

Hurt communities and resilience: The experience of «Casa della Memoria» in Brescia

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Abstract

In this paper, the author seeks to relate the experience of the «Associazione Casa della Memoria» («House of Memory Association») in Brescia, Italy. The Association was founded after a terrorist attack that took place on May 28th, 1974 in which a bomb explosion during an antifascist rally killed eight people. The Casa della Memoria is the starting point of several initiatives focused on interactions and collaboration with civil society, development of democratic processes, and spreading of a shared memory.

Through bibliographic research on the publications issued by the Association and participation in its initiatives, it was possible to identify its importance as an action of social work, in a community work way, too.

The peculiarity resides in the fact that although the Association arose from a tragic event, it succeeds in being exemplary and generative, not only in its pursuit of spreading citizenship, democracy, and memory. Indeed, with its very activity, the Association becomes a witness in the first person in showing how, after such a tragic event, it is still possible to seek reconstruction, reparation, and justice. The actions of memory carried out by Casa della Memoria seem to penetrate the social fabric and spread motifs of belonging, reparation and resilience.

Keywords

Memory – Trauma – Resilience – Community work – Relational social work

Introduction

With this paper, I seek to discuss my thesis, written during the master's program Social Work at the Catholic University of Milan, Italy. This thesis arises from a practice placement experience at the *Associazione Casa della Memoria* («House of Memory Association») in Brescia, a city located in north-east Italy. The aim of the practice placement was to understand how the work of sensitization of memory and how it is communicated

and spread after traumatic or sad events — the activities of the Association— can be considered tools for social work and also for community work.

In the first part of the paper, a brief explanation of the historical context of the attack is given. In the second part, the connections between the Association and social work are presented, focusing on the genesis and development of the Association and the resilience issues that characterize this entity.

The context

The *Casa della Memoria* of Brescia was founded in 2000 in turn from the «Relatives of the victims of the bomb attack in *Piazza della Loggia* Association». *Piazza della Loggia* is one of the largest and most central squares in Brescia.

The terrorist attack occurred at 10:12am on May 28th, 1974. A bomb placed in a garbage can detonated during an anti-fascist rally that had been called after the numerous fascist attacks in the Brescia area and throughout Italy.

The bomb explosion caused the death of eight people and also severely wounded more than 100 other people. This bloodshed also drastically changed forever the lives of all the other men and women who were in the square and were not physically harmed.

This massacre is considered one of the most notorious terrorist attacks in Italy during the *Anni di Piombo* («Years of Lead»). The *Anni di Piombo* started in Italy at the end of the 1960s and lasted until the late 1980s.

They were characterized by acts of politically motivated violence carried out by both right- and left-wing armed organisations. The word «lead» indicated the thousands of bullets fired during that period. Other attacks that took place in this period were the *Piazza Fontana* bombing on December 12th, 1969, in Milan (which is conventionally considered to have started the Years of Lead), the *Italicus Express* bombing (August 4th, 1974) and the bombing at the *Bologna central railway station* (August 2nd, 1980), together with targeted killings and kneecappings.

In over forty years since the day of the bombing, justice has been repeatedly delayed and denied. After several trials that came to nothing, only in 2017 two individuals have been found guilty for the *Piazza della Loggia* bombing by the Court of Cassation, the highest instance court in Italy. The trial ascribed the political and material responsibility for the massacre to a neo-fascist political and paramilitary organization group called *Ordine Nuovo* («New Order»). The trial also highlighted the involvement of the Italian secret services in throwing off the investigation. The final judgement in the case, issued in June 2017, upheld the convictions of one former member of *Ordine Nuovo* and an Italian secret services informant and the sentences to life imprisonment.

This long judicial process has highlighted how the thirst for truth has lasted unshakable for more than forty years.

Casa della Memoria, genesis and constitution process. The surplus of mutual aid

The history of the foundation shows us the trajectory in which this Association has worked through tragedy to become an important factor of resilience (Cyrulnik, 2002; Cyrulnik, 2011), not only for the members of the Association but also for the local community and ultimately for the society.

The story of the foundation of the Association is divided into three important periods.

Firstly, in 1982, the victims and their relatives of the massacre of Piazza della Loggia established the «Association of the relatives of the victims». Written in its constitution was that its goal was to find justice and to give a voice to the victims. In other words, the main goal of the Association was, and is, to seek alliances and human support to construct social bonds and trust, promoting and supporting mutual aid practices between victims and relatives of the terrorist attack. The deposition of Manlio Milani, the President of the Association, represented this commitment:

I went back to the streets and something happened that in my opinion was very important and changed my future life. When I entered the square and I was recognized, I heard this kind of solidarity that was not only toward me, it was like a group that had been split up violently, finding in itself the strength and hope to continue. So, together we went in front of the place where the massacre happened, there, I realized that we needed to find ourselves together again. There, I realized that, over time, I had to continue to give voice to these comrades, these friends, these affections that, like my wife, were violently taken away. The next morning, I asked for a special permit; at five in the morning I went to the morgue, because I needed to stay, at least at that time, alone with my wife's lifeless body, and I felt a lot of emotions and a lot of different things. I was there in my private space but I understand that the public space had begun. And from that moment my life has become a particular attempt to continue to give voice to those deaths and seek the truth about those events.¹

Later, in 1983, the Association of the relatives of the victims joined other Associations that were founded in that period, the Association of *Piazza Fontana* and *Italicus* (other relevant terrorist attacks of the Years of Lead). The purpose was to find a way to claim rights together, for example, the abolition of state secrets, to promote the Italian Parliamentary Commission on the massacres, and to give voice to the victims and advocate for the protection of their rights. In other words, in this second step, the Association went beyond mutual aid and focused its activities on advocacy (Dominelli, 2002), creating a network with other similar Associations.

The third period began in 2000, when the *Casa della Memoria* was founded. The founders of the *Casa della Memoria* were together the «Association of the first step», namely the «The relatives of the victims of the bomb attack in Piazza della Loggia Asso-

¹ Author's translation.

ciation», the Municipality and the Province of Brescia. This is the first important element because we find that the public sector works together with the victims and their families to spread memory.

The Association is a not-for-profit association and, in collaboration with other institutions and people, focuses on historical research about the events related to the massacre and other themes. It is committed to spreading a more participative and responsible culture, organizing commemorations, meetings, conferences and debates for schools and citizens and also taking care of its city and public spaces. The *Casa della Memoria* Association works with school and students to spread knowledge about Italian history and democratic achievements and at the same time organizes meetings and book presentations for citizens, trying to strengthen knowledge to understand the present and the future. In other words, the final portion of the Association's journey aims to re-create linkages between civil society and institutions in a real way, through a public, not-for-profit partnership founded on the spreading of collective memory as a tool to mend society. The President of the Association said:

In this context the *Casa della Memoria* aims to collect all the pieces of a collective memory acknowledging instances and the cooperation of all those who believe in this project, favouring in particular the relationship with the world of education and research because it is believed to be the places where the facts and historical truths are the basis of building a better future for coming generations.

The Association shows how the achievement of one's own well-being is not possible without also seeking societal well-being (Toch, 1965). Notably, none of the steps described changed the goals; however, the *Casa della Memoria* has gathered all the previous goals, expanding its own aims by working together with and taking care of society.

These three consecutive steps bring us to identify the *Casa della Memoria* as a reality, born from a subtraction of humanity, that has been able to reconstruct human potential, becoming generative and capable of care, opening the mutual care relation to the society and exceeding the dynamics of mutual aid. The *Casa della Memoria* acts with responsibility for society in a generative way.

Could memory be a tool for social work? The role of exemplariness

During the practice placement, I experienced how the *Casa della Memoria* was conducting activities that intersected with the professional knowledge of a social worker.

I analysed the experience of the *Casa della Memoria* through participant observation methods and bibliographic research on the publications issued by the Association.

The purpose, however, was not to confine the activities of the *Casa della Memoria* within the boundaries of social work because the Association acts in different disciplines (e.g., sociology, pedagogy, history).

Assuming that it is necessary for a social worker to be able to sense corporate flows, emotions and people's desires and constructive aspirations (Folgheraiter, 2007), the *Casa della Memoria* Association shows a constructive aspiration for the common good. As a result, I decided to observe the Association through the lens of my professional knowledge, particularly through the re-conceptualization of the definition of social work proposed by Relational theory (Folgheraiter, 2012), seeking to understand which experiential forms, particularly memory, can enrich the operational social work area. This definition calls to mind the aims of the *Casa della Memoria* Association, although its actions are not professional but instead come from great expertise. Social work looks to activation, promotion of new ideas and good practice and tries to learn from them. For these reasons, I studied the *Casa della Memoria* as an example of good practice, as an informal field in which constructive desires are born. Through this research, it has been possible to understand that the activities of the *Casa della Memoria* constitute a different way to interpret social work, as an answer to the needs of the entire society and its demand for memory, responsibility, democracy and justice. As suggested by Giddens, post-modern professionals must improve their professionalism by paying attention to external grassroots contributions (Giddens, 1990).

The *Casa della Memoria* was founded from a very tragic event but at the same time is the starting point of several initiatives and activities focused on the interaction and collaboration with Institution, associations, schools and civil society, development of democratic processes, and spread of a shared memory, fostered by «knowledge and revision», as Manlio Milani underlines. Manlio Milani lost his wife Livia in the massacre. The President also underlines the necessity of transforming the past that happened to every single person into a fact that regards the entire society. This point of view also represents the *Casa della Memoria's* way of working.

The peculiarity of this Association resides in the fact that although it arose from a tragic and sad event, it succeeds in being exemplary and generative (Magatti, 2018). The Association is exemplary not only in what it does, for example, the pursuit of spreading citizenship, democracy, and memory, but also in how the Association has become, with its very activity, an example in the first person of how, after such a tragic event, it is still possible to seek reconstruction, reparation, justice, and trust in the authorities and show a willingness to engage in conversation and narration toward the people. It shows a possible resilience that came through sharing and working for and with other people. The *Casa della Memoria* tries to empower society through its experiential skills.

The *Casa della Memoria* is also an answer to the lack of justice and to the perception of the unfair outcome of the lawsuit. This instance of social justice comes from the need for not only recognition of rights but also to give meaning to the events, both in a historical sense and in terms of civil cohabitation. In this sense, the work done throughout the network by the *Casa della Memoria*, the involvement with students and citizens in its activities and the collaboration with the authorities, serves to mend a social fabric that

was stained by collective grief. The actions of memory, narration, and testimony taken by the *Casa della Memoria* seem to penetrate this fabric and spread motifs of belonging and reparation. This view of social work is seen as an answer to the needs of society in general, in the forms of participation, recognition, freedom, justice, and analysis of past and present times, although they diverge from the most commonly known forms of personal care in response to specific needs. Today more than ever, reflection on memory assumes a central aspect in the interpretation of the present time and of *disembedding* changes (Giddens, 1990) that occur in modern society.

Memory, through its practices, allows sifting through time, recognizing oneself in previous generations and events and having a feeling of belonging with a collectivity that looks to the future. As David Bidussa (1990) states, it is necessary not to fight for a «definitive and unarguable reaffirmation of the memory» but for its «resistance and citizenship». Memory represents a «matter of democracy» that belongs to everyone and allows connecting positive dynamics of belonging and conscious citizenship.

The educational value, the sensitization, the cultural commitment and narrative of what our country has experienced, and the active participation of the citizens (not exclusively in memorial or commemorative terms but also in terms of pondering the past and hence also involving the present and future) that the Association has pursued represent tools for proactive social work toward society and incarnate the exemplary role of the *Casa della Memoria* in revising the memory of sad facts.

The attention that the *Casa della Memoria* focuses on its community and its territory enlighten the practice of community work. «Community work is the process of assisting people to improve their own communities by undertaking collective action» (Twelvetrees, 2002). The definition proposed by Twelvetrees includes the idea that it is a professional social worker who makes a community work. A community worker is a salaried person who helps members of society help themselves. Conversely, Mayo believes that community work does not end in the professional area: «Community work is concerned with enabling people to improve the quality of their lives and gain greater influences over the processes that affect them» (Mayo, 2002). In this way, Twelvetrees prefers to speak about community development.

Conclusion

Traditionally, social work has three main functions: educative and promotional; creating connections between caring, prevention and social rehabilitation; and creating connections between research and action. Over recent years, these traditional functions have been enriched by other functions, such as strengthening territorial membership, developing pre-existing resources and creating new resources to mend the territorial fabric; increasing participation of the population in abstracting social issues from per-

sonal questions; and integrating and promoting dialogue between multiple stakeholders (Diomede Canevini, 2005). This view of social work is seen as an answer to the needs of society in general, in the forms of participation, recognition, freedom, justice, and analysis of past and present times, although they diverge from the most commonly known forms of social work in response to specific needs.

To conclude, it is therefore possible to state that memory, as approached by the *Casa della Memoria*, is a powerful tool for the enriched concept of social work that is currently emerging (Diomede Canevini & Neve, 2005). In a relational way, social work is the society that takes care of itself; the society has a problem and tries to solve it to achieve its personal well-being (Folgheraiter, 2007). Taking care is a task not only for parents but also for social workers, citizens and members of a local community. In this sense, through the practice placement, it was possible to recognize that the *Casa della Memoria*, starting from a sad event, started generative processes to strengthen society, with responsibility. It is an aim of a social worker to recognize these exemplary cases that have been able to face the challenges of contemporary life and Italian history in a generative way.

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