

Introduction

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The antecedents and origins of modern social work can be identified and located primarily in dealing with the phenomenon of poverty over time. Despite its roots in the field of poor relief and its ambivalent entanglements in the distinction between the “deserving” and the “undeserving” poor, issues of poverty and social security had taken a back seat in the attention and professional debates of social work for long time. Nevertheless, poor people have always been disproportionately affected by other social and health-related problems and have been overrepresented as users of social services.

During the last decades, precariousness and poverty risks have been increasing and reached far into the middle of society. However, only recently there has been an increased focus and a growing debate on the issues of poverty in social work and on the development of poverty aware approaches and frameworks. In this context, knowledge and critical analyses of images and politics of representation of people living in poverty are of crucial importance. Social work must question hegemonic narratives and mechanisms of othering that are stigmatizing and punishing poor people. Furthermore, social work must be aware of the limitation of opportunities poverty creates and understand how to support people in their everyday struggles against poverty.

During recent years issues of poverty and minimum income protection have finally been prominently placed on the agenda of Italian politics and policy making on the national level. Despite changing policies and minimum income schemes, Italy has finally established minimum income protection as a social right on the national level and caught up with social assistance policies in other European countries. Nevertheless, different critical aspects persist both on the level of political discourse and in the context of the implementation of social assistance policies. While political discourses

confirm the persistence of stigmatizing and punitive narratives of people living in poverty, the implementation of social assistance policies is jeopardized by the difficulties of developing systems of services on the local level able to effectively support people who are faced to rely on social assistance. These new policies have their neuralgic at the local level, claiming social work as a central actor in combining material support with individualised projects of social support and inclusion.

This section presents three contributions focusing on the role of social work in current social assistance policies in the Italian context.

Andrea Bilotti presents the findings of a research project conducted with a sample of service users in relation to their impoverishment trajectories. The project aimed to answer two fundamental questions: What are the main trajectories of impoverishment processes? What are the strategies (subjective and institutional) for coping with these processes? The chapter discusses the role that critical events play in generating or radicalising impoverishment processes and highlights recurrent patterns that can be identified as biographical turning points.

Elisa Matutini proposes a reflection on the role of conditionality in minimum income protection schemes and policies. In her chapter particular attention is given to strategies designed at the local level to ensure that the conditional dimension is part of a coordinated system of interventions provided by several institutions that can effectively integrate social support, income protection, employment promotion and activation.

Chiara Zanetti presents the findings of a research project the Department of Social Services and Policies of the Municipality of Trieste carried out with beneficiaries of income support measures to understand the impact of these measures from their point of view. The presented findings address the following questions: What problematic factors emerge from individualised service contracts between social workers and beneficiaries of income support measures? What is the impact and the possible improvement as seen by those who benefitted from these measures and what critical elements are perceived from their perspective?