Giulia region to launch a study on one of its services: the Job Information Desk. This service, initially created to help people receiving social services in their search for work, has evolved over time to become a cross-cutting resource for social service practitioners. The joint assessment of the person's needs together with the social worker and the Desk practitioner leads to the definition of a support project in which the «need for work» is no longer necessarily the objective of the project, but rather

a means of initiating a supportive relationship, which may also include the development of a path to improvement or a way out of a situation of poverty and/or social exclusion.

The study therefore sought to examine the concept of poverty, which has been defined in different ways in the literature over time and which takes different forms and manifestations, involving various dimensions of people's lives and specific stages of their life cycle. It varies according to the range of disadvantages that individuals experience and can affect various aspects of their lives and well-being. There is therefore no single definition of this concept. On the contrary, poverty appears to be a multidimensional, complex, potentially ambiguous and changing reality, and it can therefore be difficult to clearly define its boundaries and outcomes (Sen, 2001; Chiappero Martinetti, 2006; Gregori & Gui, 2012; Pesenti & Accolla, 2012; Tuorto, 2017; Panciroli, 2019; Morlicchio 2020; Cellini & Bianciardi, 2022).

Currently, there is widespread precariousness in employment paths, accompanied by a progressive increase in individualisation and a contraction of traditional family and friendship support networks (Bergamaschi, 2005). As a result, the figure of the poor takes on new connotations, ranging from the working poor to single women and young people in difficult housing situations (Gori, 2017). Empirical evidence confirms that large sectors of society, previously considered exempt from the risk of having to turn to social services, are now susceptible to falling into conditions of marked marginalisation (Paugam, 2013). This context highlights the urgent need for multidimensional and integrated interventions aimed at combating and, where possible, preventing such phenomena of social exclusion (Tuorto, 2017).

Starting from these assumptions, the research therefore set out to understand how the Desk practitioner works with people, what methods have been developed over time to accompany people on their path out of poverty, what factors have allowed a path to be defined as «successful» and what factors have been obstacles or interruptions. All these elements, gathered from the point of view of those involved in the aid project (individuals, practitioners, and professionals and non-professionals), formed the basis for attempting to model a work intervention that, when tested in practice, appears to be effective.

The concept of poverty in social work

In the context of social work, numerous studies (Beresford, 2000, 2010; Krumer-Nevo, 2005, 2017; Boone et al., 2018) have highlighted how recent developments in critical social work theories, together with the spread of qualitative and participatory approaches, have contributed to giving greater importance to listening to people living in poverty.

Critical social work (CSW) is an alternative approach to traditional models of assistance, aimed at promoting equal access to goods and services, inclusion, freedom, self-determination and social justice (Weiss-Gal et al., 2014). Unlike classical perspectives,

which attribute inequalities to individual characteristics, CSW interprets them as the product of social structures and processes (Healy, 2000). In this view, reality is neither unique nor objective (Rossiter, 1996), and language is understood as representation and interpretation capable of maintaining or deconstructing power relations (Taylor & White, 2000; Fook, 2002).

CSW therefore requires a holistic approach that values people as active subjects capable of opposing oppressive dynamics (Ife, 2005). Social workers do not possess absolute knowledge, but must recognise power asymmetries, guaranteeing resources and encouraging the development of autonomous critical thinking (Baines, 2007; Healy, 2000). In this sense, the recipients of interventions — individuals, families, groups and communities — are called upon to participate actively in the shared construction of the support process, as they are bearers of skills and knowledge that enrich professional knowledge (Spencer et al., 2000).

In the context of participatory approaches, several authors emphasise the value of including people experiencing poverty as a strategy for understanding the complexity of the phenomenon (Beresford, 2002; Beresford & Croft, 2004; Krumer-Nevo, 2005, 2016; Lister, 2002, 2004; Mehta, 2008). Traditionally considered to have partial or insufficient knowledge, these people have been reduced to objects of study, reinforcing stigma and social distance (Krumer-Nevo, 2005). On the contrary, the recognition of *life knowledge* allows the experiential skills of people living in poverty to be valued, enriching the theoretical and operational corpus of social work (Krumer-Nevo, 2005).

The most recent literature also highlights how poverty is accompanied by strategies of daily resistance which, if recognised, can become a resource for practitioners and foster alliances against inequality (Chamberlayne & Rustin, 2002; Narayan et al., 2000; Regev-Messalem, 2014; Boone et al., 2018; Krumer-Nevo, 2005, 2017). In this vein, Krumer-Nevo (2015, 2021) developed the Poverty Aware Paradigm (PAP), a theoretical framework that integrates a structural reading of poverty with a relational and symbolic perspective, basing social intervention on the centrality of human rights (Lister, 2002; Davis & Wainwright, 2005; Thompson & Thompson, 2016).

The PAP rejects a technocratic view of the phenomenon and promotes situated knowledge that recognises the legitimacy of the experiential knowledge of people living in poverty (Krumer-Nevo, 2015). This paradigm, based on a hermeneutics of trust (Josselson, 2004), takes individual narratives as expressions of resistance (Lister, 2004; Regev-Messalem, 2014; Saar-Heiman et al., 2016; Saar-Heiman, 2019; Saar-Heiman & Gupta, 2020) and aims to restore agency and recognition to individuals by revealing the power dynamics that permeate social contexts.

This change in perspective also implies a different approach on the part of social workers, who should move beyond viewing people in poverty as mere recipients of interventions or bearers of needs. On the contrary, it is essential to recognise their resources, abilities and skills (Folgheraiter, 2011; Panciroli, 2021).

Relational Social Work (RSW), developed by Folgheraiter (1998, 2007, 2011, 2017, 2022), which serves as the theoretical model of reference for the research work described here, is proposed as a particularly effective paradigm for those working with individuals experiencing poverty and social exclusion. This approach highlights the importance of relationship-based intervention: practitioners who adopt a relational perspective engage personally with the people involved, with the aim of promoting their well-being and enhancing their ability to cope with life's difficulties.

To achieve this goal, RSW aims to mobilise and strengthen bonds between people, not only to support their natural ability to withstand difficulties, but also to tackle identified problems in a shared way. The relational networks activated may involve family members, friends, volunteers and other significant figures who together recognise the existence of a common problem, which may be social or related to everyday life. These networks are defined as coping networks because they are driven by the desire to act together to improve the situation, giving rise to collective action (Folgheraiter, 2017).

The heart of this approach lies in the daily life of communities, in the places where people live, meet and build relationships (Folgheraiter, 2013). In this view, wellbeing is not considered an individual or static element, but something that arises from relationships between people motivated to pursue it. It is therefore a form of wellbeing with a strong intersubjective dimension, built together with others and through others (Folgheraiter, 2017).

The role of a relational social worker is to recognise and value the will and skills of the people involved, promoting and facilitating joint reflection with the aim of identifying the strategies needed to improve a particular life situation of an individual, family, group or community. RSW therefore encourages an attitude of trust towards the uncertain and indeterminate actions of the individuals involved, so that they can perceive themselves as active protagonists in defining what is best for them, with equal dignity and competence compared to the social workers involved. Consequently, the relational social worker becomes a facilitator of human relations (or relational guide) and does not focus on analysing and discovering the causes of current problems, but looks to the future positively and helps people within the network to do the same (Calcaterra & Raineri, 2016).

The research context

In Italy, the first forms of income support began in the late 1990s, starting with an initial trial that saw the introduction of the Minimum Income Scheme in 306 Italian municipalities (Gori, 2023; Sacchi et al., 2023), until the introduction of a planning process to combat poverty and social exclusion with Legislative Decree 147/2017, which established, as of 1 January 2018, the Inclusion Income (REI) as a single national measure to combat poverty and social exclusion. Subsequently, with Decree Law 4/2019, the Inclusion Income was replaced by the Citizenship Income (RDC), an active labour policy measure to combat

poverty, inequality and social exclusion, which was a new measure in the Italian welfare system and constituted an essential level of benefits to be guaranteed throughout the country. This was also abolished and replaced by Decree Law 48/2023 with the Inclusion Allowance. All these measures provide for support pathways for individuals and families in terms of employment, training and care for themselves and the community, for which financial assistance is provided. In the Friuli Venezia Giulia region, where the research was carried out, the issue of combating poverty and social exclusion has long been part of social and socio-health planning. In 2019, following the aforementioned national law, the FVG Region approved the *Atto di programmazione per la lotta alla povertà e all'esclusione sociale* [Programming Act for the fight against poverty and social exclusion]. This act defines the services needed to support people at risk of poverty and social exclusion and the actions needed to strengthen the system of social services and interventions.

The decision to focus the research on analysing the good practices of the Job Information Desk led the author to exclude from the research and this contribution the issue of financial support provided at local and national level for people living in poverty. Precisely because income support measures aim, including through the provision of financial support, at integration into the labour market, it was considered important not to focus on the financial measure itself, but on the importance of services, such as the Job Information Desk, in supporting people in building a path to improvement and/or escape from the situation of poverty and/or social exclusion in which they find themselves living.

The Job Information Desk was established in 2006 following a trial period aimed at implementing the chain of resources offered by the local area to adults. The Desk has always been staffed by a single practitioner who, in collaboration with social services, health services and community actors, co-develops aid projects with people who require social and professional reintegration. The first contact with the Desk practitioner takes place through the social worker, who is responsible for presenting the situation together with the person concerned. In the first phase, the intervention focuses on jointly assessing and exploring the person's needs and helping them to become aware of their difficulties. The next step is to define the goals to be achieved and to develop and co-create a project that may involve the launch of interventions and services, as well as the involvement of all those interested in supporting the person on their journey. The person mainly maintains contact with the Desk practitioner and with all those involved in helping them to address the issues that concern them.

Purpose and methodology of the research

The research is a cognitive study aimed at investigating the support methods implemented by the Desk practitioner for people who have undertaken and successfully completed an aid project. The aim is twofold: on the one hand, to understand the fac-

tors that have led to positive outcomes (successes) through the direct experience of the practitioners and the narratives of the individuals involved; on the other hand, to analyse situations of failure in order to identify recurring characteristics and any critical issues. Through the analysis of good practices implemented by the Desk practitioner, the research aims to identify the cross-cutting and recurring elements in the various interventions, in order to contribute to a possible modelling of professional action in the context of combating poverty and promoting social inclusion. The research question that guided this work is: *What can help people out of poverty and how can practitioners, through their attitudes and knowledge, help people improve their living conditions?*

The research has a methodological framework that included a preliminary quantitative part to provide a description of the context and a second, qualitative part to analyse, based on the voices of the protagonists, the cross-cutting factors in a number of «successful» (Raineri & Calcaterra, 2016) and unsuccessful interventions. Although relevant, the quantitative dimension of the research was excluded from this article in order to focus attention on the results that emerged from the qualitative analysis.

Following the quantitative part, a sample of 10 projects was selected for the creation of as many FGs (FG), to which all the people that the service user considered and recognised as important and fundamental to the success of his path out of poverty were invited to participate (Corradini et al., 2019).

The sample sought to ensure the greatest possible variability among the situations analysed in terms of gender, age, education, family composition and municipality of residence. In addition, projects were chosen that, in the opinion of the Desk praticioner, as an expert in the field, were defined as successful. Furthermore, these criteria were also cross-referenced with objective parameters, which made it possible to select projects based on the formal achievement of objectives, the intensity of the helping relationship and the involvement of the network. The FGs examined the support process by listening to all those who contributed significantly to its positive outcome and highlighting the factors that contributed to its success (Corradini, Avancini & Raineri, 2019).

In order to further investigate the unsuccessful situations, unlike in the successful cases, it was decided to conduct a single FG with the practitioners only. The aim was to observe, in light of the identified success factors, the possible corresponding failure factors observed in the experiences of service service users who were unable to overcome their poverty, asking practitioners to provide practical examples and to initiate a process of reflection on possible mistake or on what, from their point of view, did not work (Cardano, 2003; Sicora, 2010). The FG involved ten social workers and the Desk practitioner. In this research, we decided to use data-driven analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006), not predefining a data coding system, but constructing the analysis through the emergence of themes common to all FGs. All FGs were conducted between March and May 2021. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the restrictions imposed, such as the ban on gatherings and the safety protocols observed by the service, all FGs were conducted online via the Zoom platform.

Results

Successful cases

Analysis of the FGs shows that people who turn to social services often have a history of trying to deal with their difficulties on their own, sometimes with the support of informal networks such as family or friends. In many cases, these are individuals who have experienced a period of relative stability, interrupted by unexpected events that have led to situations of economic, psychological or social vulnerability. The decision to seek help from services is described as a complex step, often hindered by feelings of shame, embarrassment and difficulty in accepting one's own condition of need. One participant, for example, recounts coming from a stable work environment, where he had never needed to request financial support, emphasising the discomfort he felt in making a formal request for help.

> *When we left, let's say that... where I came from, in the construction company, I had never had to ask for financial help; so, I also felt a little embarrassed to go and ask for help, that was a bit... you can imagine... to find us... from being not so much as wealthy... but from being able to pay the bills and rents every month to having nothing. Then I had an emotional and psychological breakdown. (Adult male, FG 3)*

The experience with the Desk contributed to promoting a significant change in the perception of seeking professional support, facilitating a positive re-elaboration of the meaning attributed to «asking for help». This action is gradually recognised no longer as an act of weakness, but as a functional strategy for dealing with critical moments in one's life. From the practitioners' point of view, there has also been a change in the attitude of service users, who are beginning to express their needs in a more conscious way and to value the helping relationship as a space for sharing and cooperation.

The testimonies collected during the FG highlight how motivation is a central element in the process of achieving the aims set out in the work aid projects. However, staying motivated is not a given: it requires constant commitment and demands that the person make significant sacrifices and efforts, such as regularly attending training courses, respecting working hours, and at the same time managing family and personal responsibilities. Motivation also translates into the ability to remain focused on goals, accepting employment opportunities that may not fully meet one's initial expectations, and reinterpreting each stage — even the most difficult ones — as part of a path towards growth and autonomy. Some participants emphasised the importance of adopting a proactive attitude in their job search, highlighting how personal initiative and constant commitment are crucial. One adult woman, for example, said that, in her opinion, those who are really looking for a job must put themselves out there and not expect others to come forward. She cited the example of the Desk practitioner, whose active and engaged

approach was a model for her to follow: showing interest, asking for information, making phone calls, getting noticed — all actions which, in her opinion, demonstrate genuine interest and help to highlight needs.

> *Being motivated … if you are really looking for a job you also have to come forward because you cannot wait for people to contact you, no one is going to call you… but unfortunately many… you can see that, I do not know… they don't care… because I'd adopt another attitude as Maria [Desk practitioner] I would always be proactive, call, want to know, also because you cannot expect other people to care about you, you have to be the one who comes forward, or shows some commitment. (Adult female, FG 9)*

A recurring element in the narratives is the fundamental role of the relational support offered by the practitioners, in particular that of the Desk practitioner. Their constant and attentive presence helped several service users to maintain high motivation even in times of difficulty, helping to counteract the sense of loneliness and confusion that can arise during reintegration processes. One young participant emphasised how the simple daily presence of the practitioner, their willingness to listen and engage in dialogue, represented a reassuring point of reference, capable of strengthening his confidence in himself and in the path he had chosen.

> *In my opinion… what made the difference, for me, was the fact that I had someone who… I went almost every day to this course, for four, five hours… and seeing every day, for example, Maria [Desk practitioner] there: «hello, how are you?». That thing actually gave me a lot of confidence. The fact that I had someone coming there every day gave me so much confidence and much more self-assurance, because I wasn't alone, I always had someone. (Young adult male, FG 6)*

In several situations, individual motivation became a collective driving force, generating peer support dynamics. Some participants reported how their commitment became an example for other service users, creating a virtuous circle of mutual help and exchange between people with similar goals. This collaborative atmosphere encouraged the sharing of both successes and difficulties, helping to strengthen group cohesion and active participation. Finally, the aid project also provided an opportunity for many service users to rediscover or rework previously unrecognised transferable skills, interpersonal skills and personal abilities. In several cases, it emerged that interaction with the professional played a key role in enhancing these latent resources, thus facilitating the empowerment process.

A recurring theme in service users' narratives concerns the quality of the relationship established with the Desk practitioner. The presence of a relationship based on trust, listening and mutual respect was a facilitating factor in personal openness, making it possible to share complex experiences and difficulties that had previously been kept silent. Service users described the practitioner as an authentic, reliable and willing listener, conditions that encouraged active participation in the co-construction of support pathways. One participant said he was a reserved and introverted person, unaccustomed

to interacting with others, mainly because of his previous self-employed craft activity. Thanks to the relationship established with the practitioner, he gradually managed to open up, recognising his relational limitations and the improvements he had made over time.

> First of all, it was positive to meet Maria [Desk practitioner] and then also her help in opening up, because I am a very, very private and introverted person. So, as she said, my silences were because maybe I was angry, because I didn't like hearing what they were saying to me, because I'm a very complicated person, but I have improved a lot in this aspect. Unfortunately, as I told you, being a craftsman I didn't have to deal with people, I used to do my job and that was it... I have very few relationships with people. Then clearly I had to learn to relate to other people... this has been very positive for me. (Adult male, FG 3)

Another element that emerged from the narratives concerns the dimension of reciprocity in the helping relationship. The process was not experienced by service users as a one-way action (practitioner → service user), but as a collaborative and mutual experience, in which both parties — service users and practitioners —had the opportunity to learn, exchange ideas and question themselves. Practitioners recognised that, in addition to performing their institutional role of accompaniment and support, they also received stimulation and lessons from the people they assisted. In some cases, participants took an active role in helping, becoming resources for other service users themselves and contributing to the success of the project. One practitioner recounted the case of a man who was initially very reactive and critical of the service, especially when he perceived a lack of timeliness in responses.

Over time, the person began to understand the organisational difficulties of the service, showing empathy and patience. This change led to mutual recognition of each other's roles and limitations, generating a dynamic of respect and trust that had a positive impact on both parties involved.

Analysis with the professionals involved in the project clearly shows the importance of operational flexibility within support services, understood primarily as availability in terms of time, presence and the ability to adapt to people's needs.

> What helped us? I reiterate, in addition to Alessio's presence and resilience, which were superior compared to others [...] the flexibility, let's call it that, of my role, of my position, was important. I mean, if we had a service that was open from 8:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. and then closed, it wouldn't work the same way, because I would answer before the cleaning shift and after the cleaning shift, during the service user's moments of concern before starting a job, etc. So, there was no Friday evening or Monday morning. This openness that our social service offers is significant because it sees the help desk as always ready and serving the citizens. So, I operate this way because that's how I am, but at the same time, the service also offers this possibility. (Desk practitioner, FG 5)

In particular, it is highlighted how the possibility of maintaining direct and continuous contact with the practitioner — even outside normal service hours — has been a reassuring and protective element for service users in moments of greatest vulnerability.

The desk practitioner emphasised how their availability, even at unconventional times (before or after service users' working hours, at weekends, or in emotionally critical situations), made a difference to the effectiveness of the intervention. The approach adopted was not limited to strict adherence to office hours, but took the form of a constant and accessible presence, capable of offering emotional and operational support even in moments of greatest uncertainty. In his words, if the service had been tied to fixed hours, many situations could not have been handled with the same effectiveness. The ability to contact the practitioner quickly also prevented people from making impulsive decisions, allowing them to feel accompanied through the most delicate stages of their journey. In this sense, flexibility is not described only as an individual choice of the practitioner, but as a structural feature of the service, which is «open» and close to citizens, offering responses tailored to people's real needs and timescales.

Difficulties encountered in successful cases

The analysis of the narratives collected during the FGs made it possible not only to reconstruct the facilitating factors in the support processes, but also to identify critical elements and difficult situations that sometimes jeopardised the success of the projects. Although potentially compromising, these obstacles nevertheless proved, in many cases, to be reasons for action and reflection, both for the people involved and for the service practitioners. Firstly, participants — service users and practitioners — highlighted how the critical issues addressed during the project had a dual effect: on the one hand, they generated frustration and a sense of helplessness; on the other, they represented an opportunity to strengthen motivation, stimulate critical thinking about intervention methods and consolidate mutual commitment.

A cross-cutting event that emerged in almost all FGs was the Covid-19 pandemic, described as a disruptive factor, capable of significantly interrupting or delaying the start of pathways to work and independent living.

> *The first Covid arrived… the day we were supposed to start there was the first lockdown. So then we started again in July, and in August he got injured in here, and so there was another… I'm laughing because it was such a year… we went through a lot. (Desk practitioner, FG 4)*

The Desk practitioner recalled that year as a particularly complex period, marked by continuous attempts at recovery, slowed down by external obstacles. For some service users, for example, the failure to complete the internship planned as part of their training courses represented a significant loss. In particular, the inability to gain practical experience generated disappointment and insecurity about their preparation and future job placement. One adult woman clearly expressed her disappointment at not being able to complete her internship, considering it an important opportunity to

test herself and feel ready to take on new challenges. Although the situation was not attributable to individual responsibility, it was experienced as a personal frustration and a lack of training.

> *One thing that saddened me was that we were supposed to do the internship... it was planned... we moved it many times... we had to do a kind of internship. In the end, we held on but then it could not be done... I was very sorry about it, because it would have been an experience that I wanted to do, my personal experience. But it's nobody's fault... I was sorry about it. (Adult female, FG 9)*

The pandemic also had an emotional and relational impact, generating feelings of isolation, loneliness and loss of hope, which negatively affected people's psychosocial well-being. Some service users reported experiencing moments of deep despair, linked to the succession of closures, uncertainties and the lack of stable references. In this context, the relationship with practitioners took on even greater significance, acting as an emotional and motivational anchor in times of greatest difficulty. Finally, for practitioners too, the difficulties associated with the pandemic and other critical events provided an opportunity to reflect on their working methods, leading them to question the effectiveness of the practices adopted, the resilience of services and the need to maintain a person-centred approach, even in times of emergency.

Unsuccessful Cases

Among the factors analysed in the cases that did not achieve the expected aims, social workers identified the self-determination of the individual as a central but ambivalent element. While in successful cases it was a fundamental resource for building a life plan oriented towards autonomy, in unsuccessful cases it emerged as a conscious choice not to change. According to social workers, self-determination does not necessarily coincide with active participation in the project, but also manifests itself in the explicit or implicit decision not to continue on the path of change.

In some cases, this choice has been interpreted as a form of resistance to change due to the often unconscious perception that the required transition was too painful or destabilising. One practitioner pointed out that, despite the availability of the service and the presence of a support network, the lack of active steps on the part of the service user prevented the shared project from going ahead.

> *I just wanted to share my experience, because I actually lived it as a social worker, in situations where, despite the proximity, the collaboration, despite everything we can imagine as a support network, if the service service user remains stuck there and hasn't moved from that spot... and there will be very valid reasons for them being there, I cannot move forward with a co-designed project aimed at job placement. (OP3)*

The practitioner recognised that, in such circumstances, it is necessary to accept the limits of social intervention, emphasising that the service user's self-determination must be respected even if it results in a choice not to evolve.

Another issue that emerged in the FGs was the resistance to self-reflection on the part of some service users, particularly in cases marked by long-term exposure to poverty or social exclusion. The practitioners highlighted how, at times, the person was unable to recognise or name their own needs and emotions, and tended to project the responsibility for their difficulties onto others.

This inability to reflect often led to the early termination of the programme, even after only a few meetings. Some practitioners interpreted the repeated and insistent requests from service users as a strategy to avoid contact with their most fragile side, which they did not yet feel ready to face. In these cases, help was not refused directly, but emptied of meaning through defensive mechanisms, making it difficult to co-construct a truly shared project.

In some cases, the relationship with the service was terminated as a result of failure to achieve the expected objectives. A recurring condition was the termination of the support project when, after an initial phase of intense and protective accompaniment, the service user was asked to take an independent step. The difficulty of sustaining this transition sometimes generated reactions of rejection and blame towards the service, resulting in the termination of the relationship. The practitioners pointed out that, in these situations, dysfunctional relational dynamics already experienced by the service user in other support contexts were reactivated, such as total delegation to the practitioners or failure to take responsibility.

Once the request for autonomy was made, the service user questioned the project itself, accusing the service of not providing the necessary support. One social worker pointed out that the deterioration of the relationship coincided with the person's realisation that the last step was up to them. The service user, aware of not having taken that decisive step, avoided returning to the service, fearing that the only response they would receive would be the recognition of this responsibility. In this sense, the closure was not formal, but occurred through a gradual disengagement from the relationship.

During the FG, the practitioners showed a significant capacity for critical reflection not only on the difficulties expressed by service service users, but also on their own actions and omissions which, in some circumstances, may have contributed to the failure of the support process. In particular, there was a growing awareness of the risk of an inadequate initial assessment of the person's needs, resources and skills.

> *Surely, perhaps I am reconsidering that referring someone to a job information desk without a well-defined and in-depth understanding of the situation does not work... I am self-reflecting on my assessment, on the immediate responses [...], maybe it would be more... or maybe my shortcomings lie in the assessment, in understanding the situations... (OP 7)*

Such superficial assessment has sometimes compromised the possibility of building a relationship based on mutual trust and, consequently, of defining realistic and shared objectives.

Some practitioners pointed out that the early and insufficiently motivated referral of service users to services such as the Desk represented a hasty step, dictated more by the need to «activate a response» than by a real understanding of the person's expressed and latent needs. As stated by one social worker, these were sometimes immediate responses that did not take into account the complexity of the situations, often rooted in unexpressed but decisive emotional and relational difficulties.

Another critical issue that emerged concerns the mismatch between the aims pursued by the practitioners and those actually expressed — or desired — by the service users. In some cases, social workers reflected on how, despite apparent adherence to the project, the person had never really shared the underlying purpose of the path to employment or independence.

> When I was thinking about this FG, I called Maria [Desk practitioner] and started mentioning names… and the names I mentioned were those of people who I have been carrying along for years, who sometimes call and say, «It's been a while since I heard from Maria». Then I get caught up in it, call Maria and say, «Well, what do you think, should we see them again?». So, when I thought about failure, these individuals came to mind, who have been dragged along for years. Aside from perhaps brief, isolated interventions they may have undergone, I can't really say there has been a concrete path — no work placement that succeeded, no activation, no well-thought-out or found job… And in thinking about failure, I categorised these cases and asked myself if, from the very beginning, we didn't have the same objective. (OP 2)

This has led to long but non-transformative paths, characterised by moments of temporary reactivation but lacking stable planning. This discrepancy has generated frustration among practitioners, who perceived failure not so much as a lack of commitment on the part of the service user, but rather as the effect of an approach that neglected to thoroughly investigate the real motivations and willingness to change. In some cases, practitioners acknowledged that they had projected their own professional goals onto the person, neglecting the other person's time, limitations and difficulties. Emblematic in this sense are the testimonies in which practitioners question the legitimacy of certain choices made, wondering whether the help provided really responded to the person's needs or whether, on the contrary, it represented a form of oppression.

Several practitioners expressed the need to learn to «read» the service user's request better, going beyond the formal dimension of the requests. The difficulty of understanding deep-seated needs has sometimes led to inadequate or ineffective interventions, which have not been matched by the person's real willingness to embark on a path of change. A particularly significant example showed how the intervention, aimed at finding employment, did not take into account the service user's request, which did not really concern work, but a different, unexpressed need.

> *If we thought his need was work… in reality, he refused the internship, he refused the job, and if we stopped at this, we could say that he didn't want what we had offered him. But she didn't ask us for that. So she, for everyone, helped us understand, helped us realise that it is truly necessary to learn to read well what people are asking of us. (OP 11)*

This misunderstanding led to confusion and ultimately to a break with the service, highlighting the importance in social work of distinguishing between explicit demand and latent need.

Sometimes, the social worker and the practitioner of the Desk, in co-constructing the aid project together with the service user and significant others, realised during the implementation of the programme that the service user, despite having declared his adherence to the project, was in fact pursuing other aims that had not been explicitly stated. The social worker found herself having to chase after the person on these aims, which were contrary to what had been agreed, or the objectives that had been defined jointly proved to be wrong or inadequate for that particular situation or life problem, perhaps because they were unrealistic, impractical or unsuited to the service user's abilities and resources.

Among the critical elements most frequently identified by social workers and the practitioner is the absence of a relationship of trust between the practitioner and the service user, identified as one of the main causes of early termination or failure of support programmes. In particular, in cases where people presented with a variety of intertwined problems (social, economic, relational, work-related), social workers emphasised the importance of moving beyond a sectoral interpretation of need, seeking to build a relationship that would allow the complexity of the situations to be addressed in an integrated manner. However, in some of the experiences shared, the relationship between the service user and the service ended with the response to the immediate need, without it being possible to initiate a broader or more continuous process.

> *So, if I think about the cases of failure, I repeat, not only from the point of view of the objectives… but truly a failure in not being able to build a sufficiently significant relationship that can still be based on mutual trust, on mutual respect. (OP 10)*

According to the practitioners, this outcome was perceived as a failure, not so much because of the failure to achieve specific project aims, but because of the impossibility of building a meaningful bond based on trust and reciprocity. As reported in the FG, the testimony suggests that the criterion for success of a support programme cannot be limited to the mere provision of services or the achievement of formal outcomes, but must include the quality of the relationship established. Mutual trust is, in fact, the enabling condition for extending the scope of the intervention beyond immediate needs and co-constructing more complex objectives related to autonomy and social inclusion.

In cases where this bond has not developed, practitioners have expressed a sense of professional failure, linked to the feeling of not having been able to create a relational space that could support change and reflection on the part of the service user.

Another critical dimension that emerged from the social workers' reflections concerns the structural difficulty of services in maintaining continuity and effective presence in support pathways, especially in situations characterised by high complexity or chronicity. In particular, the difficulty of practitioners in «staying within» situations over time was highlighted, partly due to the continuous influx of new emergencies that overlap and accumulate, generating dispersion and discontinuity in care provision.

> Our internal incapacity as services is also reflected in the lack of communication, but often because we are overwhelmed by a thousand things, by a thousand emergencies, or even, quite simply… I'll say it here… many times, I see the phone number of a service user or a service with whom I'm going through a challenging and difficult time. By now, I recognise that number and I think: «Well… it's that person calling, the one I really can't stand», and I struggle to even keep them in my mind. But we need to be there somehow, and so there's also our struggle, even as practitioners, sometimes just being with people and sometimes even among ourselves as practitioners. (OP 9)

According to practitioners, this dynamic creates operational and relational gaps, linked to miscommunication, unshared updates or overlooked steps, which ultimately undermine the relationship of trust with the service user. In these contexts, people often perceived a fragmented system, in which they moved around trying to seize short-term opportunities, without any real shared planning. This fragmentation ended up fuelling dynamics of instrumental use of services, but also feelings of mistrust, disappointment and loneliness, which sometimes led to the interruption of the support process.

Furthermore, the lack of communication and collaboration between practitioners was recognised as an element that compromises the consistency of the intervention and the system's ability to present itself as a coordinated network. In the absence of structured dialogue between the practitioners involved, service users perceived the services as incapable of welcoming and accompanying the person as a whole, failing to meet expectations for support and guidance at critical stages of the process. This internal disconnect had a direct impact on the quality of the relationship with the service user, weakening the bond of trust and undermining initial efforts to activate the process.

During the FG, the centrality of the knowledge that the person brings with them to the helping relationship emerged with particular clarity. This knowledge, rooted in life experiences, acquired skills and individual and family resources, constitutes a fundamental asset that must be recognised and valued in the helping process. This approach is fully in line with the relational approach, which recognises the service user's active role in defining their own goals and building their own path to change. The practitioners involved in the FG emphasised that the role of the social worker and the Desk practitioner is not to «guide» the service user's life project from the outside, but to create a space for support that integrates professional skills with the person's experiential knowledge. This implies the adoption of a person-centred approach based on active listening, recognition of the other as a competent subject and respect for their decision-making autonomy.

This reflection directly refers to the concept of co-construction of social intervention, according to which the project is not a predefined product, but arises from the interaction between the person and the practitioner, in a dialogical and relational process. This approach recognises the person's ability to act in their own social context, even in the presence of constraints and disadvantageous conditions. Another worker highlighted the importance of recognising the limits of one's professional role, as well as the need to protect the service user's self-determination, even if this involves choices that diverge from the objectives formulated by the service. In this sense, the social worker must be able to support the complexity of the helping relationship, adopting a reflective stance and making use, when necessary, of the tools of professional practice, such as teamwork or supervision.

Discussion and conclusion

Returning to the purpose that gave rise to this research project, namely to investigate the ways in which the Job Information Desk supports people in poverty, it is worth dwelling on the elements that emerged from the analysis of the FGs. These have made it possible to highlight the factors that favour the co-construction of aid projects from a relational perspective, as well as the obstacles that affect their outcome. The data collected clearly show that a positive path is always characterised by elements of relationality, even when the people involved are not fully aware of it (Folgheraiter, 2011, 2017).

The accounts strongly highlight the role of the Desk practitioner as a link between the various actors in the coping network (Folgheraiter, 1998). She takes on the role of relational guide (Folgheraiter, 2011, 2017), capable of reading the situation in its entirety, highlighting skills and potential (Sen, 2001; Gregori & Gui, 2012), and co-define goals, actions and resources to be activated together with the service user. In this perspective, the person is not a passive recipient of help, but an active protagonist of their own journey. The practitioner recognises the person as the «best expert» on their own problem (Krumer-Nevo, 2017) and values their knowledge, experiences and coping strategies, reinforcing their agency (Folgheraiter, 2011; Simon, 2013). This approach allows for the recognition and support of existing positive functioning, motivating the development of new resources and solutions (Calcaterra, 2013).

Among the facilitating factors identified in the adoption of a relational approach, the shared definition of goals proves to be decisive. In successful cases, the constant motivation of the service user and the coping network was fuelled by the close and continuous presence of the practitioner, who provided support, encouragement and reinforcement (Saar-Heiman et al., 2017). Conversely, in unsuccessful cases, the lack of a common goal led to fragmented action by the various actors, resulting in the premature termination of the helping relationship.

A further cross-cutting factor concerns the building of trust. The literature confirms that this is a necessary condition for an authentic and transformative relationship (Krumer-Nevo, 2016, 2021; Folgheraiter, 2017). In the accounts analysed, people who experienced a relationship of trust with the practitioner felt welcomed, listened to and supported, perceiving the professionalism as credible and transparent. Trust generated openness, sharing of difficulties and a willingness to review strategies and tools together in a reflective manner, thus promoting processes of reflective learning and relational empowerment (Cabiati & Folgheraiter, 2016).

From a methodological point of view, the practitioner adopts an approach aimed at strengthening reflective action (Folgheraiter, 2011), supporting the person in detaching themselves from welfare models (Folgheraiter, 1998) and accompanying them in the co-construction of the support project. In this process, professional and experiential knowledge are integrated (Raineri, 2010, 2021), generating shared and innovative responses. The enhancement of expert and experiential skills has proved decisive in creating effective and sustainable solutions.

However, the research also highlights some obstacles. Among the main ones, in addition to the absence of shared goals, are the fragmentation of services, bureaucratic rigidity and the difficulty of ensuring operational continuity, aspects that have already been highlighted at the international level (Lymbery, 2006). Added to this is the resistance to self-reflection on the part of some service users, as well as the possibility that they may choose not to change: an aspect which, while respecting the principle of self-determination, can have a negative impact on the continuation of the pathways.

The characteristics of the services are therefore decisive variables. Factors such as geographical proximity, stability of practitioners, organisational flexibility and availability have fostered the establishment of solid relationships and meaningful co-construction processes. Conversely, organisational fragmentation, lack of interprofessional coordination and structural constraints have compromised the quality of the intervention and the continuity of the pathways.

In light of this evidence, social work is called upon to enhance the active participation of people, not only by involving them in individual projects, but also by promoting community networks and spaces for peer sharing (Folgheraiter, 1998, 2016). Listening to people's life stories in all their complexity allows us to recognise not only their difficulties but also their skills and resources, restoring their dignity and agency (Gregori & Gui, 2012).

In summary, this study confirms that the quality of social work is not measured solely by the formal outcomes of projects, but above all by the ability to build meaningful relationships based on trust, reciprocity and recognition. The RSW approach and the *Poverty-Aware Paradigm* (Krumer-Nevo, 2016; Cabiati & Folgheraiter, 2016) are therefore privileged tools for promoting inclusion, autonomy and well-being, provided that services are able to create the appropriate organisational and professional conditions to support them.

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