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# **The Mixed-Methods Research for Social Work Practice. About Acquiring Methodological Skills for Social Workers**

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# The Mixed-Methods Research for Social Work Practice. About Acquiring Methodological Skills for Social Workers

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Abstract: This paper has the aim to discuss the importance of acquiring methodological skills in social research for future social workers who, as set off by the Italian Code of Ethics, have to know in-depth the complexity of the territory in which they act, to efficiently operate in answering to people needs and difficulties. The research question in (and for) Social work becomes a *tool* concretely connected to the daily professional practice of social workers, and therefore to the leading role they play in community care, by activating processes able to develop positive medium-long term strategies. In this conceptual framework, professionals need to gain a *mixed-methods* background in social research to understand social requests, both from a macro and a micro point of view. Focusing on the methodological aspect of Social work, social workers may interpret their identity in a contemporary way. Thus they can plan intervention by activating the relational networks in specific contexts, by practicing collective empowerment, and enhancing solidarity actions able to promote social capital, community building, and therefore a real social change.

Keywords: methodology of social research, mixed-methods, networking, community empowerment, policy practice

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## **Introduction**

This article has the main objective to underline the necessity, in Social work education, to empower the knowledge in the methodology of social research for future social workers. This may be the way for them to acquire the instruments to better develop their daily practices, and to realize coherent and adequate strategies in social support, independently from the enacted social workers' methods of action. Moreover, such a type of approach may involve all the nodes of the welfare system at one hand, and local people at the other one – not only the beneficiaries –, realizing a net-work intervention.

This kind of methodological education is suitable for almost three reasons:

- a. to enrich the know-how of social workers for their activities, to be integrated into the wider methodological competencies for Social work, to strengthen their professional profile and to become more complete practitioners;
- b. to pursue the precepts established by the most recent Italian Code of Ethics, which clearly defines the opportunity for social workers to understand and to gain all the information characterizing the specific territories they act within, and therefore their inhabitants' demands;
- c. to translate theoretical and practical methodological skills of social research, learnt during the education processes, into a different way for social workers to intervene in local communities. They start from understanding the most current data and the (quantitative and qualitative) attributes of these contexts to find the best long-term strategies which may empower local settings, both at a micro (the individual situation) and a macro level (the sense of citizenship), and may develop positive dynamics of networking by activating formal and informal networks.

By consequence, deeper knowledge about the peculiarities of communities, as they are presented in programmatic and institutional documentation too, and their relational features also collected through dialogues with social system's nodes and the interviews with users (e.g. to describe individuals' networks), can represent a different – and, in our intents, a more contemporary – way to present the actual social role of social workers. This task has to be intended not only from a merely operative point of view but in its political implications, as professionals are agents of change in social care, as well as in networking and community building.

The article proposes a different methodological perspective in Social work, both about the contents of specific trajectories of intervention, and the organizational contexts within which professionals' daily activities are

planned and realized. Even if Social work can be conceived as a “practical” discipline, it adopts the results of a theoretical reflection and systematizes them in models guiding social workers in their daily actions. According to Bisman & Hardcastle, “*methodological investigation to uncover data, theories, and applications* describe the work of both practice and research. In this conceptualization, research methodologies are considered practice skills”, and professionals “use scientific knowledge to create change, build knowledge, and answer practice questions” (1999, p. 63, italics by Authors). This is, for us, the reason why of the relevance of introducing a methodological discussion for discipline development *tout court*, and innovation in social practice (both of field social workers, caseworkers, and community workers).

Our discussion starts from assuming the contents of the new Code of Ethics of the Italian Consiglio Nazionale Ordine degli Assistenti Sociali (C.N.O.A.S.), entered in force last 2020, June 1<sup>st</sup>. The Code fully emphasizes that social workers must know the territory in which they act (Filippini, 2020), as they must answer to the task of “understanding and translating the needs of the single person, of social groups and communities”. As in Art. 39, they contribute to “promoting, developing, and supporting integrated social policies, aimed at improving the social well-being and quality of life of community members, with particular reference to those who are the most exposed to situations of fragility, vulnerability, or at risk of marginalization” (our translation). Furthermore, as specified in Title V, Art. 40, contemporary social worker “cannot ignore an in-depth knowledge of the territorial reality in which he/she operates, and an adequate consideration of its historical and cultural context, and related values”. They have to do it by collaborating with all the other actors of welfare system trying to find common objectives, aimed at offering integrated and coherent responses to community needs, and therefore at promoting collective well-being. Indeed, the assistance purposes underline the role of the territory and its components in defining the actions of intervention, also in terms of understanding its networks: starting with the current ties social services have with the individual and institutional nodes making up a social context.

It is along this trajectory that we would like to highlight the role of acquiring methodological competencies in Social work, recognizing the change in social workers’ professional action. The main question is about what kind of relationship may exist between the typical *methods* of Social work and the *methodology* of social research, and how they can mutually be enriched to produce significant contributions in the various settings of experience, and in the different moments of intervention processes (Salvini, 1996). By this, we will use the term “method” referring to scientific procedures, and “methodology” referring to the processes of gaining knowledge at a conceptual level.

We know that contemporary challenges show an ever-increasing degree of complexity, within a current society characterized by the most typical dynamics of individualism of the post-modern era: social workers play a central – a responsible – role in collective settings, as they activate connections, and develop ever more targeted and integrated actions. As a consequence, the way they operate has been deeply changed, and now they need to reach even more accurate skills, since their educational years. This kind of consideration finds many implications. Firstly, it means that collecting data – and therefore understanding them, independently by their quantitative and qualitative nature – becomes one of the main tasks of social workers, to realize the necessary circularity between theory and praxis. Real knowledge of local communities, and of the markers of social change, should be the first requirement to strategically operate in everyday practice: by this, a complete education in Social work has to consider the methodological discipline as one of the main elements of social worker's toolbox.

A social worker can be both producer and consumer of research (Marlow, 2001). Even if the information is already illustrated in publications or documents, and does not have to be constructed, a professional must know how to read them accurately (intended as an element of *methodological control*), translating what they tell both explicitly and implicitly in coherent strategies (to verify the strategies' *efficiency*): looking for the right purposes in activities, operating where there is a structural bias or there are particular criticalities, and connecting nodes and entities which can efficaciously collaborate doing a net-work. We are mainly referring to the knowledge of the territories and individuals, to data interpretation, and the related methodological instruments in social research professionals may use to gain context information (quantitative data), individual information (qualitative data), and relational information (network data). It is not only about really understanding the specific social problems, and social claims (Best, 2013; 2018; Spector & Kitsuse, 1977). It is also about comparing them with the local forms of governance and welfare, and, through networking dynamics, to direct daily practices towards collective empowerment.

This is not the place we will discuss the operational choices in welfare system. We aim to reflect instead on how the methodological education in social research is part of a particular *vision* of what Social work represents, and it expresses the *mission* of social workers within communities. We would try to focus that it is in the educational field that future social workers learn expert knowledge about the method, the methodology, and the tools to gain a more effective understanding of the users' needs, to identify the areas of intervention, and therefore to act social changes (Psaroudakis & Guidi, 2021). At the same time, we think that referring to the new Code's rules means that the educational system cannot work "alone" in defining the effectiveness of

its training offer: it must establish deep discussions and collaborations with the professional system (e.g. the C.N.O.A.S.), to identify common elements allowing as much as possible a shared reading of professional profiles and skills to be conceived, promoted, evaluated, and enhanced. The outcome of this synergic debate, according to a networked approach, will be a more concrete and effective interpretation of collective support.

To explain these goals, and to highlight the methodological aspects of the practice of Social work, the article is articulated as follows.

In the first part, we try to explain the importance to give students in Social work professional competencies in *standard* (quantitative) and *non-standard* (qualitative) methodology of social research. In the second part, we develop our discussion from a practical point of view, focusing on what we call the methodological “toolbox” for social workers about having competencies in social research. We take into account some examples in the documentation and Italian institutional plans (the quantitative perspective), and which methodological instruments are already part of the daily practice of social workers (the qualitative perspective). In the last paragraph, we deepen the opportunity for Social work to act a net-work perspective for community building, obtained by combining network theory and practice in daily activities. Indeed, conclusions introduce the current political role of social workers in their contexts of action, as agents of change who consider networking processes as a resource and a strategy of intervention.

### **About the importance of methodology of social research in Social work**

There always has been attention on the dialectic between theory (scientific knowledge) and practice (operability, functioning, and action) in Social work (Demartis, 2013; Fargion, 2009), in which the access of discipline into the university courses is situated, and which aligns the practice of social workers with the experience of scientific research. Within the debate and considering the different approaches (among which we mention the Empirical Practice Movement and the Evidence-Based Practice perspective), as carefully reconstructed by Dal Ben & Pattaro (2021), we can find a general agreement between the academic and professional worlds about the usefulness of acquiring methodological skills in social research for students in Social work. Nevertheless, from a concrete point of view, these two areas meet infrequently; indeed, they maintain the tendency to relegate the methodological dimension to a residual area of the profession, as well as to a rather limited sector of academia. It particularly happens in Italy, where it can be noticed a certain distance between conceiving academic research and describing what social research in/for Social work means.

We would investigate here the purposes of this connection, reflecting the importance of strengthening the scientific link between these two identities, to develop what we can define as a “shared research culture”. We will discuss both on a methodological and on a strategic level why and how to pursue this educational objective, creating learning paths that equally involve universities and the professional world focusing on the research area (connected in a circular way to the theoretical and operational fields). Having this kind of competency may enrich the skills performed by social workers in their daily practices, and produce knowledge also in a transdisciplinary and interdisciplinary perspective.

As discussed by Campanini (2021), we know that Social work arises from the necessity of responding to specific needs, locally characterized, and whose origins are in social, historical, and cultural fields in which they are expressed. Contextually, we have to remember that the practice of Social work differs according to its national scenario, especially to welfare, social policies, political choices, laws, and organizational structures occurring both at a local and a national level (Lorenz, 2006). If Social work is intrinsically connected with a local dimension, future social workers must learn the most adequate abilities not only in helping people, but first of all in social research: by making coexist, together with the traditional practical activities, other ones having a less “conventional” nature to be promoted to guarantee greater flexibility and variability in the dynamics of social care. Professionals have to know scientific methods to understand every social phenomenon within every situated context. It is here that the educational system and Social work should find a common topic, to give students the methodological instruments to develop operational practices based on the correct interpretation of the reality/ies in which they will operate as professionals.

If these considerations define the borders within which our thought develops, the post-modern society (Giddens, 1991), with its attributes of complexity, requires that social workers have all the tools to deal with social needs, which are in a continuous change, and differently impact individuals’ everyday-life. Thus, they can critically discuss the current intervention models, from the professional skills to the long-standing problematic issue of social workers’ independence in research and practice: because, as Salvini wrote (1996), professionals have to know how 1) to analyze situations, 2) to evaluate situations, 3) to design the intervention projects, 4) to realize plans, 5) to verify the process.

Since this question, in 2020 the International Association of Schools of Social Work (I.A.S.S.W.) and the International Federation of Social Workers (I.F.S.W.) accepted the challenge also from a learning point of view: as an outcome of an international debate involving academic, professionals, and experts in Social work they updated the *Global Standards of Social Work Ed-*

*ucation and Training*. Adapting to the new *Global Definition of Social Work* (Melbourne 2014), the *Global Social Work Statement of Ethical Principles* (Dublin 2018), and the recent *Global Agenda* (2020), they required indeed that the updated document “also reflects broader changes and recent developments in global social work”.

The position of these organizations entails, among many implications, ensuring that students in Social work may have “learning opportunities that also incorporate social work knowledge deriving from research, experience, policy, and practice”, and the need to establish a productive collaboration and exchange not only between different schools of Social work but “between social work education, practice, and school” ([www.iassw-aiets.org](http://www.iassw-aiets.org)). By consequence, Guidelines (point 5, Research and Scholarly activity) underline the emphasis to be given on the process of knowledge production, and the importance of “the rigorous and diverse methods used by social workers to appraise the credibility, transferability, confirmability reliability and validity of information” (I.A.S.S.W & I.F.S.W., 2020, p. 14).

We do not have enough space to deepen all the various aspects clarified by this joint document, but we would like to focus on the opportunity for social workers to collect, analyze, and explain data. Only in this way they can be able to understand how social needs change according to society and specific social settings, but also to improve their practical activities by developing the most fitting strategies.

As Pattaro & Segatto well wrote in the Introduction of their book *Ricerca nel servizio sociale* (2021), talking about research in Social work means not only acquiring a general knowledge about the fields of intervention and the techniques, but starting from information (data) to define actions, practices, and innovative plans to be set in a critical – and, we add, crosser – way. In our thought the research question in (and for) Social work should not be understood only according to a theoretical sense, but as a *skill* practically connected to the professional practice of social workers, and therefore to the social role they play: for reasons of knowledge, and reasons related to activities planning. This approach is aimed at building a more complete knowledge, as well as at facing social problems in a long-term and widespread perspective since the social worker is who directly constructs his/her expertise to read an event, or a problem. We refer to triple ability:

- a. to interpret second-hand data, as they are shown in documents or books (context information), in a deeper way;
- b. to collect data that are better useful to understand how to face a case (context and individual information);
- c. to accurately direct the “care” of communities, together with the other local actors of the local welfare system, by activating network dynamics



able to develop positive medium-long term strategies (relational information).

Briefly, everything goes around the need for social workers to generally know the society and its multiple dimensions, and particularly the territory by interpreting all its aspects. It responds to a dual purpose: at a macro (collective) level, to understand local peculiarities and critical issues, towards community's empowerment; at a micro (individual) level, to enhance (and improve) social worker's knowledge about citizens' difficulties (for example, understanding the Social work interview as a focused interview). This micro-macro dimension finds integration within a logic of networking and community welfare. Therefore, it is possible to affirm that having skills in social research can help professionals to analyze social conditions, how social problems and claims emerge, which target of people needs aid (and which kind of help), or which kind of networks already exist and should be reinforced/hold up. Finally, it is useful in evaluating the efficiency of social policies, and of organizational structures which create the local system of welfare in a network approach.

To enhance this perspective, we may take as an example the scientific and professional debate about how Social work was involved during and after the Covid-19 emergency. Considering the pandemic event as a "global social fact", and in terms of *syndemic* which impacted the entire social fabric, we can recognize how Social work is still playing a leading role in addressing its many outcomes. This is because the pandemic increased the socio-cultural-economic inequalities and widened the bases of marginalization – we are thinking about the different expressions of poverty, the worsening of the situations of vulnerability, from the job loss to the dramatic conditions related to disability, but also to the health consequences on families and older people, as in Psaroudakis, 2021.

Therefore, as Sanfelici, Gui & Mordeglia underline in their book *Il Servizio Sociale nell'emergenza Covid-19* (2020), the tasks of contemporary social workers – as social researchers – are now more than ever about: collecting data, realizing surveys, listening to stories, shifting through documents, reading (epidemiological, and more) statistics, understanding the vulnerability determinants and understanding all the available information related to everything that is connected to the emergency. This is to "make them the object of study, of knowledge, and to deduce elements which can improve the profession" (ivi, p. 9, our translation). In the volume, Authors illustrate research made by professional social workers from various regions of Italy, differently involved as co-researchers, which have promoted cognitive exchanges. This experience fully gathered the intrinsic nature of the connection between Social work and social research. Social workers who par-

ticipated in the survey were able to monitor a completely changed social system – due to an event that has represented a *turning point* for contemporary society – as well as they have produced documentary research having a great relevance and usefulness for the profession. Indeed, the pandemic has taught the need to know how to intervene not only in temporary situations of difficulty: it made clear the importance to deepen all the multiple factors acting as a detonator of latent dynamics in the fields of social exclusion. And, according to a long-term strategy, to preventively strengthen the areas of interventions promoting efficient conditions of communities' well-being. In this way, Social work may become a chosen speaker – having knowledge, experience, and expertise – both for individual users and for organizations, Third sector, and public administrations, together with the academia, in a networked dynamic and fully realizing a *community of practice* (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998).

Consequently, and starting from the example of the pandemic results, gaining skills about a correct way of data constructing, analyzing, and interpreting will allow future social workers to face the diverse dimensions of social problems, and therefore the complexity of the setting in which they will work. Practicing in the methodology of social research, and knowing the scientific methods to be used (limited and values included), may: “simplify independently obtaining knowledge, through the reading of scientific material, or the organization of practical research; finally, the adoption, even in taking charge of individuals, or families, or groups, of a scientific approach allows to evaluate the achievement of the a-priori defined objectives, based on theory or research results (quantitative or *standard* approach), or jointly with the user (qualitative or *non-standard* approach).” (Pattaro & Segatto, 2021, p. 9, our translation).

We agree with preferring the use of the expressions “standard” and “non-standard” in the methodology of social research (Nigris, 2003). Our intent is not to distinguish a quantitative from a qualitative approach (Corbetta, 1999; Di Fraia & Risi, 2019; Palumbo & Garbarino, 2016), but to point out their diverse aims: respectively, to measure, describe and give a dimension for *standard* methodology, and to create the theoretical and analytical categories to understand a social object for *non-standard* methodology. Rather, we would like to explain how both of them are complementary and equally relevant in understanding a social problem from all its different perspectives.

Indeed, according to the definition of Social work given by the I.A.S.S.W. and I.F.S.W. (2014), “the uniqueness of social work research and theories is that they are applied and emancipatory”. The profession uses theories of human behavior and social systems, “draws on its own constantly developing theoretical foundation and research”, and it “intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments”. Professionals' work is directed to-

wards vulnerable people, who need to be fully re-included in society: the social, cultural, and political setting is part of the intervention strategy against their marginalization. Social workers have to be highly knowledgeable, and be able to monitor the environment and all its changes, to concretely act in each context, because “much of social work research and theory is co-constructed with service users in an interactive, dialogic process and therefore informed by specific practice environment”.

In the following paragraph, we will explore the way how *mixed-methods* are basic tools for social workers’ practice.

### The “toolbox” for social workers

Let us now briefly see in which way and the reasons why education has to invest in the discipline of the methodology of social research, looking at the correspondences between the tasks of researchers and social workers. Research competencies are part of practitioners’ in Social work “development of their practice knowledge and skills” (Bisman & Hardcastle, 1999, p. xii). We will demonstrate that social workers already experience quantitative and qualitative tools in social research, to discuss which kind of competencies they have to improve, since their attendance at learning courses.

We start discussing context information, taking into account some case studies characterizing the Italian setting in which social workers operate. We refer to the ability of professionals to read the community profiles (and the way how they are written), such as the district/territory plans, and to construct recurring monitoring of the contexts both in terms of planning and intervention. Just looking at the programmatic documentation (e.g. the regional planning, in health and social policies: health plans, territorial activities plans, annual activities plans, implementation local plans, etc.), it is clear that, for students in Social work, gaining a methodological competence in social research (or, in other terms, an “expert knowledge”) becomes a fundamental requirement for profession’s correct development, as a systematic understanding of contemporary society and contexts of intervention, also from a *political* point of view. Briefly, to accomplish the purpose of successful Social work intervention, “research must relate directly to the needs of its field of inquiry” (ivi, p. 17).

From a quantitative point of view, it means professionals have to own skills in reconstructing territorial frames (as they are “social pictures”), in identifying trends, in knowing how to aggregate/disaggregate data in a functional way to social fields’ local planning. A longitudinally interpreting statistics, to highlight social transformations, has to do with their ability to manage the chronological dimension of analysis, which gives data a certain

narrative quality and helps social workers to constantly monitor changes in terms of social demands and resources.

An appropriate example is given by planning in health and social policies (the so-called “social-health integration”), to identify people’s current and future needs and to satisfy them through continuous evolution of welfare structures, and of their ability to offer efficient and qualified services in social care. The aim is to get the system closer to citizens’ claims by involving the various categories of decision-makers (institutions, local authorities, Third sector, intermediate bodies, etc.) according to their different roles, in a networked planning aimed at community empowerment, development of collective trust, and reinforcement of local networks. We are thinking here to the welfare system in its broader meaning, and considering the achievement of universal purposes: social justice, social support, and solidarity. Every social plan thus arises from an analysis of needs, of the new priorities and settings to manage the offer (as seen before, in health the post-Covid-19 emergency provided unknown issues that social workers must know), and is conceived through an integrated and multidisciplinary approach between different skills (among which there is Social work), for overcoming self-referential tendencies of single actors. In our reasoning, this is relevant also referring to Italian L.E.A.S. (Essential Levels of Social Assistance) and L.I.V.E.A.S. (Essential Levels of Assistance), which are defined by Law 328/2000, Legislative Decree 229/1999, and Constitutional Law 3/2001. In Law 328/2000, Chapter IV indicates the tools to promote the reorganization of the integrated system of interventions and social services, providing for the necessity of different plans for social intervention both at a national and regional level (art. 18) and at a local level (art. 19), and an information system of social services (art. 21). The Law’s strategic design requires an interconnected structure among the three dimensions of regulation, involving the government, the regional institutions, and locally Third sector, Social work, and local districts. By this, the recognition of the essential levels of assistance determines how to make the integrated system of intervention and social support (and, therefore, to formulate prediction’s frameworks), and the actions to be integrated and coordinated with health, education, training, and employment policies: legislation especially declares the importance of parameters for verifying the levels of social integration. The same reason is applied at a local level, in which plans occur as documents of territorial needs, claims, and offers. For example, the district plan is aimed at developing social policies of intervention and at providing an integrated perspective between local actors (e.g. welfare, social services) based on their complementary and flexible performances. It contains a series of quantitative and qualitative information: demographic indicators, evolutions, trends, territorial specifications, organizational services, data about disability and social

vulnerability, the analysis of local needs, the actions and projects already realized, and more.

Examining in-depth the assistance dimension, and within this interconnected design of action, we notice some differences between L.E.A. and L.I.V.E.A.S. Particularly, L.E.A. are defined by the Decree of January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2017, whereas L.I.V.E.A.S. determine a list of the national guaranteed activities, to be achieved through organizational systems (regional/local) within the framework of welfare governance. There is not a univocal definition of what L.I.V.E.A.S. are, but we know that – as policy instruments – they should guarantee a system of social support (actions) suitable for enhancing life quality and the sense of citizenship for individuals and families. This, together with equal opportunities and protection for the weakest individuals (individual rights), according to a series of attributes indicated by Institutional plans (a series of performances’ “standard” requirements). According to Law 328/2000 (art. 22), the integrated system of intervention and Social work’s activities realizes through coordinated policies and performances, by distinguishing actions (which are goods and services, as measures against poverty, and support for minors, disabled, elderly, addicted) from services (professional Social work, social secretariat, social emergency activities, house assistance, residential and semi-residential structures, and more).

It is especially within this framework that social workers practice their ability in understanding communities’ needs, in defining social problems, and in developing assistance paths. Contextually, they give indications and guidance about all the opportunities offered by the network that is activated by the welfare system and by the community in itself. Doing so, and by activating a *network intervention* which emphasizes the aid network rather than the aid relationship – obviously without removing it from the technical-operational horizon –, they promote solidarity bonding and linking ties (Salvini, 2005) and empower community-building dynamics. If this explains how much it is important for social workers to have skills in methodology to obtain a systematic collection of local information, circularly these kinds of data are important in the construction of regional and national plans too.

More broadly, students in Social work have to learn not only how to construct information (to be completed by reflections and by an accurate methodological note), but also to know where to find them. They have to maneuver into the various databases looking for the most appropriate, up-to-date, and detailed datasets (and metadata), and to identify sources (statistics, secondary analysis, ad hoc surveys, or research): the most useful ones both at an international/national level (e.g. ISTAT, INAIL, Eurostat, Eurobarometer, etc.) and at a regional/local level (e.g. Regional information systems, Chambers of Commerce, Observatories, etc.), and related monitoring. We add here reports produced by Ministries, by labor unions, by private and Third sec-

tor entities (e.g. Caritas), and more. Practically, students can learn “to read” territories and to select indicators based on the territorial relevance and the usefulness in programming (operations) both at a macro (the community), a meso (groups, organizations), and a micro (individual) level: by studying demographic indicators (population, minors, elderly), well-being indicators, health information (disability indexes, dependency indexes, diseases, assistance structures), environment (economic, productive indexes), regional/local observation’s programs about the essential levels of assistance.

A comparison between data – produced also by social districts and services in which Social work acts – allows young social workers to evaluate the “health degree” of local settings, and to better outline the logic of future intervention. For example, the instrument of the community profile, as a holistic support tool for social, socio-health, and health territorial planning, can be considered as an integrated, critical, and reasoned reading of the contexts. It helps professionals to understand the occurring phenomena, and the differences between territories, also identifying their strengths and weaknesses: every information about the local social capital (Putnam, 2000), made by social and solidarity networks, and social fabric’s hold. At last, for professionals, owning the appropriate operational knowledge and acquiring adequate skills in the analysis of contexts and their networks (their functioning, their conditions of existence, and reproduction), represents a way to favor methodological integration, the multidisciplinary convergence, and a multidimensional approach to solve social problems (Salvini, 1996).

Taking now into account the qualitative point of view, we know that the correspondence between social workers’ tools and the most typical instruments of qualitative research to reach individual information is daily and explicit (e.g. the construction of case studies for evaluation of practice, for needs assessment, for program evaluation). Descriptions include observations, data from case records, impressions of others, and interviews which are part of social workers’ practice (Marlow, 2001). By doing interviews, observing family relationships, conducting territorial observation practices, social workers create narratives, enhanced by the interaction among interviewer (professional) and interviewed (user) in a way that recalls the theoretical and methodological perspective of Symbolic Interactionism (Blumer, 1969), as interpreted by Charmaz and her Constructivist Grounded Theory approach (Charmaz, 2006; 2008a). The coherence with the interactionist suggestions provides a relational framework to processes within which subjects give a particular meaning to their experiences, and which they restore during the interviews experienced as symbolic moments of interaction. According to this thought, human behavior is purely symbolic: in interactions, every social actor *creates* his/her universe of meanings, which is composed by symbols, the definition of the situation, the relationship between indi-

viduals, because “meanings are linked in symbolic systems” (Strauss 1993, p. 27). Therefore, social workers assume an interactional point of view, as by investing in relationships with the subjects of intervention they establish an empathic link based on the exchange of meanings, on how individuals indicate social environments by interpreting situations, and confer particular values on their experiences. The relational modality exercised in the in-depth conversations/observation with users is characterized by empathy, according to the principle of others’ recognition as a style of listening and interaction. This allows developing a relationship based on immediacy perceived as an added value, in which the emotional element blends with the interaction.

In Social work, this theoretical and practical approach translates into the ability for social workers – adequately trained in the practice of qualitative research – to bring out the complexity of situations through subjects’ stories, to understand personal languages, the vocabulary of motives, the culture of the interviewees, and therefore the (relational) link they have with their environments (and with their formal and informal networks). These skills make social workers capable of strategically implementing paths in which beneficiaries’ needs, the support offered by services, and the achieved results (not often immediately evident in statistical reports) are interconnected. The qualitative methodology guarantees depth and completeness to research; we mean that the reconstruction of *life histories* (Bichi, 2004) allows to deepen and integrate the outcomes of quantitative research, even in a longitudinal way. This is the reason why students in Social work must learn qualitative methods’ techniques: to know the various instruments to be able to discern the most useful tools to achieve information depending on the circumstances (using interviews, focus groups, participatory research, visual analysis, etc., De Lillo, 2010; Silverman, 2016).

In this article we limit in underlining how the *biographical interview*, which takes place in a given social situation and is based on the emergence of a universe of meaning, has a dual nature: on one hand, it has a hermeneutic attribute, as it is connected to the interpretative act (of a social worker), on the other, it has a motivational feature since the purpose (of the user) becomes one of the (many) cognitive dimensions to be investigated. We point three aspects of this type of interview, which we consider essential related to the methodological attitude which a social worker has to act in daily practice:

- to create an intimate familiarity with the interviewee, because, as Charmaz wrote,

"gaining intimate familiarity means looking, listening, and learning about studied life. It means sustained interactions with people and with written data. It means experiencing wonder about their world,

being willing to plunge into it, opening oneself unforeseen, and grappling with uncertainty. Gaining intimate familiarity has been called getting an insider view. Now we realize that an insider view always reflects conditions of the particular situation, including the extent to which the researcher shares this situation"

(Charmaz, 2008b, pp. 53-54);

- to adopt an *emic* perspective, or the ability to acquire the other's point of view (Salvini, 2015);
- to experience *role-taking*, or the ability to assume the other's role "diving" in subjects' social worlds (Mead, 1934).

By consequence, realizing interviews aims at reconstructing the multiple dimensions of social experience as narrated in the life-histories: a) the biographical element (the historical-empirical path in which the experience is lived, within the framework of a specific definition of the situation as discussed by Berger & Luckman, 1966); b) the subjective element (the evaluation given by the interviewees when they look back at and tell their own experiences), and c) the relational element (arising from the dialogue between subject and interviewer).

We specify that the *biographical approach*, which is mainly descriptive, borrows from qualitative research and aims to understand how the interviewee's life context has affected the existential turning points in life-careers. The *narrative approach*, equally typical in Social work, may integrate the biographical perspective and emphasizes the dimension of meanings: it looks for the most relevant aspects experienced by the subject (who is not the object of observation!) as they emerge through the interaction and the uniqueness of the story, interpreted by the listener in a one-to-one and empathic relationship.

If the outcome of narratives is the reconstruction of the user's social world and identity, as written by Galavotti (2020) the interview becomes a tool characterizing social workers' professional actions and identity too. The qualitative method accomplished in social workers' practice is a non-conventional method needing the ability for social workers to listen and "to be within processes", by realizing a feeling of (a sort of mechanism of) *sympathetic* knowledge. The *social placement's* requirement pursues this direction: it is about the necessity for professionals to consider not only the individual case, but the overall social context, in a process of *collective empowerment* enhancing people and roles within a community vision. We underline again the importance for social workers to construct this kind of familiarity, recognizing that it is not possible to comply with the assumption of helping and supporting people, without first knowing the history and the biographical and personal characteristics of the subjects of intervention.



We can eventually affirm that a *mixed-methods* perspective of action may be promoted and enhanced by developing community empowerment. Social work has to learn from daily experiences, to know social settings in their quantitative and qualitative aspects, and to favor a networked approach (between people and organizations, together with Third sector), for a long-term intervention that can characterize the operational practices. A stronger connection between professional and academic fields, and an increased exchange in the dialogue between theory and practice knowledge may, in our opinion, easily empower activities of (future) social workers.

### **Conclusions: A complete methodological perspective for social workers' practice**

In conclusion, we recognize that nowadays it is unavoidable to adequately prepare students in Social work by giving them a methodological background in social research for which the research topic is strongly connected to the concrete action of social workers. We discussed that social research applied to Social work should be understood as an autonomous methodological process from the intervention, but we highlighted how it represents an essential moment in the practice of professionals. Therefore, we know that knowledge about social settings and their inhabitants is only one of the essential elements in social workers' education. Among others, we summarize activities' organization (practice), ability to enhance each node of the community (empowerment), strategic planning (in writing, conceiving), relationship care (other's recognition), daily administration, cooperation, and collaboration (networking). Every topic refers to interactions between individuals – and social workers too – and their contexts; for this, as discussed by Fargion (2009), the role acted by scientific knowledge is fundamental in practice, as a toolbox of resources to be concretely used by professionals to increase their chances of problem-solving.

From an educational point of view, we particularly underline the opportunity to offer deep attention to network dynamics and networking (relational information). We focus on relational work – a *net-work* (Anklam, 2007) – as the social workers' ability to intercept and activate the individual/collective relational networks which are developed in specific contexts, to enhance daily strategies able to promote social capital. The activation of social solidarity through network practices thus becomes an instrument of structural cohesion, necessary to implement welfare practices for collective empowerment. Theoretical lexicon and the typical measures of Networks Science and Social Network Analysis can be used according to these purposes: a) to identify relational structures of inclusion and exclusion, b) to evaluate the nature, cohesion's level, intensity, and attributes of social ties,

and c) to analyze the position of the subject within relational networks, and his/her involvement with the environment (Chiesi, 1999). Network practice for community development is organized to increase both the circulation of available resources, and the primary and secondary networks of users, by reducing the risk of people's vulnerability through developing in quantity and quality of relational capital at stake (Sanicola, 2009).

This kind of research is therefore a mandatory step to understand individuals' situations and difficulties, to help them in a process of autonomy and in building new links with the environment, which can involve the entire network independently from its parts. This is also to interpret both people's behavior and social structure from an ecological point of view and to create multiple support networks. For example, the structure and intensity of relational networks can be considered causes of social marginalization and precariousness. Knowing them, social workers can adequately intervene by re-orienting processes in such a way as to improve access to resources (individual social capital) and to support networks, fostering elements of social cohesion, generalized trust, and the sense of belonging to a community (collective social capital). This is the reason why professionals' skills are useful in activating solidarity ties in a collective dimension: theoretical and methodological aspects of network result in the effective ways of community work too, considered as a practice oriented towards the identification and mobilization of individual and collective resources to be mutually connected.

There is a long tradition in the study of network approach for Social work (Folgheraiter, 2004; Folgheraiter & Raineri, 2012; Raineri & Folgheraiter, 2014), from which students can source to familiarize themselves with the network activity, as a strategic change in social workers' practices and their organizational modalities. According to this perspective, professionals' reflection, observation, and intervention focus on network dynamics, which become the innovative key for interpreting social settings: as a diagnostic element, a resource, and an operational area (Salvini, 2012). The network intervention, based on the spread of networks as social support for situations of weakness, emphasizes the promotional, negotiating, and cognitive competencies of social worker, to be combined with his/her traditional support techniques and care activities.

However, we admit there is a risk of conceiving the network as an abstract entity, as in Social work learning it lacks a strong and adequate knowledge of both networks theories and social capital theories, to be concretely put into action for dealing with problems. The network approach is whereas linked to social workers' methodological skills to be strengthened, as a circular connection between scientific knowledge and method – and between network theory, network analysis, and network. For professionals, it represents a different opportunity for intervention because network structures

become causal mediations between the features of social contexts and the biographical trajectories of users. Therefore, we hope for an ever greater reference in educational fields to the methodological heritage offered by the figure of Jane Addams, as a role-model for future social workers (Psaroudakis, 2016; 2021). In her vision, as experienced in the Hull House settlement, network perspective and community building practically go hand in hand in mutual empowerment, in which the tools of social support open to the quali-quantitative methodological dimensions of listening, inquiring, synergical cooperating.

In the end, through net-working the target of intervention in Social work shifts from individual to the network (the community, as an extended practice of *neighborhood*), or from a dyadic relationship (of the user with other social actors) to the overall structure of interactions and the deeper knowledge of others (the intimate familiarity). We underline the relevance of such an approach not only at a methodological level, but in the processes of social and health policies definition too. Adopting a *mixed-methods* perspective means to directly observe social contexts, to collect data and documentary research, to hear people's narratives to plan activities, without prefiguring "fixed" objectives. This vision opens to a network practice, thus professionals have to gain competencies in building a relational setting: a network setting able to evolve depending on the various links and connections established by Social work with every (local, individual) dimension mobilized during the support process.

Moreover, this implies a different conceptualization of the contemporary role embodied by social workers: it has to do with the political meaning of their daily experience (an authentic policy practice), which makes them act for social change by implementing certain operational choices related to methodological research activities. It is a sort of a different paradigm for Social work's practice about innovation strategies in intervention, operational instruments, and organizational culture. Discussing the educational paths of Social work finally means engaging in a broader reflection about the *social role*, and the intrinsic *political identity* of social workers, as active and fully responsible leading players in community strategies.

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