Synergies and tensions in child protection and parent support: Insights from the Italian case

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My presentation deals with an issue which, although deemed crucial, has hardly been addressed successfully to date: how to effectively protect children against harm while at the same time building cooperative relations with their parents and working as far as possible in partnership with them. I will discuss the Italian situation, but I will first place the issue in the context of two approaches to tackle child abuse and neglect. In the Western world, researchers have identified two basic models of intervention with family and children. One is centred on child protection; the other focuses on child welfare or family support (Jack, 1997; Waldfogel, 1998; Spratt, 2001; Khoo, Hyvonen, Nygren, 2002; Hearn, Pösö. Smith, White, Korpinen, 2004; Platt, 2006). I will locate Italy within these two frameworks and illustrate the tensions between child protection and child welfare. Finally, I will identify different styles of conceiving professional social work in Italy and show their connections with the two frameworks described.

Child Protection

The first perspective, child protection, has been defined as an approach which gives primary importance to protecting children against abuse. The goal is to prevent damage to children, and to reduce the risks of harm. Social work practice therefore is defined mainly as an investigation, conducted to detect potential harm in family life situations. The focus is on the legalistic side of the issue, and the relation between social workers and parents is often portrayed in adversarial terms. Social workers' main goal is, in fact, to determine whether the child has been abused or neglected, or whether there is a risk of this occurring: Consequently, practitioners are likely to be perceived as enemies by parents. In fact, when a child protection orientation is adopted, the assessment becomes an outright inquiry, which is often proceduralised in order to reduce the probability of human mistakes:

> Judgements about significant harm, or decisions about whether a child is in need, are just that; they rely upon the assumption that objective measures exist against which development and standard of parenting can be evaluated. The categorisations that law demands continue to depend on the seductive certainties of formal knowledge (Hearn, Pösö, Smith, White, Korpinen, 2004 p. 34).

Based on the same thought, actuarial tools are very often used to calculate risks and overcome the problem of professional evaluation, thus assuming that they make more reliable predictions about future harmful behaviour by parents (Krane and Davies, 2000).

The overall aim is to achieve objective certainty of what the child's situation actually is through the correct application of procedures. As said, risk assessment tools predominate in child protection.

> … institutions tend to interpret the standards strictly in terms of Enlightenment thinking, fearing any reliance on tacit or artistic endeavors. The result is that practitioners are constrained from intervening meaningfully in the lives of clients because they can only rely on measurable interventions and what can be measured does not always present the fullness of the picture in reality (Martinez- Brawley and Zorita P.M-B, 2007 p. 7).

This, of course, severely restricts the discretionary power of practitioners. Critics of the child protection orientation also maintain that, after a while, procedures become ends in themselves. But they are not totally harmless, as parents perceive them as intrusive sources of anxiety (Spratt, 2001).

Moreover, risk assessment tools prevent social workers from accessing people's lives, and from understanding specific circumstances as well as the meaning that people attribute to the situation: "With increasing use of risk assessment tools…social workers may thus become more distanced and more adversarial in their relationship with clients" (Krane and Davies, 2000, p. 41).

There is an incompatibility between a partnership relationship and the surveillance role that social workers perform in the child protection model; in this light, one can understand why the relation is easily portrayed as adversarial. As in a circular process, difficult relations with parents encourage practitioners to concentrate on children. Interventions are narrow in their focus, and they do not take account of the parents' needs for support and advice about their roles. A consequence of stressing the surveillance role and narrowing the focus is that interventions are seen as intruding in the private sphere and as limiting families' liberty; hence, social workers tend to intervene only when strictly necessary (Khoo, Hyivonen and Nygren, 2002). Resources are employed for remedial intervention and there is no room for preventive action. It follows almost automatically that the main interventions consist in the removal of children from their families and 'safe' placements, or, in other words, 'substituting interventions'.

The Child Welfare Model

By contrast, child welfare is 'characterised by a tendency to understand acts, or circumstances, thought of as harmful to children, in the context of psychological or social difficulties experienced by families' (Spratt, 2001, p. 934). More than inquiries, therefore, social work interventions are characterised by assessment in order to provide services (Brunnberg and Pećnlk, 2007). What differentiates assessment in the child welfare approach is that it looks for resources and strengths in families, not just for difficulties and problems, as risk assessment tools often do. In fact, whereas child protection policies restrict professional discretionary power, the child welfare orientation emphasises professional autonomy, which, in this frame, is the basis for the personalisation of interventions, with social workers spending more time and energy on clients.

Khoo et al. (2002) have compared social work intervention in child maltreatment in Sweden and Canada, showing that social workers in a child welfare model are more likely to undertake early interventions, would intervene on the basis of an individualised assessment, and would consider the child's best interest in broad terms, including the well-being of the family. Thus, social work is much broader in focus and is concerned with supporting families and preventing problems. Interventions are highly flexible and often involve the use of non-statutory resources, etc.

Prevention is considered an important feature of interventions in regard to child abuse. Whilst in the child protection model prevention means intervening at the first signs of risk, in the child welfare model it means providing services to address the family's needs. But it must be acknowledged that a child welfare orientation goes together with the provision of more resources and services for the families and with

> …a greater willingness of the state to intervene in the private realm of the family— providing supporting measures such as adequate housing, decent day care, medical and dental services for children, and economically viable parental leave from work (Khoo et al., 2002).

All this implies that social workers have a stronger position and higher professional status:

> The professional identity of Swedish social workers is strong. They have comparatively more professional freedom, their status is high, and they do not face the same degree of public mistrust as child protection workers in Canada, whose decisions are frequently challenged (Khoo et al, 2002 p. 467).

Not surprisingly, therefore, research on families who have had dealings with social work shows their clear preference for all the features that characterise a child welfare model (Gray, 2003; Dale, 2004; Leigh and Miller, 2004).

Child Protection Model	Child Welfare Model
Best interests of the child are narrowly focussed on protection	Best interests of the child are broadly defined to include the welfare of the family
Law-led rather than discretion-led	Discretion-based
Assessment based on standardised tools	Assessment based on interaction between family and social workers
Aims at objectivity	Acknowledges different perspectives
Centred on difficulties and problems	Considers difficulties and resources
Treats difficulties as signals of risk	Seeks to understand difficulties in order to find ways to provide support
Restricts professionals' discretionary powers	Enhances professional strength
Less readiness to intervene	More readiness to intervene
Individual rather than community oriented	Community oriented
Remedial rather than preventive	Preventive rather than remedial

Where does Italy stand?

First, let me tell you a bit about the organization of the social services, particularly children services in Italy. The Italian law provides for the care of dependents under the public services provisions. All permanent residents in the country are provided with monetary support at times of need under the social security clause and are eligible to receive services under the social services provisions. Social services are organized by regional and local authorities but funded by the state. Children services are managed by partnerships of local welfare agencies, national health service units and the state department of justice (*Ministerio della Giustizia*). Such partnerships may differ substantially across different regions. What is common, however, is that child protection and child welfare interventions are the responsibility of the same social work unit. Social work units are organised in area teams, consisting mainly of social workers, responsible for a particular area of the city where they are in charge of all social service delivery and cooperate with all the organisations whether voluntary or

not-for-profit. Emergency services and services for children aged 14 to 18 who are involved in criminal activities are usually centralized to emergency teams that cover larger areas.

It's important to set child welfare intervention in Italy in context of looking at current views of childhood. Italian society has a reputation for its inclination to take care of children collectively. While poverty and industrialization may have affected the roots of many families, families are probably less mobile than they are in the U.S, and this results in stronger natural networks in local communities. Therefore, the main problem faced in Italy is connected to children living in poverty. Unfortunately, child abuse is quite as common as in the rest of Europe, but it is rare to hear cases of neglect or abuse to the point of death.

Moving now into the child protection and child welfare models discussed, a first observation is that the Italian welfare model still strongly relies on the family in order to protect the weaker segments of society. An important role in this regard is played by natural networks.

Like many other countries, Italy has seen a significant shift in legislation since the mid-1990s, with emphasis moving from child protection policies to child welfare policies. The law aims at promoting rights and opportunities for children and establishes a special regional fund to finance projects supporting families and the relations between parents and children. In order to access these funds, projects must demonstrate that their purpose is to prevent violence and neglect within families by providing the latter with both financial support and social services.

Although natural families, fostering, and part-time fostering are often mentioned as important resources, until 2000 the law mainly depicted families as clients in traditional terms more than as partners. A change took place in 2000, when a new law introduced an integrated system of social intervention and social services, thus marking a change in the view of the relationship between social services and families. The idea behind this turn stressed the development of subsidiarity, and a welfare mix system. Italy is characterised by the strong presence of a so called 'not for profit' third sector, which has developed particularly through cooperative organisations. The integrated system of interventions and social services acknowledges and supports the family's important role in raising and caring for the person. Families are regarded as partners:

> "The social service system supports co-operation, self and mutual help, associations of families…it values the active role of families in promoting and evaluating social services… Practitioners must recognise the responsibility of persons and families and involve them in the organisation of social services" (Social Services Reform Law 328/2000 [L.328/00]).

The lines along which policy in relation to families is developing can be summarised as follows:

- the family has the right to take care of its members and the state has the duty to promote this right;
- this right must be promoted by taking into account issues of gender equality and multiculturalism;
- the support is intended to enhance the freedom of choice for families and individuals;
- the family is regarded as a resource and partner rather than a client of social services.

As in other parts of the world, while the legislation foresees a system very close to the child welfare model, the reality of social services is somewhat different. A welfare orientation, in fact, implies the development of support resources, so that social workers spend more time with their clients. However, resources are very often insufficient, and social workers are overstretched and their caseloads are such that they are forced to concentrate on the most serious cases. Moreover, the constant focus by the media on scandals and extreme cases has created a defensive attitude in the profession and a tendency to intervene in terms of risk management.

Social Workers' Styles of Thought in Family Services

A still unresolved question, in my view, is whether social workers are attuned to a child welfare approach and have the cultural resources and frameworks with which to perform their task with such an orientation; or whether, on the contrary, their views and frameworks resonate more closely with a child protection orientation.

I shall now take the analysis a step further by looking at practitioners' cultural orientations, and at how social work frameworks can be connected to the two approaches to child and family interventions. I will do so on the basis of research I conducted in the context of social services for families and children in Milan and Turin. The accounts of social work practice gathered by the study illustrated two styles of narrating and constructing the work experience. They differed in how sequences were constructed, in the meanings attributed to crucial aspects such as understanding of the situation, and in the importance attributed to theory. Two conceptions of the relationship of professional social workers with clients, and of their power, emerged. Here, I shall analyse three ways in which the two styles of thinking social work exhibited differences: how the process was presented and organised, how the social workers represented their understanding of users' situations, and the part played by risk and mistakes in the accounts. I believe that these differences are the most significant for reflection on the child protection versus child welfare orientations.

Two ways of thinking social work

Interviewees of the first type tended to describe the work process as a fairly stable sequence. Phases or steps were connected by reasons or logical principles: something must be done before the next step can be taken. The principles used to justify and explain the sequence varied. For instance, some interviewees referred mainly to the organisation of the service, and presented the sequence as strongly determined by service philosophy and rules. Others tended to see this structure as more connected to professional expertise.

One group described their work in terms of rules that had to be followed. Usually, this tendency was accompanied by a reduction of the complexity of the situation, which will emerge more clearly when I discuss the way of understanding the situation. Nonetheless, the case tended to be described as a sort of fixed scenario in which the work process took place:

> When a user comes to me, either voluntarily or through institutional channels such as the children's court (tribunal), I always start with an inquiry, for the tribunal or for myself, in order to understand the case. Then, before starting the intervention, I have to make a contract with the user, by which I mean to define the intermediate goal (the final goal in theory is just in my mind), where do we have to arrive together, what path we have to take, what is up to me to do.... This must always be done.[1]

With this approach or mindset, there is a tendency to predefine the boundaries of the intervention on the basis of considerations independent of the specific interaction and the way it developed. For instance, the workers would comment that they were there for the children and that other problems with parents or relatives, etc., were not in their domain, such as a conception of the role or the idea that social work must be focused on children.

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[1] This transcription has been translated as close to the original spoken words and objectives in Italian as possible.

The narrative style of the second group was completely different. These accounts gave the impression of the 'flow of life' with all its complexity. The phases of the intervention (and of its account) were identified by subsequent happenings, and through subsequent agreements. The goals and boundaries of the intervention were defined through the interactive process. A previous predefined structure was not apparent, at least not as a preliminary feature to be explained in order to make sense of the sequence. In a sense, it could be said that the structure was created simultaneously with the intervention, as a product of the interaction between social worker and client.

> It is very difficult for me to talk …in general terms, in theory so to speak... because while we are talking, a lot of different situations come up to my mind, I could go on talking the whole day…[1]

> Maybe I cannot give myself any rule. Maybe it is my limit, I am too flexible....Then certainly I have my principles, maybe they are nothing special, the respect of the person, to listen without judging and so on…. These are always present. I will stand by these principles until I retire. [1]

The phases of the intervention (and of its account) were identified by subsequent happenings, and through subsequent agreements.

Work was very often described in terms of following and taking part in the natural evolution of the situation, rather than taking control of it. Note that this 'following' was not in any sense the assumption of a passive position. The social workers interviewed described themselves as making many interventions and taking several decisions. But the work was portrayed as creating the conditions for things to happen and develop, rather than as determining what should happen and how things should develop. Even decisions not to act (e.g., not to refer a case to the court, or to postpone a plan) appear to have been the outcomes of hard reflective and emotional work, not of a passive 'wait and see' attitude.

Here it is already possible to connect the social workers' representations of their work to the orientations presented in the first section. The first way of describing the process, with its predefined structure, is closer to proceduralisation. The second one implies a higher degree of discretionary power and it is much more closely tailored to the client's specific life circumstances.

Understanding clients' situations

The approach to understanding differed markedly between the two groups. For the first group, the practitioner's goal was to produce a clear and stable picture of the situation through categorisation of problems and people, or through comparison against a standard. In a sense, the purpose was to grasp the general features of the situations.

Most accounts exhibited, more or less explicitly, a particular approach to the evaluation of the situation. Practitioners in this group described their approach to understanding the client's situation mainly in terms of having a clear picture or having the situation clearly framed. Categorisation was apparently the best means to achieve this outcome. This calls to mind an approach identified by Harrison (1991). In some cases, the situation was categorised by looking for information and clues suggesting what kind of problem or difficulty was present. In other cases, it appears that the client's situation was compared against a standard and evaluated as adequate or inadequate in relation to

this taken-for-granted benchmark (see on this, also, Scourfield and Pithouse, 2006). The situation was defined in terms of appropriateness or inappropriateness in relation to standards, and interventions were directly connected to the divergences identified. One could define them as 'corrections' of the situation.

Besides categorisation, there was a tendency to define situations and problems in objective terms. Problems and difficulties were assumed to be entities 'out there' that had to be discovered and identified. Subjectivity, when considered, was seen as interference or/and as part of the problem. Accordingly, 'hard data', such as concrete events, behaviour, or material life conditions, were highly valued.

These accounts represented clients and practitioners as characterised by asymmetries. Hence, clients were mainly described as having problems and difficulties, and social workers as possessing the expertise necessary to understand the problems and to identify appropriate solutions:

> I am the one who leads the game; I do not think that this is like saying that I overwhelm clients because I listen to them. But I think that when someone addresses a service anyway he asks for this. He recognises a competence.... I can adjust, but I steer the situation. I have the game in my hands.... I think that this is what my agency asks of me, but also the people who come to me. …I make plans, I have goals, I can change, adjust, but it is me. Otherwise I would change tack all the time...[1]

Another social work of this group states:

> I do not think I put myself over people, but there is not equality. I am somebody who has competences; they (the clients) come because they have difficulties. I think it is my duty to help them in a professional way…also with my ability of seeing things. On the other hand, I believe one should never undervalue or look down on these people…[1]

Anyway, what emerges from this kind of understanding is a rather schematic but clear picture of the resources and deficiencies, strong and weak points, of the situation. The picture was stable throughout the accounts and was presented as orienting actions and interventions. In many cases, the social workers explicitly stated that the use of tests would be very helpful in gaining a clear picture of the situation.

In the second style of representing social work, by contrast, attention focused on specific features of the situation; and problems and difficulties were more easily connected to the client's history or life contexts. Situations were seen in dynamic terms, and difficulties were interpreted as being part of evolving processes, not as static features of clients or of their context. The importance given to clients' requests, views and intentions was reflected in the kind of understanding on which the work was based. Definitions of the situation appeared to evolve and develop along with the work.

> Probably at the beginning we have to know each other. I know nothing about them and they know nothing about me or about the service... We explore the request and what the service offers... Well, it depends a lot on what this person says, how s/he sees the situation... We arrive to the definition of a path ... We explore what is feasible…[1]

Social workers were focused on emerging difficulties or requests. Evaluation was dynamic as long as it was based on attempts to explain and understand the reasons rather than on attempts to classify, and it was more likely to develop during the interaction. For instance, in one case a practitioner's first evaluation was based on an attempt to understand the reasons for her difficulties through a

connection between the story the client told her and her present situation. Attention focused on identifying the causes or origins of problems, more than on classifying them. In a sense, a clear picture of the situation never emerged from the stories, but rather fragments of understanding here and there. Understanding was itself presented as developing within the work process, and as new information became available. Descriptions tended to emphasise the use of information that arose spontaneously during the work, rather than from a specific endeavour to collect it. Clients' views and their ways of making sense of their experience were highly valued; in many cases, attempts were made to see the situation from within, through the eyes of the person living through it.

Whilst the previous group regarded detachment as a privileged position, this one did not view involvement as a disadvantage: on the contrary, in many cases the interviewees considered their affective involvement with clients to be a positive factor in understanding and working with them. As the understanding of problems was accumulated from the subjective perceptions of clients, doubts and uncertainties on how to interpret the information, or about what to do, were usually dealt with through discussions with clients. For instance, in a case where a social worker was in doubt that the mother, who had gone through a very tough time and had been in jail, could be in a condition to look after her child in autonomy, the social worker decides that the best thing is to discuss the issue with the mother.

The image of clients emerging from this group was one of people with meaningful views of their experience, views that should be taken into account and discussed. The starting point was not the client's problems, but the client's position. Problems appeared very much to be defined in terms of possible agreements and not as objective entities. However, 'following the client' was never presented as a passive 'laissez-faire' attitude: it entailed an ability to engage with the clients on their own grounds. And this trust in how clients defined their problems required the practitioner to deal with anxiety and fears, and it entailed taking risks. For instance, a practitioner presented her way of working and success as follows:

> Maybe what worked was the fact that I avoided doing more in order to solve the problems quickly... You know, when there are two children in care you are in a difficult situation, anyway; it is not a good thing for them to stay there; you would like to (act quickly)...so maybe you have to accept the anxiety...and to trust what people tell you, to accept not doing more... Yes, maybe to accept that you intervene when people ask you to, and not push…. [1]

Mistakes and risks

I will now focus on differences in conceiving mistakes and risks, given their crucial role in intervention in child protection. I consider mistakes because they have been the subject of endless discussion: on the one hand, social workers have been accused of committing numerous mistakes; yet on the other, such mistakes are apparently inevitable. Authors such as Munro (1996) have maintained that accepting mistakes, being ready to acknowledge them, and being flexible in terms of readily changing view and line of intervention are essential for good practice in child and family social work.

The concept of risk is closely connected with that of mistake, and as we have seen, it has become crucial in social work. When analysing the concept of risk, Stalker (2003) has identified two main positions in social work, which she terms 'risk avoidance' and 'risk taking'. The former equates risk with danger and tends to enact controlling interventions to minimise it. The risk-taking position has a broader view of risk and identifies it with the inevitable uncertainties of life.

The first group described the work process in terms of strategies to avoid or limit mistakes. The intervention was thought out and carefully planned to avoid mistakes, false steps, and all possible disturbances or interferences. Mistakes were seen as arising particularly in assessment, and they were interpreted as signs of superficial evaluation or sloppy work. Most of the social workers interviewed stated that assessment was crucial in this respect. In some cases, they said that making the wrong move, starting with a wrong line, meant running into trouble, and it was very difficult to go back and start again. As a social worker of this group puts it: 'When things go wrong, I find it very difficult to go back and start again.'

The negative attitude toward mistakes combined with a negative attitude toward risk, which was much emphasised while describing practice. Risks were identified in the clients' situations, which left to natural courses might degenerate or cause damage; or they were seen in terms of non-implementation of the appropriate interventions. Risk avoidance was regarded as a crucial part of the work. Of course this view went together with a negative perception of uncertainty in social work: uncertainty had to be reduced as much as possible. As said, risks were viewed as future problems which might derive from some present inadequacy of the family, and all interventions were also presented in terms of reducing risks. One could hypothesize that substitutive intervention tends generally to involve a reduction of risks for the social worker and a reduction of risks in implementation of the plan, and the achievement of certain goals. This position was clearly expressed by a practitioner when commenting on the work of another social service trying domiciliary support in a case in which, in her view, the parent was 'inadequate' in certain respects and a residential care measure was needed:

> I think that to leave this boy at home is a risky choice, it may compromise the outcome of the intervention,… strong support should be offered to the mother, but with these psychological interventions one sees the outcome after a long while, and he (the boy) needs to grow up now. Maybe the mother will learn ... she is clever, but if we have to wait until she is able to look after her child then....it could be too late. [1]

By contrast, the second group of accounts exhibited a much more relaxed attitude toward mistakes, risk and uncertainty. Here, in many cases, the sequence was presented explicitly as a 'trial and error' process. Commenting on a case she has presented, a social worker says:

> It was a sort of 'trial and error' process. I realised that I did not know what this person was asking me. For instance, when expressing her fears about the possibility that the children were taken away from her and all the other things at the same time…was this a way to ask me to do something in this direction? Or was she asking to be reassured that I, as an expert, thought that she could look after her children even in such a difficult situation? I went for the second hypothesis and this maybe has helped her a little bit...[1]

This illustrates how differently this group of practitioners perceived mistakes, which were often considered to be an essential part of the process. Work proceeded through a series of attempts, and it could not be otherwise. As a practitioner puts it: 'At the beginning, one has too little information to make a proper evaluation, so any decision one takes requires daring'. A project that does not work, therefore, is usually just treated as the basis for a new negotiation.

Undertaking risks and tolerating the consequent anxiety seemed to be considered an inevitable price worth paying in order to work in a meaningful way. Risks were more widely seen as connected not just to the clients' situations but also to the interventions: The solutions found might create further problems, and were, in this sense, risky:

> ... even understanding that there was a risk for the children and even feeling the duty to do something about this, well I kept all this to myself for a day.... So I said let's risk... Had I referred the case… I saw the risk that she could jump out of the window, maybe with the kids. By not doing anything of the sort, there was the risk that, for a while, she would wake up at mid-day, get upset with the kids and slap them and so on, but it was still better than the other possibility. [1]

A social worker reflecting over what could have been judged as a risky choice shows clearly what this view is about:

> If anything had happened they would have asked me 'What have you done?' Who would be willing to listen to the reasons for supporting this project?... I often asked myself why I did all this. But what I thought was that this woman would have 'blown up' if she was forced to stay in residential care against her will and without good reasons; the point is that it did not make sense to me to act otherwise. [1]

Working on the basis of an agreement often entailed taking unusual paths, so that practitioners, at times, had to accept not being in control of the situation. Trusting clients was often perceived as a somewhat hazardous move. It was not based on a naïve faith; rather, it was presented as a sort of gamble that practitioners felt worth taking. Working on the basis of agreement was, therefore, associated with an increase of anxiety and concerns, but these were seen as inevitable.

Style of thought close to child protection orientation	Style of thought close to child welfare orientation
The work is organized by a predefined structure	The work develops with interaction between clients and practitioners
The sequence of actions is connected by an external logic	The sequence of actions is described in terms of previous happenings and following ones
The understanding is based on classification of problems	The understanding is presented as dynamic and evolves with the interaction
Problems are perceived as objective entities	Problems are defined through negotiation
Subjective views are perceived as an interference	Subjective views are perceived as relevant
Client/practitioner relation is defined in asymmetrical terms	Client/practitioner relation is described in terms of qualitative differences
Professional practice is connected to strategies to avoid risks and mistakes	Practice is described as a trial and error process which inevitably entails risk-taking

Concluding remarks

My research on social workers' representations of their practice provided access to two different professional worlds, two distinct and relatively coherent ways of conceiving work experience, the roles therein of practitioners and clients, the features of the work process, etc. The analysis has identified as intrinsically valid two ways of thinking which have arisen from professional practice as a collective experience: These are the selfsame styles of thinking that academics have sometimes dismissed as banal common sense, or at other times—more respectfully—regarded as forms of practical wisdom, yet always limiting their assessment to the most superficial aspects.

The first conception probably represents the most legitimate and accepted model of professional practice. My findings illustrate its basic features, in particular its representation of the work process as rational and systematic, as bringing the situation under control, its view of assessment in terms of applying categories and standards, and its portrayal of the relationship between clients and practitioners as asymmetrical. This representation goes very well with the legitimised view of professional practice, and at the same time it is in many respects coherent with a child protection approach. It shares with the latter a negative view of risk and uncertainty, and more profoundly, it considers people's circumstances in terms of deficiencies that must be corrected.

The other style of thought resonates with certain stereotypical representations of practitioners within the academic community. It evokes the image of the anti-intellectual social worker operating on the basis of incoherent, commonsensical assumptions (Howe, 1986; Milana, 1992; etc.) in a basically anarchistic and individualistic way (Ferrario, 1996). This sort of practitioner is an advocate of 'heart' rather than 'head' work (Smith, 1971), whose practice is a-scientific and a-systematic (Sheldon, 1978). However, deeper exploration of this style of thought reveals the strength of representations of practice that make the most of the often contradictory information available to practitioners; that accepts the unpredictable elements in the evolution of a case and the resulting uncertainty, while still acknowledging the practitioners' influence over the process from the outset, also when engaged in identification of the feasible options. It is a style of thought which confronts the uncertain and dynamic nature of human life and reflects on the dynamic character of social work knowledge. As Martinez-Brawley puts it:

> Social work knowledge is an unfolding essay. Social work knowing almost always implies interpretation. Inclusionary searching and re-searching requires even more interpretation, and place the finding of the work often in tentative, incomplete mode (Martinez-Brawley, 283).

At the end, what emerges here is a strong connection between child protection and child welfare orientations on one side, and the two styles of thinking social work identified on the other. The first style appears to have many traits in common with a child protection orientation, for instance its stress on assessment as a key feature, its rule oriented attitude, and its adversity toward taking risks. On the contrary, the second style, with its broader views of the complexities of family lives, its flexibility, its positive attitude toward partnership and risk taking, looks very much the one needed for a child welfare approach.

In Italy now, while social policy goes toward a child welfare orientation, nonetheless the flexible approach to social work is far from being accepted as fully legitimate. There is a need to develop it so that it can become explicit, accountable, and teachable.

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