Role conflicts and management strategies in social workers working for refugees

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Abstract

The article presents a qualitative study of the relational dimension of the social work practice with asylum seekers and refugees. The aim of the research is to explore how a group of social workers working with asylum seekers and refugees represent their relationship with users and how they construct this relational work. In Italy, the social workers' practice is performed by workers with different educational backgrounds, as it is not a juridically recognised job with its theoretical and operative background. In this study, 20 social workers working with asylum seekers and refugees employed in the asylum accommodation centres of the Extraordinary Reception Centres system and the Protection System for Asylum Seekers and Refugees in Northern Italy participated in semi-structured interviews. From the results of the thematic analysis of the interviews, which applied a bottom-up coding strategy, it emerged that social workers describe their relationship with users as a means of intervention (goal-oriented relationship) but also as a source of information (needs-centred relationship), a negotiation process and a source of emotional strain (emotionally demanding relationship). Furthermore, the construction of relational work requires social workers to take into account normative obligations and organisational lines (contextual frame) to refer to their role but also, at the same time, to their biographical background and personal resources

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to develop strategies. Therefore, social workers working with asylum seekers and refugees need to find a mediation between a personal approach to the relationship and a professional one (person-role balance).

Keywords: social workers, asylum seekers and refugees, relationship-based practice, emotion, professional role

Introduction

One of the social challenges that characterises the new millennium is the management of migratory flows and asylum seekers at both the national and international levels (Geiger & Pécoud, 2010). For instance, in Europe, the increasing migration from African and Asian continents has prompted states to organise port reception policies and facilities aimed at promoting practices and instruments of integration (Castles, 2004). Furthermore, the significant numbers that have characterised recent migration flows have often led to "emergency" claims, resulting in the implementation of several measures based on concrete necessities. Italy undeniably stends out among the international stakeholders that have played and continue to play a prominent role in these mechanisms (UNHCR, 2015). Due to its unique geographical position in the Mediterranean, Italy is one of the primary gateways for European reception.

In contrast, however, to other European countries and nations (like United States and Australia), Italy entrusted the local implementation of interventions to individuals known as social workers for refugees (SWRs) – who did not have a professional institutionalisation. Therefore, while the international literature refers to social workers as professionals working with migrants (Al-Makhamreh, Spaneas & Neocleous, 2012), in the Italian context this activity does not adhere to the same ethical, deontological, and training frame, but rather to a unique, specific, and local one. Consequently, SWRs in Italy do not share the same educational background and lack training for specific objectives. They must rely to their role, or to the line established by the organisational task, to orient their daily practice with asylum seekers and refugees (ARs).

For the reasons mentioned above, namely the particular geographical location of Italy and the specificities of its asylum accommodation system for refugees, we conducted the following study.

Being a Helper: How?

Over the past two decades, the management of migratory flows and refugees has emerged as a significant agenda in the field of social work, both at national and international level (Lacroix, 2006; Strier & Binyamin, 2010). Consequently, the role of the social workers in providing services to refugees has gained increasing importance, requiring them to critical reevaluate their methods and models of practice (Humphries, 2004). In particular, social workers involved in asylum accommodation bear the ethical responsibility to continuously examine their practice, ensuring it is consistently directed towards the promotion of resources and the inclusion of users (Sakamoto, 2007). Recognizing the potential risk of losing focus on the user and the humanitarian approach within the context of migration policies, it becomes necessary to refer to international codes that clearly define the mission of the profession (Briskman & Chemlyn, 2005).

One of the key aspects of social work with migrants revolves around the implementation of social and civil inclusion practices tailored to their specific needs (Nash, Wong, & Trlin, 2006). However, addressing the demands and needs of asylum seekers from a social, legal, and psychological point of view poses significant emotional challenges in conducted with them (Fiske & Kenny, 2004). For example, the importance of supervision for social care workers providing services in Non-Governmental Organizations has been extensively demonstrated (Robinson, 2013). Social workers employed in the field of asylum accommodation are currently facing the dual challenge of maintaining their daily work routine while also developing innovative management policies in response to evolving circumstances (Rine, 2018). Recently, comparative studies have emerged, aiming to compare the outlooks of operators working in state and non-state bodies (e.g., Carey, 2014; Robinson & Masocha, 2017).

Only a few studies have directly investigated, from a relational perspective, the experiences of social workers working with refugees (Guhan & Liebling-Kalifani, 2011). Some research has focused on exploring the complexities and work demands faced by social workers in the dynamic landscape of hospitality (Robinson, 2013). Furthermore, there have been investigations into how these professionals perceive ARs as “others” (Masocha, 2014, 2015), taking into account the contextual factors that inevitably influence their practice (Masocha & Simpson, 2011). A recent study, specifically, delved into the role of social workers working with ARs, since these represent a fundamental junction in the system of asylum accommodation and the promotion of the integration

of ARs (Tartakovsky & Walsh, 2016). It is also necessary to consider that this work seems to require, sometimes even openly, a divergence from the policies established within the intervention system leading to the development of "counter-practices" (Strier & Binyamin, 2010) and the exercise, in the work with the migrants, of cultural competences (Harrison & Turner, 2010).

Relationship-Based Practice

The present research utilizes contemporary understandings of relationship-based practice to examine the relational dimension of the practice of SWRs. The relationship-based practice is defined by Hollis (1977) as an attempt to activate personal and environmental resources in order to improve the effectiveness of personal and interpersonal functioning and the opportunities available to one person. This approach to social work practice is grounded in psychosocial approaches to practice (Howe, 1998; Ruch, 2005; Trevithick, 2003) as well as psychodynamic and systemic theoretical perspectives (Hingley-Jones & Ruch, 2016).

Within a relationship-based approach to social work practice, the practitioner–user relationship serves as the primary mode of intervention and a vital source of information for social workers to understand users' needs and provide effective assistance (Ruch, 2005). As argued by Trevithick (2003), it is crucial to avoid viewing the construction of a good relationship as an end in itself (relationship-building) – in an untenable philosophical and theoretical alignment with the person-centred approach developed by Rogers (1951, 1958), epistemologically inconsistent with the social work practice (Murphy, Duggan & Joseph, 2013) – and start framing it as a medium through which to build future work with users. Furthermore, the reciprocity within the relationship allows practitioners to enhance their knowledge and expertise with each interaction (Trevithick, 2003).

Developing a contemporary model of social work practice requires acknowledging the prevailing trends towards managerialism and techno-rational approaches to practice (Cornish, 2016; Howe, 1994; Parton, 1994; Ruch, 2005; Wilson et al., 2011). These trends often stem from neoliberal political ideologies (Smith & White, 1997) or as defensive response to emotional overload within professional practices, leading organization to increase control systems (Ruch, 2005). The pervasive language of risk fosters a diffused climate of fear, distrust, suspicion and unsafety (Horlick-Jones, 2005; McLaughlin, 2007), challenging social work to reposition itself in relation to risk perception and questioning the

foundation of the practice on relationship and its agency in the promotion of progressive policies (Murphy, Duggan & Joseph, 2013). Many authors highlight contradictions between the bureaucratisation of practice and the core principles of social work, which center on relationships and social justice (Ashworth, 2009; Cornish, 2016; Harlow, 2013; McDonald, Postle & Dawson, 2008; Trevithick, 2014). Cornish (2016) identifies "two cultures" (Snow, 1993) in contemporary social work: a techno-rational and highly regulated model of practice and a more creative and relationship-based approach. A practice solely focused on technique, without grasping the needs of users, can contribute to or intensify the sense of distrust, anxiety and uncertainty (Trevithick, 2003).

Relationship-based practice and reflective practice can offer alternatives to the limitations of the contemporary models of social work practice (Howe, 1998; Schofield, 1998; Trevithick, 2003). Reid (1978) identifies eight "unsatisfied wants" that social workers commonly encounter in their daily practice, such as «interpersonal conflicts; dissatisfaction in social relationships; problems with formal organizations; difficulties in role performance; problems of social transition; reactive emotional distress; inadequate resources; psychological role and behavioural problems not identified elsewhere» (cited in Trevithick, 2003, p. 167). Since many critical issues arise within the relationship, a relationship-based practice could be a holder within which the problems of users can be comprehended and a secure base for their management.

Most of the studies that have adopted the relationship-based perspective to reflect on social work practice have focused on precise fields, such as work with children and families (Brown, Winter & Carr, 2018; Ferguson & Gates, 2015; Mason, 2012; Reimer, 2013; Williams, Reed, Rees & Segrott, 2018). Fewer studies have focused on social work with migrants and ARs from this perspective. In the present research, the adoption of this frame allows the investigation of the SWR practice, highlighting the relational dimension of the work. Since the objective of this research is to explore how a group of SWRs, working in the field of asylum accommodation in Northern Italy, construct and represent the relationship with the ARs in relation to their working practice, it will be appropriate to provide brief information on the Italian asylum accommodation system and the context of their professional activities.

The Italian Asylum Accommodation System and Social Workers for Refugees

The current asylum accommodation system has been entrusted to asylum accommodation centres, which are divided into four main types according to the institutional functions they perform. These include hotspots, used as an initial, temporary accomodation, identification and subsequent relocation of migrants to asylum accommodation facilities or administrative detention centres. The first asylum accommodation centres, called regional hubs, are responsible for formalising the applications for international protection and for the transfer of migrants to long-term shelters. The latter are distinguished in Extraordinary Reception Centres (CASs) and centres of the Protection System for Asylum Seekers and Refugees (SPRAR). The SPRAR is a public system of diffused and connected second asylum accommodation centres that follow an integrated and emancipating logic of reception, providing for the user the development of paths aimed at encouraging the reconquest of autonomy and taking charge according to a holistic approach that enhances individual resources, while at the same time providing basic material assistance (SPRAR, 2018).

The SPRAR is a public system comprising dispersed and interconnected second asylum accommodation centers that follow an integrated and empowering reception approach. The focus is on facilitating the users' autonomy and self-reliance through individualized paths, while also providing basic material assistance (SPRAR, 2018). To address the heterogeneity of educational backgrounds and the lack of defined professionalization among Social Workers for Refugees (SWRs), the SPRAR offers guidance on suitable training profiles for the role and guidelines for user support processes (SPRAR, 2018). On the other hand, CASs were established in 2014 as a response to the increased arrival of migrants by sea and the limited capacity of existing ordinary centers. CASs operate under a ministerial mandate and serve as substitutes for regional hubs or SPRAR centers. Unlike the SPRAR, the CAS system is based on an emergency logic and exhibits internal fragmentation in terms of service provision and user support. There are no common operational guidelines, and the bodies responsible for managing the accommodation centers are mandated to provide minimum standards of material, legal, and health assistance. Despite being temporary and extraordinary, the CAS system is the largest and most widespread asylum accommodation system in Italy, accommodating the highest number of asylum seekers and refugees.

In both types of long-term asylum accommodation centres, the selection criteria, professional composition of teams, and division of roles are independently managed by the managing bodies and local authorities (SPRAR, 2018). Given the high number of employees in the field (Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro [CGIL] & Fondazione Giuseppe Di Vittorio [FDV], 2018) and due to the absence of specific training courses for the profession, the sharing of guidelines and best practices by various governmental and non-governmental bodies is distributed at the national level. Distinctive characteristics of the current position of the SWRs are as follows: the poor definition of the contractual requirements and qualifications; the lack of uniformity at the training and management level between the different managing bodies in which they work; and the poor recognition of the training and professional experiences and innovations brought by workers in the various operating contexts. Other characteristics include tensions between mandate and established practices, on the one hand, and responsibility towards users on the other (CGIL & FDV, 2018); the inadequacy of available resources and tools; bureaucratic-organisational obstacles and management (Ministero della Salute, 2017); a perennial situation of urgency; and a lack of time and adequate space to offer services (CGIL & FDV, 2018; Tarricone et al., 2013). At the same time, many SWRs are highly involved and committed to their role, even at an emotional level, and are pushed into accessing and exercising their role based on solidarity and humanitarian motivations (CGIL & FDV, 2018).

The Italian government passed a new law on immigration and security (L. 1 December 2018, n. 132) that makes significant changes to, inter alia, the asylum accommodation system. Among them is the restriction of the access criteria to the SPRAR and, then, the further enlargement of the CAS system, under which the CASs will host all adult asylum seekers for the entire duration of the asylum procedure. This could have some negative effects, such as the overcrowding of centres, that could exacerbate the abovementioned difficulties faced by SWRs – for instance, in the construction of a relationship-based practice – and could require the SWRs to redefine themselves as primary care providers.

Thus, it is considered important to explore in greater detail the SWR-AR relationship, as the complexity of this particular kind of supporting relationship remains under-researched. Therefore, the presented study will have the precise aim of exploring the relational dimension that social workers must construct in their everyday work in the field of asylum accommodation and their representation of their relationship with users.

Method

Participants

The research involved 20 SWRs working within the institutional asylum accommodation system, both in CAS and SPRAR contexts, in Northern Italy. They came from nine different bodies responsible for management at the local level. The interviews included nine male and 11 female participants, with a mean age of 31 years and ranging from 24 to 43 years. Specifically, the group of participants was composed of 17 Italian individuals, one Lebanese, one Syrian and one Cameroonian. Thus, a non-probability sampling with voluntary adhesion was used (Howitt, 2016).

The participation of SWRs was obtained through an invitation extended to all the operators working inside the aforementioned centres. Out of the total of 72 operators working in the centres, 20 agreed to be part of the research. Interestingly, as shown in Table 1, there was a pronounced heterogeneity in personal curricula and experience in the field in terms of years of work. As highlighted above, there is no defined link between one's educational training and what is required formally by the role of SWR (see Table 1).

Material and Procedures

The research first adopted, in order to enter the field, an ethnographic approach (Brewer, 2000) and an ethnography of everyday practices (Zucchermaglio, 2013) inside two of the nine institutions cited above. The ethnography was conducted by two of the present researchers, who carried out participant observation over a period of three months. The procedure consisted of three phases:

- Organizational ethnography (Rosen, 1991), in which the observer enters the context with the aim of collecting data regarding its functions, structures and practices. Furthermore, a first step in defining the unit of analysis takes place;
- Unstructured observation of everyday routines and collecting recurrent discursive events;
- Identification of the relational dimension of everyday work activity as the unit of analysis.

Furthermore, semi-structured interviews have been constructed in order to deepen a more detailed description of the centrality of the relationship. Participants have been encouraged to speak about the relational aspects involved in their daily activities and work.

Since the research focuses specifically on the relational dimension of SWRs' practice, outlining how it is represented and constructed, it has been decided not to use a theory-driven approach to both the interviews and data analysis, as shown below.

Tab. 1 – *Participants sociodemographic data*

Participant	Age	Education	Months of work in the field	Gender
P1	33	M.D. in Didactics of Italian	<1	M
P2	36	M.D. in Communication Sciences	63	M
P3	31	M.D. in Sociology	24	F
P4	33	M.D. in Political Sciences	29	F
P5	27	M.D. in Psychology	3	M
P6	31	M.D. in Political Sciences	29	F
P7	38	High School Diploma	5	F
P8	33	M.D. in Psychology	61	F
P9	27	B.D. in Educational Sciences	<1	M
P10	30	M.D. in Political Sciences	18	M
P11	30	M.D. in Criminology	6	F
P12	32	M.D. in Psychology	18	F
P13	31	B.D. in Social Work	25	M
P14	31	M.D. in Psychology	13	M
P15	27	M.D. in Political Sciences	21	F
P16	27	B.D. in Psychology	7	F
P17	23	B.D. in Psychology	2	M
P18	41	M.D. in Geology	11	F
P19	26	M.D. in Language & Literature	6	F
P20	31	M.D. in Social Work	13	M

Data Analysis

The interviews were transcribed and analysed through the software ATLAS.ti (version 7). Data analysis has been conducted consistently with the analytical qualitative methodology of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke), composed by five analytical phases:

1. Immersion and familiarisation with the data: Interviews were read several times during the transcription and data coding phases.

2. Coding: Using the software ATLAS.ti, the coding was conducted following "narrative themes", identified as conceptual cores, concluded in themselves, that may develop in several paragraphs or be defined by a single word that, being full of meaning, represents a significant result in itself.

3. Themes research: The potential themes were formulated, regrouping codes with homogeneous content. In order to achieve this division, thematic areas upon which the interview track was based were mainly considered. Other code combinations were also determined. Hence, the constructed set of codes formed broader categories (code families).

4. Themes revision: The potential themes and sub-themes, after their internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity were evaluated, were reformulated and modified so that the content and definitions of every theme were appropriate and clear.

5. Theoretical organization. Themes and codes were set in relation to each other in order to create conceptual networks that could describe the theoretical contents emerging from the data in a coherent narration (See Figure 1).

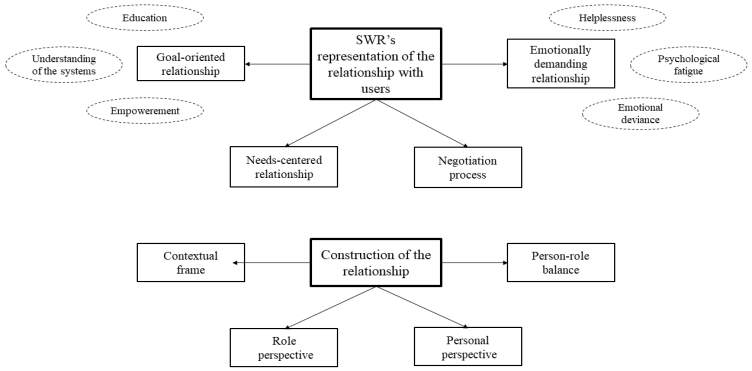

Figure 1 – *Results from the thematic analysis*

Results

SWRs' Representations of the Relationship with Users

In the thematic area of "SWRs' representations of the relationship with users", we have grouped all the quotations that identify the different ways participants represent the relationship with the users in relation to their work practice. Four different themes characterise the thematic area: goal-oriented relationship, needs-centred relationship, negotiation process and emotionally demanding relationship.

Goal-oriented relationship. This theme encompasses all the quotations referring to SWRs' representation of the relationship as a means of intervention, which is a medium through which to reach the predefined goals of the asylum accommodation facility, being decided by the single SWR – by virtue of his or her operational autonomy – or by the entire team. Specifically, these goals are represented by three codes constituting the theme: education, understanding of the system and empowerment.

The code "education" refers to all attempts through which SWRs try to be educational and use the time they spend with a user as an opportunity to pursue educational goals, such as:

> Sometimes I even get to do some civic education in the sense that I carve out some work time for that purpose. Maybe you are on an accompaniment and you have some time: you explain to them a little bit about how things work, sometimes you make them understand "look, in Italy when you talk to a doctor or a person which is older than you and that you do not know, you should be polite and say good morning" and stuff like that. I explain to them that they should not spit on the ground because it is not polite. (Participant 12)

The code "understanding of the system" refers to all the quotes in which the relationship becomes a channel through which to broadcast information about the asylum accommodation system and Italian society. As, for example:

> I am certain that in this kind of work when you are working with people who have lived a traumatic experience, from my perspective and from the way I interpret the work, it is important for them to have, in the country that welcomes them, a human reference rather than a formal, bureaucratic person. That is, a person who humanly tries to be close to them and to convey the messages that the new society tries to send you. (…) I personally get involved on a human level and I still try to get away from the level of explaining what the legislation says and try to get into it

> a little bit “man to man” in explaining to them a little bit the context also in general and then also a whole series of forcing that you have to do on yourself to keep up, let us say, with the current situation. (...) Taking charge from the human point of view in the human relationship is the basis, is the general framework, which then serves as a vehicle, as a channel to ferry a whole series of notions, of knowledge, of news that are bureaucratic and formal. In my opinion, however, without that basis there, of human relationship, it all becomes much more difficult for both the operator and the beneficiary. (Participant 4)

Finally, the code “empowerment” refers to the relationship as a medium through which SWRs envisage empowering and promoting autonomy and responsibility-taking. As quoted below:

> For those who stay in Padua, who stay in our projects, this is the destination of their migration journey, so we work together with them on enriching this destination and giving them the resources to integrate themselves in the territory, to build a network, to be adequate to the demand of the world they are in and with respect to the things they will be called to do. There is a particular push on making their stay here not a request for assistance pure and simple. Rather, we try to give them pushes to get busy, what we always repeat to them is that reception projects are not eternal and that sooner or later they end and sooner or later they will have to pay their bills and they will have to somehow manage on their own, with the resources they have acquired in the meantime. (...) You try to make them independent, you do it more or less every time you accompany them to use a service. So if I imagine myself in my typical day accompanying a young person to the hospital or to carry out a visit of some kind, I spend time explaining to them what we are doing, how it works, what the numbered card I take is for, what kind of queue I am standing in, why I am going to admission first and then standing in another queue to wait for the outpatient clinic and so on. (Participant 16)

Needs-centred relationship. This theme refers to the SWRs’ representation of the relationship as a source of information for understanding users’ needs, expectations, skills and competencies. A needs-centred relationship allows SWRs to personalise the interventions to the specificity of a single user, to understand how to best help them and to co-design with them a path of empowerment. For example:

> I spend the vast majority of time in doing individual interviews because alone I can not come up with ideas. However, I see that in the individual interview, ideas come up and mostly they are ideas that are more or less shared. I think to the extent that you can share a path then the path goes well. When I have my own idea and I try to impose it, it does not work, so most of the time I have interviews that are then ultimately about understanding the situation. That is, "You are here and we have to get here. How do we get there?" (Participant 13)

Negotiation process. In this theme, the researchers group all the quotes in which SWRs represent the relationship as an ongoing process of dialogue that allows SWRs and users to negotiate meanings and share rules. Through relational work, SWRs attempt to construct a relationship of trust within which the dialogue can substitute for the use of punitive measures in sanctionable situations, such as violations of regulations or conflicts and acts of violence. A relationship of dialogue is made possible by the disposition of SWRs to exchange views with users, instead of merely applying the rules and complying with the disciplinary and control functions required by the role. This is demonstrated in the quote below:

> The easiest task they gave me was at the beginning of the job experience, and it was relational, in the sense that I was comfortable in the community. I always created good relationships with the kids. This turned out to be easy afterwards even in having to impose something: that is, having trust afterwards helped me in the applications of rules that maybe could be more complex and without ever going into conflict, that is, forced. (...) When the boy sees an operator who is not just the operator telling him "do the cleaning, do the dishes, tomorrow you have to go to the police station" but there is a relationship of dialogue and trust and so we talk to each other sincerely, it also comes easier afterwards to create a community a little more serene. This job should have a different preparation, but it practically does not have it. (Participant 19)

Emotional demandingly relationship. Working with ARs is emotionally demanding, a challenge for one's role and resources. Constructing and being in a relationship means to be involved and to let things touch you. This theme refers to the SWRs' representation of the relationship as a source of emotional strain and encompasses the reported feelings and emotional difficulties experienced by the participants within the relationship. The theme is composed of three codes: helplessness, psychological fatigue and emotional deviance.

The code “helplessness” refers to negative feelings experienced by practitioners within the relationship with users and created by their incapability to be helpful and respond to users’ needs. Among these feelings, they report guilt and frustration, inadequacy, a sense of ineffectiveness and impotence. The sense of helplessness emerges as the SWRs’ affective reaction to organisational deficiencies, such as the insufficiency of training and unclear procedures, but also as the feeling of not living up to their own expectations. As, for example, in the following quotation:

> I happen to say to myself “but what training do you have to do these things here?” I tell myself that I try anyway (...) just of the relational skills: I do not know if the very relational interventions I do sometimes... I feel inadequate because just maybe yesterday I accompanied a boy to have a specialist visit and he started crying at the end of the visit, but it was not related to the pain he felt, I see him a little bit – let us say – different from the usual for a couple of days. These kinds of episodes happen a lot, maybe you see reactions, a way of behaving, a way of relating to you or to other guests that changes even in a perhaps sometimes sudden way in the guests and while I am there and I am doing what I feel I am constantly wondering if it is the right way to deal with that moment there “ah but maybe if I had said some different words he would have opened up?”. (Participant 3)

The code “psychological fatigue” refers to the experiences of SWRs of mental and emotional fatigue, such as overthinking, frustration, emotional overload and exhaustion, deriving from their emotional involvement in users’ troubles and the difficulty of placing boundaries between work and personal life. For instance, as stated below:

> Well, among the negative aspects [of this job] there is maybe the load of thought, in the sense that it is a job that you never disconnect from in some way, in the sense that your home is there, it is kind of your home, that actually one thing you have to do though afterwards is to be lucid, disconnect, you also have to impose it on yourself, however with your head often and often, however you are dealing with people, people sometimes can give you problems, they can be health or bureaucratic deadlines, it is obvious that it is a job where it is not that you punch the clock and you are home and you do not have any more thoughts. You are in constant contact with your colleagues, with the guys, so maybe that is the most negative aspect from a personal point of view. (Participant 19)

The code “emotional deviance” expresses the discrepancy between, on the one hand, the emotional involvement of the practitioners in the relationship with users, which is characterised by befriending closeness, and on the other hand the perceived rules of the working context that normalise an emotional detachment, promoting the assumption of professional distance. In some cases, given the ambiguity of the emotional norms of the context, participants report doubts about the pertinence of their feelings. Emotional deviance can be the source of a moral distress that needs to be managed. As stated below:

> It has happened to me maybe you feel guilty if you do not listen to him like you would listen to a friend, devoting maybe the same amount of time and in whatever space however it is just the delicate balance if precisely between finding the right way between coldness that does not serve anyone and too much closeness I do not know how to say. (Participant 3)
>
> I find it tiring, frustrating, too impeding (...) in the long run I guess I do not stay in this program forever, also because anyway, besides the fact of the rules that I do not agree with, I tend to become friends with people and this thing is not compatible. (Participant 18)
>
> It is obvious that the attitude has to be as polished as possible, but of course then feelings also come into play, I mean, the fact that you are attached to a person, even if you have to be as neutral as possible, at least in facade, however that anxiety is also triggered. (Participant 19)

Construction of the Relationship

In this thematic area, “construction of the relationship”, the researchers have highlighted all the dimensions implied in the construction of the relationship, among which normative, organisational, role-related and personal issues prove to be relevant for SWRs. Furthermore, participants report some strategies that they identify as their background in building a relationship. This thematic area is composed of four themes: contextual frame, role perspective, personal perspective and person–role balance.

Contextual frame. This theme refers to the participants’ description of the organisational context and normative obligations as framing their practice and relationship with users. For example, as follows:

> If we have to try to make them understand that the regulations that come from the top change from week to week, it is a disaster for them, they are just not used to it, so I mean then this thing affects the trust that they have in us both as people and as a

> cooperative, because they say “wait, until yesterday we were doing this, how come from today we are changing?” It means I can not trust you anymore, that you told me A and now it has become B but no matter how much you explain to them that A has become B not because of us, in quotes, but because it was imposed on us, I do not know, it creaks a little bit the trust with them, and then the whole relationship is affected obviously, the whole path they take with us. (Participant 15)

Furthermore, some participants have the perception that the relational work is not being promoted and recognised by the organisation, with so the construction of the relationship with users depends on the personal commitment of the single, individual SWR. For example:

> In my opinion our contract absolutely does not cover all these parts, but then of course in the day-to-day work you still have people in front of you. If there is that human intake that we were talking about before it becomes difficult to work with the limitation of the contract, I mean, so anyway the work gets done and what there is to do in short. (Participant 4)

Role perspective. This theme groups all the quotations in which participants represent the relationship with users as a working relationship, the construction of which implies a boundaries definition. The SWRs refer to role boundaries and professional approaches in terms of the interposition of distance and the employment of neutrality. As, for example:

> I am the operator, and he is the beneficiary. However, I always make it clear to the kids that there is a distance that they have to respect because anyway, if you do not set a limit maybe at some point you feel, you get carried away by feelings and so you have to set the limits a little bit right away. (...) I speak for myself, in the sense that being a foreigner and working with foreigners I feel a little bit like them and so, you know, I have to work on myself first, but a lot, otherwise I easily get carried away by their stories, their difficulties. (Participant 10)

Personal perspective. This theme refers to the use of personal interpretations, biographies and professional knowledge that SWRs acquired during their academic studies and in different working contexts as a reference for building the relationship. In fact, in their opinion, the construction of the relationship requires the employment of personal resources and the development of a personal approach. For example:

> I realize that I use my skills as a community psychologist and I see how my background, both at the university level and all the professional skills acquired over time also in social mediation, I

> make use of all of them. So it is true that you find yourself doing some really low-key things that can be an apartment set-up, being many hours in the emergency room and then you are there simply to accompany the person and to help them with the language. The approach that I may have toward the beneficiary anyway I put them all out there. (Participant 12)

Person-role balance. This theme highlights the efforts of SWRs to balance their befriending attitude with a professional approach in their relationships with users. Some of the participants emphasize the need of this balancing process for constructing a healthy relationship for users:

> In my opinion it is good that we still field ourselves in the sense that otherwise it would be a different job, it would not be working with people. But I also think that if we only refer to our personal feelings, this in some way would then make it difficult to build the project with the beneficiary because anyway we are not friends with the beneficiary even if sometimes, we are, right? It happens that you do a path of one year or two years and so you also feel him close as a person and then confusing it with a personal relationship. In my opinion, this is a mistake mainly for the beneficiary because in any case the role is there and, in my opinion, it is right that it is there without locking us in. I do not know how to explain without putting barriers, but it is important that it remains in my opinion clear for a question also of transparency and clarity towards the beneficiary. Because then we, however, operators work in a system whereby you may be against some things as a person, but you move within a system of precise rules that you have to respect as an operator. (Participant 6)

In other cases, participants report their difficulty in finding a mediation between a working relationship and a befriending one. As stated below:

> Certainly, I feel that my role interferes, I feel the fact that it is becoming, you know, that it is a profession, it is delineated as a profession, it is sold to you as such, so you have a certain limit, you have a certain time for which you are being paid and so the whole relationship is affected by that. So even when I get to talk to some of them and ask where they come from, I feel a difficulty (...) I do not know maybe it is the time that you have, that you are also doing it because you are paid but I fear that after a while, because of the fact that it is a job, you forget that it is also a human relationship that you have. This is something that terrifies me, terrifies me to think about it. The thing that I

> feel, they probably feel it too. I mean they, in my opinion, see me as an operator; i.e., as essentially a person they can trust but up to a certain point paradoxically, despite the fact that I should guarantee them a certain service, they trust me less because there is the role that protects me, right? That is, I almost never respond to them as myself anyway, I almost always respond as an operator of the cooperative, so if I fail in something or do not immediately meet a need, a want, a request that comes from them, they know very well that I can play the card of "I did not know, someone else knew" and then immediately hide myself in that mass that is the whole cooperative, this agglomeration that people can fall back into so that they do not resent the responsibility that they have individually. So, I think they also see me that way. With time, in any case, I am quite aware of the fact that in truth I am somewhat unobservant of my role, that is, I willingly step out of my role. (Participant 17)

Discussion

The present research explored the relational dimension of SWRs' work and, specifically, how it is constructed and represented by them. The results revealed that SWRs described the relationship with users as goal-oriented, needs-centred, involving a constant negotiation and emotionally demanding (Hochshild, 1979; Lewig & Dollard, 2003). Additionally, the study identified different dimensions that influence the strategies employed in building the relationship: the normative and organisational context frame the relational work; the role orients the boundaries definition of the relationship; personal resources and biographical background guide the individual strategies of construction of the relationship; and, finally, a balance between the last two dimensions is needed in order to construct and maintain a good relationship with users.

Although several studies have highlighted the critical issues for a worker who works with AR (Al-Makhamreh et al., 2012; Briskman & Chemlyn, 2005; Carr, 2014; Healy, 2017; Masocha & Simpson, 2011; Masocha, 2015; Ørvig, 2011; Robinson, 2013; Shaw, 2014), few research have focused on the particularities of the Italian context (Tarricone et al., 2013).

The study contributes to the understanding of a work practice that has received limited research attention. Notably, the emotional strain experienced by SWRs revealed organizational shortcomings concerning

asylum seekers as well as the emotional closeness between SWRs and users. Moreover, the study highlighted the moral conflict arising from the disparity between SWRs' emotions and perceived contextual rules.

The relational work emerges as the result of the personal commitment of the SWRs to orientate a work activity – one that lacks an institutional definition and is based on logics of control and discipline – towards a relationship-based practice. In fact, it is noted that, in addition to the institutional and organisational aims, the operator also introduces personal objectives, strategies and approaches.

The emphasis on the relational dimension, a key novelty of this study, aligns with existing literature and underscores the relationship between SWRs and ARs as a crucial turning point for addressing and processing challenges (Trevithick, 2003). Previous studies have already highlighted the high levels of stress and emotional labour involved in working with ARs for SWRs (Al-Makhamreh et al., 2012; Ørvig, 2011; Robinson, 2013; Shaw, 2014; Tarricone et al., 2013). It has also been noted that the work with ARs requires a delicate balance between providing assistance and exercising control (Briskman & Chemlyn, 2005; Carr, 2014), making it challenging for SWRs to navigate ethical dilemmas and choose appropriate interventions (Evans & Smith, 2018; Healy, 2017). SWRs encounter various challenges at political, organizational, institutional, and educational levels, which subsequently influence their work with users. Balancing the duty to protect and support clients with legal requirements, maintaining professional boundaries, and addressing cultural, religious, and gender-specific considerations are ethical challenges that social workers may face. Therefore, the relational dimension acts as both a "confluence" where these challenges converge and as a process that facilitates autonomy and innovation. In conclusion, while the results align with existing literature, critical insights invite us to go beyond the emphasis on the relational dimension and explore the broader systemic factors that shape the work of SWRs. By critically examining power dynamics, systemic barriers, and the limitations of relying solely on relationships, we can gain a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges and possibilities for transforming the field of SWRs' work (Käkelä, 2019). In addition, the literature highlights the importance of collaboration and interdisciplinary approaches in working with asylum refugees. Social workers often work alongside professionals from various sectors, including healthcare, education, and legal services, to provide holistic support to refugees. Collaborative partnerships can enhance service coordination, address complex needs, and promote comprehensive interventions (Morley, Le & Briskman, 2019).

Moreover, the psychological fatigue is coherent with the results that literature has gained burnout (Ambrose, Rutherford, Shepherd & Tashchian, 2014), stress (Ørvig, 2011; Robinson, 2013 Shaw, 2014; Tarricone et al., 2013) and emotional demands (Al-Makhamreh et al., 2012). Turnover working trajectories, therefore, can benefit from the contributions of psychological fatigue construct to better describe workers' career paths (Antòn, 2009). Thus, our findings stress the need to build self-caring and mutual supporting working infrastructures within the organizational environment. The need for supervision and debriefing sessions could be useful to address the emotional toll and build resilience among SWRs (Wirth et al., 2019).

In conclusion, the research carried out a detailed analysis of the relational dimension in the work with ARs, the centrality of the achievement by SWRs of institutional and personal goals. In the report, moreover, both the critical aspects and the possibilities converge and react, revealing a space in which it is further necessary to work for the education of the operators and for their supervision (e.g., Abrams & Shapiro, 2014; Marlowe & Adamson, 2011).

Limitations and Future Perspectives

The research has two main limitations. Firstly, due to the qualitative methodological design and the non-probabilistic sampling strategy, findings can not be generalized. Secondly, the lack of involvement of the centres' coordinators should be addressed in future studies in order to collect their voice and contribution to role dynamics. Working on these aspects in the future could allow further clarification of the intervention modalities and the needs of SWRs and to offer more in-depth information on team relationships, often indicated as a key factor in dealing with everyday problems.

Conclusions

The findings of the present research stress the importance of building a more consistent and competences-oriented educational background for SWRs. Indeed, rather than technical procedures which prove to fail in helping SWRs managing complex situations, it would be useful to enhance relational competences through psychological and sociocultural knowledge. SWRs face a wide range of different situations and are constantly confronted with or exposed to the secondary trauma, thus highlighting the need to work on themselves and balance their involvement. Moreover, the findings suggest that working with AR can

become difficult and threatening when it comes to the meaning and aims of with them. The sociopolitical context of social work practice, especially in Italy, can be perceived to be useless or not impactful enough, thus reducing commitment and empowerment over the work.

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