

To be a manager in social services: the relational perspective

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Abstract

This article explores the role of managers who work in social services according to the perspective of the Relational Social Work Method. The Relational Social Work Method helps to highlight managers' specific skills and competences in social services where they don't dispense standard products to the market, but instead they take care of people and their life problems.

The article presents part of the results of a broader qualitative ethnographic study which analysed the activity of six Italian managers identifying functions and distinctive features. The study uses two research techniques: shadowing and semi-structured interviews.

The study identifies and then explores five specific functions of managers who work in social services: 1) promoting participation; 2) fostering empowerment; 3) providing technical expertise and professional supervision and being directly involved in the field; 4) identifying and promoting discussion of the ethical issues involved, 5) assuming responsibility.

Key words

Management – Relational Social Work Method – Organizational ethnography – Shadowing – Social services

Introduction

It is recognized that managers play a central role in the proper functioning and development of social services (ESN, 2014b). Indeed, the effectiveness of social services depends not only on the work of practitioners, but also on how people in leadership and coordination roles operate (Wilson, 2009). Managers are responsible for defining operational procedures and work practices to be used by professional's social services and in doing so they influence how each single intervention for assistance is implemented and the work of the service and the organization in general.

The role of the manager working in social services has changed over the years, also as a result of institutional changes caused by the rise of neoliberalism which has impacted the welfare systems of various European nations, including the social welfare sector (Dominelli & Hoogvelt, 1996; Penna, Paylor & Washington, 2000).

This article starts from the idea that being a manager in the social services does not mean simply applying procedures or working solely to reduce costs and evaluate performance and results. Being a manager is more complex. The manager must take into account the directives of policy makers and superiors as well as budgetary limitations, but without losing sight of the real aims of the organizations for which they work: guaranteeing social services that help people cope with their life problems (Folgheraiter, 2011; Raineri 2004).

This paper explores the role of managers who work in social services according to the perspective of the Relational Social Work Method, which helps cast light on the specific skills and behaviours of managers who must care for the individual on a daily basis. In particular, managers who work in social services must facilitate the «well-being» of the people through service and welfare interventions.

Starting with a review of the literature on the subject, the paper presents some of the results of a broader qualitative ethnographic study (Biffi, 2016) which analyses and describes the managerial activity of six Italian managers, identifying functions and distinctive features.

Brief overview of the literature

Notes on the evolution of management theories

Focus on management as a doctrine, and as a field of interest and study, has a long history. Management theory was born with the great economists of the past (Adam Smith, David Ricardo, John Stuart Mill, Karl Marx), but was developed following the Second World War (Drucker, 1974).

A succession of management theories and schools of thought have since appeared which have been influenced by the prevailing historical and economic conditions of the time. The different theories can be traced to three major schools of thought (Morgan, 1997; Hatch, 2006).

The first concerns the scientific model and includes the theories that see the organization as a machine (Taylor's Scientific Management, the Administrative Management of Fayol, the Bureaucratic Management of Weber). The focus is on improving the performance of organizations through rationalization of the work environment. The second school of thought is concerned with the human aspect and includes those theories that regard the organization as a social system (the Human Relation School of Mayo, the Behavioural

School of Barnard, the Humanistic Psychology of Maslow, McGregor's X and Y Theory, Skinner's Operating Behaviorism, Herzberg's Two Factor Theory, Argyris's Organizational and Individual Development Needs, Likert's Leadership Styles). This thinking refocuses attention on the central role of the individual with its psychological and social implications, on a humanisation of the workplace, focusing on job satisfaction, the nature of the work, the environment, participatory and engaging communication, and leadership styles. The last approach concerns the systemic school of thought, which includes those theories that see the organization as a complex system (System Theory of Boulding, Johnson, Kast and Rosenzweig, the Contingency School, a theory developed by scholars such as Woodward, Fiedler, Lawrence and Lorsch, among others, Hersey and Blanchard's Situational Leadership, the Blake Mouton Managerial Grid of Blake and Mouton). This approach seeks to find a balance between the earlier schools of thought and focuses on an awareness of the dangers of a mechanistic view of organizations, on the assets of a vision based more on the relationship between the elements of an organization, the reciprocal conditioning and influencing, and the awareness that their inter-relationships «become a system».

During the time, some authors (Drucker, 1974; Feldman, 2005; Mintzberg, 2009) described management function has a dynamic process based on practice and learned by fieldwork experience in a particular framework. Mintzberg (2009) argued that the best way to be manager is act in according to each situation. This author refused two main ideas of management: the idea of manager as a meticulous and systematic planner of his/her activities¹, and the idea that is not advantageous to focus the reflections exclusively on the natural talents and qualities that a «good manager» should have². Attention is given to the role of guide and facilitator (Drucker, 1954; Mintzberg, 2009): starting from the idea that the manager's action cannot exist without the involvement of other people, through his/her function the manager helps people to express personal energies and abilities.

In 2008 a group of managers and management researchers produced «Management's 25 Grand Challenges» (Hamel, 2009), which describes twenty-five significant challenges of management in the context of the prevailing situation. The document reveals a new way of understanding organizations, which are interpreted as places for living, and for this reason it highlights the importance of extending management's responsibility towards socially significant purposes. The challenges call attention to the need to ensure that organizations are genuinely human and therefore places where people can flourish and have lives worth living, incorporating the ideas of people and communities by recognizing the interdependence of all those involved, promoting trust, encouraging diversity, facili-

¹ Mintzberg argued that to program, to control, to coordinate and to organize-the 4 phases introduced by the French Henry Fayol in 1916- describe only partially the manager's activity.

² About the theoretical reflection on management, Mintzberg contended that during the decades attention was given to «the best way» to be manager (starting from 1916 when Frederick Taylor defined his method as «the best»). Conversely, according to Mintzberg (2009) doesn't exist the «best way» to be manager for anyone in any context or time.

tating employee autonomy and re-examining issues related to the hierarchy, promoting the exchange of ideas, talents, resources and imagination.

Literature on social services managers

The relatively small amount of literature on the subject suggests that the work of social services managers is characterized by constant change, excesses of paper and technical work, dwindling resources and the strain of being positioned as buffers between funders, more senior management, front line staff and service users (Healy, 2002).

Managers who work in the social services operate within a context and with a particular goal, both of which influence the way they work. They are not professionals who build tangible items using scientific criteria. They work within a social context that is a complex whole of relationality and unpredictability, rationality and irrationality, where social interventions cannot be pre-codified or have definite applications or outcomes (Dominelli, 2004). Goods produced by the social services are intangible in nature, which makes them difficult to measure and quantify. As a result, the actions of managers cannot focus solely on the efficacy and efficiency of the service or organization for which they are responsible.

In addition, managers who work in social services must navigate between the directives of policy makers and the practitioners who work with the service users (Folgheraiter, 2011; Calcaterra, 2013). Given that managers are surrounded by politicians, colleagues and co-workers, they become the point of reference for the needs of each of these groups.

They must possess many skills (Hoefler, Watson & Preble, 2013; Watson & Hegar, 2013) and must be able to combine managerial skills (typical of managerial roles) with the specific skills of the caring professions (typical of social services). Business skills, fundraising and human and financial resources management are also important in dealing with the consequences of the economic crisis that has likewise affected social services. Interpersonal skills, commitment to users, dedication to the mission, integrity and ethics are important because they help managers understand people and social issues. Efficacy and efficiency must go hand in hand with the principles of participation, trust, loyalty, honesty and reciprocity, social justice and equity. Managers are challenged to develop management approaches that recognize the demands of the new environment without sacrificing the humanitarian value base and knowledge of the complexities inherent in professional practice (Healy, 2002).

With regard to the excess of technical, procedural and bureaucratic work (Healy, 2002), some authors (Banks, 1995; Gosling & Mintzberg, 2004) propose reflective work processes for managers, which counteract approaches and practices that concentrate solely on the procedural aspects of the activity. Some studies (Aronson & Smith, 2011) demonstrate that many managers are resisting the implementation of organizational practices

that focus solely on the procedural aspects of the work and budget limitations because these practices do not always guarantee the protection of individuals and marginalized communities for whom the social services are intended. Managers who use reflective and collaborative strategies encourage professionals autonomy and empowerment and this has a positive influence on the quality of work and results. In this way the person becomes the focus in the work of the social services, a prerequisite for genuine social work (Gvaldaitė, Švedaitė-Sakalauskė & Buzaitytė-Kašalynienė, 2014). When managers adopt collaborative practices, they feel it to be congruent with their professional identity, with the aims of the service they manage and with the activities of front line staff (Shanks, Lundström & Wiklund, 2015).

The manager in social service and the Relational Social Work

The Relational paradigm (Donati, 2010; Folgheraiter, 2004, 2007), which was developed in the context of social work education and practice (Cabiati, 2016, 2017), suggests that an organization can work in a relational manner not only in the field, but also at management and policy level.

Relational Social Work is a method for which the process of existential problem solving, in whatever setting it takes place, presupposes free encounter and synergy among diverse individual efforts and points of view. It is not the outcome of unidirectional cause-effect intervention. According to this conception of welfare, well-being is not achieved through the manipulative procedures of welfare professionals and systems. On the contrary, it maintains that freedom of cognitive elaboration and the serious commitment of people in community networks can be crucial resources for the functioning, and the purpose itself, of welfare organizations and policies.

Folgheraiter (2007) defines Relational Social Work as a practice paradigm in which professionals identify and resolve problems by facilitating coping networks (conceived as a set of relationships between people interested in a common aim) to enhance their resilience and capacities for action at both individual and collective levels. Participative and inclusive ways of working are engaged to mobilize and develop supportive and problem-solving networks that can include family members, friends, neighbours and professionals, such as teachers, health workers and social workers. Relational Social Work focuses on relationships as the basis for change. The central idea is that change emerges from a reciprocal aid. The practitioner helps the network to develop reflexivity and improve itself in enhancing welfare and, in turn, the network helps the practitioner to better understand how s/he can help it, even when the matter is to counter structural inequalities.

The Relational paradigm (Donati, 2010; Folgheraiter, 2004, 2007) overturns the normally taken-for-granted assumptions in mainstream social work, which is that if we exploit the prescriptions furnished by scientific knowledge, it is possible to eliminate people's

problems. This «salvationist» claim is gainsaid by relational theory, which provocatively suggests that it is the human energy that emanates from motivated people that «resolves» the problem of the apparently growing inefficacy of welfare systems. It is sociality and humanity, modulated in the correct ethical and scientific terms, that legitimate whatever helping practices are adopted (Folgheraiter & Raineri, 2012).

In the Relational perspective, managers within organizations (executives, middle managers and area or team coordinators) create the conditions to enable their social workers to act as relational guides in interactions with social networks and bring the related learning back to the organization. To create such conditions, managers do not take a directive approach to defining the actions that need to be taken or the services to be made available to front line workers, but neither do they leave practitioners to face the problems on their own. Instead, managers steer and direct the methodological process by which coping strategies are identified. The managers promote rules, procedures, structures that foster relational behaviour in each care pathway, in the planning, implementation and verification of community projects, services and provisions (Folgheraiter, 2011; Calcaterra, 2013).

Methodology

The study, some results of which are presented in this paper, aims to examine the role of managers who work in the social services (Biffi, 2016). Using an ethnographic qualitative approach (Van Maanen, 1988; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995; Floersch, Longhofer & Suskewicz, 2014; Haight, Kayama & Korang-Okrah, 2014), the study involved 6 successful managers in order to understand how they work and to identify their characteristics. The study was conducted between May 2013 and May 2014.

Research tools

The two tools used in the research were shadowing and semi-structured interviews. Shadowing requires that the researcher observes the subjects, taking note of everything they do or say (McDonald, 2005; Earley, 2012; Czarniawska, 2014). The researcher followed the managers like a «shadow» during a working week, participating in all their activities (staff team meetings, meetings with politicians and other organizations, phone conversations, and so on). The data were collected into a field diary, in which the researcher wrote down everything that managers did and said and everything that happened in the organizations where the managers were working. The data were then analysed using thematic analysis, identifying similarities and differences in the observed experiences and identifying issues related to the functions of the manager.

The semi-structured interview involves the interviewer having a framework of topics to explore (Bryman, 2008). The interview was carried out at the end of week of shadowing and made it possible to collect information on the education and training of managers and to explore issues that emerged during the observation.

The sample

Quota sampling based on professional standing was used in the research design. People in the study were identified by the professional community as «mangers of success». No specific criteria have been adopted to individuate mangers of the present study. They were identified through key informants (Bryman, 2008) (social workers and managers engaged in the community in which selected managers work). Key informants gave all the requested information to define the sample. The sample consisted of 2 Local Authority social services managers, 2 managers of Third Sector Organizations and 2 directors of Consortiums of Municipalities.³

In presenting the results of the study, a code was given to each manager to guarantee anonymity and at the same time facilitate the identification of distinctive features that distinguish one manager from another.

The characteristics of the managers in the sample were as follows:

- LA1 Female, 49 years. She has worked for the local authority for 11 years and has performed a managerial role for 23 years. Observation period: May 20-24, 2013.
- LA2 Female, 46 years. She has worked for the local authority for 19 years and has performed a managerial role for 15 years. Observation period: December 2-6, 2013.
- TS1 Male, 60 years. He has worked in a Third Sector Organization for 11 years and has performed a managerial role for 19 years. Observation period: January 13-17, 2014.
- TS2 Male, 48 years. He has worked in a Third Sector Organization for 21 years and has performed a managerial role for 16 years. Observation period: May 5-9, 2014.
- CM1 Female, 55 years. She has worked in a Consortium of Municipalities for 9 years and has performed a managerial role for 20 years. Observation period: September 16-20, 2013.

³ In Italy there are several organizational forms for social services (142/1990 Act). The study focused on managers who work in three types of organizations: Local Authority, Third Sector and Consortium of Municipalities. Consortium of Municipalities is a grouping of Local Authorities (Legislative Decree 267/2000). It allows social functions to be carried out in a cooperative manner to ensure increased efficiency and rationality.

- CM2 Female, 49 years. She has worked in a Consortium of Municipalities for 11 years and has performed a managerial role for 14 years. Observation period: February 24-28, 2014.

Findings and Discussion

The results of the study are presented using narrative methodology (Mishler, 1986; Riessman & Quinney, 2005). This method involves alternating between a description of the observed events (excerpts from the field diary of the six shadowing) and subjecting the various useful concepts to analysis. An argument is then developed that is supported and illustrated by parts of the observations or extracts of interviews.

From an analysis of the data, specific functions⁴ were identified for managers who work in social services. These functions are coherent with some key concepts of Relational Social Work Method.

In short, a manager who works in social services:

1. promotes participation: a) practitioner participation, b) service user participation through the professional activity of front line workers;
2. encourages empowerment: a) empowers practitioner and consequently fosters organizational empowerment, b) promotes services and organizational methods able to empower service users;
3. provides technical expertise and professional supervision and is directly involved in the field: a) is a point of reference for technical/administrative questions, b) promotes methodological reflections on the work method, knowledge development and resources activation in order to deal flexibly with work and relational processes, c) plays a «double role» (managerial functions and working directly with care users);
4. identifies the ethical issues and encourages individuals to think about them: a) is aware of the ethical issues and dilemmas, b) manages conflicting duties, c) solicits ethical reflections, d) promotes equity and social justice;
5. is responsible: a) is responsible for their own actions in relation to superiors and policy makers, the organization, professionals (individual and group), users and society, b) is responsible for the actions of the practitioners towards superiors and policy makers, users and society.

⁴ Functions refer to the activities that a person carries out in their own work.

The manager who works in social services promotes participation

One of the main tasks of the manager is to define practices and procedures within the service that s/he directs. Such procedures should promote user participation in decisions that affect them, also in line with the Statement of Ethical Principles (Ethics in Social Work Statement of Ethical Principles, IFSW & IASSW, 2004), and the Italian Social Worker Code of Ethics (Ordine Nazionale degli Assistenti Sociali, 2009).

Promoting front line participation means guiding the actions of the social workers towards involving the users, who are regarded as experts of their lives and able to identify useful strategies to cope with their problems. As a result, users and individuals are not passive recipients of interventions decided by the professionals.

During a team meeting, it is seen that TS1 helps operators to organize a project on the subject of interculturalism. The manager suggests that in organizing the project, the staff should involve some foreign nationals who use the social services, as they are experts of their culture and history. (Field Diary)

«On issues of gender-based violence, I would like to increase the number of local volunteer workers.» CM1 believes that the objective of the European Union «Daphne programme» is to involve the local community, schools, and third sector organizations. «Our objective is to promote the local community and, within a year, replace our professionals with volunteers at the abuse help centre, not because we have no resources or staff, but because we think it's better for the local situation and for the women.» (Field Diary)

The manager should encourage participation also at management level. The manager receives help from collaborators (team, other professionals, volunteers, active citizens, and so on) in carrying out his or her task of defining practices and procedures. The manager who works at promoting employee participation has the task of encouraging interaction between all parties, leveraging the skills of each and focussing on the aims of the organization. In this way the manager encourages reflection, fosters action, and promotes participatory decision making.

«I worked with one member of the administration when I was in the technical department of the local authority and we didn't always get on — says LA2 —. Then I became manager for the social services department and I asked him to come and work in my Department and he agreed. His legal expertise is very useful for us and I think this is where he can make the best use of his knowledge. I really want the administrative staff to go beyond just getting the job done by also offering their own personal contribution.» (Interview)

The more the manager encourages the participation of employees in how the service is organized, the more employees are willing and able to bring creative ideas that influence the organization. In this way, organizational procedures emerge from the bottom up within the context of the indications defined by policy makers (Calcaterra, 2013).

CM2 defines the objectives of the Organization starting from the bottom. She asks the professionals of the various services managed by the organization to share difficulties, critical issues and areas of their work that need to be improved. These areas will become the objectives pursued by the Organization as a whole. (Field Diary)

The manager who works in social services promotes empowerment

It is recognized that the purpose of the social services is to enable people to «empower themselves» and to achieve «self-determination». Empowerment is a process which from the point of view of those who possess it signifies the «feeling that one has power» or «that one is able to act». From the point of view of those who facilitate it in their interlocutors it is «a strategic attitude which increases the likelihood that people will feel themselves in power to act, or conversely the technical ability to prevent people from feeling that they are powerless» (Gutierrez, 1994; Bandura, 1997; Folgheraiter, 2004).

The manager must empower her or his team by giving them power and making them feel capable. The manager uses strategies to strengthen the authority of practitioners, and leaves people free to assume their own responsibilities and to experiment.

During LA1's observation week, a new person started work in the social services administrative department and she was nervous and inexperienced. The person in question was engaged in assigning a council house to a citizen. The situation was complicated and it was not possible to use the standard allocation procedure. For this reason, the person was very worried and said she was unable to sleep at night because the situation concerned people's lives and this made her feel that she had to do the best she could. She often asked LA1 how she should behave and what procedures should be followed in order to move forward in the best possible manner. LA1 always listened patiently to this person, took on responsibility for those aspects of the work that the person did not feel up to handling, kept her updated and helped her to complete the tasks that she believed the new employee could accomplish on her own. She helped the staff member to handle anxiety and emergencies, and to organize and prioritize her work. The employee undervalued herself but the manager supported her and tried to bolster her confidence: «It is not true that you don't understand anything, you're handling one of the most difficult jobs of my office. Don't worry!» The manager then explained the importance of allowing the individual to be as autonomous as possible, while making sure that she would not feel isolated when she needed help. In the end the employee demonstrated that she understood the meaning of the work and the reasons for some choices. She managed to carry out complex tasks independently and, with a sense of accomplishment, she informed LA1 of all the steps that she had managed to complete for herself. (Field Diary)

The Relational Social Work Method (Folgheraiter, 2004, 2007) proposes that one should work in such a way as to promote relational empowerment. The manager fosters relational empowerment when s/he understands that ceding part of her/his power to

practitioners will make them more effective. Doing so s/he also enhances her/his role considering that relationship between managers and professionals is based on reciprocal exchanges.

Promoting employee empowerment, the manager promotes organizational empowerment (Gui, 2009), which is based on the knowledge that an organization grows and develops only if the people who work there grow and develop. The ability of the manager to foster a working environment where people feel valued and where they can make a dynamic and proactive personal contribution can have positive effects on the empowerment and the well-being of the individual employee and the entire organization.

During a meeting with all service managers, TS2 proposes that the group should read and reflect on an article that addresses the issue of organizations that nurture the responsibilities and talents of the people who work there. The idea underpinning the article is that the organization grows if the people who work there grow. So how can we develop people, be they employees or service users? (Field Diary)

In addition, the manager must develop procedures within the service they manage that are capable of promoting the empowerment of users and individuals. Managers must foster in their team the ability to work with people in order that they become empowered.

The social services manager provides technical expertise and professional supervision and is directly involved in the field

The manager is the point of reference for practitioners, colleagues, superiors who often ask for procedural, organizational and legal guidance. The manager offers recommendations and suggestions as regards the work practices of the organization and other organizations.

In addition, managers encourage social workers to reflect on methodology, helping team to think about the work methodology, how knowledge is cultivated and how resources are activated to deal with the work and relational processes.

When working in a team, managers help social workers to define strategies and operational approaches, to think about the meaning of their decisions, the consequences of their choices and the purpose of the work. They bring the viewpoint of the users, the organization and other agencies. They stress the logic of their decisions, reveal the reasoning behind any proposal that is made, and help and encourage social workers to maintain good relations with the various stakeholders involved in the processes. Some use verbal reformulation (Rogers & Kinget, 1965) as a methodological tool to help professionals to reflect on their work practices. (Field Diary)

The managers help social workers, superiors and members of other organizations to reflect on the purpose of decisions surrounding the interventions involving persons

or families in need. They endeavour to see beyond the single action and to help others to do so. Above all, this means helping social workers to connect with the purpose of their actions in relation to the case, group or community work that they are doing.

«Reflect on the purpose of the meeting - says LA2 - and on the basis of this reasoning, evaluate who should be involved.» (Field Diary)

During a meeting with staff from other organizations, TS2 states: «Are you saying that if we have to do a project together we should share a common sense of the meaning and not only agree about the organizational aspects?». During discussions with his team, the same manager tries to shift the debate from specific to broader issues; he wants to think about the meaning of things and the goals to be achieved: «I don't want to get to the end of the project only to say that we have done a host of things but we were unable to transfer tools or work practices to the community. When practitioners are no longer there, I do not want everything to disappear. What do we leave to the community?». (Field Diary)

The social services manager is directly involved in the field. Consequently, the manager plays a «double role» (Folgheraiter, 2004; Calcaterra, 2013) in carrying out managerial functions and also working directly with the users. Such direct involvement fosters a global view of the work and allows managers to experience for themselves the difficulties that practitioners encounter in their work on a daily basis.

All managers are directly involved in the field. Third Sector and Local Authority managers are also responsible for working directly with people, carrying out interviews with individuals and with their families, facilitating group work and so on. The directors of the Consortium of Municipalities maintain direct relations with the representatives of local organizations with whom they work for different projects. (Field Diary)

The manager who works in social services identifies the ethical aspects and stimulates reflection on these issues

What for a manager is just a technical issue (concerning a simple application of the rules) may be an ethical problem for someone else (a difficult decision but one that clearly must be implemented) or an ethical dilemma for another (those situations where there are no correct solutions). This depends on how each manager sees the situation, how s/he experiences the taking of moral decisions and how s/he prioritizes ethical principles (Banks, 1995).

During a meeting concerning the financing of the organization's operations, TS2 emphasized the ethical value of the relationships created between the organization and the companies/people who make donations. «Of course, we must admit that large companies give us donations, but at the same time we may not agree with everything. Some hardly know us. Sure, they give us money, but then it's our job to try to involve

them more in our activities. [...] We have to involve them in our projects, in our services, and in the things we do.» TS2 says he does not agree with a funding strategy where an activity or project is presented at random to a private company in the hope of obtaining funding. The manager thinks it more appropriate, credible and ethical to find the right project for that company in terms of its particular characteristics. «We need to examine the project in depth in order to present every angle, we must speak of the people for whom it is intended. In this way, maybe the companies will also become enthusiastic about it!». (Field Diary)

With regards to ethical issues, the manager is aware of having to deal with duties that may conflict with each other. In this regard, managers move between professional duties (especially if the manager belongs to professional groups that have a specific code of ethics such as social workers, doctors or lawyers) and duties dictated by the organization of which s/he is a member (which the manager must respect as an employee of the organization). Sometimes these duties clash (Banks, 1995; IFSW & IASSW, 2004).

During a training course, LA1 says: «I am a government employee, but also a social worker. If I don't respect the ethical code concerning confidential information about service users, I face legal consequences.» She explains that she finds it difficult when politicians ask to read reports or documents relating to service users. As a social worker, she cannot do it, but as an employee, she must follow the orders of her superiors. (Field Diary)

The manager's task is to stimulate reflection on ethics in social workers, colleagues and superiors, and to fight for moral values and principles. The manager is asked to take an ethical position and to define practices and internal procedures within the service that are consistent with that ethical position.

A social worker asks LA1 to defend some families who have not paid for their children's school meals. The social worker believes that, as a social service, one must fight for these issues because school meals cannot be for the sole benefit of well-to-do families. (Field Diary)

With regards to ethical considerations, specific attention is paid to issues of equity and social justice (IFSW & IASSW, 2004; Banks & Nøhr, 2012) which are closely related to the functions performed by managers in organizations.

Equity refers to distributing resources equitably and the fact that resources are limited poses the problem of the efficient and tenable use of the money available. Resource management is a specific skill of managers who work in social services and is an increasingly important and sensitive issue in light of the economic crisis. The impact of the economic crisis on individuals and communities has been considerable, not only in Italy but also in many European countries. The increase in demand for services together with the reduction in public spending have led to profound consequences for social services and their ability to adequately respond to increased requests for help (ESN, 2014a).

LA2 explains to a social worker why she does not want to pay a course for a girl with a Court order for her protection: «The Local Authority cannot do everything for everyone. If I pay a course for that girl I have to also pay for the other children that the Court has entrusted to the Local Authority». (Field Diary)

Social justice does not refer solely to economic issues, but also involves challenging unjust policies and practices. This relates to the task of the manager in defining operating procedures within the service that oppose work practices that exclude certain categories of people.

The team ask TS1 if it is possible to have some users participate in the activities managed by the organization free of charge. In particular, a member of staff presents the situation of a disabled boy who risks being returned to the Roma camp - his father is in prison for serious crimes and the mother cannot take care of him on her own. The manager discusses with her the possibility of enrolling the boy for free at their day care centre for the disabled in order to give him access to care and the opportunity to socialize. Given that the organization is non-profit and based on Christian principles, the manager considers it consistent with the aims of the organization and the associated ethical principles to allow access to users who live in difficult circumstances, even if the costs are not covered. The manager also considers that the same situation would apply to an elderly person being allowed to participate in activities for free, if professionals are certain that s/he is in difficult financial circumstances and if such activities are useful to the person in question. «We can use two criteria: whether the activity is important for that person and whether the person finds themselves in economic difficulty. You can then apply these two general criteria to specific situations.» (Field Diary)

The manager who works in social services is responsible

One of the things that characterizes and complicates the task of the manager is the fact that s/he moves between the political administrative institutions (policymakers) and the action of front line staff who have direct contact with individuals and service users. The manager has therefore a responsibility to superiors and politicians, the organization, professionals, service users and society.

In relation to the possibility of suspending the activities for two months during the summer in the light of the decision of the Institution that pays for the service, TS2 states: «Two months of suspension of activities is a lot for everyone: for the kids, for the cooperative, for the practitioners». There are many people involved and there is a responsibility to everyone. (Field Diary)

The manager is directly responsible for his or her actions in relation to superiors and policymakers, the organization, practitioners, service users and society.

One of the tasks of managers is that of transforming the ideas and indications of superiors and policymakers into concrete operational projects, taking account of the pro-

fessional activity of the staff and keeping the focus on the service users. So the manager is responsible to superiors and policymakers regarding his or her ability to translate their directives into reality and make them workable.

«I am very happy - says CM2 - that I have been able to define the rules governing the home care in line with the requirements of policy makers. Through this step of fairness, services and pricing have been changed. This has been a significant improvement for our area». (Interview)

The manager is also directly responsible to the organization because the action of the manager influences the growth of the organization. If the manager promotes employee participation and empowerment, people feel valued and in a work environment where they can make a dynamic and proactive personal contribution. Staff contributions are an asset to the organization which can grow thanks to contributions from motivated people who feel empowered by the manager.

The manager is directly responsible for her or his actions regarding practitioners because s/he guides their professional activity by defining operational practices and procedures. In this way, s/he defines how they should work and so influences the well-being of the individual staff member and the group as a whole. In addition, being responsible for professionals as a manager means «taking care» of them (Wilson, 2009). In this case, the responsibility does not mean an obligation to respect a set of formal rules, but instead implies the ability to understand the needs of the team, in the knowledge that it is the duty of the manager to ensure their well-being.

Local Authority managers have instructed social workers not to fix appointments with service users late in the day, when there is no one available at the Local Authority office and the situation could be dangerous. In particular LA1 says she wants to stay in the office until all the social workers have finished the interviews in order that she can step in to help if necessary. (Field Diary)

Managers are directly responsible for their actions in dealings with service users, individuals and society because their decisions influence the outcome of interventions.

LA1 discusses the situation of two children with colleagues and asks: «If we arrange the intervention without involving child protection who also have a psychologist, can we be certain that these children will have a sufficient level of professional regard? I'm worried about them. For me it is important to know that professionals with different skills will take care of the situation». (Field Diary)

The manager is also responsible indirectly. The manager is ultimately responsible for the work of practitioners in dealings with superiors, policy makers, service users and society. The manager is responsible for the work of his or her team in dealings with all stakeholders. For this reason it is important to define practices and procedures that

guide social workers towards a methodological paradigm that promotes participation and empowerment, to provide technical expertise and methodological supervision, to maintain focus on ethical questions, and to combine management skills with the specific skills of the caring professions.

Conclusions

This article presents some results of a more extended study conducted with the aim to examine the role of managers who work in social services. From the data analysis emerged managers' specific functions that are coherent with some key concepts of Relational Social Work Method and that are below briefly summarized.

The social services manager fosters the participation of practitioners and service users through the work of front line staff. Facilitating professionals participation in his or her work, they experience for themselves the positive outcomes achieved by involvement and more easily learn how to work with service users by involving them. If service procedures are defined together with all stakeholders (professionals, service user representatives, and so on), they are more easily respected because they are actually shared. If the procedures are respected, the service performs better and that is precisely the manager's goal.

The manager fosters practitioners empowerment and as a consequence also organizational empowerment, and promotes organizational services and methods capable of fostering service user empowerment. This means distancing oneself from the idea that the function of the manager is solely to give directions, and it also means distancing oneself from the idea that people are left alone to face situations. Increasing empowerment means supporting people by giving them confidence in their abilities without taking their place.

Managers are the point of reference for their practitioners for technical and methodological issues. In addition, in social services it is important that managers can «experience reality», and one of the ways they can do this is by participating directly in the activities of the service. There is a two-fold benefit to the direct participation of managers: the service will derive benefit from all the information and knowledge of the managers, and they in turn will benefit from learning new strategies acquired through practical experience in the field.

The manager who works in social services identifies the ethical aspects and stimulates reflection on these issues. In particular, s/he must manage at first hand issues concerning equity and scarcity of resources. The combination of management skills and those of the caring professions makes it possible to produce services and interventions that are within budget without sacrificing the very values that underpin them.

Managers are responsible for their actions regarding all those categories of people they are in contact with and they assume these responsibilities through practical and

everyday care activities. They are also responsible for the actions of team with regard to superiors and policy makers, service users and society.

Managers and coordinators who work in social services and according to a relational framework promote the conditions that enable social workers within their organization to adopt a methodological approach to social work that engages relations in tackling social problems and enables the services to present themselves as organizations open to social relations. A relational style of management allows front line work to be relational.

On a daily basis, managers who can be defined as «relational» strive to aid the realization of a system of services in which the participation and involvement of practitioners, service users and society play a central role. Such managers feel responsible for all the categories of people with whom they have contact and they assume this responsibility through practical care on a daily basis with a view to promoting empowerment for both individuals and the community. They are present, dynamic and proactive, able to engage with passion in services that enhance relational and ethical aspects, where it is important to obey principles that promote social and economic justice and where the moral dimension is recognized as a value that directs professional actions.

The relational manager is able to value people, the relations between them and to learn from the experience and knowledge of others, because s/he is aware that the knowledge of the other will allow her or him to perform better as a social services manager.

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