

Go and return home: A mutual/self-help group between parents with looked-after children

Francesca Corradini

Catholic University of Milan, Italy

CORRESPONDENCE TO

Francesca Corradini

e-mail: francesca.corradini@unicatt.it

Abstract

Studies that investigate the experience of parents of looked-after children demonstrate that the removal of children from the home deeply marks the lives of the people involved and that the birth parents feel pain, anger and guilt. This is due to a lack of confidence in the interventions proposed by social services, along with the feeling of not receiving any kind of help.

Mutual/self-help groups allow people to share their similar, difficult situations and to develop collaborative, supportive and trustworthy relationships. Following the logic of «helper therapy», each member of the group is at the same time both helper and helpee.

This paper presents the experience of a mutual/self-help group with parents whose children are in care, carried out in 2010 within the Child Protection Service of the Municipality of Modena, a city in central-northern Italy. It provides a description of the process of constructing the group and a summary of the main issues that emerged.

The group helped participants overcome the barrier between helpers and helpees and increased mutual trust between parents and social workers. Relational Social Work provided the theoretical and methodological framework in which the mutual/self-help group was realized.

Key words

Children in care – Birth parents – Mutual/self help groups – Relational Social Work

Parents with looked-after children: background and experiences

Studies that investigated parents' experience with Child Protection say that the out-of-family placement of a child due to an order by the Court or the Local Authority deeply marks the lives of the people involved.

A literature review carried out in Australia (Harries, 2008) highlighted certain recurring themes that emerge from research on the experiences of families whose children have been looked after:

The absence of attention to the voices and experiences of parents: there are few studies aimed at illuminating the experiences of parents with looked-after children, it is more frequent that research focuses on the relationship between parents and social workers in the assessment phase or project definition. The parents also complain that their voices have not been heard (Tilbury and Ramsay, 2017).

The absence of attention to the emotional reactions of the parents: there is little research that takes into account the feelings of parents who are in the process of moving away from their children. Moreover, research demonstrates that social workers do little (or do nothing at all) to help parents rework their negative experiences, as if parents' feelings were not important (Memarnia et al., 2015).

Problem-focused orientation and dominant negative discourses: research reaffirms extremely negative images of families in need of Child Protection Services, painting them as indolent, dangerous or unsuitable for raising children (Schreiber et al., 2013; Gibson, 2015). Moreover, social workers often use adjectives such as «inadequate», «dangerous» or «incapable» to define the parents whose children are looked after, and this attitude can affect the ways in which social workers relate to the parents themselves (Featherstone et al., 2014).

Focus on negative constructs of mothers: several authors highlight how negative judgements on parenthood almost always coincide with judgements on motherhood. Mothers are the ones assessed as incompetent and incapable, often based on stereotypes linked to a social image of parenting that attributes the functions of caring for children exclusively to women (Holland, 2010).

Importance of family and the continuation of contact between parent and child: virtually all literature on the topic shows how the maintenance of relationships between children and at least one member of the birth family makes reunification at the end of foster care placement more likely (Thoburn, 2012; López et al., 2013). Even when return to the birth family is not possible, continuity with family members increases the stability of the foster care placement (Andersson, 2009).

Problematic relationships between parents and Child Protection workers: the position of social workers in situations of out-of-family placement is ambivalent since they have the task of protecting children and often have to undertake coercive interventions that may involve removing children from their parents. On the other hand, they have the task of helping families overcome difficulties in taking care of their children and supporting them during the reunification process (Healy and Darlington, 2009). Parents show little confidence in social workers, who are seen as being in positions of power and often unwilling to listen and change their ideas according to family proposals (Corradini and Corradini, 2012).

Generally, research clearly shows that most parents with children in care experience feelings of pain due to the loss of their children as well as anger and guilt for not being able to prevent their removal (Dumbrill, 2006; Salveron et al., 2009). Regarding their relationship with social workers, parents mainly experience disempowerment combined with a feeling of being deceived, due to having received little information, and often being confused in different situations (Palmer et al., 2006). This involves a lack of confidence in the interventions proposed by social services along with the feeling of not receiving any kind of help (Dale, 2004).

Even on the rare occasion that placement occurs with the consent of the family, the experience of disempowerment is strong as there is a feeling of not having power over one's choices along with the shame of a stigmatizing situation (Smeeton and Boxall, 2011; Gibson, 2015). Parents feel expropriated of a fundamental function for the construction of their identity, and they struggle to recognize in social services' professionals those who could provide support in order to help improve their relationship with their children.

Professionals also often experience impotence and difficulty in establishing constructive relationships with parents (Gladstone et al., 2014), and it is common to think that the removal of a child is the «final point» rather than the «starting point» of a project (Buckley, 2010).

Mutual/Self-help groups: an effective support

The origin of the mutual help concept dates back to the beginning of the century, when the Russian scientist Kropotkin (1955) theorized the importance of mutual support for human evolution. Mutual help seems to be a natural characteristic of the human being in relation to others (Calcaterra, 2013); however, over time, this natural predisposition has intertwined with the professional skills of social workers, particularly if it is related to work with groups (Papell, 1998).

According to Steinberg (2010, p. 54) mutual/self-help is a process through which people: 1) develop collaborative, supportive and trustworthy relationships; 2) identify and use existing strengths and/or develop new ones and 3) work together towards individual and/or collective psychosocial goals.

These dynamics develop within small dialogic groups that show certain clearly identifiable characteristics. First, people share similar life conditions or face the same issues, and this communality constitutes the aggregating element from which the group originates (Gitterman, 2006). The sharing of experiences within the group makes all members peers: they all are in the same difficult situation and are all able, like others, to help (Katz and Bender, 1976; Olson et al., 2005). The mutual/self-help groups are originally constituted as autonomous experiences independent from services (Hatzidimitriadou, 2002), as the emphasis is on the help that comes from exchange and mutual exchange

between participants, not from the technical know-how of professionals (Borkman, 1976; Knight e Gitterman 2013). From this perspective of autonomy, it is necessary to emphasize the importance of voluntary participation, understood as the choice of each participant to participate in a group (Corradini and Corradini, 2012), even if it is possible to place different situations in an intermediate area between completely voluntary or coerced participation (Gitterman, 2006).

Reciprocity is fundamental in defining the self-help process: following the logic of «helper therapy» (Riessman, 1965), each member of the group is simultaneously both helper and helpee. Putting oneself in the position of providing help, understanding and support allows one to think about one's situation and increases one's sense of self-efficacy and self-esteem, leading to a condition of greater well-being (Silverman, 1989).

Mutual/self-help groups face different situations of difficulty, linked to specific problems (mental health problems, addiction, eating disorders, disability) and harsh life conditions (mourning loss, being adoptive parents, being foster families) or to caregiving (Flora et al., 2010).

In her text addressed to group facilitators, Steinberg (1997) points out that self-help can be observed through two closely related dynamics: the process and the result. The result is linked to the achievement of goals that the group (and each member of the group) has set in relation to the problem that is being faced: for example, if the group is made up of individuals with alcohol addictions, the goal that they set would be to stop drinking.

The process is instead related to the development of mutual help within the group, i.e., the effective perception of mutual help: everyone feels that, during meetings, he or she has given and been given something. These dynamics are possible because, within self-help groups, everyone's experience, which is often full of hard work and sometimes desperation, is emphasized, is valued and becomes experiential knowledge that is useful to everyone.

As Raineri states (2017, p.25): «the mutual/self help group can be considered as a context in which, through the processes of sharing and dialogue, knowledge and experiential expertise emerge, are spelled out in words and compared, are provided with some structure and thus become useful for all participants».

Self-help groups are therefore a place where empowerment and social capital (Folgheraiter and Pasini, 2009) develop to the highest degree.

Although independence from professional help is a feature of self-help groups, social workers have often supported and accompanied groups or movements to promote self-help.

The presence of professionals within the groups can take various forms: it can be constituted as support in the start-up phase, an accompaniment along the whole process, or a support to specific initiatives (Drumm, 2006). However, when the group is promoted within a Social Service, it is necessary to guarantee the group's autonomy and to avoid any attempt at control by professionals (Silverman, 1989).

Mutual/self-help groups as a coping network

As Raineri (2017) pointed out, the perspective of Relational Social Work (Folgheraiter, 2004, 2007, 2011, 2017; Folgheraiter and Raineri, 2017) offers a useful theoretical framework and certain consistent methodological insights to study the experience of self-help groups.

The Relational Social Work framework is based on the idea that, in situations where people are facing life problems, help does not derive from decisive attitudes and unilateral proposals of professionals, who diagnose situations and propose various types of therapy. On the contrary, only by sharing the expert skills and the experiential knowledge of those directly involved is it possible to co-construct paths for improvement.

A professional helps all individuals interested to develop reflexivity and find strategies, while the individuals involved help professional to understand how best to help them. Even on the basis of this brief description, the connection with different principles of self-help is patent: first of all, with the principle of reciprocity, where according to the Relational Social Work framework, as well as in self-help groups, there is no expert who makes decisions; instead, solutions derive from dialogue and comparisons between all participants.

The improvement of challenging conditions resulting from this process benefits not only those involved but also professionals who feel they have developed their skills (Folgheraiter, 2017). Another fundamental element is the peer level: all those who participate in a relational approach to improve a difficult situation bring their experience and work together with others without a hierarchy of decision-making. In the same way, all the participants in a self-help group are placed on the same level in the reflective and dialogical paths, which are necessarily open, indefinite and not pigeonholed within predetermined hypotheses.

In the Relational Social Work framework, the group of people available to meditate and to commit themselves to the improvement of a problematic situation is called a coping network (Folgheraiter and Raineri, 2017, p.14): «a set of relationships between people concerned about a shared aim, for example, the aim of sorting up a social life problem». The self-help group can be considered a coping network whose purpose is «directed inside», that is to say, the purpose is to improve the living conditions of the members of the group (Raineri, 2017).

The self-help group includes the main characteristics of a coping network: voluntary participation, peer level, direct interaction between members in order to encourage dialogue and reciprocity, common purpose, and indeterminacy of paths.

The professional's position in a coping network is not to direct the work but to facilitate it: it supports the interactions and creates the conditions for exchanges to be valuable and enhances the contribution of each individual.

The facilitator (or relational guide) «moves between directivity and non-directivity» (Cabiati and Folgheraiter, 2016) and keeps his or her focus on the goal and accompanies

others to collaborate for the same cause. It can be said that a facilitator «acts retroactively» as he or she intervenes in the second measure only when the network is in a situation of deadlock, and works mainly through feedback and reformulations in order to stimulate shared reasoning.

These ideas can be extended to mutual/self-help groups, which do not provide management or coordination functions, only facilitation. It is precisely the difference between facilitating and leading that can help social workers define the type of group they work with and outline their position relative to other members (Doel and Sawdon, 1999). A social worker can support the start of a self-help group, encourage meetings between people who share the same difficult situations, and act as a facilitator in a group, always, however, with a subsidiary attitude with respect to the members of the group (Raineri, 2017).

The «Go and return home» (Andata e ritorno) group experience

The experience of the self-help group «Andata e ritorno», which helps parents whose children are placed in a foster family or in a children's home, was launched in 2010 within the Child Protection Service of the Municipality of Modena, a city of 180,000 inhabitants in central-northern Italy.

In the Italian context self-help groups are still uncommon (Pasini, 2006) and often move in parallel to social services without integration or sharing except in rare cases. At the time it was started, this group was highly innovative, as self-help opportunities for birth families of removed children were few and were mainly carried out by children's residential home organizations. It may be useful, therefore, to report the professionals' reasoning at the time of starting the group, to then provide a description of the process of constructing the experience, and conclude with a summary of the main issues that emerged throughout the process.

Why self-help in working with the families

The choice to propose self-help for birth families within Child Protection service could seem (and so it seemed to many «insiders») to be a risky choice. The doubt that parents, who were judged negatively for not being able to raise their children, could provide help to other parents, was present in many social workers and psychologists, alongside perplexity from professionals who had to act exclusively as facilitators within the group. In addition to these objections, service managers feared the negative dynamics that could have been established between people deemed «inadequate», along with the fear of a coalition being formed that was united against the services; still others believed

that maybe nothing negative would happen, but the group would be useless, with the discussion remaining on a superficial level without reaching the root of the problems.

The project was based on a deep trust in people and on an awareness of how bonds with children strongly motivate parents, and also, perhaps above all, how these bonds motivate parents whose children are looked after in regard to overcoming the difficulties that hinder them from being full-time parents. Alongside these considerations, there was the desire to emerge from a dichotomous scheme that contrasts voluntary and coercive interventions. The choice was to focus predominantly on relationships, even if this meant for social workers «to put themselves on the other side of the desk» and get involved directly as people and not just as professionals.

The Relational Social Work framework provided the theoretical framework through which the professionals understood the problem of work with the birth families and the tools with which the project was hypothesized and realized.

The building of the group

Following the suggestions of the Relational Social Work framework (Folgheraiter, 2011), the starting point of every intervention is the identification of a concern about a life problem, this concern is felt by those who live a specific situation directly or by someone who decides to get involved in it. The concern must be shared by all those who seem motivated to face it and must be «transformed» into an operational purpose that will then be discussed again with all those involved.

The project was born from the joint consideration of two social workers, starting from the problems related to work with birth families after the removal of children: there was a lack of parental involvement, proposals for standardized and inefficient paths, and a low number of children returned to the family. The fact that parents are often excluded from consideration when a project of action is built in situations of out-of-family placement was considered. The imbalance of power between practitioners and families, who feel they are hardly involved and completely dependent on the decisions of professionals, is also evident.

Understandings of this problem from a proactive point of view have been transformed in order to provide greater support to birth families. This, along with the idea of working better with parents and ultimately facilitating their reunification with children. Therefore, a first reflective coping network was established that, beginning with the two social workers, progressively involved other professionals and service managers.

During the process, the hypothesis of the construction of the self-help group came to the forefront in the perspective that the self-help group empowered and enhanced the experiential skills of families. Joint consideration led to the definition of certain criteria aimed at identifying potential participants: it was decided to involve parents in the group

who were allowed to meet their children, both free and with supervision, and for whom the out-of-family placement had occurred at least for some months. No restrictions on the personal characteristics of the parents were set, apart from a basic knowledge of the Italian language and a minimum ability to stay within a group; however, people with psychiatric problems in the acute phase were not included.

Given the removal problem, it was considered appropriate to find potential participants through the social workers who were in charge of different situations. It was not conceivable to solicit a spontaneous enrolment on the part of the parents, because the only available contacts could be provided exclusively through the social service. The facilitator, a social worker from the service, held meetings with professionals in various local teams to identify potential participants. We tried to use a non-directive style to share as much as possible between the practitioners the purpose of the group and to define the most suitable way to invite each parent.

Connecting this network was rather tiring, particularly because of the need to respect the time of others and bureaucratic priorities. Several meetings were therefore necessary to get in contact with all the social workers and to build a shared idea for the group. The difficulties that emerged in this phase demonstrate that it is not enough to perceive a problem or even share it with other people to create a coping network. All professionals involved, in fact, recognized how difficult it is to work with birth families to encourage child reunification, but not all recognized the need to work more with their parents. Some believed that other paths were preferable, such as working with foster families; others did not judge the strategy of self-help positively, as it was considered too «risky», not effective or simply useless.

The involvement of suitable participants took place through contact with their social worker.

The purpose of the meeting was to present problems to parents and to be understood as if they were perceived by those directly involved. In addition, we tried to explain the essence of self-help. All the people involved clearly recognized the condition of loneliness and the experience of stigmatization due to the situation with their children. However, not all of them agreed on sharing this problem with others, even though they were facing the same situation. An initial group of six people was therefore formed.

It was an «open» group (Doel and Sawdon, 1999) that could be attended at any time. Throughout, some parents exited the group, while other enrolled in it. The meetings were held every fortnight in the presence of two social workers who functioned as facilitators.

Main issues emerged

Within the group, parents were confronted with sincerity and generosity on many important issues faced on their life path and on the projects started with the collabora-

tion of social services. The group has shown its full effectiveness in developing self-help dynamics with positive outcomes for both individuals and for the relationship between parents and social workers.

Some of the issues that emerged during discussions are explored below to understand the value that meeting within the group had for these people who live in situations of serious hardship and marginalization. The quotes are short sentences taken from the group diaries in the years 2009 and 2010.

Power and judgement

When you go to the social worker, it takes very little to ruin everything: they give you an appointment that day there, at that time there and if you have a bad day or do not want to talk, she thinks: «here we are, nothing has changed». And then she writes it to the judge. We cannot afford to have bad days. (Tina)

It's bad even when you make a request and they tell you: «No, you cannot do it». So, without explanation, and you cannot help but accept, but you don't understand why. (Sara)

The experiences of disempowerment are strong: these parents feel they have no power over the lives of their children and depend completely on the decisions of the social worker, who embodies, in their eyes, the Power.

The social worker is almost always the one who decides if you will spend Christmas with your son, if you can meet him alone, if you can have lunch with him or go for a ride in the park, and especially the one who will write the «final sentence» to the Court. The impression obtained is that there is considerable distance between professionals and service users in the mechanisms that lead to the construction of projects. In fact, social workers think they make shared decisions with an attitude of openness, collaboration and sharing, but parents view social workers as individuals who decide without confronting anyone and do not have a good understanding of what criteria the social workers use.

It is difficult for these parents to understand what can be done to overcome the situation and to remedy it, and they feel heavily judged and experience feelings of loss and impotence.

The group becomes the place where one feels less powerless, where the opinions of all are taken into consideration and discussed together with others on a peer level, without fear of judgement and without fear of making mistakes. The presence within the group of two social workers, who are on the same level as all the other participants, is certainly a new experience for these parents:

My social worker is good, I feel comfortable with her, but sometimes I wonder if social workers really put themselves in our shoes. I would like to know (addressed to the facilitator) if you are like that even in your office. (Anna)

Experiential knowledge

So we are not the worst of all parents! (Irina)

The experience of these parents is that they are deprived of their function as they are judged unable to care for their children or to make the most important choices for them, from school, to leisure, to health care. It is a condition experienced as mortifying, eliciting feelings of inadequacy and depression, or anger and aggression, and it is more generally reflected on the image that these parents have of themselves.

The experience that is felt within the group is completely different: it starts from the assumption that only those who are experiencing or have experienced concretely the removal of children can be considered «expert» in what it feels like and know the most useful strategies to face this situation, both in relation to the children and in the relation with the services. Finding that there are other people who are experiencing the same situation makes one feel less alone and allows one to ponder more lucidly and consciously about what is happening. The group, therefore, often becomes the place for comparison of choices, even important ones (to introduce a new partner to the child, to have another child, to move house, ...) related to the management of children or, more generally, to the project of life.

Perceiving one's opinion as valued and taken into account, being interviewed as parents, and receiving requests for suggestions and advice, even on trivial topics such as, for example, music classes for children, is, for these parents, a new experience allowing them to see themselves in a new light as «competent parents», even if only partially.

Trust

Who made me do that day to go to the social worker? (Anna)

The group setting encouraged members to quickly trust each other, as a mutual recognition took place from the beginning due to the common condition of parents with looked-after children. This has paved the way for a very intimate narration so much that, for some, the group has become the depositary of this «secret», the only place where they can talk freely about this experience, bringing to light the most authentic feelings.

If one considers self-confidence, one can see how the experience of child removal, especially in the initial period, strikes at the root of one's confidence: parents feel they no longer have the power to freely manage their own life, each choice must be carefully considered, and they live constantly in doubt and in fear of judgement.

This experience is exacerbated by the distance of the social workers, who place themselves (or in any case, are perceived) as those who know «what is better» and make

decisions regardless of parents' thoughts and wishes. Trusting professionals is therefore very difficult for parents; even those who come to understand the reasons for the out-of-the family placement of their children continue to wonder what would have happened if they had not come into contact with the services and hold the idea that perhaps they would not have been separated from their children.

Who knows what my life would be like today if I had not gone to ask for help from the social services, I went to ask for financial help, then I told the truth, I said I had a son and that my husband was not there, they saw that there were problems, I was sick and they took the baby away from me. I have a friend who was perhaps worse than me, but never asked for help, and her son is still with her. (Tina)

Hence, questions related to the theme of truth emerged from parents several times: is it right or not, or to say it better, is it useful or counterproductive, to tell the whole truth about our lives to the social workers? To what extent can we think they are on our side? Or rather, will the information we give be used «against us»? The group did not give a definitive answer to these questions, as opinions were undoubtedly mixed; however, after hearing from «angrier» parents, other parents invited them to have confidence in professionals and to follow guidelines that have been useful to them, which was an experience of great value.

The dilemma of time

How long does it take to get them back home? In my opinion, up to 18 years we will always have social workers at home! (Mohamed)

Time is a constant topic present throughout the cycle of meetings, parents need to know «how long they will be away from home» while being aware that each story is different.

The dialogue with others, knowing the paths that have led some parents to pass, for example, from supervised contacts to meetings at home, feeling how these changes occurred, understanding what factors influence the choices of social workers and judges, are all precious opportunities offered by the group. This is because there are almost no other opportunities for sharing with those who live a similar experience, so there are no terms of comparison, and the passing time seems infinite or empty of content. For this reason, it was important that the group included parents with different stories and in various phases in their relationship with their children in order to support thinking and stimulate mutual comparison.

The impression is that this opportunity has been very useful to clarify the paths of the services and the role of professionals and court and to reassure parents that the long duration does not mean that a situation is not proceeding in a positive way.

Loneliness and hope

When I talk about my son I do not know what to say, so I say he's at a boarding school. (Piero)

Experiencing the removal of children is a highly stigmatizing experience, which is almost never shared except with those in the close family circle; for example, it emerged that often, even work colleagues were not informed of the situation.

The experience of loneliness is therefore very strong, every parent carries within himself or herself the belief that «nobody can understand me».

The mutual/self-help group breaks this wall, bringing together people who live the same experience and making them feel less alone. In fact, these parents said they did not know anyone else in the same situation and that the only opportunity to feel truly understood was through participation in the group.

Relationship with foster-carers

Once the foster-mother made a very sharp gesture towards my son in front of me. I didn't say anything, what could I do? But I felt very miserable. She is too hard, and when something is wrong, she screams. (Irina)

It's bad for a parent to see others punishing your son. (Mohamed)

The relationship with foster-carers, whether they are a foster family or professional caregivers in a children's residential home, is a crucial point for these parents as it stimulates a strong reflection on their part about their ability to make choices about their children's upbringing.

Within the group, parents are allowed to express disagreement on some foster-carers' education choices while voicing out all the frustration that originates from disempowerment. The choice of the foster family, in fact, was made by the service, the foster parents were considered able to take care of the children, so one has to accept their evaluations even when one does not agree.

Even on the more pragmatic aspects of the management of children, the question about «who decides?» emerges clearly:

- Who maintains the relationship with the school?
- Who takes the child to the doctor?
- Who decides which sport the child can play or which school he will have to attend?
- Birth parents or foster parents?

Through these questions, people figure out their parenting, how much of it is left to them and how much they feel they have been deprived of it beyond the law and the so-called «formal rights».

Relationship with children

You need a lot of patience with your children. (Piero)

Participants met as parents, this was clear from the start, and the willingness to talk about their children, their character, their history, what they do together and even their problems, has always been very consistent and has fuelled the discussion in every meeting. Within the group, a sincere discussion of the relationship with the children was emphasized, starting from individual experiences and debating with one another even on practical matters, for example, about Christmas presents, birthday parties, or the age at which children can stay home alone.

The group discussed different education models, the most suitable answers in different circumstances, always starting from the comparison of experiences.

All the topics were dealt with deeply, with great respect for the participants who were facing hard times, and accepting the emotional experience behind apparently trivial questions that are not so trivial for those who do not live with their children. In fact, if for each parent it is possible to chat with others about a birthday party or a bike ride, for these parents there is always the unknown factor related to knowing whether they will be able to spend that day with the child or perform that activity. In this sense, the group had a strong «normalizing effect»: it allowed a dialogue between parents even on very simple issues, making them feeling that they can talk about the growing of their children «like everyone else».

To sum up

The group was a *container of feelings* in which everyone was able to express anger, sadness and even joy and was able to feel deeply understood, accepted and not judged. Even the social workers, as facilitators, were part of the group and were urged to express themselves as persons, with their own experiences and feelings, freed from institutional framework.

The group was an *opportunity to exchange experiences*. The members showed competence, attention and ability to express themselves in an open manner; within the group, each participant brought their own resources, showcased their skills and felt valued.

The group was a *place of hope*. The atmosphere was never desperate or depressed, the perspective with which we have met was that of mutual support along a difficult and painful path, but with the desire to find, right away, positive aspects in the relationship with children, for the time is granted to each one, without false hope.

The group was an *area of freedom* both for members and for facilitators. Everyone was able to experience what it means to be able to speak and to listen freely, giving full

credit to what is being carried out, without having the information used in other contexts, particularly the judicial one.

The group was *a source of empowerment*. Participants began to feel like parents in a holistic way, they perceived the value of their opinions and their feelings, and they were able to acquire greater security in terms of services and their relationship with their children. Above all, they began to think that their experience, so depleting and stigmatizing, had some value, not only for themselves but also for other parents in the same situation.

As for the social workers who took on the role of facilitators and also the social workers who had been invited and accompanied parents along the way, it was a fundamental experience that helped them to «overcome the barrier between helper and helpee» and to see parents as possible resources to pave the way for others. The group increased mutual trust between parents and social workers: on the one hand, parents saw in the facilitators «the human side of social service», and on the other hand, social workers met more open and proactive parents who were aware of their situations and willing to question themselves.

References

- Andersson, G. (2009). Foster children: a longitudinal study of placements and family relationships. *International Journal of Social Welfare*, 18(1), 13-26.
- Borkman, T. (1976). Experiential knowledge: A new concept for the analysis of self-help groups. *Social service review*, 50(3), 445-456.
- Buckley, H. (2000). Child protection: unreflective practice. *Social Work Education*, 19(3), 253-263
- Cabiati, E. & Folgheraiter, F. (2016). Oltre la non direttività. Il metodo relazionale nel lavoro sociale. *Riflessioni sistemiche*, (14), 166-174.
- Calcaterra, V. (2013). *Attivare e facilitare i gruppi di auto/mutuo aiuto*. Trento: Erickson.
- Corradini, F., & Corradini, S. (2012). Riprendere in mano la propria storia. Il gruppo di auto mutuo aiuto di famiglie di origine a Modena. *Animazione Sociale*, 267, 58-68.
- Dale, P. (2004). «Like a fish in a bowl»: parents' perceptions of child protection services. *Child Abuse Review*, 13(2), 137-157.
- Doel, M., & Sawdon, C. (1999). *The essential groupworker: Teaching and learning creative groupwork*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Drumm, K. (2006). The essential power of Group Work. *Social Work With Groups*, 29(2-3), 17-31.
- Dumbrill, G. C. (2006). Parental experience of child protection intervention: A qualitative study. *Child abuse & neglect*, 30(1), 27-37.
- Gibson, M. (2015). Shame and guilt in child protection social work: new interpretations and opportunities for practice. *Child & Family Social Work*, 20(3), 333-343.
- Gitterman, A. (2006). Building mutual support in groups. *Social Work with Groups*, 28(3-4), 91-106.
- Gladstone, J., Dumbrill, G., Leslie, B., Koster, A., Young, M. & Ismaila, A. (2014). Understanding worker-parents engagement in child protection case-work. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 44, 56-64.
- Harries, M. (2008). *The experiences of parents and families of children and young people in care*. Wrawley: University of Western Australia.
- Featherstone, B., Morris, K., White, S. & White, S. (2014). *Re-imagining child protection: Towards humane social work with families*. Bristol: Policy Press.

- Flora, K., Raftopoulos, A. & Pontikes, T. K. (2010). A Look at the Evolution of the Self-Help Movement. *Journal of Groups in Addiction & Recovery*, 5(3-4), 214-225.
- Folgheraiter, F. (2004). *Relational social work: Toward networking and societal practices*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Folgheraiter, F. (2007). Relational social work: principles and practices. *Social Policy and Society*, 6(2), 265-274.
- Folgheraiter, F. (2011). *Fondamenti di metodologia relazionale: La logica sociale dell'aiuto*. Trento: Erickson.
- Folgheraiter, F. (2017). The sociological and humanistic roots of Relational Social Work. *Relational Social Work*, 1(1), 7-14.
- Folgheraiter, F. & Pasini, A. (2009). Self-help Groups and Social Capital: New Directions in Welfare Policies? *Social Work Education*, 28(3), 253-267.
- Folgheraiter, F. & Raineri, M.L. (2017). The principles and key ideas of Relational Social Work. *Relational Social Work*, 1(1), 15-22.
- Gitterman, A. (2006). Building mutual support in groups. *Social Work With Groups*, 28 (3-4), 91-106.
- Hatzidimitriadou, E. (2002). Political ideology, helping mechanisms and empowerment of mental health self-help/mutual aid groups. *Journal of community & applied social psychology*, 12(4), 271-285.
- Healy, K. & Darlington, Y. (2009). Service user participation in diverse child protection contexts: principles for practice. *Child & Family Social Work*, 14(4), 420-430
- Holland, S. (2010). *Child and family assessment in social work practice*. London: Sage.
- Katz, A. H. & Bender, E. I. (1976). Self-help groups in Western society: History and prospects. *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 12(3), 265-282.
- Knight, C. & Gitterman, A. (2013). Group work with bereaved individuals: The power of mutual aid. *Social work*, 59(1), 5-12.
- Kropotkin, P. (1955). *Mutual aid: a factor of evolution*. Boston: Horizon Books.
- López, M., Del Valle, J. F., Montserrat, C. & Bravo, A. (2013). Factors associated with family reunification for children in foster care. *Child & Family Social Work*, 18(2), 226-236.
- Memarnia, N., Nolte, L., Norris, C. & Harborne, A. (2015). «It felt like it was night all the time»: listening to the experiences of birth mothers whose children have been taken into care or adopted. *Adoption & Fostering*, 39(4), 303-317.
- Olson, B. D., Jason, L. A., Ferrari, J. R. & Hutcheson, T. D. (2005). Bridging professional and mutual-help: An application of the transtheoretical model to the mutual-help organization. *Applied and Preventive Psychology*, 11(3), 167-178.
- Palmer, S., Maiter, S. & Manji, S. (2006). Effective intervention in child protective services: Learning from parents. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 28(7), 812-824.
- Papell, C. (1998). Thinking about group work: Thirty Years Later. *Social Work with Groups*, 20(4), 5-17.
- Pasini, A. (2006). Dizionario: Auto/mutuo aiuto. *Lavoro Sociale*, 6(2), 283-290.
- Raineri, M. L. (2017). Relational Social Work and mutual/self help groups. *Relational Social Work*, 1(1), 19-38.
- Riessman, F. (1965). The «helper» therapy principle. *Social work*, 10(2), 27-32.
- Salveron, M., Lewig, K. & Arney, F. (2009). Parenting groups for parents whose children are in care. *Child Abuse Review*, 18(4), 267-288.
- Schreiber, J. C., Fuller, T. & Pacey, M. S. (2013). Engagement in child protective services: Parent perceptions of worker skills. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 35(4), 707-715
- Silverman, P. R. (1989). *Mutual help groups*. London: Sage.
- Smeeton J. & Boxall K., (2011) Birth parents' perceptions of professional practice in child care and adoption proceedings: implication for practice. *Child and Family Social work*, 16, 444-453.
- Steinberg, D. M. (1997). *The mutual-aid approach to working with groups: Helping people help each other*. Jason Aronson Incorporated.
- Steinberg, D.M. (2010). Mutual aid: a contribution to Best-Practice Social Work. *Social Work With Groups*, 33(1), 53-68.

- Tilbury, C. & Ramsay, S. (2017). A sistematic scoping review of parental satisfaction with Child Protection services. *Children and youth services review*, 141-146.
- Thoburn, J. (2012). Achieving successfull return from care: what makes reunification works. *British Journal of Social Work*, 42(5), 995-997.

Corradini, F (2018). Go and return home: A mutual/self-help group between parents with looked-after children
Relational Social Work 2(1): 47-62
doi: 10.14605/RSW211805



Relational Social Work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License