



*Original Article*

**Between ideals and reality.  
Critical reflections on basic training in Italian social work  
in the light of the results of research involving a group  
of municipal social workers.**

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**Abstract**

Is the Italian social work today capable of developing its own cultural and scientific knowledge? What conditions influence this internal production process within the professional community of social workers? These questions are the focus of a reflection conducted with a group of 70 social workers from the municipal social services. More than twenty years after the inclusion of social work within university education, the discussion on the ability of this discipline to produce original scientific knowledge is intense in Italian social work. Caught between an operation increasingly guided by bureaucratic models and an increasingly complex social reality, social work must find a way to produce knowledge through reflective processes that often find little space in the institutions in which social workers operate.

**Keywords:** Social work training; scientific knowledge; scientific production; reflexivity; institutional constraints; bureaucracy.

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**Foreword**

Social work training is a highly complex and much discussed matter. This article intends to contribute to the debate on social work training by analysing the contents of some focus-

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group discussions involving approximately seventy social workers employed by the municipal social services in the Region of Friuli Venezia Giulia, in North East Italy.

The central issue addressed in this essay can be summed up as follows: is social work today capable of developing its own cultural and scientific knowledge? What conditions influence this internal production process within the professional community of social workers?

In order to answer these questions, the first section sums up the main problems facing basic training for social workers today. In greater detail, it highlights the complexity of pinpointing stable cultural training for a discipline that aims to intervene with tangible human needs, which are however socially and historically determined. The fact that social workers are called upon to intervene within an institutional system that shapes the conditions of their work makes the analysis plan even more complex, especially today, when municipal social services seem to be organised according to management models that do not advocate reflectiveness and the processing of individual scientific thinking.

The second section will analyse some of the focus groups' conclusions on the issue of basic training in social work. As you will see, social workers' reflections are very useful when it comes to showing just how complex it is for this professional community to follow up on the professional mandate of contributing to the development of critical knowledge by processing their working experience. Here we find one of the main issues that weigh on social work as a scientific discipline today, namely the fact that daily operations in municipality-run local social services are structured and evaluated according to bureaucratic canons. Opportunities for the scientific evaluation of their work is extremely limited, if not completely absent, as are the possibilities for taking advantage of professional supervision. All this seems to fuel an idea among social workers that "culture" and "scientificity" should be offered and discussed in other places, mainly within universities, while local services are increasingly perceived as the place "of practice". All this impoverishes the professional social work community's internal capacity to produce knowledge and to critically analyse the knowledge offered by university training centres.

Lastly, the third section will conclude with a reflection on the role played by university work placements in constructing the professional identity of future social workers. Work placements are an essential part of social work training, helping to shape professionals who should have the ability to combine theory and practice. If, however, the work placement takes place within an educational context dominated by a divide between theory and practice, in which the professional community in question primarily perceives itself as a working group that struggles to reflect critically and produce knowledge, then it would be necessary to start seriously reflecting on whether university work placements actually have the potential to help improve the quality of social work today.

### **Social work training: a structurally complex issue**

Discussing the training of social workers is not an easy task, as this professional figure incorporates three very different social requirements (Dal Prà Ponticelli, 1987). On the one hand, social work has provided itself with a set of codes of conduct, both national and international, which outline the figure of a worker who should operate within a framework of values with a clear focus on social justice, inclusion, defence of the rights of minority groups, and welfare systems. On the other hand, social workers operate professionally through institutions that politically define the needs to be met, the beneficiaries of their

work and the results to be achieved through welfare operations. Lastly, social work takes place within social contexts characterised by specific political, cultural and economic conditions, which also influence the image and professional mandate of social workers.

The complex dynamic between professional mandate, institutional mandate and social mandate means that the identity and operations of national professional communities are structured in different ways, making it very difficult to identify the cultural and operational characteristics of social workers in a precise and unambiguous fashion (Hare, 2004). For example, social work in northern Europe, in Scandinavian countries, is characterised by an emphasis on sociological and political training content, in line with a universalist welfare structure, and social workers are familiarised with a professional role that looks at the social roots of the problems presented by users and the consequent factors of social injustice (Hutchinson and Kőrösy, 2007). On the contrary, in liberal welfare regimes, such as the USA and Canada, the university education of social workers is strongly influenced by medical and psychological disciplines, which focus more on exploring the origins of the problems presented by social service users within a micro-social dimension (*ibid.*, p. 57). However, this does not resolve the intrinsic tension between universal and detail that has characterised social work since its historical origins. Indeed, it is certainly no coincidence that in the USA, the academic and professional community of social workers is characterised by heated opposition between those who advocate a political vision and critical approach to social work and those who, instead, continue to consider social work as a discipline predominantly oriented towards solving individual problems (Rossiter MSW, 1997; Turgeon, 2018).

These complex and diverse operational and training contents in social work are not only to be found in the comparison between different national situations, but also concern the historical development of this discipline that began life as a tool to solve the needs of the poorest social classes, but that, soon afterwards, realised that it was necessary to equip itself with conceptual apparatus able to strengthen social workers' interpretative and interventional skills (Neve, 2011). From its very beginnings, social work has sought to combine its mandate of attempting to solve the tangible problems expressed by a section of the population with the development of theories that could both explain the origin of these problems and guide professional action. Of course, it has never been possible for social work to come up with a definitive body of theory able to conclusively explain the genesis of problems that have historically appeared to be linked to the various conditions affecting human societies. The vision and mandate of social work and, as a consequence, its training content, have therefore changed over time, in connection both with progress in scientific disciplines of reference, and with changes in the institutional systems within which the social services have found themselves operating. In greater detail, the introduction of public welfare systems meant that social services were also required to act from a "political" perspective, becoming an executive instrument of a system that intended to extend social rights to social groups that had previously been excluded (Dal Prà Ponticelli, 1987).

As far as social worker training in Italy is concerned, we can say that it too has been affected by the historical, cultural, political and institutional conditions in which this figure came about and developed (Neve, 2011). In Italy, the inclusion of social worker training within academia was rather late, between the 1980s and 2000s, compared to the long history of professional social work in Italy. Previously, social workers were mainly trained by a set of regional bodies, which were either of a denominational stamp or associated with trade unions, whose mandate was to cover the working needs of local

social services within a welfare system that was fragmented into a plurality of interventions involving local authorities (regions, municipalities and provinces), the Church and the private social sector. All this has undoubtedly contributed to building the figure of the Italian social worker according to a predominantly welfare-based model, with actions centred on the response to individual problems, often through sectoral interventions and with limited resources to definitively resolve situations of need. This does not mean, however, that social work training in Italy has not historically presented the elements of internal contradiction that structurally characterise the heart of social work and are the product of the interaction between the three professional, social and institutional mandates, which are elements of tension that the professional community has tried to unite in conceptual terms. Indeed, since the late 1960s (Fargion, 2013), Italian social workers have developed their own original theoretical and professional intervention model, with an ecological-systemic matrix, which assigns this profession the task of simultaneously influencing the various social systems considered responsible for the generation, structuring and resolution of human problems: the individual; his or her social context of reference; the institutional system in which the social services operate. This “trifocal” perspective (*ibid.*) thus seeks to hold together the need to take care of the interpersonal relationship between social worker and user, developing a relationship oriented towards change and the resolution of human problems, while also not neglecting to work on the structural social components within which the same needs arise and are met. In greater detail, the professional community of social workers has always been very clear that the very definition of what a “need” is and how it should be addressed is the product of political processes that are embodied in laws, care regulations and professional job descriptions (Dal Prà Ponticelli, 1987). In the same way, the professional action of resolving needs has a “political” impact, since it legitimises the choices made with regard to the definition of needs and the objectives assigned to social interventions. We could say that, especially since the 1960s, social work has also seen itself as a factor of cultural reproduction in a social system that constantly produces economic and power inequalities and that, through the welfare system, tries to contain the emerging contradictions while not questioning the dominant configuration of social relations (*cf.* Dominelli, 2015; Heron, 2005). During the period of major reforms in the Italian welfare system, this political dimension’s awareness of social work revealed radical criticism of social control exercised by welfare institutions, advocating the involvement of social workers in overcoming the asylum facilities operated by Basaglia (Foot, 2014), while also refusing to bring the basic social work training into the academic field (Samory, 1995). This had a negative effect on the scientific development of social work, weakening this discipline and the municipal welfare system as a whole.

With the subsequent inclusion of social work in university education, both in Italy and abroad, there has been a growing interest in learning more about the quality of training (Wilson and Campbell, 2012), but also concerns about the possible accentuation of the fragmentation of the theoretical content offered to students and the disconnection between theory and practice experienced during professional placements (Bressan et al., 2011). The fact that social work is the product of a synthesis of knowledge obtained from several scientific disciplines (sociological, psychological, anthropological, legal) and that it is translated into a practical activity, often disconnected from academia and research centres, makes the danger of widening the gap between theory and practice very real, while also running the risk of weakening the value and political dimension of social work.

All this, as Lorenz (2017) notes, is made even more complex by the structural characteristics of contemporary modernity in which the social services operate, a modernity in which the impoverishment of the sense of solidarity perceived in relation to those who live in situations of poverty, immigration and social exclusion is accompanied by a weakening of the collective protections guaranteed by public welfare systems. Picking up on Rosa's (2003) and Sennett's (1988) reflections on the corrosive nature of capitalism, Lorenz speaks of a "situationalist modernity" in which people perceive that they have lost control over their lives and cannot plan their futures with certainty, even in the medium term. Ours is a modernity in which even social work becomes "situationalist", since it too is required to remedy a small part of human problems without questioning the structural social factors linked to the emergence and evolution of these problems. According to Lorenz, this explains the importance that university social work education assigns to methodological teachings on intervention "technique", while less and less time is dedicated to reflections on the critical political role of social work. Certainly, not even the establishment of bureaucratic and corporatist management models for social services seems to be alien to this possible technicist and situationalist turnaround in social work, or the introduction of fixed-term contracts for social workers that makes medium- and long-term planning of interventions much more complex (Bertotti, 2016; Evans et al., 2012).

These reflections highlight how it is very difficult to draw a clear picture of what the characteristics of social worker training should be. Together with the need to accumulate technical and methodological knowledge in order to better address increasingly differentiated and complex human needs, the social worker also has to implement a professional mandate that is, essentially, the expression of both the democratic value system of liberal democracies, but also part of the cultural heritage of the European socialist tradition, with its calls for social justice and the defence of welfare systems (Lorenz, 2017). This libertarian and critical root was fuelled, starting in the 1960s, by youth protests, the feminist and homosexual movement and, more recently, by movements defending the rights of migrants and other ethnic minorities (Graham and Schiele, 2010; Rossiter, 2008; MacKinnon, 2009).

As we will shortly see by analysing the results of the research presented here, it seems that in the group of social workers interviewed, this ethical and political component, in addition to other aspects, has been sacrificed during their training and work due to pressure caused by a growing number of social problems in the population (such as the spread of poverty; the scarcity of services for the non-self-sufficient; the needs of the immigrant population, etc.). In fact, discussions with social workers also seem to reveal operations in which the methodological aspect, even if perceived as essential for good-quality interventions, is actually often neglected within organisations that force workers to carry out standardised bureaucratic work and in which the quality of the work is evaluated on the basis of business-type standards. Time for reflection, research, discussion and supervision seems rare, if not altogether absent. To summarise, we can say that the social conditions in which Italian social workers operate seem to intensify a divide between the three instances (professional, social and institutional) and that several problematic aspects emerge in this gap linked to the quality and structure of professional training for social workers in Italy.

## Social workers' opinion on the training they received

The transition of social worker training from the old special schools to university courses was a moment of great change for social work, both in terms of theoretical content and teaching methods. Pre-university facilities could certainly not guarantee significant in-depth theoretical study and scientific research, and the teaching content was often based on developments from abroad, especially in the English-speaking world (Fargion, 2013, Neve, 2011). The introduction of social work into the academic world has paved the way for greater scientific depth, more focused on analysing the national situation, and for more multidisciplinary educational content. However, while something has certainly been gained in this transition, there is a feeling among social workers that something else has been lost. We will now look at four conclusions drawn by four focus groups on the topic of professional training in the social services, which involved approximately seventy social workers working in the municipalities of the Region of Friuli Venezia Giulia. As we shall see, these conclusions all coincide in highlighting how basic university training in Italy has improved the quantity and quality of the theoretical content offered to social work students but, at the same time, has increased the distance that has always existed in social work between theory and everyday operational needs.

*“There is a clear gap between theoretical training and operational reality in social work. Perhaps this is also due to the interdisciplinary nature of our profession and the fact that our degree courses are taught by a plurality of lecturers from different scientific disciplines who often have no idea what a social worker is. There are some courses, including some master’s degrees, which are very interesting from a theoretical point of view, with a philosophical or historical imprint, but far removed from the daily reality of social work. These courses offer unusable content. This may also be due to the fact that we have very few social worker lecturers teaching in universities, and this is probably also our responsibility, as we have clearly invested very little in research and teaching and this is the result.” (group 1).*

*“Our educational experiences are very diverse and depend both on the universities involved, but also on the years of attendance and the different curricula. While the real strong point of the old-style basic training was the search for a connection between theory and practice, ever since this basic training has been included in university courses, which are far removed from professional practice, we have noticed a distancing of the theoretical content from the needs of operational practice. This is probably also due to the fact that many teachers who teach vocational subjects in university education have never had any practical practice.” (group 2).*

*“Basic training has changed a lot and is very much devoted to the theoretical component and much less to the processing of practical experience. Entering university inevitably meant sacrificing something of the previous educational experience and we have to accept this, because we’ve done so much to get into university. There’s much more emphasis today on student performance in exams. It is probably also a question of the interdisciplinary nature of the profession, with difficulties in giving a specific focus to social worker training. Furthermore, many university lecturers do not know what social workers do in social services, what their tasks are.” (group 3).*

*“We have observed a disconnect between theory and practice, even with regard to vocational subjects. There is a lack of theoretical reflection on the relationship between social work and the political and institutional dimension. This discrepancy between policy guidelines and the real needs expressed by users is rarely addressed within university education.”* (group 4).

The first thing we can point out is that the four groups all agree in noting a gap between university training content and the operational requirements placed on municipal social workers, just as all four conclusions seem to see the university as the place where theory and practical operational needs should be combined. Of course, the amount of theoretical content offered in university courses, which is certainly greater than in the old special-purpose schools, seems to have further highlighted the difficulty of implementing a conceptual synthesis that could help to support social workers in their everyday practice. However, it must be stressed that the problematic nature of the relationship between theory and practice in social work has always existed, even before university education became available, not least because social work began life as a practical intervention and, subsequently and “slowly ... the idea matured that theoretical reference schemes were needed to guide practice” (Ponticelli, 1984, p. 19). This process of “mediation” (ibid., p. 22), which has been very slow in Italy, has been characterised by the extreme difficulty of trying to adapt theoretical contents – often developed in social and scientific environments that differ significantly from the Italian and European environment – to operational practices, in order to guide and/or justify the practice itself. Subsequently, over the last thirty years, an intense debate has developed in international social work about what it means to give a scientific framework to this discipline. The dynamic of this discussion is certainly very interesting as it is centred on a proposal for a constant relationship between practice and the exercise of reflectiveness, all within a methodological and theoretical framework of a scientific nature (see Fargion, 2013, pp. 23–46). In short, social workers today are expected to act reflectively, critically considering each stage of the methodological process implemented, making a connection with the content of theoretical disciplines and codes of ethics, and subjecting the results of their work to verification. In this way, the connection between theory and practice should not only be made in academia, but also – and we would say above all – by the practitioners who implement the interventions, e.g. in the social services themselves. To be more explicit, the idea that there is a theory tailored to practice in the field of social work seems to be the product of an outdated approach that is no longer suited to the needs and challenges of social work. The group of social workers does not seem to be particularly aware of all this, which can be partly explained if we consider some organisational variables that affect their work. Firstly, the almost total lack of time and opportunities to develop reflectiveness. In greater detail, almost none of the organisations of the 246 social workers interviewed in the FVG municipalities make any provision for professional supervision for social workers or research on the results of interventions. Secondly, almost all respondents stated that the bureaucratic workload, which takes up a large part of their professional time, has increased steadily. These two factors make it practically impossible to approach professional practice in a reflective way, taking time to explore the connection between theory and practice. Hence the perception that local service cannot be the place where one can/should test the contents received in theoretical training, even going so far as to process innovative contents. The divide between theory and practice is therefore confirmed as an aspect that has not been resolved at all, since it depends on institutional factors, social workers’ lack

of opposition to the bureaucratic roles imposed on them and the revendication of a professional role that cannot be denied reflection, research and cultural comparison. This also has a negative impact on the ethical and political dimension of social work, as reported by a social worker participating in a focus group:

*“... We are in constant danger of becoming completely absorbed in administrative work and we should rebel against this, not accept these kinds of expectations of us. If, however, the management expects you to do office work and sees compliance with bureaucratic procedures as the most important element, then you lose the potential for change at work ... and you reduce the available resources.”*

The feeling of losing the potential for change that should always be entailed in social work has much to do with the acceptance of an operational role subordinate to the demands of municipal administrators, governed by bureaucratic logic. As one focus group argued, when talking about the difficulty for social workers to implement interventions to promote community, it seems clear that often *“... Social work is seen as a sort of monitor to inform administrators about local issues, and also to reassure citizens, to reduce their anxiety, especially today when people are increasingly lonely, isolated, and in need of help. In short, we exercise a controlling role to the benefit of policy.”* (group 1).

Here we have confirmation that the compression of daily operations into an executive and performance model, evaluated according to bureaucratic logic, facilitates the loss of the ethical and methodological content of social work and the use of this profession for the purposes of political control. Some focus-group respondents were very aware of these dangers and verbalised their distress at seeing social work surrender to an executive role in political decisions, without the professional community attempting to develop its own vision of the reality in which it operates. Interestingly, it was mainly social workers trained in the 1970s and 1980s who were more critical and less willing to consider social work as a purely operational tool. Meanwhile, social workers who trained in the 2000s, on university courses and in a cultural climate very different to that of their older colleagues, were the main group to show less opposition to the executive and bureaucratic role they were called upon to play in their work. Here we perhaps have confirmation that the professional identity of the social worker has been redefined over the years and that this redefinition is also implemented through adherence to the role proposed by the welfare institutions.

All this brings us to analyse another important training tool provided during the university education period: work placements for social work students. We will discuss placements because it is also through them that students are familiarised with the role of a social worker and because university work placements should be an example of how to bridge the gap between the theoretical and practical dimensions. However, as we will see shortly, the available data do not seem to indicate that the training experience offered by work placements is better able to teach future social workers how to combine theory and practice. On the contrary, it would seem that work placements also contribute to fuelling the idea that “theory is one thing, practice is another” and that, above all, this “practice” could confirm not only a tendentially executive, operative image of the social worker, but also a scarcely change-oriented, substantially conservative vision of this profession.



## **Work placements in the university education of social workers: a wasted opportunity?**

Even after the inclusion of social work in academic training, work placements have continued to be recognised as an integral part of building the professional identity of future social workers.<sup>1</sup> The aim of work placements is to allow students to experience practical activity and associate it with the theoretical dimension, fostering the development of an initial professional identity (Studi Zancan, 2002). Through work placements, students are therefore familiarised with a professional role that should be centred on the ability to keep the theoretical contents together with the operational needs related to the three professional, social and institutional mandates, in both a critical and dynamic fashion. This process of learning in the field should therefore enable the cultural reproduction of a professional community capable of analysing and acting critically with regard to both its theoretical and practical dimensions. Once again, therefore, we see an emphasis on the fact that it is in the operational phase that the natural gap between theory and practice, which structurally characterises social work, should be bridged. It is considered a discipline that arises from practical instances outside academia, but which needs to construct its own theoretical conceptual framework both to provide a basis for its actions and to legitimise itself socially.

The problem, however, is that the data obtained from our research does not seem to suggest that work placements alone can play this role of building a professional identity capable of combining theory and practice. This seems to be due to a set of variables linked both to academia and to the organisational characteristics and methodological approach of municipal social work.

With regard to academic variables, the interviewees highlighted how university education is often characterised by a logic of accumulating credits in a short period of time, as well as mentioning how social work students often perceive work placements to be like any other training activity, as reported in the conclusion reached by one focus group:

*“The aim of the work placement student is often to complete the university course by doing a work placement, with the placement beings increasingly similar to any other study subject for which a final grade is awarded. Students’ attention is often more focused on the completion of their education, making no real distinction between theoretical examinations of any kind and the work placement.” (group 1).*

Two other focus groups also pointed out the same problem, highlighting how this logic of accumulating university credits in a short timeframe makes it very difficult for social workers’ supervisors to find sufficient time for encouraging adequate reflection on the relationship between theory and practice, and on the problems that can emerge during practical work.

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<sup>1</sup>Work placements for university students studying social work is a compulsory activity, as established by Presidential Decree 509/1999 and Ministry of Education, Universities and Research Decree 270/2004.

*“We had a very rigid structure, including as regards work placements, with clearly defined time periods, which were decided in close continuity with the course on social work methods and techniques, so as to ensure a connection between theory and practice. Today we see placements being completed during the summer or even the year after the methods and techniques course, completely unrelated to the professional theory part. All too often, the questions that arise during practice cannot be studied in the theory part.” (group 2).*

*“With university education, it is often the case that supervision is required for work placement students who have to complete their placement in a very short time, sometimes just a couple of months. This is due to a combination of factors within the university and what we then have to deal with is an intensive placement, compressed into too short a time frame to be useful and educational. There is no opportunity to reflect on their practice and make connections with theory, taking the time to discuss this with students. Done in this way, a work placement is of no use other than to complete the course of study.” (group 3).*

Another focus group highlights the difficulty of structuring an effective educational relationship between universities and social services and how this results in a deterioration in the quality of the education and training offered to social work students:

*“In the old style of training there was more opportunity to understand what the motivations were in choosing to be a social worker and this was then discussed between the teaching staff at schools and the work placement supervisors. Nowadays all this is much more difficult to do, everything is done much more quickly and even university tutors, who are the supervisors’ contacts for work placements, tell us that, in the event of problems, it is not easy to deal with difficulties such as these at university. In the old system, when we had end-of-year discussions with teachers of vocational subjects about work placements, they actually investigated why we wanted to continue with our studies and this has been worked on less and less over time. It now feels like doing chemistry, engineering or social work is all the same.” (group 4).*

Widening the analysis horizon, according to some of those interviewed, the different cultural context in which social workers are trained nowadays also plays a part in making it more difficult for work placements to shape a professional identity in which ethical and political aspects of the profession are valued, as we can read in the conclusion reached by this group:

*“The final year of the work placement, done in stages, over time, had a specific educational significance. We had the opportunity to take responsibility, to put ourselves on the line, and to clarify our motivations for being a social worker. Perhaps we had more ideal and political motivations than today’s young people, who have a wider range of choices. ...” (group 5).*

The respondents show a very clear understanding of some of the management problems associated with the transition from basic training provided at the old special-purpose schools to universities, and the effects of this on the training of future social workers. However, what did not emerge in the group discussions was a critical reflection on the image that a municipal social work placement conveys to students. While, as we saw in the previous section, there is a fairly widely shared idea that routine and standardised operations are increasingly prevalent in basic social work, stripping social workers' job of its professional contents, in the group discussions no considerations whatsoever emerged regarding the fact that work placements, carried out in such an environment, could accustom students to the mainly bureaucratic role of the profession. The fact that the reflective dimension is significantly lacking in the daily work of social workers could confirm an idea among students that "theory is one thing, practice is another", thus accentuating the distance between the theoretical dimension and professional operations. And perhaps it is precisely because of all this that the social workers in the focus groups attributed universities with the role of trainer, even as regards those purely professional aspects that should be learned above all during the work placement experience, as we can observe in the following discussion passages:

*"We find university education only partially adequate, very theoretical and generic, and disconnected from professional reality. For example, there is very little training on the organisation of social and health services and levels of responsibility. Training would also be needed on how to produce written documentation in social work and how to communicate in writing."*(group 1).

*"University courses in social work lack training in administrative procedures, in the administrative process to be followed by social workers in a municipal administration. In addition, we notice the students have a lack of training in communication with users."* (group 2).

*"More selection should be made with regard to people applying to work in social services. Not everyone is suited to this job and certain personal qualities are also needed to be able to do it well. Universities do not perform this role of selecting students."* (group 3).

How to produce professional written documentation, how to relate to users and how to evaluate the professional qualities of future social workers are aspects that should be central during the professional training experience. They can primarily be evaluated during practical experience and much less so during theoretical training. However, the problem is that social work lacks a model for analysing and supervising the daily work of social workers, who are not used to reflecting critically on their personal and professional dimensions. In the absence of a reflectiveness that balances out practical work, it is easy for even the basic training to be deprived of its potential to create professionals able to interpret their own actions critically, to contribute to questioning theoretical content and to fuel the debate on the role played by social service institutions, thus replicating over time a professional model based increasingly on the mere execution of tasks, often assigned to social workers by the administrative structure. As Dominelli (2015) argues so well, social

work without the reflective dimension, without critical debate and the political component can easily be reduced to an instrument of further oppression for those who experience conditions of need that are also determined by structural social factors. The familiarisation of social work students, through work placements, with a role devoid of reflectiveness could accentuate the dangers of reproducing a professional habitus that transforms the social worker from an agent of change into an instrument for preserving dominant configurations of power.

## **Conclusions**

The contents of discussions among focus groups made up of municipal social workers open up numerous critical reflections on the quality of basic training in social work. One difficulty that has always been present in this theoretical and practical discipline is the fact that it is complex to keep instances together that are sometimes very divergent. As we have seen, the professional mandate outlines social work as a profession strongly anchored in the ideals of democratic societies and assigns this profession the role of guarantor and promoter of the rights of the economically and politically weaker sections of society. On the other hand, social and institutional bodies sometimes ask the social services to act in a way that does not always comply with social work codes of conduct. These divides and conflicts between different expectations (of promotion and protection of rights/control and limitation of access to welfare resources) are made even more evident today by the accentuation of corporate models of governance in municipal social services, which shape the bureaucracy involved in social workers' jobs. The request that seems to come from the social workers interviewed is for a basic training that can heal this growing divide between the theoretical dimension and practical professional experience. This question, however, seems to arise from the assumption that it is only at university and during training that future social workers can be given the tools to deal with an operational reality that is judged to be far removed from what is taught in university lecture halls. What seems to emerge from the social workers' discussions is the idea that there is no room for producing knowledge during operations themselves, confirming a vision of professional action that is lacking in reflectiveness and proactivity. Within this framework of analysis, the training role played by work placements should also be reconsidered. In a context in which social workers express an essentially executive and bureaucratic vision of their professional mandate and in which there is a lack of time for reflection, delegating the construction of the professional identity of future social workers to professional training appears to be an operation that will not help social work to strengthen itself culturally and will not support the revival of local social services. On the other hand, social work training certainly needs an academia that does not accentuate the fragmentation of the theoretical content offered to students, but also a professional community that claims the possibility of having time and tools for reflection, through research, supervision and continuous training. Universities and professional associations of social workers should create an educational relationship centred on the enhancement of these capacities for the cultural and operational growth of social work. On the one hand, universities should direct basic training more towards exploring the issues most important to social workers, as well as providing future social workers with the tools they need to do research, supervision and produce professional knowledge. On the other hand, the community of social workers should claim more time for reflectiveness, offering new models of intervention to administrators and being more active on a social and political level. The academic community and the social services

community should perceive themselves as two poles of the same professional community whose quality depends on mutual interaction. The current social climate calls for social work equipped to read the situation and intervene in processes of exclusion and violence against human groups that are in a state of great economic and political weakness. We do not need social workers who act as “executors” and “bureaucrats”, but instead we need complex professionals.

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