Il Servizio Sociale durante la Pandemia: Presa di Coscienza, Teoria e Pratica

Sintesi della ricerca internazionale:

Argentina, Brasile, Italia, Spagna, Svezia
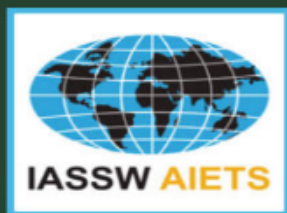
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Teoria e pratica del servizio sociale nel mondo in tempi di pandemia

Argentina, Brasile, Italia, Spagna, Svezia

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SOMMARIO

ITALY

Social work and pandemic from COVID-19 in Italy:
maturing the professional consciousness of being science and art together

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In an attempt to investigate globally what the process of becoming aware of the changes that have occurred in social service practice during and after the pandemic emergency from COVID-19 and what reflections have developed around the changes to be made in social service teachings aimed at students, this contribution reports a cross-section of the Italian experience.

The first part of the chapter reconstructs what happened historically in Italy during the advent of the pandemic, highlighting, on the one hand, its impact nationwide and across sectors of social and economic life and, on the other hand, the characteristics of its coping from a social service perspective.

The reconstruction of the situation in which social service has come to find itself and the various resilience strategies put in place has been possible mainly thanks to the studies that flourished in the pandemic years that highlighted the link between being a person and being a professional, between the protection of health and the protection of the physical and social environment, between the individual and the collective good. These links, which were already there, became more visible and stronger than in the past, to the point of entering the sphere of personal freedoms generating, on the one hand, manifestations of dissent, skepticism, and disbelief with respect to the knowledge that what was happening was real; and on the other hand, manifestations of solidarity on the part of the inhabitants of territorial communities according to reciprocity and with special attention to the weakest groups.

In the last part of the chapter, the results of the research carried out in Italy are presented and the testimonies and reflections of the social workers who participated in the study are reported, according to the internationally agreed dimensions of analysis: the process of becoming aware of emergency and the role of social service in emergency; the ethical-political, theoretical-methodological and theoretical-practical dimensions of professional work in the contexts and organizations to which they belong; and the learnings that professionals believe should be integrated into the training of students who represent the future of social service.

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The immediate impact of the pandemic in Italy

Italy holds the sad world record of being the first country, after China, to be overwhelmed by the severe effects of the pandemic on its national territory. From December 2019, when the first cases appeared, until the beginning of the year 2020, when media attention focused on Bergamo and Lombardy, there was the "lighting of a fuse" that day after day turned into an unprecedented real threat for the entire national territory.

It could be said that the Italian government's reaction was timely from the very first moment, even in the absolute novelty of an unprecedented health crisis situation: as early as February 23, 2020, the Council of Ministers passed an initial Presidential Decree (DPCM) on the first measures to contain and manage the epidemiological emergency from COVID-19. The decree covered a restricted territory, namely, municipalities in Lombardy and Veneto and was intended to counter the first fast wave of contagions before they spread to the rest of the national territory and whose consequences for the infected were lethal. But ~~the~~ situation immediately precipitated and had to be accelerated with further measures to counter the spread: only two days later, on February 25, a second, much more stringent Decree followed, applied to wider sectors of the country. Along with people, a large part of economic, educational and educational, cultural, religious worship, sports and various forms of public sociality activities in the regions of Northern Italy had to be stopped. Faced with the massive economic consequences that this decision entailed in the immediate aftermath, just three days later it became necessary to issue a new decree-law that introduced urgent measures to support paralyzed families, workers and productive activities.

For most Italians, however, the date of March 4, 2020, the day on which the Prime Minister signed a new decree that incisively affected the entire national territory, with no more regional differences, has remained etched in their minds: the ban on all forms of gathering of people in public places or places open to the public now had national extension. It was above all the closure of all Italian schools that plunged the population into the realization that this was now an unprecedented health emergency. In no other Western country was the situation so severe, and Italy was the first European country to impose such a drastic *lockdown.* Within days all commercial and retail activities were closed.

On March 22, the ministers of Health and the Interior adopted a new ordinance forbidding all individuals from moving or commuting by public or private means of transportation to municipalities other than those in which they were located, except for proven business needs or absolute urgency. As in the war, the term *curfew came to* scan the lives of all Italians: as soon as the evening hour struck no one could leave their homes. Such a restriction of freedom had never been seen in the entire history of republican Italy, from 1948 to the present. Thus, in the span of a single month, the entire population found itself in a situation of unprecedented exceptionality.

The emergency also caused perplexity among many people: the calamity had not manifested itself from a violent impact or a catastrophe visible to all, such as to justify a mobilization of relief that would then gradually fade away until normality was restored; rather, a series of initially contained cases expanded exponentially, however, giving rise to a statistic of contagions and deaths, and thus to the perception of an invisible enemy that had to be contained in its looming menace, without, however, certainty about remedies, nor about the duration of the phenomenon (Gui, 2020).

Reports of contagions, the dead and the cured immediately became daily, evidence of a problem on a global scale, intangible, mysterious, unknown. The calamity was immediately

pervasive, affecting everyone, victims and rescuers alike, and finding experts, scientists, and institutions unprepared. Extreme uncertainty shrouded predictions about the duration of the epidemic, which had since become a pandemic, and about the path leading to the restoration of normalcy. The feeling of helplessness in the face of the unstoppable growth of the contagions was rampant. This *invisibility of the enemy* meant that, from the first days, a part of the population was opposed or resistant to the measures, incredulous of their necessity, on some occasions doubtful to the point of reading into them a conspiracy of institutions, artifices of a fabrication or exaggerated calibration of risks that resulted in a restriction of personal freedoms that was difficult to accept.

The social worker as a person and as a professional in pandemic emergence.

As one of the leading social service researches carried out in Italy points out, the impact of the emergency has seen social workers involved on the front lines in combating the effects of the pandemic both as individuals and as professionals (Mordeglia, 2020). In fact, the absolute novelty of the consequences of COVID-19 is in the fact that it can only be understood as a total social fact, as a phenomenon that transforms all dimensions of the social, all mechanisms of functioning of the community of reference (Mauss, 1924). The pandemic completely shook the foundations of society and overturned the economic, political, cultural and, even, symbolic dynamics in which social service, and social workers, had operated up to that point.

Unlike the Anglo-Saxon literature on social service, the Italian literature does not boast much reflection on the capacity of social service to deal with disasters, crises and shocks as in the case of earthquakes, floods and natural disasters. What happened with the pandemic certainly caught most social service professionals unprepared. As the president of CNOAS[158] argues, the "upheaval" that the pandemic has produced in the territorial social protection, social and health care systems has had more serious consequences as a consequence of the timing of social policies in Italy: *austerity* measures and *new public management* applied to health and social care in recent years with linear cuts and a reduction in investment in the training of professionals have had their influence. In addition, Italy is pervaded by critical elements related to fragmented and cumbersome *governance*, a failure to define organic policies at the national and regional levels, and infrastructural (service) gaps both intraregional and interregional, with prevalence of economic and performance transfers at the expense of prevention and support logics and interventions (Gazzi, 2020).

In every catastrophe and calamity, the first moments are marked by alarm, confusion, a deflagration that overwhelmingly disrupts *routine* (Desai, 2006). What is taken for granted, what is part of the everyday, is no longer "in its place" or, even, no longer there. The environmental context appears to have changed abruptly, to the point of being unrecognizable (Dominelli, 2013; Gui, 2016). This is what has happened to the Italian social service since March 2020, bringing with it an alarming and disorienting disorientation.

With the onset of the pandemic, social services and social workers have been invested with a feeling of uncertainty. According to Gui (2018), unlike other professionals with a purely scientific-positivist disciplinary approach, aiming to establish with increasing degrees of certainty the reality of facts, the causal chains of events and the predictability of phenomena in accordance

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[158] National Council of Social Workers.

with the findings of laboratory research, social workers are instead confronted daily with high degrees of uncertainty, in the complexity and variability of the factors affecting the evolution of social processes, with different possible attributions of meaning of what happens by the actors involved, because of the co-constructive value of the social reality of the actors who receive it and at the same time realize it (England,1986; Payne,1997).

In Italy, the COVID-19 emergency brought to a sudden halt the mobility of the population and thus the interventions of social workers, freezing initiatives and limiting the possibilities of communicative relations. However, along with this also unfolded great citizen solidarity. During the pandemic there was also a kind of temporal suspension that seemed to be able to momentarily freeze thinking about the future. This suspension was characterized by two components that combined simultaneously: urgency and uncertainty. In the midst of the *lockdown,* the Italian population found itself incredibly united by the same condition (all confined to their homes, subject to the same cogent rules of behavior) and at the same time separated and unequal in the different ways of coping with that condition (Gui, 2020). On the one hand, the population was united by the obligation of isolation, on the other hand - for the same reason - people lived isolated from each other in the concrete conditions in which each was in his or her dwelling. All equal, on the one hand, without distinction of class, but, on the other hand, all profoundly different in the actual possibilities of adhering to the isolation measures. Likewise, social workers also endured the emergency, exposed to contagion, illness, and possible death, but also within a relief system of social health systems for which they could be identified as *heroes in the trenches* (Garfin, Silver, and Holman, 2020).

The huge impact of the pandemic in Italy on health and social life

In Italy, from the beginning of the epidemic-the "official" date could be considered February 20, 2020-and until the end of 2020, 2,105,738 positive cases of COVID-19 have been reported. During this time, 75,891 deaths have been recorded. At the national average level, from the beginning of the epidemic until December 31, 2020, the contribution of COVID-19 deaths to overall mortality was 10.2 percent, with differences across geographic distributions and age groups, more pronounced among men than women (ISTAT, 2021).

The epidemic spread scenario followed three phases in the year 2020: the period from February to the end of May 2020, the "first wave," was characterized by a very rapid spread of cases and deaths and a strong territorial concentration, mainly in the North of the country. In the summer season from June to mid-September, the transition phase, the spread was initially very low. Starting in late September 2020, the second wave, cases again increased rapidly until the first half of November, and then declined. Compared with the first epidemic wave, the spread situation in Italy has changed significantly in terms of both quantity and geographical distribution. In this second wave, new cases increased for a few weeks at an exponential rate until, since mid-October, ordinances at the regional level and the adoption of additional containment measures (DPCM No. 275 of Nov. 4, 2020) contributed to a reversal of the trend of infections.

The impact affected all levels of Italians' lives: during the year 2020, GDP recorded the heaviest decline since World War II (-8.9%). The effects were transmitted through different channels: the fall in global activity, exports and tourist inflows; the reduction in mobility and consumption; and the repercussions of uncertainty on business investment. The contraction of output was heterogeneous, with faster recovery in industry and performance in services weakening again in the last months of the year 2020. The economic crisis triggered by the pandemic and

237

measures to contain it affected all geographic areas, but was more pronounced in the North of the country, which was hit hardest by the first wave of contagion. Consumption (down 10.7 percent) was affected by measures to restrict economic activity. Businesses halted capital accumulation plans, leading to a 9.1 percent drop in gross fixed capital formation. The effect of the pandemic on exports was strong, but temporary: after a sharp decline in the first half of the year, foreign sales regained momentum, returning in the final months of the year to the levels before the contagion spread. Fiscal policy reacted decisively to the pandemic, with some figures that were absolutely unprecedented in our country: net borrowing grew to 9.5 percent of GDP, being just 1.6 percent in 2019.

The repercussions on the labor market have been very heavy, but the use of existing social shock absorbers and extraordinary ones introduced during the crisis has helped to mitigate them substantially. The sharp drop in hours worked was matched by a much more moderate reduction in the number of people employed. The employment loss was concentrated among the self-employed and those with fixed-term contracts, especially in services, penalizing young people and women in particular.

The crisis from COVID-19 also had an obvious effect on the economic conditions of households. More than two million households were in absolute poverty in 2020. After a decline in 2019, the state of deprivation in absolute terms thus significantly rises again, affecting more than one million more absolute poor than before the pandemic (Caritas, 2021).

In the Italian case, absolute poverty is closely related to age, in an inversely proportional relationship, with a tendency to increase as the latter decreases, so much so that the highest incidence is recorded precisely among children and adolescents under 18 (13.5%), compared with an incidence of just 5.4% among people over 65, confirming the idea that Italy is a country where it is older people who have better living conditions. Paradoxically, below the national average are the poverty levels recorded in households with at least one elderly person (5.6 percent) or among couples where the age of the reference person is over 64 (3.7 percent).

With respect to occupational status, 2020 marks a sharp worsening of living conditions for the employed for whom the incidence of poverty rises from 5.5 percent to 7.3 percent, with clear differences depending on the position occupied. For households with a reference person classified as a laborer or assimilated, the burden of poverty rises to 13.2 percent (i.e., more than one person in 10), among the self-employed to 7.6 percent. On the other hand, the situation of households with reference person retired from work (4.4 percent) or seeking employment (19.7 percent) is stable, the latter as usual very high (Caritas, 2021).

Moreover, as far as family types are concerned, the protection of larger families is clearly poor: the incidence of absolute poverty, in fact, rises from 20.5 percent among families with five or more members, to 11.2 percent among those with four; 8.5 percent if there are three. The situation becomes more critical when there are children living in the household, especially if they are minors, and if there are more than one: in that case the incidence in fact rises to 9.3 percent in families with only one minor child, to 22.7 percent in those with three (or more). Another aspect that has been talked about in recent years is related to the situation of single-parent families: in just one year, poverty increased, touching almost 12 percent of such families, while it was as high as 9 percent the previous year.

The pandemic has strongly impacted education levels as one of the most stressed social cohesion factors. From pre-pandemic to 2020, the conditions of households whose reference

person had at most an elementary school degree (or no degree at all) worsened from 10.5 percent to 11.1 percent. Compared to 2019, the conditions of those with a lower secondary school diploma also worsened visibly, from 8.6 percent to 10.9 percent (registering +2.3 percentage points). In households where the head of household has at least a high school degree, there are much lower absolute poverty incidence values (4.4 percent), although they have increased compared to 2019 (+1 percentage point).

The blocking of normal school activities every grade and level has increased or made inequalities more evident. A strong factor of inequality is clearly given by the possible access to the Internet and computer platforms for distance education. In Italy, full continuity of the educational process has not been guaranteed for all students, the paths of those with less capacity for family support, or with particular criticalities and vulnerabilities such as fewer resources available, being compromised. Ninety percent of schools activated at least one of the distance education modes in less than three weeks, the remaining share within six weeks. Delivery modes ranged from simple sending of materials and worksheets, group chats, audio-video recordings, and synchronous video lectures with the teacher. The latter were secured by 78 percent of schools, with higher frequencies for secondary schools (accounting for 86 percent).

Looking at the pandemic event in perspective, we can see how the closure of schools first, and the alternation of openings and suspensions of in-presence teaching later, have had profound consequences on students' skills but, first and foremost, on their emotional and relational development (especially among adolescents).

In Italy, as in most of Western Europe, an aspect that needs to be taken into account regarding the effects of the pandemic has to do with the presence and conditions of third-country nationals, as strong inequalities between Italians and resident foreigners are denoted, exacerbated in the pandemic years. In fact, absolute poverty remains below average for Italian-only households (6.0 percent) albeit up from 4.9 percent in 2019, while it rises to 22.2 percent (from 16.1 percent) for mixed households and 26.7 percent (from 24.4 percent) for foreign-only households. There are 1.5 million foreigners in absolute poverty, accounting for 29.3 percent, compared to 7.5 percent of Italian citizens, for a total of 568,000 poor households (28.3 percent of households in poverty while making up just 8.6 percent of resident households).

Also a consequence of the pandemic was the spread of *smart working that* began in the spring of 2020. This is an aspect that has amplified social inequalities, primarily between those who have been able to benefit from this mode of work and those who have not. And even on this front, data from public statistics show eloquent indicators: in Italy it was mostly women who had to work from home (23.6 percent compared to 16.3 percent of men), those employed over 35 years of age (20.5 percent compared to 14.8 percent of younger people), Italians (21.0 compared to 4.0 percent of foreigners), and residents in the Center and North (21.9 and 20.6 compared to 15.0 percent in the South). Differences by level of education are also very significant: 42.5 percent of college graduates were able to work in agile mode, 17.6 percent of high school graduates and only 3.4 percent of those with a middle school diploma. This figure is clearly related to the type of profession held: skilled professions are characterized by a higher incidence of those who worked from home (41.1 percent).

Another element that has affected the increase in inequality is housing. The pandemic has made even more manifest the wide disparities in the availability of adequate living space. Among

households in poverty there is a higher incidence of overcrowded conditions with the emergence also of all the health and social problems related to this increased social vulnerability.

The pandemic has also affected the widening gender gap. According to the latest Word Economic Forum (WEF) report, *Global Gender Gap Report*, the health crisis has actually severely slowed progress toward gender equality. In Italy, in 2021, despite a rebound in the economy in the first half of the year, employed women continued to decline. During the pandemic, 421,000 women lost or failed to find work. The share of working-age women available for work (female activity rate) declined by about 2 percentage points during the pandemic and remains far behind that of men at 72.9 percent. In this respect, Italy ranks last among European countries. The pandemic entailed an unprecedented *surplus of* difficulties compared to the usual ones for women who found themselves having to manage the double burden of caring for their children and working at home. 52.9 percent of employed women say that during the health emergency they had to shoulder an additional load of stress, fatigue and commitment in their work and family life. For 39.1 percent, the situation remained the same as in the pre-COVID period and only 8.1 percent improved.

An anomic minority pervaded by non-rational thinking.

The pandemic has brought great skepticism, perplexity and, even, antagonism in not a few citizens. A December 2021 survey (CENSIS) shows some shocking results, in the sense that the pandemic impact would have created a minority reluctant to take the scientific data that have been communicated by the institutions as well as the scientific data as well as the scientific data as well. Surprisingly, for 5.9 percent of the Italian population (about 3 million people), COVID would have been the invention of a disease that does not actually exist and, consequently, all measures taken would have an exclusive purpose of population control and alienation of fundamental rights. For 10.9%, the vaccine is useless and ineffective, reasoning that there was a refusal with respect to prophylaxis and vaccination campaign or to vaccinate only because of the conditions imposed for the continuation in the presence of the working, economic and social life of the country. For 31.4 percent of respondents, the vaccine would be an experimental drug whose effects are uncertain, and people who vaccinate could suffer serious health consequences even in the long term. All this in a climate of distrust in which it emerges that for 12.7 percent of the Italian population, science produces more harm than good. This pervasiveness of the irrational has infiltrated the social fabric not only in individual skeptical positions, but also in protest movements that have manifested their malaise in the public squares, and have had no small space in the public discourse, conquering the top of the *trending topics* in *social networks*, climbing the book sales charts, and even occupying important spaces in television evenings.

Pessimism about the future is also evident in terms of very negative economic expectations: just 15.2% of Italians believe that after the pandemic their economic situation will improve. For the majority (56.4%) the economic situation will remain the same, and for a substantial 28.4% it will worsen. There would be restraining factors conspiring against economic recovery. All the socio-economic risks that were feared during the pandemic (the collapse of consumption, business closures, bankruptcies, layoffs, widespread poverty) are now replaced by the fear of not being able to fuel the recovery, of stumbling over old obstacles that were never removed or others that suddenly appear before us, the more insidious the faster our run-up will prove to be.

Although these opinion movements have had a fair amount of penetration of the executive and political figures in general, some mobilizations and demonstrations in the streets have had a major media impact, including the emergence of far-right currents that have produced violent and

intimidating acts, such as the occupation of the headquarters of Italy's main labor union in Rome by an unauthorized march on October 9, 2021.

Social emergency policies and measures: timely solidarity action.

The consequences of the pandemic would certainly have been more devastating in health, economic and social terms if the state, successive governments, public agencies and institutions had not been active in an unprecedented coping effort. Italy has had a very active government in providing for the composition of institutional measures that could support the need for interventions aimed at preserving jobs and protecting the weaker groups that have suffered from the crisis. One of the first interventions, the so-called *Cura Italia* decree of March 17, 2020, acted to strengthen the national health service and provide economic support to families and workers. Thanks to a varied package of measures, including temporary ones, an attempt was made to limit the social impact of the pandemic: tax deadlines were postponed and workers' taxes, especially the self-employed, were deferred. Aid was provided to families: parents with children under the age of 12 were eligible for leave with 50 percent allowance for a maximum of 15 days, or, alternatively, a "baby-sitting" bonus worth up to 600 euros for the purchase of services that would facilitate the reconciliation of work life and child care during a period when children could not go to school. In addition, for pay purposes, the period of compulsory quarantine was equated with illness. Also in attention to people with dependency status, the leave provided by Law 104 of 1992 for the assistance, social integration and rights of people with disabilities was increased. Regarding aid to businesses, a Guarantee Fund for SMEs has been established and investment support measures have been provided, contributions to settle debt situations thanks to loans from the state, which is committed as a guarantor. New social shock absorbers were also promoted for companies with outstanding extraordinary layoffs or solidarity allowances.

Just seven days after the publication of the Cura Italia decree, the Ministry of Labor and Social Policies issued the circular *Social Services System and Coronavirus Emergency* addressed to the heads of plan offices and social services of municipalities, offices that manage the Citizenship Income (RdC)[159] of the territorial ambits, ANCI[160] and Civil Protection, in which they reported indications to continue to guarantee, with the appropriate reinforcements, the services deputed to the best application of the Government's directives and to maintain maximum social cohesion in the face of the challenge of the pandemic emergency. The circular reiterated the role that the social services system must play vis-à-vis the community, with particular regard to those in fragile conditions, and especially emphasizing the need to guarantee the minimum essential levels of regulated social services.

Along with these measures, the March 30, 2020 Civil Protection Ordinance introduced food solidarity measures, increasing the solidarity fund allocated to municipalities. These were able to choose the way in which disbursement was to take place: the provision of bonuses for the purchase of food at commercial establishments or directly the purchase of food and basic necessities to be distributed to identified beneficiaries. The measure was very important in guaranteeing food to citizens in a state of economic fragility caused by the emergency and who were not previously receiving economic support from social services. Given the general criteria, responsibility for

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[159] National *minimum income* measure.

[160] National Association of Italian Municipalities.

241

evaluating the granting of the benefit was given to the social service office of each municipality, which was entitled to supplement the fund with its own resources and make use of third sector entities for the distribution of food and/or bonuses. In this way, the implementation of social protection programs and interventions have reflexively involved the structuring and organization of the social service office deputed to reach the weakest and most fragile groups (Cerro, 2020).

From another perspective, the pandemic has also triggered unprecedented solidarity mechanisms among citizens. One-third of Italians participated in solidarity initiatives related to the health emergency, joining fundraisers for nonprofit associations, for civil defense or in favor of hospitals. Nearly one-third of those who took action personally performed free activities in voluntary associations engaged in the fight against COVID. 20.7 percent of Italians believe that emergency management by institutions produced good results and 56.3 percent that it was quite adequate (Sanfelici, 2020).

Research characteristics.

The analysis carried out and presented here intends to identify how social work practice has been characterized in different social service organizational structures during the emergency and what its implications might be for the future definition of the social worker's work. To this end, it was necessary to investigate the process by which the awareness of the emergency and the consequent anticipation of professional action to cope with it occurred. In fact, there have been two factors that have most challenged social work: as "work" with the introduction of *smart working*; as "social" with the operational timeliness and programmatic foresight that have variously characterized the territorial responses, given the high degree of diversity that connotes the personal services infrastructure of the Italian *welfare state.* In fact, as we shall see, the level of development of individual and organizational awareness of the pandemic event together with the level of organizational rationality of the context where the social service operates prove to be determining factors for emergency management that does not undermine the standards of efficiency and effectiveness to which the territorial social service is accustomed to work.

In light of Paulo Freire's (1968) concept of conscientization, the research team questioned the situated meaning of the same in the Italian context. What follows is a semantic analysis of the concept of *conscientization,* which proved indispensable for the very communicability of the project to the social workers interviewed, for the thematic analysis of the interviews themselves, and for the situating of the Italian cultural context in the world panorama.

The word *consciousness* comes from the Latin *conscientia/ consciens/ conscire* and means "to be aware." Composed of *cum* "with" and *scire* "to know," *conscience* would constitute the feeling that accompanies *science*, that is, that is, that we strive for awareness of what is going on in us: "that inner knowing that each person has of the good and evil freely acted and the judgment he has of his feelings and actions, according to the relation they have to the principles of morality" (Bonomi, 2004). The adjective *aware* also derives from *cum* "with" and *know* "to feel flavor" and refers to one who "together with others has cognizance of checchessia" and is therefore "complicit," is one who "has full cognizance of the thing in question." Such etymological meanings show how in the concept of *conscientization* and, therefore, *consciousness-taking*, there is the dimension of *knowledge* and *knowing* of a given object in a dual intimate and individual and collective perspective.

Rather, the organizational contexts that characterize social work, and within which the concepts of *consciousness* and *awareness* can be observed, make clear the process that social workers are professionally called upon to go through, moving from a moral-individual dimension to an ethical-collective dimension of consciousness (Durkheim, 1893; Marx, 1867). Social professionals, in fact, are called upon not only to have self-consciousness as professionals, but also to have self-consciousness in the organizational and social context within which they work with other professionals and with the very beneficiaries of the interventions and systems of action they enact.

In another definition, commonly found in the legal-philosophical and psychological disciplinary areas, the concept of *consciousness* reveals the "awareness that the subject has of himself and the external world with which he is in relationship, of his own identity and the complex of his inner activities." Alongside the knowledge of one's interiority, the external context and the relationship existing between interiority and exteriority, there are also to be considered the temporal and spatial conditions under which this knowledge takes place. *Consciousness* is also to be understood as "something that exists under certain conditions and does not exist under certain others" (Mead, 1966, p. 68-83). In this sense, observing how a professional's process of becoming aware develops in a given organization and in a given context is particularly significant when the conditions are emergent because they are caused by a collective catastrophe.

The concept of consciousness is, therefore, to be considered in the first instance from an organicistic point of view, with reference to the unconsciousness and consciousness that a human being has of its own automatic organic functionalities, that is, which exist beyond its knowledge, under the conditions in which that organism finds itself. If it were, for example, in a perpetual condition of stasis, the organism might never perceive the occurrence of a change in its own organism, not seek its source and thus not become aware of it. The starting point of the process of becoming conscious can thus be regarded as the condition of unconsciousness: that is, the organism exists beyond individual perception and knowledge and even those relating to another human being: "a person continues to live even when he is under general anesthesia. Consciousness comes and goes, but the organism itself continues to function" (Mead, 1966, p. 68-83). This distinction between consciousness and unconsciousness comes in handy in reflection since the emergency event, because of its immediacy and unpredictability, can provoke a compulsion to become aware of factors previously unknown to personal and organizational consciousness, in this case of social service.

According to these initial defining reflections, we can observe how consciousness is composed of several factors: a sensory one, relating to the mind's attention; a cognitive one, relating to the selection of certain stimuli on which to place attention; a hostile one, inherent in the difficulty in grasping with consciousness the totality of the organism; and a relational one, inherent in the possibility of grasping the difference between external and internal reality of the organism and sensing the presence of interaction between these two dimensions, according to various and different forms.

The impossibility of grasping the totality of external stimuli with an individual consciousness and the relative necessity of the Other to try to do so further underscores the importance of the aggregation of individuals around the attempt to become conscious, assuming awareness and producing knowledge, through the use of language. The sensory, cognitive and linguistic apparatus are combined in this sense.

A further characterizing element has to do with the concept of "false consciousness" (Marx, 1867) and the need to build a process by which to achieve a "class consciousness," that is, a 'collective consciousness' of belonging to the same social stratum, which in turn is part of a given stratification structure, that is, one that exists apart from the consciousness of the human beings who compose and inhabit it. Such consciousness would help, in Marx's reasoning, to generate a possible movement, thus a change in position or even structure itself. Here a further step is added in the reflection: from the automatism of the functioning of the structure/organism, thus from a state of individual and social unconsciousness, to one of consciousness and awareness and, again, to one of action (conscious and aware) directed to the modification of one's position within the given social structure or, even, the structure itself.

The process, then, of conscientization as applied to social intervention and, specifically, to the work of the social worker in an emergency health care setting brings to the attention of our analysis the need to achieve at least two transitions: from a state of unconsciousness to one of individual and collective consciousness of the self as an individual and of the self as an organization and social context; from a structure of automatic actions, linked to unconsciousness, to one of organized actions directed toward social change, linked to consciousness of what one is and what one needs to become in order to respond to the needs of the context, the organization, and the individual. Social service, in this sense, responds to itself as a profession, to the organization as a working tool, and to the context as serving the population and aimed at the realization and consolidation of its well-being.

Methodological framework

The methodological framework used is qualitative and is inspired by a *semi-grounded* constructivist approach (Charmaz, 2006), in that while it is based on theoretical analytical categories of reference, it leaves room for themes to emerge from the narratives of the interviewees.

The main technique chosen for collecting information was the narrative interview (Ferrarotti, 2003), while the selection of social workers interviewed was reasoned, that is, aimed at identifying a group of subjects as heterogeneous as possible with respect to the number of years of experience and the type of organizational role and function, but especially with respect to the area of intervention.

The type of analysis carried out was thematic analysis (Bazeley, 2009), that is, aimed at identifying themes pertaining to the concept of consciousness that stem directly from the field experiences of *social* workers. The method of analysis was *in-case* and *cross-case* (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006), so as to have the possibility of cross-referencing themes related to individual experiences with those related to the set of experiences collected.

Analysis of interviews

The profile of the interviewees is fairly representative of the Italian social worker with regard to prevalence of the female gender, out of n.15 social workers interviewed n.2 are men and n.13 are women; from a geographical point of view, most represented is the geographical area of Central - Southern Italy and the public sector. In contrast, the areas of intervention in which the social workers interviewed operate are extremely heterogeneous in order to capture the variability and common elements of the practices implemented. Out of 15 social workers interviewed, No. 2 experienced the pandemic as employed in immigration offices, No. 3 in anti-poverty offices, No.

4 in local health agencies, No. 5 at local government agencies, and No. 1 at a regional professional association as president. Below we present the categories of thematic analysis identified worldwide and through which we attempt to represent the process of consciousness raising in its ethical-political, theoretical-methodological and theoretical-operational dimensions.

The process of awareness

The time when we conducted the interviews, between June and October 2021, forced the interviewees to relive the first moments of the pandemic as something farther back in time than what a half year can objectively mean. Some say that a difference is experienced between perceived time and experienced time. The density of novelty in the first *lockdown* time, the amazement at what was happening, the upheaval of everyday life, are all characteristics that point back to indelible memories of exceptionality that do not follow the normal succession of days and months.

Revisiting those episodes has, in the first place, elicited not only memories about the events, but rather a set of very strong feelings of surprise, novelty, intensity, and concern. These were times when changes happened with great celerity: "*I could not get my head around it, everything was happening without having the slightest preparation for what was about to happen.*"

It was also a historic event in which the consciousness of having participated collectively shines through, in which personal, contextual, and the whole country's affairs were intertwined in solidarity as with few other dimensions of life understood. And yet, in the testimony of some colleagues, a prevailing feeling was one of loneliness: "*I felt lonely, I would come to work and there were only two or three people in the whole building; even on the street you felt like you were living in a terror movie, with the streets deserted.*"

The transition from a state of unconsciousness to one of awareness of the pandemic situation was characterized by being *immediate*, because it was predominantly marked by emotions of fear pertaining to the personal-individual sphere of the subject, and *progressive at* the same time, because it was accompanied by the various forms of reorganization of social services.

> [...] the perception of gravity was immediate because in any case immediately there was a lot of fear about what was happening and already with the closing of the schools there was a disruption of let's say everyone's life; so, somehow there was an immediate awareness [...]

> [...] the school closure provision in my opinion made everyone change and make real what was happening ... from there smart working was born and so somehow by necessity you had to understand that something was happening. It was an escalation of immediacy [...].

> [...] it was a surprise for everyone, in the sense that we found ourselves catapulted, something really surreal, then in this service we are few [...]

> [...] I began to understand that something was happening on a broader level however, we still did not understand the spillover effect this would have on the territory, we still felt far from the problem [...]

The elements that connoted the immediacy of awareness refer to: events related first of all to the private lives of professionals; secondly, to the reorganization of the work *setting* and, in some cases, to the specific tasks of professional life; to the increasing demands for help from service recipients, some of them unexpected and unusual; and to the disruptiveness and dependence of their movements on the regulatory and governmental dimensions not only at the national but also at the local level.

> [...] we realized this right away because we immediately activated the emergency service [...]

> [...] another thing that made me realize was the e-mails from family members and support administrators [...]

> [...] I understood the gravity of the situation here in the office when the letter came from the mayor about what the whole reorganization of the service was supposed to be ... and I realized how everything was changing and we had to adapt to the new reality [...].

Instead, the factors that connoted the progressiveness of awareness were: the dependence of the reorganization of personal and professional life on the sometimes sudden changes due to government decisions that radically altered the livability of the area and accessibility to services; the dependence of the internal reorganization of each organization on the ever-increasing demands for help from those who were already beneficiaries of services and from citizens more broadly.

> [...] I remember this sense of abandonment and the looks from my colleagues, because we didn't know when we would see each other again, how long it would last, what was going on, whether we would get paid ... it was a silent situation but really there were a lot of questions that we wanted to ask, that we wanted answers to but no one knew how to answer [...]

> [...] I had surgery at that time ... I became aware of what was actually going on when the situation exploded in one of our facilities ... a residence for the elderly .... despite the fact that I was on sick leave we followed it up with the health management [...]

In the face of the immediacy-progressiveness ambivalence of the awareness process, one of the difficulties to increase it more were found in the absence or the little time devoted to the processing of the emergent experience as a working group in the form of professional supervision, despite the fact that a sense of solidarity among colleagues considered very strong, but unspoken, was experienced during the process.

> [...] with colleagues even though there were only a few of us the solidarity that was created among us, the desire not to break down, we were all strong enough ... is something that made us feel united in pain in suffering ... but it accentuated all the issues [...].

> [...] at the end of the emergency. we had working groups with each other, working groups with a professor from the university, and then we - under my compulsion - decided to write, to put a little bit in writing what had happened ... almost a little bit in a cathartic way [...]

In the testimony of the fifteen social workers interviewed, the process of becoming aware seems to have been characterized by a shift from a state of personal and professional

unconsciousness to one of personal and professional awareness having elements both of immediacy, due to the emergency containment measures emanating from national government measures, and of progressiveness, because they were calibrated to the level of organizational rationality peculiar to each facility at which the social worker was practicing at the time of the pandemic.

A relevant and critical element, expressed fairly homogeneously, was the process of personal and organizational reframing of the critical event that each professional felt the need for and that was not always ensured or otherwise addressed, such as by processing in written form.

For many of the interviewees, the pandemic also meant an event of vulnerability and crisis regarding the ability of science and systems to protect the protections of their citizens. One colleague expresses it this way "(...) I felt betrayed by science. I thought I was better prepared to be able to fight against any disease, I realized that in fact there was no possibility of containing that virus."

Ethical-political dimension

The regions' transposition of the governmental decrees highlighted, in particular, two important factors: the possibility of adopting emergency procedures that every organization is supposed to have; and the limitations and fragilities that characterize every organization.

The government, on the one hand, was perceived as reliable but not efficient in communications, which helped fuel that sense of parallel progressiveness and immediacy in the awareness process.

> [...] It was all very immediate ... there were emergency procedures that were ramified by the ministries, placed under consideration in our case at the COC (Municipal Operations Center) which was the let's say final link in the local emergency chain and the COC (Municipal Operations Center) as early as February 27 had been established and had made its first meetings [...]

> [...] There was a lot of reflection but forced reflection, where reflection and action went hand in hand ... because there was not a lot of inventiveness, that is, the legal stakes of the COC (Municipal Operations Center) of the state of civil protection, in fact outlined how the emergency was to unfold. So with this substrate of law the rest was just reading the needs of the population and thinking about how to meet them in record time [...].

> [...] there are already established rules, the problem is that this emergency was so unprecedented that the emergency we are used to are the cold emergency, the excessive heat emergency or the earthquake-related civil defense emergency. And the pandemic one certainly needed continuous restructuring however there are rules present for emergency management [...]

> [...] the municipality used the hierarchy of positions, the COC (Municipal Operations Center) was made up of the managers, then each manager would branch out to the organizational positions, the organizational positions to the staff ... probably a more synergistic and diffuse communication could be organized however this thing does not only happen in the emergency, it also happens in the everyday [...]

The main ethical dilemma involved how to preserve personal safety and, at the same time, collective safety within the same organization, considering the vulnerability of the population receiving services even before the pandemic outbreak.

> [...] as early as March 6 we were contingent at the entrance ... we didn't shake anyone's hands, there was already a whole series of attentions and even inside the office we had started using disinfectant, the situation was already blatantly known to the office because a level of attention was maintained with respect to the turnover of people, the distances [...]

> [...] Not all colleagues maintained continuity in the cases they followed. We were first concerned about those we had the least news about, those cases where we knew that living together was difficult for various reasons and that we were not able to contact easily [...]

> [...] even though the administration required us to observe a rota ... we because of the workload and the emergency decided with our manager to be here every day ... we had the option to ask for smart but we did not do it [...].

> [...] the asl was not able to give everything right away ... we got there over time ... with colleagues in the facilities there has been exceptional work, because the private sector is less harnessed in institutional meshes; therefore, it is freer in some ways ... but for placements there has been a total block [...].

> [...] the government with a whole series of measures had financed the provision of food solidarity measures, which also involved not inconsiderable work for municipalities because the legislation ... said "we are giving you this money, you do things, you see what how and when" without actually giving lines [...]

From this area of analysis, the relevance of organizational readiness to government and civil defense guidance emerges strongly. The professional ethical dilemma appears to be particularly pressing with respect to the professional's relationship to his own safety, that of the beneficiaries of services, and obedience to regulatory requirements that are not always clear and not always consistent. So, the usual ethical dilemma between professional mandates was compounded by concern and consideration to one's own safety and that of one's household. Alongside this, there also emerged: organizational gaps pre-existing at the outbreak of the pandemic emergency, unfamiliarity with the emergency procedures provided in any organization dedicated to personal services, and little sharing of the same information with practitioners who did not have coordinating roles or organizational responsibility.

For some social workers, the time of the pandemic is also a time of "growth and opportunity," because in the deep crisis situation of all social structures and organized systems, it has brought out the humanity, creativity and supportive initiative of many people.

> [...] we did things during the covid that at another time would have been difficult; people felt called to help out with what they could offer on behalf of those who were struggling the most [...]

> [...] when institutions closed, people took action to somehow solve their problems by relying on the people around them [...]

248

It is emphasized that the scale of the pandemic has created the basis for a greater collective consciousness that revives levels of some equality.

> [...] since we all had the same fear, we were also all very close and very united. New relationships were created, where sharing was more intense [...]

Theoretical-methodological dimension

Emergency and urgent social work is characterized as a field whose knowledge is still under construction in Italy. The perception of the social workers interviewed is that although the topic belongs to the everydayness of professional experience and was actually experienced during the pandemic emergency, the sense of unpreparedness and reorganizational difficulty was tangible and experienced by all albeit in different ways and degrees.

The themes that emerged from the analysis and that characterize this dimension concern planning and conflict between the technical and political sides, the role and space of reflexivity in social service in emergency situations, flexibility as a competence to be integrated into the training curriculum of social work professionals

The importance of planning actions together with the political side is posed as necessary in order to have the appropriate information to perform the coordination function, giving a sense of security and support to colleagues and, as a result, the public.

> [...] we found ourselves dancing with steps that we didn't know, that's kind of the metaphor, there was no thought but you couldn't structure it then particularly because the rules were changing all the time ... this margin of decision-making from above up to a certain point leaves time for thought [...]

> [...] the readiness to still be trained and aware people of both the social and the administrative aspect certainly made a difference, however, there were points where this thing was not expected to emerge; therefore, it was always a little bit of putting yourself on the line, to understand the limit of what they tell you, how you have to do it and how you can do it in the best way [...]

Lacking, on the other hand, were spaces for collective reflection on how the emergency was being managed from an organizational and emotional point of view. Such moments would have been necessary during crisis coping and afterwards, in the recovery phase, to gather everyone's views and rethink and reorganize the characteristics of a hypothetical new phase of emergency coping.

> [...] from this experience it accentuates our aptitude to be open even to improvise ... to adapt to everything ... in this case in the field ... I felt with colleagues in the trenches ... I was enriched, experienced. we were able to handle the situation however these things then need to be put in a supervisory situation, we need to understand how we felt, what to change [...]

> [...] I proposed a corporate project to deal with covid ... the project was on the coordination of the social health districts of the corporate professional social service, because I thought it could be useful ... to detect expressed needs ... the famous filter function that we have was to be activated for the network asl municipality and private social ... that was my idea ... and it was blocked ... due to the lack of adequate technical

> means for online meetings ... and the social workers were all put on smart working ... and they were all over 50 [...].

> [...] supervision must be made mandatory, it must not be left to the discretion of agencies, or at least personal. i as a professional deontologically must feel the responsibility to be supervised even emotionally [...]

Finally, the professionals interviewed were walked through a transition in reflection from a more theoretical-practical level to a more formative one in which they agree with respect to the recognition of flexibility as a core competency for the profession.

> [...] it is important at the training level to teach so-called empathy ... but especially the ability to adapt, to have self-esteem especially when we feel attacked from all sides ... to think that we are not god on earth, to do what we can [...]

> [...] certainly we all have to be more ready for change, we don't have to be glued to patterns, what has to come through is adaptability, because our work is a dynamic work, it's a work that changes with time, we have to be able to accommodate changes ... attention to technology is also another aspect [...].

> [...] and then the social worker must have administrative training, because it is not possible not to be aware ... I have to know how the administrative machine works ... there are no social services that do not go through the administrative machine [...].

Relative to the theoretical-methodological dimension, ordinary organizational planning and extraordinary organizational planning appear to be closely interconnected and interdependent, which is expressed in a chain of extraordinary interventions during emergencies, but not without programmatic vision and foresight. This dimension is particularly rich in formative insights and reflections.

Three main factors are highlighted: flexibility, as a transversal competence that the social worker must acquire at least in the training internship phase; digital competence, as indispensable in this historical period and for the future of social service; and global knowledge of the administrative machine. This last point appears particularly significant for our reflection, since the process of becoming aware as a transition from unconsciousness to individual and collective consciousness must necessarily include knowledge of the context and functioning of the structure with respect to which consciousness develops. Only if one is in possession of knowledge of the context and landscape in which one is immersed, can one also assume a position and posture of meaning in terms of action, foreseeing and generating actions that can affect the coping with the emergency at hand, the use of the organizational machine, and the protection of the welfare of the population, which does not exclude the practitioner's own.

The territorial councils of the Order of Social Workers also saw themselves in a predicament of being able to give precise guidelines to colleagues on how to proceed in a context where perplexity and disorder ruled the organization of social services. After the initial torpor of figuring out what was going on, some dynamics of participation and exchange among colleagues ensued:

> [...] we asked as a professional body to report innovative methodologies, but not many came; perhaps more time was needed to mature structured thinking... [...]

As methodological reflections, the difficulties of integrating all services were pointed out, and in particular, the difference in support in services between health and social services. It is lamented that the vision of health care does not fully incorporate a more holistic concept so that we can talk about social and health integration. In particular, the home-based care of the most vulnerable people who have suffered the undesirable effects of social isolation has not seen timely reinforcement of home-based care, but on the contrary:

> [...] we had difficulty in giving continuity to people's home services, except for health attention cases. Some cases were reported later when they had covid [...]

In some contexts, "crisis units" were created as an emergency response. The participation of social services was not planned at first, but later, when faced with the need for organization in the territories, they were called in.

> [...] when the civil defense formed the crisis units, they did not call us. Then, seeing that our role was central, they asked us to participate. Our role became central in the distribution of spending bonuses and coordination on the ground basically with parishes [...]

Theoretical-practical dimension

A common sentiment in the daily practice of emergency social service from COVID 19 concerned the state of *race* and *danger*, which strongly evoked the rhetoric of relief in *war* situations, also much used in the media. The common goal of the professionals interviewed was to "give something, anything, to make the other person feel better." The feeling that constantly accompanied their work practice can be summarized with an expression used by one interviewee: "it was a continuous doing without thinking."

Issues pertaining to the theoretical-practical dimension of emergency social work are distributed among strictly material conditions of work, organizational elements and quality of work. With regard to the practical instrumentation provided to the social service, the introduction of *smart working* has revealed the need to increase and train professionals in the use of technological tools.

> [...] we dealt with the shopping vouchers ... in the first months of smart working having to go and evaluate, with respect to the criteria decided by the municipality of Bari, going to evaluate families who had applied for shopping vouchers already recipients of support measures ... with a view to not accumulating interventions on the same family [...].

> [...] female colleagues who had the vision of territorial work did not understand that the work could also be done from home ... they learned after practicing the experience ... the partial failure was due to the inexperience of remote work and the fear of staff ... before the new hires arrived ... I am 60 years old and the youngest ... the fear was so much [...]

A not insignificant risk that some services encountered was that of *organizational paralysis in the* face of an emergency situation. The use of the organization as a tool to levee for professionals' emotions of fear was strategic in some cases depending on the extent to which individual safety equipment, the technology necessary for smart work and a sustainable distribution of roles and tasks were guaranteed in light of the different conditions in which professionals found themselves compared to their initial work *status.*

251

> [...] I prefer working in presence, because working from home implies losing the work-home dimension. In fact, I would not make the difference between what was happening at home and work so clear because at first it was a continuous work without schedules, in the second time when smart working was then started at a time when emergency management was under control, in the months of April and May, being at home if you have a family dimension present means lengthening the work time [...]

> [...] in the office I didn't feel protected and sheltered at all ... because inevitably we were a lot of people together, we had a lot of contact with people ... we used PPE (Personal Protective Pquipment) however the dimension of fear in a system that said to limit contacts um here it is as if contacts did not limit themselves, in fact in some ways it is as if contacts were implemented [...]

Factors that made a difference in the quality of the practice of social service work in emergencies were, on the one hand, the ability to maintain a high level of attention to the content of the caring relationship that social workers already had in their custody and that were added in the course of the emergency; on the other hand, the degree of solidarity among components of the professional team, within the organization and, again, the solidarity that was manifested at the community level, among citizens.

> [...] it was a gradual crescendo ... the first need was to organize basic provisions because we were faced with people who were unable to leave their homes ... to the need to go and buy medication ... so the first thing that was activated was the possibility of giving extra availability on our part [...].

> [...] the phone was a switchboard and we found it difficult to handle the administrative part ... create an Excel platform from scratch because we had to collect data, make a ranking to distribute money [...]

> [...] I think we should create a new model, which is problem solving in emergency, where in fact the pattern of social service action does not change during the emergency. That is, net of the covid, the fear it created in the moment of closure, the model of problem solving in emergency and in flexibility implies that first of all the operator has to be really flexible. That is, all the rules that are in some way lose some value; that is, you have to be half operator half volunteer, and this not everyone is willing to do ... So, building such a model of intervention ... flexibility and humanity and professionalism, these three things have to marry in this model [...]

Smart working, remote working, or *digital social work was* initially embraced as an imposition of circumstances where one made use, in the absence of alternative, of what "one could do by calling people's cell phones and coordinating with video conferencing." However, most of the services lacked adequate preparation to make continued use of them.

> [...] readiness, self-sacrifice ... different levels of operation, they were always ready to respond to any kind of request, any no, however, at least they were trying to be there, at least to accommodate questions [...]

The hasty and precarious introduction of long-distance communication as a tool of the services gave rise to a second phase, in which the effects of the pandemic tended to diminish, in which discernment opened up in each context about the convenience of remaining with certain practices that had shown its effectiveness. The reflection of some colleagues is that while

recognizing that direct work with people is irreplaceable in the profession, it is also true that the immediacy, efficiency, and simplicity of computer communication has allowed for growth in quality and accessibility of service.

> [...] there are those who prefer to work from home, and there are others who immediately reincorporated into face-to-face work as soon as it was possible. We still do a lot of meetings with computers, because it is easier and more direct [...]

> [...] there were times when I was working all day on my cell phone. People seem to me to have been very thankful for this way of being so willing to take an interest in how they were doing, even if only I could do it in this mode. When the pandemic is over, we should ask ourselves whether we should not continue this availability [...].

In this dimension, we observed how social work theory and practice intersected: on the one hand, we noted how organizational ineffectiveness and inefficiency, mainly due to the poor provision of technology and digital skills for carrying out *smart working*, generated the risk of paralyzing social work; on the other hand, such ineffectiveness and inefficiency stimulated social service creativity and solidarity among colleagues belonging to the same professional teams.

The research also probed which collectives suffered most from the pandemic effects. In Italy, the impact of covid on the elderly population was very noticeable as a health impact, but the consequences of productive inactivity in many sectors affected a large part of the population, who saw themselves without the minimum income to live:

> [...] the pandemic greatly affected those who lost their jobs, those who could not access services, and those who suffered the problems associated with isolation. Many were new users of social services. People who never thought they would see themselves in such a state of need [...]

> [...] when people stayed at home, situations of conflict and violence immediately became invisible. It was difficult to follow people [...]

In addition to the more flagrant cases, a growing concern emerged during the research about the consequences the pandemic has left, perhaps less visibly at first, on adolescents.

> [...] 14- to 18-year-olds have very much suffered this situation. Without being able to go out, too old to have a chance to go out with their parents, too young to go out on their own to work or whatever, all day catapulted to relate only with the computer... now we see the consequences, they don't know how to live normalcy anymore, they have problems to go back to school, some even to leave the room... [...]

The training of social workers.

The research also allowed us to hear the reflection of social work professionals on the topics to be included in the training of future social work colleagues following the pandemic event. Two main contents emerged: emergency work and *digital social work*.

Regarding the former, almost all respondents agree that they were not prepared, technically, for a situation like the one that happened. This "unpreparedness" affects several dimensions, and has to do with the ability to reorganize work in the face of a disaster that has occurred and the suspension of a whole network of coordinated actors with whom one collaborates on a daily basis.

According to professionals, the same concept of intervention in "social emergency" cannot be the same before and after the covid epidemic.

> [...] until this pandemic, the concept of "social emergency" was about something else. On the one hand, it was about following up situations on cases in the territory, where there was a need for urgent action, with a dedicated team available at all times (...) In addition, groups of colleagues who had targeted training organized themselves to move to territories where an extraordinarily extraordinary event had happened (earthquake, natural event, etc.); what we will have to think about is, instead, how to act when the whole country remains blocked [...]

In this way, the skills to be developed in social workers regarding social emergencies would no longer correspond to specialization, but rather to cross-training for all social professionals in any service and on any field, who transversally should be able to manage "holding" their role and protecting citizens even in the face of a national emergency event. This means being attentive to "minimum maintenance of services, particularly toward the most fragile people" in a time of crisis.

A second aspect that emerges strongly, perhaps not related exclusively to the pandemic event, concerns a revisiting of social service methodology in the face of the new distance communication tools to be incorporated, in a balanced measure, among the tools of the social service professional. Aware of the limitations with respect to the irreplaceable in-person encounter with users, reality shows that they can be highly effective in stimulating accessibility of services, in building a relationship of trust within the helping process, in monitoring situations, as well as in group intervention and networking.

> [...] I'm reconsidering more and more the potential that Zoom, WhatsApp and others are giving to the service, both in the organization and in the relationship with the users. They themselves are asking if it will be possible to maintain some of the ways they started during the pandemic when it is over [...]

> [...] at first I found it difficult to use these things, but I can't deny its usefulness. I can't deny the effort..., but I think it is really useful and will remain as a practice in the services [...]

During this pandemic period, the training of trainees meant, in fact, a spur to the development of theoretical reflection on these tools as well. The skills of the young students also benefited from the support of the quick adaptation to the new tools of more experienced social worker colleagues, in an interesting synergy of mutual collaboration.

CONCLUSIONS

Italy, the first country after China to be shocked by the effects of the pandemic, has gone through this unprecedented experience without having references to look to that had similarity of characteristics, not only in terms of form of state and government but also in terms of welfare state. This confronts each of us, in our own space of action, but also nations, in their own space of governance, with the need - no longer postponable - to become aware of the interdependence that connotes us and to question ourselves regarding the implementation of policies and the consolidation of practices that give body to the awareness of being responsible not only for oneself but also for others, albeit in different forms and dimensions of impact. With respect to this point, as a social service we can question the role we have or can have in affecting at the policy level the

awareness of the shared responsibility we have for one another and the vital need to act accordingly.

From the perspective of the organization of social services, the feeling of displacement that pervaded the entire system at the national level had different manifestations and strategies of resistance, mainly depending on the type of organization, the age of service of the professional, and the geography of the territory (which in some cases saw services better prepared to deal with collective emergencies). However, the organizational paralysis that affected a large part of the national social service system was in each case eased by the way each organization managed to reinvent its service.

Alongside this organizational unpreparedness, professional unpreparedness, more of a practical-methodological nature, also played no small role. This manifested itself in an increased use of one's professional discretion and ability to improvise and adapt, net of the guidance provided by regulatory provisions. However, this reaction has also accompanied professionals in maturing an awareness that they have little room for sharing reflections and building best practices, starting from the local organizational level and ending at the national system level.

With respect to this point, the reflection and commitment of the social service and its Italian professional order have been present for some time; to have a temporal reference one can refer to the establishment of the framework law of social interventions and services of 2000 (Law No. 328). Also thanks to the pandemic emergency, the discourse related to the need to define and apply essential levels of services in order to reduce as much as possible the inhomogeneity and fragmentation of welfare and service organization takes substance with the new National Social Plan 2021-2023 and with Mission 5 of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan, which provides for the allocation of funds dedicated to professional supervision. These regulatory measures therefore also address the need for professionals to carve out a space and time dedicated to discussion and sharing of reflections, practices and emotions that work generates on a daily basis. Along with this, the commitment of the Italian social service alongside civil protection is also embodied in the experience of the National Association of Social Workers for Civil Protection suggests the existence of a structured interest of the social service in maturing theoretical and practical skills of coping with collective emergencies.

The question that arises in this regard concerns the care, accompaniment and training from which these instances need to be supported.

With respect to the relationship with service beneficiaries, to whose well-being the construction and care of all these mechanisms and structures is intended, the pandemic emergency has confronted professionals with ethical dilemmas inherent in the protection of users and the protection of self as professionals in social service environments. Not in all organizations and not with respect to all user groups has it been possible to ensure the same level of protection through the provision of personal protective equipment and education on sanitizing self and living environments. These elements, together with the introduction of digital working tools in the helping relationship, have led the reflection of professionals around the meaning and effectiveness of the content and forms of established relationships that until the pandemic were perhaps more underestimated.

This theme opens up an essential field of social service study and application to be explored and put into practice, and that is the introduction of digital social work and its impact on the construction and effectiveness of helping relationships.

This research, in sum, involved the joint effort of researchers and practitioners in reflecting on the concept of consciousness-raising and assessing how little this is chewed up and internalized in ourselves, first and foremost as human beings of this historical period. That of consciousness is a challenging concept in Paulo Freire's (1968) perspective, which although traditionally (and perhaps even instinctively) brings thinking back to individual morality, requires instead a fundamental and radical shift from the idea of self as an individual to the idea of self as a collective, inviting a shift from "self" to "we." The pandemic event actually trespasses each self, bringing clearly into evidence the interdependence that characterizes human beings globally, and challenges every national boundary to defeat an invisible but common enemy.

The commonality of the "enemy" was, however, contrasted by the difference in the starting point that characterizes the contexts where this stopped and where social workers, along with the other professionals who on the front lines were protagonists in coping with the emergency, were already acting in the name of protecting rights and ensuring social justice.

Some themes in the social service debate in Italy have been given more space in national reflection and planning, such as the theme of strengthening professional identity, the theme of caring for professionals with supervisory activities, and the theme of ensuring essential levels of performance nourished by dedicated economic, human and technological resources and outlined in planning and related provision for evaluating the change brought about as a result of the implementation of actions.

In this chapter, we have attempted to present the reflections of professional social workers on the changes that the pandemic emergency has produced in professional practices and the possible learnings to be retained and used to build the future of social work in Italy, relative to practices and training.

In conclusion, two issues emerged that contribute to professionals' awareness of the essentiality and importance of the profession to society: 1) the necessary knowledge on the part of professionals of the components and modes of operation of the social service organization-both with respect to the system in which it operates directly, and with respect to the local, regional, national and global territorial system-and the concrete possibility of networking and acting together, practicing in some way the matured consciousness of being an "organism" as well as an organization; 2) the need to be "in" the society in which it operates, learning from time to time to communicate with all the tools necessary to understand in an increasingly in-depth and current way the needs to which it responds; hence the use of digital that has emerged so disruptively and, in some cases, overbearingly in the habits of professionals.

The oldest and most fascinating knot to which the reflection made during and thanks to this research brings us back concerns the realization that social service is science and art and that professionals have the right and the duty to equip themselves to express themselves and be recognized as science without forgetting to nurture the artistic and creative dimension that characterizes it, without which it would not be able to work with the levels of uncertainty and immateriality with which it has to deal on a daily basis.

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Questo libro è il risultato di una ricerca internazionale, realizzata tra gli anni 2020 - 2022, finanziata da IASSW-AIETS, che ha coinvolto ricercatori provenienti da Argentina, Brasile, Italia, Spagna e Svezia. Lo studio ha superato le sfide linguistiche e culturali, utilizzando metodologie che hanno promosso l'interazione tra i partecipanti, inclusa la traduzione simultanea nelle riunioni online. Gli intervistati sono stati integrati come analisti, contribuendo a un processo collaborativo durante la pandemia di Covid-19, riconoscendo l'importanza della partecipazione attiva di tutti.

I capitoli del libro riguardano l'analisi della situazione socio-politico-sanitaria di ciascun Paese, la **presa di coscienza** degli assistenti sociali di fronte alla pandemia e le risposte teoriche e pratiche date durante l'emergenza. La presentazione della ricerca in questo libro segue una matrice metodologica tripartita: dimensione etico-politica, teorico-metodologica e tecnico-operativa, analizzando gli impatti di tali azioni sulla formazione e sulla pratica professionale. Pubblicato in diverse lingue (italiano, inglese, portoghese, spagnolo e svedese), il libro poliglota amplia la portata dei risultati.

Le interviste rivelano che la pandemia è stata un periodo unico per studiare il *modus operandi* e il *modus cogitandi* degli assistenti sociali, evidenziando il loro ruolo cruciale nel contrasto alla crisi sanitaria, richiedendo un maggiore riconoscimento da parte della società riguardo la professione come parte fondamentale della costruzione/sostentamento civilizzatorio. La conoscenza accumulata durante questo periodo è vista come una crescita intellettuale ed empirica essenziale per la formazione e la pratica professionale in diversi contesti nel presente e nel futuro.

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