



# Norms, Social Roles, Culture, Conflict and Social Work

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## Abstract

This work analyses the field of social action connected to Social Work on the basis of the normative dimension that disciplines the social positions connected to it, highlighting the conflictual dimension inherent to the particular internal specialist culture that distinguishes the social workers in the sector. When analysing the social and professional positions connected to the field of social action definable as Social Work, it must be underlined that the social workers who act within it or who come into contact with it, do not appear only as psycho-physical entities, but also and above all as bearers of social roles and statuses, point of destination and origin of models, expectations of social action, interests and purposes, in the light of an internal specialist culture that if it does not unite, then from a conflictualist perspective it can divide. In this perspective, the communicative activity of social workers appears to be aimed at controlling the antagonist by tracing the limit between the sphere of action, their own competence and that of others, becoming the communicative system in its correlation with the conflict or social negotiation that always accompanies it a terrain of comparison and/or clash. A sort of arena in which “a game” is played, the stakes of which are the acquisition of resources for which one conflicts or negotiates: the social relationship of power is above all communicative and often resolves itself in a choice and opposition of signs and symbols between the interacting social workers.

**Keywords:** *Social Work; Law; social roles; specialized culture; conflict, communication.*

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## 1. Field of action and normative dimension of Social Work.

This work analyses the field of social action connected to Social Work on the basis of the normative dimension that disciplines the social positions connected to it, highlighting the conflictual dimension inherent in the particular internal specialist culture that distinguishes the social operators in the sector. When analysing the social and professional positions connected to the field of social action definable as Social Work (Bourdieu 1986: 3-19), it must be underlined that the subjects who operate within it or who

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in any case come into contact with it, do not appear only as psycho-physical entities, but also and above all as bearers of social roles and statuses: point of destination and origin of models and expectations of social action (Crespi 1994; 1998; 2002; Ferrari 2004: 130). If the subjectivity of each individual, the rational instrumental action is put into effect, originates from, and feeds on, the social organization, being in turn influenced by it, then there is a continuous interaction between individuality and sociality, which must always be taken into consideration when analyzing the social and professional positions connected to the social sphere. An interaction that produces the most varied forms of aggregation, large and/or small, structured and/or unstructured, more or less long-lasting over time, more or less similar and/or different depending on the social contexts in which they are born, develop and cease to exist, the normative systems of reference that discipline and regulate them, the external or internal factors that influence them, even of a natural nature (Ferrari 1997; 2004: 130; Febbrajo 2009; Pappalardo 1994).

The field of action attributable to Social Work is characterized by a stable and lasting normative dimension that disciplines both the structure, functions and organization of the institutions attributable to it, and the roles and social statuses of the subjects that operate within it and through it, assuming in one case as in the other positions characterized by a high degree of normative stability and social visibility (Ferrari 2004: 130). Even in this area there are subjects capable of imposing new models of action and lines of behavior on others, fixing them in more or less structured protocols; even in this sector there are subjects who are more familiar with the rules of behavior, resulting in a better ability to offer advice on how to act and how to implement them; and finally, even in this field there are subjects suitable for intervening to resolve any disputes and/or conflicts that arise between those who operate within it, using normative criteria that are widely practiced or in any case accepted by the majority of subjects (Ferrari 2004: 130-131).

In this particular sphere of social action, social and professional roles and statuses merge and/or distinguish themselves, differentiate themselves and/or articulate themselves in an increasing number of positions, depending on the normative context in which they arise and develop: the more the social and legal norms are articulated and complex, the more the subjects who operate within the sector specialize in the activities of formation, application and understanding of the norms, differentiating themselves in the performance of the relative functions (Luhmann 1972; 1981; Ferrari 2004: 131).

The positions, roles and social and professional statuses referable to the dimension of Social Work, the lines of action and behavior underlying them, tend over time not only to crystallize, becoming increasingly similar to each other, but also to structure themselves into real collectivities, more or less large, different depending on the level of specialization and professionalization achieved (Ferrari 2004: 131). These are interest groups that appear stronger and more cohesive the more the roles and statuses in which they are articulated and recognized correspond to socially relevant positions for the availability of material and symbolic resources (organizational, professional, cultural, political, economic, etc.) (Dahrendorf 1963; Ferrari 2004: 131).

The analysis of groups, of the processes of formation, of the articulations, of the reciprocal relationships, of the interactions they have with other social aggregates, of the complex networks of social interactions in which they are involved and immersed, all aspects considered in the light of the social and legal norms that regulate and discipline them, constitute as many significant elements that allow from the sociological-legal point of view to explain and understand the dynamics underlying this particular sphere of social

action in the light of the roles and statuses assumed, of the interests and purposes pursued by the social actors who operate in this particular social sector (Ferrari 2004:131).

From this perspective there is no doubt that the social and legal norms that govern this particular sector, if they constitute the symbolic reflection of common feeling, of the morality widespread in society (Durkheim [1893] 1930), then they also highlight and crystallise the formal and informal distribution of power: a power that is primarily that of choosing between contrasting alternatives of action or that of creating, interpreting and applying the social and/or legal norms by the subjects who assume particular positions within the scope of Social Work, influencing the sphere of action of others (Ferrari 2004: 131; 1997: 142).

## **2. For an internal specialized professional culture of social workers.**

Since ancient times and throughout modernity, there have always been schools capable of creating sector experts, equipped with specific skills, able to carry out defined functions, to cover different professional positions often fungible within the specific field of social action (Ferrari 2004: 130). Today, schools are an integral part of university institutions, just to mention training bodies of a different level compared to other scholastic institutions from which they differ only in functional but not substantial or hierarchical terms, places of education and learning that appear increasingly extensive and articulated: as knowledge has differentiated, the faculties pertaining to the Social Work sector have also assumed and assume increasingly marked and diversified characteristics, making the knowledge connected to this particular sector of social action increasingly specialized and differentiated (Ferrari 2004: 133; Gui 2009).

These are aspects that, from a sociological point of view, highlight multiple differences between experiences, training paths, courses of study and professionalizing itineraries, however they also outline different points of contact, if not even coincidences and uniformities. First of all, that to access the profession (Social worker, Professional educator, Psychologist, Educational assistance operator for the disabled, Cultural mediator, etc.) it is necessary, depending on the case, to have previous experience, if not even carry out a period of internship, or acquire a master's or three-year degree, the latter requirement constituting the necessary condition to take qualifying exams for access to one or the other professions described even if in a summary and non-exhaustive way (Codini, Fossati and Luppi 2025).

These are differences that do not eliminate the common underlying sensitivity that unites subjects formed by experiences, schools, professional courses, which if anything highlight a cultural background, a basic unity, which suggests how the symbolic world of "social workers" who operate within or in contact with Social Work can constitute and in fact constitutes the characterizing element of a specific "community" in the broadest sense of the word (Cotterell 1995), which distinguishes it, makes it capable of distinguishing itself from other communities (Ferrari 2004: 133). A community that reflects and substantiates, that denotes and characterizes, a particular cultural form (Gallino 2000: 186-187) consisting in observing social relationships through specific normative-interpretative schemes; in interpreting the social and legal norms that regulate the sector of reference according to methods that, albeit with the necessary adaptations, appear similar to each other; in relating the rules to each other in a systematic way and using this particular form of knowledge in practical, professional and ordinary life (Ferrari 2004: 133).

This is an "internal specialist culture" of the community of reference, which brings

together and unites its members regardless of social and professional differences, even placing itself above the narrow internal and external borders of the field of action considered, a mental and intellectual habitus which presents similar characteristics almost everywhere. The expression internal specialist culture is intended to mean the complex of knowledge, ideas and values through which social workers select, interpret, conceptualize and organize information concerning the Social Working sector and translate it into stimuli, impressions, convictions and, eventually, social actions, that is, claims supported by a strong and peculiar normative justification, that is, by a strong legitimation (Friedman 1975 [1978]; 1994; Nelken 1997; 2001; Pennisi 1998; Crespi 1998; Nelken and Feest, 2001; Ferrari 2004: 162).

There is no doubt that this cultural form can provide and in fact does provide a key to reading, explaining and understanding the social relations connected to Social Work, capable of identifying behavioral models and lines of action that allow for the prevention, management and resolution of problems, disputes and conflicts that arise in this particular area when they are unavoidable. From a different perspective, however, it cannot be ignored how this mental habitus, this specific cultural form, can assume and often does assume an ambiguous, even equivocal value, becoming a tool that, instead of contributing to better delineating and clarifying the representation of the world, paradoxically deforms it, leading to the belief that this corresponds to the predictions and concepts of social and legal norms referable to this particular sector of social action mediated by the specific cultural form of reference (Crespi 1998; Ferrari 2004: 133). An aspect that takes on profiles of particular delicacy when the "social workers" have not acquired other experiences other than that relating to the social and legal norms that discipline, regulate and manage this particular social sphere, that is, they have studied only the forms of symbolic mediation or the rules and not also that which in its constant becoming is regulated (Ferrari 2004: 133). It is therefore a culture, a mentality, often a psychology, which although varying within a wide range of individual and social positions, makes recognizable and knowable those who have absorbed and practiced it, therefore the social workers, becoming at the same time and in fact a tool capable of excluding all those who do not share and practice it (Ferrari 2004: 134).

There is no doubt that this is an intellectual environment that is difficult to classify or refer to in sociological terms as a specific social group, and it is even difficult to affirm that the subjects who share this type of cultural formation and experience constitute a class, an association, an institution, an organization, and not even, as anticipated above, a group that constitutes the weakest form of a stable group, and obviously not even a class, united by the same culture and social extraction (Crespi 1994; Weber [1922] 1974; Ferrari 2004: 134). From this perspective, it is impossible not to point out how the number of graduates in the area of Social Work has not only grown significantly over time, and in particular in recent years, but has also involved all social classes transversally, characterized by processes of mobility that are not only ascending, but also and above all descending and of relative disintegration, which in some countries, including Italy, appear clearly visible (Ferrari 2004: 134).

Nevertheless, in this complex and articulated perspective, those who carry out an activity in the social sphere in the terms described above can be defined in a unitary way as "social workers", an expression that uniformly designates the multiplicity of subjects who carry out a certain profession, cover certain roles, statuses and assume specific social positions connected to Social Work. It is a generic and broad expression that highlights the

fact that the experts who emerge from the experiences, schools and professional courses related to Social Work do not constitute a clear and well-defined social grouping; that highlights how the groups and subgroups of social workers, including professional ones, are not always and necessarily composed of experts in Social Work; however, it also underlines in an equally clear and distinct way the existence of a "community" in the broad sense specified, associated with a well-defined cultural form that can be defined and defined as "internal specialist culture" (Cotterell 1995; Ferrari 2004: 134).

These are reflections that raise important questions about the relationship between the way of thinking of "social workers" and the specific cultural form associated with them: both in terms of the reciprocal influence between the way of thinking and the internal specialist culture of reference, and in terms of the identification of uniformities regarding the way of acting and that of thinking, aspects that could constitute the object of careful theoretical-empirical investigations (Damiani di Vergada Franzetti 2023).

### **3. For a conflictualist perspective.**

The different professional and social figures operating in the field of Social Work, if they share the same space of action, then they contribute to the control of the rules that regulate and discipline it also from a communicative perspective: legal and social rules through which the actors can guide and hinder the action of others by influencing it, in light of the interests pursued and the purposes that they intend to satisfy in a potentially conflictual perspective (Bilotta 1999; 2008; 2013; 2014). This is an aspect that explains how each of the social and professional positions operating in the field of Social Work are potentially if not constantly in conflict, often latent: one of the most recurring themes and often the most difficult problem to solve for the legislator who legislates in this sector consists precisely in trying to mutually define and regulate the respective areas of competence and influence of social workers (Ferrari 2004: 154; Severino, Cascino et al. 2023). From this perspective, it should be noted that the delimitation of the areas of competence does not only and exclusively concern figures holding public power or in charge of a public service, but also semi-private and private figures, ultimately all those who find themselves operating in this specific context of action or have contacts with it, therefore all social workers in various ways (Ibid). Regardless of the distinction between public and private, a classification that always appears unstable and often the result of normative ideologies that change over time, there is no doubt that even social workers who are in any case without formal normative or regulated powers, hold, like other subjects who operate in the same sector, substantial powers of intervention, not only on the social and legal norms that discipline and regulate the field of action of Social Work, but also on the lines of conduct of the participants who in various capacities operate in the field of social action considered (Ferrari 2004: 154). *In fact, social workers, as experts in a specific area, in whatever specific field and at whatever practical level they are called to operate and actually operate, formulate, disseminate interpretations, systematize social knowledge regarding social and legal norms, action models and lines of behavior pertaining to Social Work (Ibid.). From this perspective, social workers do not only influence those who formally create the norms, settle conflicts that arise in relation to them or offer advice on how to act and how to implement them, but in everyday experience they also and above all guide the actions of their interlocutors inventing, formalizing new action models, informally resolving any new conflicts, completing their tasks in an official and/or semi-official manner, giving course and realizing their action projects. In this sense, even the history of this sector of social action, therefore the history of Social Work*

*operators, can be interpreted in a conflictual perspective, in light of the common characteristics that distinguish the history of the conflict concerning social roles and statuses, therefore the social positions and professional figures connected to this specific field of action and to the relative normative dimension (Ferrari 2004: 155; Fargion 2009; Dal Pra Ponticelli and Pieroni 2005; Malizia 2022; 2023).*

There is no doubt that this is a communicative conflict concerning a particular social sector that interprets and speaks for instances coming from the top and the bottom of the social and professional pyramid: a conflict that does not originate from classes and/or social classes, but rather crosses the different sectors of the same “community”, the latter understood in the broad sense of the term to which an “internal specialist culture” can be associated (Ferrari 2004: 155; Cotterell 1995). A conflict that is expressed in symbolic forms (Crespi 1994) strictly connected to the nature of the material to which it refers, consisting of social and legal norms, models and lines of action concerning the specific sector of Social Work. A communicative conflict that does not consist solely in sending messages to the opposing contender, but also to external participants of the communicative exchange belonging to the communicative arena, all in order to acquire consensus, legitimacy, legitimation and self-legitimation. A conflict that also uses rhetorical forms since the object of the dispute consists precisely in defining or specifying the meaning of those models of action and lines of social behavior, social rules and legal norms, communicative messages that regulate and discipline the field of Social Work since the law is the structure of the conflict: symbols that the disputants present in positive terms whether they aim to defend the current system of action or whether they intend to protect an alternative system considered better (Tomeo 1973; 1981; Treves 1975; 1987-1988; Ferrari 2004: 155). A conflict that, if it is directly consumed between the disputants involved, can then also be realised through a third party, resorting to social figures connected to collateral figures who act as elements of connection with the main roles and statuses of Social Work: figures who, if they take a position more or less openly in favour or against one or the other of the contenders, can nevertheless aim to satisfy not only their own interests, but also general interests (Ferrari 2004: 155).

#### **4. Conclusions: between negotiation and conflict for the control of the sphere of action of others in Social Work**

The communicative social action field regarding Social Work is constituted, in its simplest scheme, by a sender and a receiver, it is a communicative field that recurs and uses messages through which social workers, making use of symbolic resources referable to the internal specialized culture of the community to which they belong, experience and express meanings about the world, fixing and modeling the states of consciousness and knowledge of the disputing interlocutor, achieving the expected results in a way that does not appear obvious. Social workers enter the communicative process according to articulated and complex forms of interaction, and the messages that are the object of communication are formulated, transmitted, interpreted, propagated, addressed, received, retransmitted by the workers according to often elaborate and intricate ways. The communicative interaction between social workers of Social Work constitutes a process of continuous construction, which arises from their mutual relationship, acting on the basis of the self and the neighbor acquired on the basis of interactions founded both on symbolic negotiation processes and on conflictual processes, using symbolic constellations and orienting their expectations, their behaviors and their ways of thinking on such knowledge.

In this perspective, the communicative activity of social workers appears to be aimed at controlling the antagonist by tracing the limit between their own sphere of action and that of others or their own competence and that of others, becoming the communicative system in its correlation with the conflict or social negotiation that always accompanies it a terrain of comparison and/or clash. A sort of arena in which a "game" is played, the stakes of which are the acquisition of resources for which there is conflict or negotiation: the social relationship of power is above all communicative and often resolves itself in a choice and opposition of signs and symbols between the interacting social operators (Lasswell and Kaplan 1969; Kertzner 1989; Ferrari 1997).

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