The Social Work scientific research: A non-sociological style of sociological studies?[1]

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Abstract

What is the science that social workers have to refer to? The paper discusses that Social work is a discipline at all and consequently that there is also a type of social research that is strictly attuned to the sense and to the work of social workers. In the first part of the paper the autor presents the Participatory research as particularly suited to the heuristic needs of Social work because it permits to structure the observation of extreme human suffering by enlarging the external mind of the researcher and connecting it with minds directly involved in the problem. In the second part, the paper discusses of the specific empirical studies of Social work that differentiates this disciplines from sociological or social policy studies.

Keywords

Social work – social work research – participatory research

1. Once upon a time there was an epoch when we all stated, ingenuously and without blushing, that Social work was an art (Richmond, 1917). We would like to be able to say it this way again, *sic et simpliciter*, but the price to pay would be, nowadays, too expensive. Romantically rejecting any contact with positive science, we would come to suggest that Social work is not a profession, a paradoxical and counter-empirical affirmation for a sensible practice of such historical roots (Bortoli, 2013). In many parts of the world we even have Associations/Registers officially defining it as *a profession* (Folgheraiter & Raineri, 2012). By definition, a «profession» is a complex and discretionary practice directely referable to specific scientific knowledge (the current one, of course). Karl Popper explains that scientific knowledge is fed through two simultaneous channels. The first one is the rigorous rational speculation, addressed by the imagination (in the formulation of hypotheses) and supported by the logical sense (in the setting of the research design and in the conduct of the reasoning). The second one is the meticulous empirical comparison with «things», with the «true and specific» reality we might say if it were not so difficult to

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say, in every field of knowledge and particularly in the human sciences, what «the real» and «the specific» effectively are.

Therefore, a so-called professional area is not really such if it does not have its own *scientific discipline* (Prandstraller, 1980). A scientific discipline, in turn, must have, as a first requirement, its own «object of study» which has to be different from other fields even if they are related; as a second requirement, this object must be investigated, eviscerated, compared, weighed, measured with *rigor and objectivity*. An object of this nature makes it possible to formulate falsifiable concepts or theories (Popper, 1994). The progressive attempts to falsify scientific theories lead to the accumulation of corroborated data (i.e. validated, but always hypothetically and provisionally) that constitute the cognitive and sapiential heritage of the specific profession. All professions now recommend to act in connection with such data, following an evidence-based perspective (Gambrill, 1999). In social work, this positivistic trend can show, as we shall see, cracks and even sometimes misleading, but it cannot be simplistically rejected or circumvented (Gray, M et al., 2009; Thyler, 2012).

To comply with the requirement of falsifiability, the object of scientific disciplines must be consistent with the empirical research, that is scientific research by definition. Empirical research requires an engagement in a methodical confrontation with reality (Popper, 2009), a confrontation in which our limited human mind challenges the complex nature of «reality» that too often, as epistemologists say, are elusive or changing or illusory, reality reserved, jealous of themselves, who do not intend to let themselves be penetrated and decoded only partially and only, so to speak, by those who deserve it (Husserl, 1997).

For our purposes here we start from the premise that there is «a science» of Social work that is the direct reference of «the Social work profession» (Folgheraiter, 2012). Just as Medicine, for example, is the reference of doctors, Pedagogy of educators, Law of lawyers, etc., we affirm that even social workers refer to Social work, that is to say their own recognized science and not so much, as often we resign ourselves to believe, to a jumble of collateral sciences. Consequently, we hypothesize that there is also a type of social research that is strictly attuned to the sense and to the work of these willing, and in many ways also brave, professionals.

2. Social work studies the shaken and painful «us». It studies the meaning of our existence when we feel it shaky or tragically senseless due to lack of relationships and emotional understanding; when life in common collapses and, as a reaction to suffering or «unbearable» worry, it exudes - so to speak - in search of help and alliances; when my experience and my action of confrontation intertwines with yours or with that of others, in a relational dynamic that generates a tension to respond together (associatively) to the perceived challenge.

Social work captures deep subjectivity and allows subjectivity to remain subjectivity even when it is combined or intertwined with other similar subjectivities, giving rise to the

sharing of pain. It is intertwined subjectivity giving rise to the sharing of hope and necessary action. It is subjectivity that is always recombined as deep existential intersubjectivity, something that remains pulsating existence even if, as it moves towards an open future, in some ways it «solidifies» and manifests itself as a structured action.

Social work does not operate with statistical artifacts but with people in flesh and blood. One of which may be the social worker itself, or other persons with statutory responsibilities that may be present in the relationships (such as the magistrate, or the principal, or the parish priest, or the doctor, the mayor, etc.). The «specific» of Social work is the ability of various human subjects interested to associate themselves to face the existential hardships (that is, worrying events related to the way of life) that those same human subjects recognize and define. (Folgheraiter, 2003; 2012; 2017). With this limited set of agents it is essential not to lose deep contact as we meet them to study them, taking into account that they can study us while we observe them. The suffering along with the action expressed by the Alter can change due to the interaction with the scholar, so that he becomes part of the studied reality.

3. We must seriously ask whether objectivity is ever possible under such conditions. Would not it be advisable to cut short, and stay more with your feet on the ground? It would be like thinking this way but ... we would be wrong.

To better understand the nature of our humanistic field of study, and proudly accept it, we can help ourselves by considering the impressive modern developments of theoretical physics, the hard science by definition (Capra, 1982). As in the social sciences, even in the physical-mathematical sciences, reality can be distinguished in two great areas: the physics of the macroscopic world (the events we see with our eyes) and that of the microscopic one (the invisible reality of atomic and quantum physics). In macro physics we can keep the idea that there is a certain objectivity. It is reasonable to state that reality is stable and exactly measurable/determinable, through Newtonian concepts and its well known formulae. If a stone falls on our foot we feel it and we can measure, if it is worth it, the strength with which it hits us, etc.

Instead, in subatomic physics (in the motions of the particles and in the energies that are in the nucleus of the atoms) the carrying logics sound differently. Here the interaction between observer and observed reality, between measuring instrument and measured values, is powerful: the measuring instrument modifies the measured values. The very mass of particles, which seems the most concrete thing existing, melts in our hands. When we go deeper into the structure of those entities, we see that mass does not even exist. The mass is ultimately nothing but energy. We Westerners have struggled to understand these things, due to the limitations of our limited cerebral frameworks (maybe eastern philosophers have understood it better). The new frontiers of physics - that is to say the hardest science - are characterized by the principle of indeterminacy (formulated by Heisenberg) and therefore also, the queen of all sciences, as the most humiliated human

sciences, and particularly the sciences who study human action arising from perceived suffering, must penetrate an evanescent and fleeting subject, that in some cases does not even exist because it is just «created» by observation. This, however, does not prevent physics from being, or feeling, scientific, indeed it is even more so. Because the challenge, out of a trivial determinism, is more stimulating.

So if the Social work, to be scientific, must ape something, it has to ape the right thing! I must not be fascinated by mechanics, but by quantum.

4. There is an attitude of the researcher that is particularly suited to the heuristic needs of Social work. Before proceeding, let us note the surprising affinity that in the field of existential help, is found between what happens at the level of research and at that of operating. The principles of professional methodology (Folgheraiter, 2003; 2011; 2017) - those principles that from various points of view warn the practitioners of not being able to do everything by themselves in «producing» desirable changes – finally prove themselves to be useful for a correct investigation. Let's talk about the so-called Participatory Research (Aldridge, 2015; Cornwall and Jewkes, 1995; Turner and Beresford, 2005; Fleming et al., 2014). Looking at it with the gaze of other disciplinary fields, «participatory research» may seem - again – a frail scientific style of research (not objective enough). It is therefore often viewed with suspicion. On the other hand, for the Social Work Theory, that is to say for how the field we are discussing is devised, it offers good insights in order to solve the dilemmas we have discussed about. It is the kind of research that allows us to respectfully approach the unapproachable reality of the vulnerability of others. (Lizzola, 2017). It is therefore, for our field, the «most scientific» method that can be imagined at the moment, and it will remain such as long as the aim of every science will be that of developing a knowledge that is as suitable as possible to its specific disciplinary object.

In short: what is the basic idea of participatory research? It is the one according to which the researcher must carefully balance, in the research process, the necessary dose of detachment, distance and aseptic conditions, with the equally necessary dose of closeness or empathy or even immersion in the desired object. A researcher must «stand out» without too much emotional involvement and at the same time «stay close», if not even «stay inside». If researchers do not know the object of his research «by experience», they are perfectly external and detached, but they will never understand anything. If researchers are too involved and know too much from within the observed situation, they will distort their observations with their ego and, paradoxically, they will never see what is really inherent in the object.

A researcher who is himself ill with the disease he is studying can certainly become an excellent scientist, but in order to be like that he will have to engage with even greater force, and an extraordinary capacity for ego decentralization, to the external anchorages of scientific knowledge and the rigor of the method, in order to be able to speak lightly of his pain, as if it were that of another (Shakespeare, 2017).

On the contrary, a fortunate researcher who has never been ill or disabled, who has not yet experienced the suffering either directly or within his family, will need, in order to understand the sense of what he is studying, to lean on a person who «knows all these things».

In social work, the right balance we are referring to is rarely attained spontaneously. It is therefore necessary to figure out procedures, to move with a certain strategy. Human frailty and vulnerability are the most personalized phenomenon, contextualized and submerged under the surface of evidence that can be imagined. My pain and my despair are different from any other and will give energy to the action of contrast differently. They are always distant and foreign realities for those who are outside. For example: what can I understand about what it means to have lost a child in a car accident or to have lost a child because the Court ordered the removal? If I do not come into contact with these realities (hopefully, even without actually entering), they will always slip from me.

The idea, then, is to structure the observation of extreme human suffering by enlarging the external mind of the researcher and by connecting it with minds directly involved in the problem. Let us therefore imagine forming a researching network, a sort of augmented mind (Prensky, 2013) composed of multiple and sensitive points of view that are both internal and external to the studied events.

In the participatory research scheme, the research team is constituted by the researcher supported by a qualified representation of people similar to the people that the research intends to investigate (or at the limit are the same). All the phases of the research, from the definition of the research hypotheses, to the construction of the tools (questionnaire or interview trace), to the data collection, to the analysis and interpretation of the results, are shared with representatives coming from the sample of respondents.

The latter bring internal experiential knowledge, the researcher brings the external control and the necessary detachment to ensure that the data are as objective as possible, despite being (and having to remain) data heavily imbued with immeasurable subjectivity.

5. The specific empirical study of Social work (different from sociological studies or social policy studies) can be hypothetically divided into the following areas.

a) *EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCES AND RESILIENCE. How do people, families and local micro-communities feel when they are hit by adversity? How do they get together to «keep going» to the problems of their life?* This area studies the reality of human existential suffering: how a shared sense of fragility/vulnerability can be understood and represented. More generally, it studies how the associated suffering becomes energy, the capacity for resistance, seriousness and responsibility for one's own lives (*care*). An in-depth research is required here and it can be primarily attempted with interviews and/or focus groups and/or narrative methods, etc.

b) *COPING AND RECOVERY. What do the people involved in the severe hardships do to get out of it?* This area studies the dynamics of coping actions that start from the

aforementioned internal suffering: how the care of individual subjects engages the care of others and structures the caring associated (caregiving and various relationships of mutuality) (Donati, 2010). This research focus can be grasped with case studies or with research-action methods and also with network analysis.

c) *DEVELOPMENT OF EXPERIENTIAL COMPETENCES.* How the experience of a deep shared (relational) confrontation develops in common people significant existential capabilities (human ability to help) also of para-professional order (*natural helpers* or *experts by experience*). These realities are studied primarily with real life stories.

d) *VALIDATION/STANDARDIZATION OF PROFESSIONAL METHODS. Does this method work in general? If I use it, do I place myself within the evidence based approach? Does it trigger the expected deterministic or probabilistic effects better than others?* This area concerns the scientific corroboration of professional methods used by social operators (methods as, for example, counseling (Mucchielli, 1987; Seden, 2005), mutual/self-help groups (Steinberg, 2002) motivational interviews (Miller & Rollnick, 2014), Family Group Conferences (Morris, 2007) foster care project devised in a participatory way (Calcaterra, 2014; Raineri & Calcaterra, 2017) abstractly, without reference (or with weak reference) to this or that context of use. This is experimental research, ideally achievable (with intrinsic limits important for social work) with the counterfactual method, as well as indirect studies on scientific literature (*systematic reviews*).

e) *EVALUATION OF PROFESSIONAL INTERVENTIONS. Was this specific «personalized» help action effective? Was it worth it or did it waste public energy/money?* This area studies the empirical evaluation of interventions carried out and already implemented professional practices or projects (including social work education), with particular reference to the satisfaction of the recipient / involved subjects. This is an *ex post evaluative research*, which can be pursued through a mix of traditional methods, both quantitative and qualitative.

f) *ANALYSIS OF BEST PRACTICES AND EFFECTIVENESS FACTORS. What makes an intervention or a social project that works valid and exemplary? What factors «work»?* This area studies the optimal ingredients and the particular organization or the master idea that has guided the realization of practices that are unquestionably considered (or following a scientific evaluation of which point *e*) are successful (*good practices*) or even the best ones (*best practices*). More generally, efficiency factors can be observed across several «successful» interventions. In this context, we primarily carry out the research with case studies or with secondary studies based on the available literature (*systematic reviews*).

g) *WELLBEING AND COMPETENCES OF THE PRACTITIONERS. What do the social workers do and how do they feel?* This area studies social professions within existing welfare systems (developed or emerging): how professional social workers or

welfare managers live and organize their daily work within services (workloads, training, experiences and stress borne, acquired or missing skills, relations with the management, etc.). These are quantitative descriptive research, such as surveys, or qualitative research with interviews and/or focus groups.

6. Some of these areas allow us to glimpse at specific «Social Work» research (research *in* social work); others instead social/sociological research «on social work» (research *on* social work). On the one hand, we can detect the endogenous/idiographic research of social work (observation/understanding of the starting painful reality and/or accompanying «in their making» of processes/events proper to professional action), on the other hand, the exogenous research, or social research on the realities and/or current practices of social work.

The first three points focus on the free action of social subjects within relation contexts, even or especially related to the world of so-called *informal care*; the remaining points are centered instead on the action of social professionals, on their methods, on their achievements, on their location within the welfare organizations.

Point *d* (objective validation of professional methods) is a type of research particularly demanding and must be carried out with rigorous quantitative methods (even in the classical forms of counterfactual analysis, for example). However, the research design must necessarily become sophisticated so as to take into account the intrinsic degree of relationality of the studied inputs, in order not to inadvertently be confused with the mere contingent evaluation research (addressed to in point *e*). The study of social care methods (unlike health care, in general) requires researchers to take into account, in the search for «deterministic» effects, that the professionals investigated in their work are by definition external and detached from the vulnerability of others and must therefore connect with the feeling of Alter and co-constructing the «solutions». Therefore, the problem is that the administered input for the controlled experiment is out of the operator's control for at least fifty percent and that the effective solicitation of Alter's contribution is a fundamental element of the method's value. Consequently, input is not really deterministic. It is an interaction process only partly predictable *a priori* and that can be classified as correct input only after a careful *ex-post* observation. This complicates the whole process.

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