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Luca Pavani, Elena Allegri & Mara Sanfelici

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Coping strategies against oppression in social workers' everyday practice: findings from a national study

Strategie di fronteggiamento dell' oppressione nella pratica quotidiana degli assistenti sociali: risultati di uno studio nazionale

Luca Pavani [a], Elena Allegri [a] and Mara Sanfelici [b]

[a]Department of Law, Political, Economic and Social Sciences, University of Eastern Piedmont, Alessandria, Italy; [b]Department of Sociology and Social Research, University of Milan-Bicocca, Milan, Italy

ABSTRACT

The article discusses findings from a national study examining social workers' (SWs) awareness of potentially oppressive professional and organisational practices within social and health services. The international definition of social work (IFSW, 2014) assumes that SWs not only should promote social justice, but also have agency and enough power to tackle processes that produce oppression and social exclusion. Nevertheless, SWs are most of the time employees of bureaucracies that through categorisation processes embedded in procedures profoundly influence their work. This situation is exacerbated by the rise of neoliberal policies that emphasise individual citizen responsibility and resilience as solutions to social issues. Through 12 focus groups in 2021 and 2022, involving 115 SWs from various settings, the research explored whether and how they tackle oppression and discrimination, the organisational factors that facilitate or hinder an anti-oppressive approach and potential strategies for influencing policies and practices. The findings reveal a set of strategies employed by SWs to address service user oppression. These strategies are interrelated and emerge from a co-constructed process influenced by organisational dynamics and varying perceptions of social workers's role.

ABSTRACT

L'articolo discute i risultati di uno studio nazionale che esamina la consapevolezza degli assistenti sociali (AS) rispetto alle pratiche professionali e organizzative potenzialmente oppressive all'interno dei servizi sociali e sanitari. La definizione internazionale di lavoro sociale (IFSW, 2014) presuppone che gli AS non solo debbano promuovere la giustizia sociale, ma anche avere capacità di iniziativa e potere sufficienti per affrontare i processi che producono oppressione ed esclusione sociale. Tuttavia, gli AS sono principalmente dipendenti di burocrazie che, attraverso processi di categorizzazione incorporati nelle procedure, influenzano profondamente il loro lavoro. Questa situazione è esacerbata dall'ascesa delle politiche neoliberali che enfatizzano la responsabilità individuale dei cittadini e la resilienza come soluzioni ai problemi sociali. Attraverso 12 focus group nel 2021 e nel 2022, che

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CONTACT Luca Pavani luca.pavani@uniupo.it Department of Law, Political, Economic and Social Studies University of Piemonte Orientale (Eastern Piedmont), Via Cavour, 84 - 15100 Alessandria, Italy

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hanno coinvolto 115 AS da diversi contesti lavorativi, la ricerca ha esplorato se e come affrontano l'oppressione e la discriminazione, i fattori organizzativi che facilitano o ostacolano un approccio anti-oppressivo e le potenziali strategie utili per influenzare le politiche e le pratiche. I risultati rivelano una serie di strategie impiegate dagli AS per affrontare l'oppressione sulle persone che si rivolgono ai servizi. Queste strategie sono interrelate tra esse ed emergono da un processo co-costruito e influenzato sia dalle dinamiche organizzative sia dalle diverse percezioni del ruolo degli assistenti sociali.

Background

This article presents findings from a national study exploring social workers' awareness and representations of potential oppressive practices in social services in Italy, as well as their perspectives about possible strategies to tackle them. The broader aim is to increase knowledge on the processes that can either foster or hamper anti-oppressive practices in social services, contributing to the evolving international debate.

The Blackwell Dictionary of Sociology defines social oppression as 'a relationship between groups or categories of people in which a dominant group benefits from the systematic abuse, exploitation, and injustice directed toward a subordinate group. (…) All members of dominant and subordinate categories participate in social oppression regardless of their individual attitudes or behaviour. Social oppression becomes institutionalised when its enforcement is so of social life that it is not easily identified as oppression and does not require conscious prejudice or overt acts of discrimination' (Johnson, 2000, p. 293). Oppression can manifest within social policies, social workers' practices and public services when they perpetuate discrimination in favour of dominant élites and fail to ensure equal access to services for all subordinate categories of citizens.

To further develop the argument presented, it is essential considering how social workers position themself into social service organisations. Social workers' practices can be constrained by unjust policies, rigid procedures or contingent work schedules, which undermine their autonomy; professionals, as street level bureaucrats (Evans et al., 2004; Lipsky, 2010) can either try to act as policy changers or act as executors, depending on how they interpret and enact their role in these organisational contexts.

Moreover, there may be different perspectives about the roots of people's problems and the role of social work to tackle them, ranging from conservative perspective to critical professionalism (Timor-Shlevin & Benjamin, 2021). In a more conservative approach, social workers may perceive service users as individuals in need of correction and monitoring (Krumer-Nevo, 2016), taking for granted the wider conditions of the socio-political and economic contexts. Conversely, a critical approach (Fook, 2016) is grounded in a commitment to social justice (Strier & Binyamin, 2014), emphasising solidarity with service users and the need to tackle social roots of their condition of disadvantage, unveiling power relations between oppressed and 'privileged' (Freire, 1970; Pease, 2010). The critical approach also offers lenses to guide reflection on the power dynamics inherent in helping relationships (Dominelli, 2002). Even when attempting to help people, social workers may unconsciously enact oppressive practices in the complex balance between care and control, particularly when they are themselves oppressed by unjust policies and organisations (Baines, 2007).

The professional mandate asks social workers to advocate for social justice, assuming they are endowed with the agency, competencies, and power necessary to address oppression and social exclusion. This risks placing a nearly exclusive responsibility on them, neglecting the wider organisational and political factors affecting their possibilities to act as change makers.

Various scholars (Baines, 2007; Baines & Diane van den Broek, 2017; Dalrymple & Burke, 2006) highlight that the debate regarding the role of social services within the welfare systems and societies has not produced a consensus about how the ideal commitment to foster social justice

should be enacted in practice. Empirical studies (Allegri et al., 2022; Baines, 2011; Thompson, 2021), reveal significant challenges that may hamper the attempt to adopt an anti-oppressive approach, including communication gaps, fragmented care pathways, unequal access to welfare resources, historical underfunding of services, and critical issues in social worker education. These elements collectively hinder social workers' ability to act as catalysts for social change and to effectively engage with the political mandate.

For example, institutions may be organised based on conservative norms that uphold mechanisms of social exclusion, in fact, placing social workers in a position in which they need to choose between complying, as employees are required to, or assuming a more critical stance, challenging an unjust status quo (Banks, 2011; Timor-Shlevin & Benjamin, 2021). In addition, social workers may not be recognised as entitled to participate in the design of policies and the organisation of services.

Such a condition is particularly evident in those contexts, where the influence of contemporary neoliberal policies have led to prioritising individual responsibility and resilience as solutions to broad social challenges (Bauman, 2008), resulting in tensions between professional and organisational mandates (Lorenz, 2006). Neoliberalism promotes reliance on the private market over government services, and pushes for the introduction of managerial approaches, which prioritise economic logic in welfare services, leading to reduced public spending and government intervention (Baines, 2011; Pavolini & Klenk, 2015).

More specifically, the New Public Management (NPM) seems to be in line with this wider perspective, emphasising entrepreneurial thinking as a fundamental value, business management methods, evaluation parameters for professional practices and competition as the basic dynamic for action (Pavolini & Klenk, 2015). Despite some positive effects on the organisation of social services, research shows that NPM disrupts public services and affects the professions involved (Rogowski, 2011), leading to the de-professionalization and de-politicisation of social work (Timor-Shlevin et al., 2023).

In this context, social workers and the social services organisations can act in compliance or showing resistance as opposition to systemic constraints that hinder ethical practice (Ferguson & Lavalette, 2006; Strier & Bershtling, 2016). Ferguson and Lavalette (2006, p. 312) suggest that 'there are four potential bases for the development of what might be called a social work of resistance': first, acting on the internal contradictions of neoliberal social work, for example its rethorics about 'what works' and an individualised perspective; second, resistance can rise from within the profession, acting not only to improve the working conditions but also to defend the vision of what social work should be like if it pursue social justice; third, service user movements have challenged traditional professional practices, advocating for participation, and co-production in services; lastly, broader anti-capitalist and anti-war social movements offer social work a renewed global perspective and a vision of alternative futures.

Mumby et al. (2017) highlight a range between overt and covert practices at the micro- and macro levels of operation. Overt resistance is visible and outright, a form of open opposition to unjust procedures and norms and calling for major changes in policies; at the micro level, practices of 'deviant social work' (Carey and Foster, 2013: 578) promotes critical perspectives by formally opposing oppressive practices at the street level. Covert resistance includes 'under the radar' operation of resistance to promote critical rationality in small, hidden steps (Harding et al., 2017), forms of 'minor' opposition, which subversively challenges the fundamental elements of hegemonic discourses, organisational habits and the social order. At the street level covert resistance can take place when social workers challenge the managerial hierarchy by various means, among them the partial avoidance of organisational tasks and the use of humour, cynicism and ambivalent performances.

Timor-Shlevin et al. (2023) suggest considering radical incrementalism (Schram, 2015) as a strategic approach that operates in the middle range of covert and overt forms of resistance. Rather than relying solely on direct confrontation or sporadic hidden acts, radical incrementalism seeks to achieve critical changes through a series of deliberate, gradual steps from within existing systems, aiming to reshape power dynamics and policies in favour of social justice.

Against this background, our study aimed to answer the following research questions: (1) How do social workers navigate the diverse forms of oppression that emerge from social and organisational contexts? (2) What strategies of resistance or coping mechanisms do they employ in response to practices that are incongruent with their professional mandate?

The context of the research: social work in Italy

The professional field of social work in Italy began to develop significantly after the Second World War. However, it was not until the 1980s that social work gained both academic and legal recognition. This pivotal advancement was marked by the introduction of the first university diplomas for training and the establishment of a professional council and register in 1993, which regulates access to the profession of social worker . The bachelor's degree programme was founded in 2000. To become registered social workers (in Italian, *assistenti sociali*), graduates must successfully pass a State examination. Currently, there are approximately 48,000 registered social workers (CNOAS.- National Council of Social Workers, 2023). This number reflects significant growth since the mid-1990s (Facchini & Lorenz, 2013). The landscape of social services and the role of social workers in Italy mirrors that of other Western nations, with the majority employed in Municipality social services, the national and local health systems, and Third Sector entities. Over the past two decades such services have encountered similar challenges as in other countries, posed by neoliberal austerity measures and the rationalisation of social expenditures (Garrett & Bertotti, 2016). In response to resource reductions and deteriorating working conditions, exacerbated by an increase in managerialism, NPM and bureaucratic processes, social work in Italy is actively seeking new avenues for social and professional legitimisation. Some steps forward have been observed in the recovery stage after the COVID-19 pandemic. The National Plan for Recovery and Resilience (PNRR) approved in 2021 set as a priority the necessity to reinvest in an adequate network of territorial integrated health and social services. The 2022 Budget Law introduced resources and guidelines to guarantee some essential levels of social services (LEPS), in particular, to reinforce the social work workforce at the municipality level, to organise emergency duty services in the overall national territory, and continuity of assistance services after hospital discharge. The discourse surrounding anti-oppressive practice is predominantly situated within the social work literature (Allegri, 2015; Allegri & Sanfelici, 2023; Campanini & Facchini, 2013; Raineri & Calcaterra, 2015; Sanfelici, 2024), while it did not enter in the discourses of professionals on the field.

Method

This study employed a qualitative methodological approach to examine how social workers represent and address forms of oppression stemming from their social or organisational contexts. Between 2021 and 2022, twelve focus groups (FGs) were conducted with 115 social workers across various settings to collaboratively explore: (a) forms of discrimination and oppression in the social context; (b) organisational factors that either foster or hinder an anti-oppressive approach in professional practice; (c) strategies to copy with organisational or professional practice deemed oppressive.

A call was launched by the Council of Social Workers' digital channels (newsletter and social media) to present the study project and invite social workers around the nation to participate. The selection of the participants was related to their specific area of intervention; two FGs were carried out for each specific setting: Social services in the municipality (including anti-poverty social services and social services for adults (FG1A; FG1B)); Mental health and addiction social services (FG2A; FG2B); Services for migrants (FG3A; FG3B); Child protection services (FG4A; FG4B); Justice system (FG5A; FG5B); Hospital social services (FG6A; FG6B). All participants provided informed consent prior to their involvement in the FG. Given the pandemic restrictions in 2021 the first round

Table 1. Main features of the Focus Group participants. $N = 115$.

Gender	Female	102 (88.7%)
	Male	13 (11.3%)
Age	21–30	6 (5.2%)
	31–40	21 (18.3%)
	41–50	32 (27.8%)
	51–60	41 (35.7%)
	>60	15 (13.0%)
Years of experience	0–9	30 (26.1%)
	10–19	42 (36.5%)
	20–29	16 (13.9%)
Geographical area	North Italy	61 (53.0%)
	Central Italy	26 (22.6%)
	South and Islands Italy	28 (24.3%)
Main area of work	Social services in the municipality (FG1A and FG1B)	20 (17.4%)
	Mental health and addiction social services (FG2A and FG2B)	19 (16.5%)
	Services for migrants and asylum seekers (FG3A and FG3B)	18 (15.7%)
	Child protection services (FG4A and FG3B)	17 (14.8%)
	Criminal justice system (FG5A and FGB)	21 (18.3%)
	Hospital social services (FG6A and FG6B)	20 (17.4%)

(FGA) was carried out online, in the second round (FGB) we decided to maintain the same setting to ensure coherence and consistency. Table 1 illustrates the key characteristics of the FGs participants.

Each discussion was consistently led by the same researcher, while two other members of the team participated as silent observers of non verbal communication and the dynamics within the groups. The discussions among participants in each FG were stimulated by three main questions aimed at uncovering the representations and opinions of social workers concerning: (a) possible forms of oppression within social services, both in national and local policies and in daily work routines; (b) awareness of having been engaged in unjust, discriminatory, or oppressive practices as social workers; (c) strategies to counteract oppression within organisations and society at large. This paper focuses in particular on the third question.

A decision was made to conduct a pre-test with a group of seven experienced social workers. Their feedback highlighted how the vocabulary of anti-oppressive practice was not known by the participants, and underscored the importance of starting each focus group providing a clear definition of the approach, helping them to reflect on their own examples from practice.

Additionally, we decided to start the discussion focusing on organisational dimensions first, while reflecting on their own possible involvement in oppressive practices in subsequent stages, when the participants showed a greater sense of trust in the researchers and within the group, necessary to share also difficult situations in which they had been involved. This approach fosters a more effective, critical, and ethical discussion. The discussions were audio-recorded and then transcribed *verbatim*. The empirical material was thematically analyzed (Braun & Clarke, 2022), adopting an inductive approach in which themes were actively constructed by the researchers through a systematic process of coding, comparison, and refinement (Morris, 2024). The thematic analysis led us to construct a typology as the result of a process of developing and reviewing themes (phase 4) and then refining, defining and naming themes (phase 5), following Braun and Clarke's (2022) revised version of thematic analysis.

Findings

This section presents the themes referred to the types of strategies social workers adopt when facing different forms of oppression. More specifically, we identified the following themes: executing, invisibilizing, helping to adapt, externalising the locus of control, adapting rules and procedures, being in opposition, persuasion and open dialogue.

These types can co-exist in the professionals' experiences, as they are the result of interactions among different actors (professionals, service users, managers, decision makers) in situated contexts,

influenced by different representations of the role of social work, structural variables at the organisational and institutional levels and relative power dynamics.

Executing

Some narratives show how professionals have internalised bureaucratic ideologies, leading them to believe that interacting with service users in a 'cold,' 'objective,' and standardised manner is the most appropriate way to fulfil institutional requirements. There seems to be a general belief that structural issues cannot be changed, since it is not in the role of a social worker trying to tackle them. The status quo is taken for granted and social workers seem to act as collaborators in maintaining it, controlling resources and service users' behaviours. The task is to comply and execute as a duty of an employee, a representation associated with a general perception of a weak professional autonomy and the interpretation of the social work role as technical; the social worker operates on behalf of the administration, and strictly apply procedures:

> I had to be very strict, I just had to say 'No: you don't have the requirements, you don't have the right documentation. No, and no' (SW4 FG4A).[1]

This leads to neglect the task of critically reflecting on professional and organisational practices, and sometimes even to a kind of denial of emotions while carrying out the helping process in standardised ways that do not consider personalised plans:

> I had to be very cold, objective and firm, and give the same answer for everyone (…). 'there are no solutions or alternatives', you just have to communicate it (SW4 FG4A).

The social workers reflect on their feeling of being obliged to execute, also linked to their precarious position as temporary workers, that could risk their job in case of non-compliance. The result is that they become at the same time an oppressed worker and an oppressor:

> When I got home, I started to think about what I had done, (…). If I had acted differently, I would have risked my job, and as a temporary worker … and I could not afford it (…) this was psychologically oppressive for me, but I was an oppressor towards these people as well (SW4 FG4A).

When describing this strategy our participants most of the time referred to other colleagues or to their own past negative experiences, in which they 'learnt' to comply with oppressive policies and practices, feeling this was required by their managers.

Invisibilizing

In other cases, social workers seem to interpret their role essentially as managers of resources, more than a facilitator of empowering processes. This sometimes leads to situations in which they intervene only when formal or informal resources are already available to people, helping those with stronger networks, while neglecting the most vulnerable groups of the population.

For example, a participant employed by the Ministry of Justice social services talks about the case of migrants that after a time spent in jail lost their houses; among those, people with a weaker juridical status are denied access to housing solutions even through the public services, making it difficult to set up any kind of plan outside the jail, without having a home:

> Formally the access to the same rights is ensured to everyone … but in my agency, those who do not have a permit, migrants who do not have roots and social networks here (in Italy), are those who stay in jail without having the possibility of external plans, and we (the social workers) – totally overwhelmed by bureaucratic duties and too many demands of arranging plans for alternative measures to prisons – we totally neglect our role of fostering access to rights for those who access less informal resources compared to the other (…) those more disadvantaged. (SW3, FG5A)

Paradoxically, social workers tend to give priority to cases in which plans are easier to implement. Also due to a very high caseload, more or less consciously, they choose to work supporting

service users who already have a home and social networks that can help them. As a consequence, migrants in more precarious conditions are essentially invisibilized and neglected, as default. This echoes the creaming effect described by Lipsky (2010), when professionals tend to prioritise cases easier to resolve, especially when facing excessive workloads and limited resources.

Social workers should work at the meso and macro level to advocate for the rights of the most vulnerable, but this function does not seem to be one they can perform in those services, focused on individual casework.

Helping to adapt

Some participants reflected on categorising processes embedded in organisational and professional practices, that risk forcing people into paths in which their self-determination is at risk and may lead to stigmatising forms of labelling. Sometimes, the only way to activate formal available resources is to influence service users' intentions and behaviours to fit them into organisational frames and assumptions: people are helped to understand how to comply with procedures, running the risk of reinforcing social oppression and exclusion embedded in these regulations. For example, in some cases the only way to obtain economic subsidies is to be certified as disadvantaged, and social workers collaborate in this process to produce a paper-based certificate service users need for the online application. Some professionals explain how this certification is a labelling tool with consequences on people self-esteem and on their identity's definition:

> Unfortunately, we push users to try to get into that category of 'disadvantage' that allows them to obtain the benefit (SW7, FG1A).

Another social worker describes how service users are sometimes forced to adapt to plans made for them based on available resources:

> To foster hospital discharges in faster ways we sometimes manipulate in some way the will of the families and the people themselves to move them to the only place available, even if it is a place nobody wants to go to (SW7, FG6A)

In other cases, service users are pushed to prove they are not lying and really committed to collaborate with the service, forcing them into paths that led to forms of humiliation and loss of dignity as a sort of challenges to 'prove' their real commitment and deservingness:

> I have found myself in several situations where the families who finally obtain aid are forced into a path of humiliation and loss of dignity before they finally get the real help they need … this path, that I call humiliation, is a way to verify if their needs are real (SW3, FG3A).

Externalising the locus of control

Several participants are critical and aware about the potential risks of oppressive procedures and rules, but essentially they attribute the role to tackle them to higher levels in their organisation, especially the managers.

> No one really cares about them (the service users), but they (the managers) just don't have the competences … so … basically I keep getting angry … I am seen as the one who gets angry … but I know it is not anger that becomes constructive (SW8, FG4B)

This participant describes the emotion of anger in a situation in which she feels managers do not really care or they simply do not have the competences to analyse and understand social issues. In fact, often in Italy managers of social services have economic or administrative backgrounds, influencing choices within the organisations that are not in line with social work professional mandate. The combination of individual negative emotion and constraining structural conditions seem to lead to a vicious circle: this social worker feels at the same time blacked in her possibility

to act and help people, trapped by organisational conditions which she is not able to influence and hamper also her capacity to imagine alternatives.

Adapting rules and procedures

Several examples described by the participants are similar to what in the literature (Strier & Bershtling, 2016) are named as acts of 'covert resistance', mainly at the case level, when social workers try to act on the rigidity of rules and procedures, to make them work in relation to specific situations. These professionals seem to start from the assumption that the organisational structure cannot easily be changed, since this is not under their control, but in some cases they find ways to limit the effect of rigid laws and policies to help service users. Professionals act on constraining bureaucratic procedures, without changing them but feeding them only with those information needed to obtain services and resources:

> The solution then is not to make the agency's mandate more … elastic, but (…) I help you tell me only what you need to, so that I'm able and allowed to help you..Because then I can bring your instance that otherwise would not have been taken into consideration … because the mandate is rigid. (SW 5 -FG4A)

The issue related to these covert forms of resistance is that generally the overall system remains unchanged and unchallenged, and there is a need for continuous efforts to find individual solutions within standardised regulations, hampering personalised interventions.

Being in opposition

Some participants describe situations in which they refuse to comply and execute procedures and practices that are in contrast with their ethics and more generally with their professional mandate. These social workers have in common a strong sense of commitment when seeing forms of social injustice and the perception of a strong professional autonomy, that allows them to manifest loudly, they are not simply executors of external orders or decisions and they are there to protect service users' rights. For example, a social worker described how the manager of a hospital department trying to force the speed of hospital discharges was essentially neglecting the patients' health needs, also hampering her possibility to build plans to ensure the continuity of care, but the group of social workers and the clinicians were on the same page, without complying with the management request, even if this implied an everyday struggle.

> The doctors wanted to discharge a woman who had been admitted for serious and recurrent ill-treatment and send her back home, because 'ten days had already passed and the hospital is spending too much money.' We did not have an alternative plan yet, but we all knew that he [her husband] would have beaten her again. So, I told them that if they did send her back, I would have reported them (SW3 FG6B).

These actions are taken when there is the perception that the management or the politicians assume close and rigid positions that exclude dialogue, imposing agency's priorities that clash with an ethic-based profession. Such actions of overt resistance (Strier & Bershtling, 2016) are more likely when workers are able to build alliances among them or with other professional groups trying to lobby for a more humanistic and relational way of practicing and organising.

> Within this rigid vertical hierarchy in the continuity services the strength was having on our side the physicians, an alliance that led us winning, staying at the side of the patients (SW1, FG6B)

Persuasion and open dialogue

Acts of mediations and the ability to build relationships of reciprocal trust within professional groups and with decision-makers and politicians seem to be the more satisfying ways of tackling the risk of forms of institutional or social oppression, while influencing perspectives and the overall organisation culture;

> You have to work a lot as a team, creating alliances between and within groups, mediating, sometimes when there is a lot of confusion and incomprehension among different perspectives that need to be confronted. Confidence in your competences matters too, when you are able to show it … . this happens daily, for example, when they tell you 'we need to discharge this person' and you say 'wait, lets talk' and we work on this together (SW7, FG6B)

This seems possible when the boundaries between the professionals and the management are more permeable, and flexible organisational structures allow people to think together:

> I talk to the manager, who absolutely wants this person (the service user who is receiving the basic income) to do these 7 h of work, because it is due, according to the regulations and procedures,(..) and while talking with him some signals and inputs are already given … So we can start to think together, you reason together about the fact that it is not only a duty, that these people can be also resources for the community (…) just this phone call for me is an action to counter oppression (SW3, FG1B).

Building alliances and forms of 'radical incrementalism' (Timor-Shlevin et al., 2023) with the management is easier when the organisational and political mandate is in line with the social work values, and generally when different perspectives are seen as a possibility of enrichment and reciprocal learning in open organisations.

> There was a politician here who was in line with the values of social work.. I would say she was committed to social justice, she called us, it was possible to discuss with her possible solutions to collective issues of our neighborhood (…) Now..with the new right wing government they essentially ask us to execute, neither the opportunity to discuss nor the opportunity to think critically about what we have to do are recognised any more (SW6, FG1B).

Discussion

Our findings offer a first picture of how social workers can react to oppressive practices, with strategies that seem to be linked with different ways of interpreting and enacting their professional role, the inherent tensions that characterise their fieldwork, also in relation to the structural constraints in the welfare systems and the wider socio-political and economic contexts (Rogowski, 2011; Timor-Shlevin et al., 2023). More specifically, our results identified various forms of coping strategies that seem to be associated with two different assumptions about the role of social work: a more bureaucratic approach (paragraphs 3.1, 3.2, 3.3) and a more critical stance (paragraphs 3.4, 3.5, 3.6, 3.7).

Some of our participants see themselves more as technicians, gatekeepers or managers of resources, taking for granted wider structural conditions even if oppressive; in this way, they risk to neglect people's needs or to force them to adapt to disempowering organisational practices (Drury-Hudson, 1999). This strategy seems to reflect a professional identity in line with the bureaucratic approach recognised as one of the perspectives assumed in Italian social services (Fargion, 2013). In these contexts, practice is primarily shaped by the application of predefined categories embedded in institutional procedures and classifications that regulate access to services, regardless of their alignment with the professional mandate. In addition, social workers may act as managers of formal and informal resources without taking responsibility for challenging the broader structures that maintain privilege and oppression. This attitude is not surprising, giving the mainstream representation of social work in Italian bureaucracies as a technical operator on behalf of the local or national government, more than a service users' ally, a tendency reinforced in the last decades with the introduction of neo-managerialism discourses and forms of organisations (Allegri et al., 2022).

The majority of our participants assume instead a more critical stance, being aware of their mandate to foster social rights, even if this intention does not always turn into practice in their daily work, and more frequently manifest itself in actions taken at the micro level. Such stances do not simply depend on professionals' choices and attitudes, but they emerge from complex interactions between different actors – professionals, service users, managers and politicians – and are further influenced by structural variables and power dynamics in the organisational environment. Based on the result of such interactions, it is possible to act in forms of overt and covert practices that challenge oppression. This is in line with Gibson's (2019) conceptualisation of professional

resistance as a response to different forms of organisational control, identifying strategies such as compromising expectations, concealing resistance or influencing institutional processes as means by which social workers negotiate ethical dilemmas. In this sense, resistance is not only an act of opposition but also a form of professional practice embedded in complex personal/structural negotiations. Also Timor-Shlevin et al. (2023) theorise resistance as operating on a scale of power exertion – from minor to major acts – emphasising the importance of the intermediate types in promoting sustainable changes. In line with this argumentation, our results highlight forms of strategy that are neither uniform nor simply dichotomous, but rather exist on a spectrum influenced by power – from passive compliance ('execution') to more proactive forms of resistance such as persuasion, alliance-building and open dialogue. For example, in our findings we found social workers who engage in acts of covert resistance, manipulating bureaucratic procedures to benefit service users, similarly to what is exemplified by Sørensen's (2016) framework of constructive resistance, in which professionals simultaneously challenge and work within the system to promote more just outcomes, even if without directly transforming institutional structures. This strategy is consistent with the positive deviant practices outlined by Carey and Foster (2011) in which practitioners often engage in creative strategies to uphold service users' rights within restrictive organisational contexts, such as rule bending, concealing information to help service users conform to preset criteria, spending more time with service users than permitted by norms and regulations, and exaggerating service users' needs to increase budgetary support.

Nevertheless, a key issue that needs to be addressed is that, according to our findings, even the most open forms of resistance – such as 'open dialogue' (paragraph 3.7) with the management – remain confined to the micro level of specific cases or the organisational level, as internal forms of policy practices (Gal & Weiss-Gal, 2013). They do not extend to the macro level: none of our participants have engaged in social advocacy or collective actions outside of their agencies to tackle structural problems. What seems to be lacking is a collective framework for action: while many social workers engage in covert or overt micro-level forms of resistance (Strier & Bershtling, 2016), the persistence of structural oppression would require organised advocacy efforts that go beyond isolated professional actions, but such actions seem not to be part of our participant practices.

This is understandable, given the fact that the vast majority are employees whose mandate does not include macro social work practices, and the engagement in such activities risks dismissal or retaliation (Cellini and e Sanfelici, 2025). Moreover, studies found that social work education in Italy does not invest enough in competences for macro social work practice (Cellini et al., 2025), leaving them without the tools to think and act politically. The interplay of these factors easily lead social workers to remain confined to individualised interventions, thereby neglecting the transformative potential of their political role, included in their professional mandate (Ferguson & Lavalette, 2006; Lorenz, 2005)

However, some professionals' strategies seem to help moving in the direction of more just institutions, trying to act everyday to foster changes in the organisation, in forms of dialogue and mediations and more or less overt conflictual acts of contestations. We therefore can recognise how several social workers – despite their organisational mandate as executors – do not position themselves as neutral providers of services, but as active agents in everyday struggles rather than mere facilitators of institutional policies designed elsewhere. Not surprisingly, this possibility also depends on relations of power linked to age, year of experience and more or less precarious working conditions; also the type of service seemed to matter: those workers that need to act as gatekeepers of resources (for example, subsidies) seem more frequently experience ethical dilemma and tensions in mediating the organisational and service users' different priorities.

Concluding remarks

This study highlights possibilities for transformation that social work can foster as a profession within social work agencies and as a discipline, even if some conditions are required.

Our findings show that many social workers rely on covert resistance strategies, while acts of overt resistance, in more or less conflictual modes, are mainly at the case level or at the agency level, with no mention of involvement in collective strategies of policy advocacy. This is likely linked to the constraints and risks involved in openly challenging institutions, but also to social workers competences and different views about their role, so that transforming actions need to be thought of, while taking into account different dimensions.

One of the main issues that should be addressed in the country is related to the quality of social work education in preparing practitioners to engage in policy practice as both a form of resistance and a route to structural intervention. While many programmes emphasise policy analysis skills, there remains a gap in teaching students how to identify institutional power dynamics and implement anti-oppressive methods. If we wish to move beyond isolated, individual instances of resistance to oppression, our educational frameworks must cultivate a nuanced understanding of power structures, equip students with practical tools for challenging institutional constraints, and foster collective approaches to advocacy. Without embedding resistance as a central part of professional identity and ethical responsibility, social work risks reinforcing the very systems it seeks to change. Consequently, opening up a discussion about how social work education can cultivate not only technically skilled practitioners but also reflective, politically engaged professionals becomes an essential step in addressing the wider paradox in the field (Weiss-Gal, 2016).

This can also foster a broader conversation about the nature and the future of social work (Brockmann, 2024). It is undeniable that the profession's dual role of care and control can actually hamper the struggle for a structural reform of oppressive systems (Maylea, 2020). To navigate this tension, it is necessary to build a coalition both within the profession and with other key actors such as policy makers, managers, and citizens. This coalition should work to collectively recognise and critically analyse the dominant assumptions embedded in welfare agencies and in the wider social context. Such efforts are crucial, especially given the powerful influence of contemporary narratives shaped by neoliberal ideologies, which deeply permeate welfare services.

This study shows examples of social workers' compliance to oppressive systems within bureaucratic organisations, but also everyday efforts of several practitioners to challenge prevailing norms and practices that obscure the values of care and solidarity. Several social workers resist, mediate and try to spread a care-oriented perspective, bringing about meaningful, middle or long-term transformations. A language and a practice of care can be seen as a source of counternarrations to overcome managerialistic or bureaucratic approaches, contaminating the organisational and professional practice within social services agencies.

This cannot be an isolated effort of the single practitioner, nor a goal of the social work profession only, since it involves different actors in the policy making arena.

To value such efforts, professional as well as scientific social work associations are committed to trying to create the conditions that could foster collective resistance within social work agencies. The National Council of Social Workers in Italy for example has been the main political entrepreneur in passing a reform that for the first time made social work supervision as mandatory in all the municipality services: this can be a chance to foster not only critical thinking, but also to build more alliances within the profession in line with its core values (Allegri, 2023). A further step in strengthening social work's transformative role should be to provide ongoing, in-depth training and research for social service managers to ensure they are equipped to reinforce the competence of critical reflection also at the management level (Timor-Shlevin, 2025).

Note

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ORCID

Luca Pavani http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6918-1717
Elena Allegri http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2775-0675
Mara Sanfelici http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6588-5338

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