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Poverty and social services.

Human Systems, 5(3-4), 1994, 319-336.
(Tradotto in *Prospettive sociali e sanitarie,* XXV(3), 1995)

Old and new "poverties"

The most common definition of poverty used in Italian literature refers to it as: "A situation in which the subject taken into consideration disposes of economic resources lower than an established level" (Serpellon 1991). The amount of material goods that are available to the individual is, then, the main reference by which the concept of poverty is defined in Italy.

In this perspective, the degree of attention researchers or scholars give to the phenomenon of poverty varies in relation to the economic conditions of a particular country in a particular historical period.

In the post war period and in the fifties in Italy, for example, poverty was the object of numerous studies and analyses. In the subsequent period of economic boom, researchers turned their attention elsewhere. In fact, in the face of a great availability of material goods which characterized Italian society in the sixties and seventies, poverty was regarded as a marginal phenomenon, involving few subjects. Yet it is not only the quantity of studies produced that varies, but also the kind of solutions advocated are different. If in the period when material goods were scarce, politico-economic interventions were called upon to bring about changes in the entire social make up, in times of widespread well-being it is different. In these times poverty becomes a problem of assistance, delegated to services whose task it is to provide resources for those who are without. Given an economic order that focusses upon the quantity of resources available in the context and not on the people who may or

may not have access to these resources, the poor prove to be interesting and worthy of attention only if they represent a large number of the population.

At the end of the nineteen seventies and beginning of the nineteen eighties, Italy witnessed the emergence of a new tendency: those who used the social services for economic assistance were joined by those with problems of a socio-relational nature. And so, now poverty has become an object of study and research again and appears to be a many sided phenomenon. It is not only tied to a concrete lack of material resources, but also to a scarcity of social, psychological and relational ones as well. A new terminology is coined. Expressions such as "new poverty" or "post-materialistic poverty" (Serpellon, 1982; Censis, 1979) describe conditions of a lack of non-material goods present in various sectors of society, such as the isolation of the elderly, the ostracizing of ethnic and social minority groups, the institutionalization of minors, etc. As far as solutions are concerned, "post-materialistic poverty" opens new scenarios of intervention, it demands that suitable social policies be identified and it suggests that networks of support should be set up in the local community system (home-help for the elderly, day centres to assist the handicapped, assistance for families with small children, etc).

The need-response paradigm

The social services thus see their duties and functions multiplying, but the epistemological and methodological approach regarding how these interventions are to be carried out, does not change. It is still planned in an economistic framework that envisages the user as a person in need and the service as the provider of resources, which may be either material goods or psychological and social support.

Three ideas are implied in this framework, which we shall discuss here:

1) No distinction is made between the need and the person who is in a state of need.

2) The dissolution of the condition of need is presumably connected to a transfer of resources from the service to the user.

3) The action of the social operator (social worker or social welfare officer) is considered exclusively with regards to the quantity and type of resources to be found and made available to the user.

Given these three ideas, certain implications follow. Therefore, it is

necessary to analyse the ideas in detail.

1) The need expressed by the people who apply to the social services, either voluntarily or through referral, is at the centre of the attention of the operators who set about solving it. The emphasis placed on their need involves an exclusive consideration of the insufficiencies that these people express through the state of need in which they find themselves. This constitutes a point of view that, directed as it is to detect the insufficiencies, does not reveal the resources that the people are capable of expressing and using. The impossibility or even incapacity of finding a home for one's family, which, for example, an individual declares when she/he requests help from the social service, ends up, in the eyes of the operators, obscuring other capacities that the same individual activates in any case to provide for other needs of her/his family. The reduction of the person to his/her need is a premise that is implicitly and widely shared by the operators of services and which has important consequences on an interpersonal and social level.

As far as the helping relationship is concerned, this tends to construct non-evolutive interactive processes.   A relationship built exclusively on the presupposition that one of the interlocutors is in a state of need and the other is in a position to provide the response to that need is characterized by dualisms that tend to hypostatize the positions of the interlocutors into a rigidly asymmetric model.   In   this   way,   giving/receiving,   active/passive, competent/incompetent, right/wrong, healthy/ill, lacking in/possessing resources are just some of the dualisms that derive from the principal one, need/response. They also end up characterizing the relationship in such a way that it rigidly assigns the role of active and competent pole to the operator and passive and lacking pole to the user. The paradigm "response of the operator to the need of the user" contains in itself a conception of the intervention of the socio-sanitary services as being reparatory. Something has broken or is missing in the user and the services repair the damage or fill the gaps. It creates such a paradoxical situation that in the moment in which the response to the need is provided (the repair is carried out) the state of need in which the user finds her/himself is confirmed. Thus a non dynamic, non emancipatory, and therefore, non evolutive interaction is constructed (Fruggeri, 1991).

The consequences of this organization on a social level has been described very well by Imelda McCarthy (1992) who stresses that much of the work with clients who live in poverty constitutes a "colonising practice", that is, a practice that imposes norms, points of view and life styles from the culture of the

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dominant classes.

2) Facing the problems of people who find themselves in conditions of need or poverty from an exclusively economic point of view has, in addition, an implicit presupposition that the problem will be solved through the transfer of resources from the services to the user who manifests the need.

This is an idea that reveals the very conception of need, insufficiency or poverty involved in an economic perspective. This conception is characterized by the absence of any consideration for the psycho-social processes that are involved in or structured through a condition of need or necessity, which is so objectivized and abstracted by the context in which it has arisen or has manifested itself.

Yet this conviction is often challenged by the results of the interventions of the social operators. Making resources available to citizens who are in a state of need, does not always exhaust their state of need. In fact, social operators not infrequently find themselves in the presence of users who are unable to use the resources available, or who, even though they are making use of them, continue to request them.

These are cases for which the idea discussed in point 1) provides a ready explanation: they are users who not only lack resources or abilities necessary to look after themselves, but they also lack the capacity to use the resources that are made available to them. They are cases which end up in the category of socially irrecoverable or deviant. This is a linguistic category that permits the operators not to reflect and question the various forms of poverty that appear even in the presence of sufficient and sometimes copious resources available, or on the socio-contextual reasons that are at the root of the incapacity on the part of some to use the resources available.

3) The conception of intervention that guides the social operators is closely connected with the ideas discussed above. This is conceived as an action (making the necessary resources available) that is put into effect to the advantage of the user, an action whose aim is to fill the gaps or repair the damage. The emphasis is placed exclusively on the resources; the relational context of the operator's action and the interpersonal process that this action helps to structure is completely ignored.

The social construction of insufficiencies and resources

We wish here to propose adopting epistemological and methodological models that do not confine themselves to conceiving poverty as a problem that calculates insufficiencies and resources in economic terms, but which direct attention towards the social processes that produce insufficiencies and resources.

With this aim in mind, we suggest:

1) Moving the emphasis away from identified needs, to the people who find themselves in states of need.

2) Regarding the state of need as a result of psycho-social processes that take place in certain contexts.

3) Taking into account the process of constructing meanings, social identities and realities which the operator helps to establish through the intervention put into affect in responding to the state of need in which the users find themselves.

This framework implies the presupposition that, as well as any insufficiencies and needs, users also possess resources and capacities. This further implies establishing a helping relationship with the users in such a way that, while the needs are being satisfied, their capacities are recognised and respected. Lastly, it implies distinguishing between an evaluation of need and an evaluation of people.

Can we say that a mother who is lone parent and works but stays at home from work to look after her child or who leaves her child on his/her own in order to go to work, is an inadequate mother? Alternatively, is she a mother who does not know how to combine the contingent necessity of ensuring a living with that of looking after her child? At this point, it must be asked where does this incapacity to solve the problem begin? Is it from a lack of information; from a difficulty in using the services; from the lack of a socio-relational network; from problems connected with significant relations or from anything else? Furthermore, is it possible to exploit the capacities she utilizes in other areas of everyday life with a view to resolving the problem she manifests?

We must find an answer to these questions, since according to whether we opt for one or other eventuality, the resulting intervention is very different as is the type of process that is triggered off by the intervention. However, it is even more important to formulate these questions so as not to exclude a priori any of the various possibilities. On the other hand, the answers to these questions are not found in the type of need expressed; they may derive only from the analysis

of the context and of the psycho-social processes through which this need is generated and maintained. We include among these processes also those which are triggered off due to the very intervention of social services.

Making resources available to a person is not a unilaterally determined action. That what is made available as a resource, is not decided upon by the operator. It is the user who must "recognise" what she/he is given as a resource. The latter does not depend on the intentionality of the operator or on the objective characteristics of what is offered, but on the meanings that the user attributes to what he/she is offered. These meanings in turn derive from the social and interpersonal processes in which the person takes part both in society and with social welfare.

As soon as there is a more or less explicit request for and an offer of help, an interactive process is triggered off that, as all interactive processes, constructs meanings, social identities and realities. But such constructions do not take place ex novo , they are bound by previous social practices that have generated meanings, social identities and realities that constitute the context from which the request for help originates.

Following these reflections, our hypothesis is that the action of the social operators may trigger off evolutive processes if it is effected, A) from an awareness of the social meanings that the intervention helps to construct, B) from the consideration of the resources that the people may express even when they find themselves in a state of need, and C) from the analysis of the context and psycho-social processes within which the condition of the necessity originates and is maintained.

Typologies of users and models of intervention

In our experience and on the basis of the considerations we have made so far, we have identified typologies of users who apply to the social service and whom we would now like to discuss in detail. The cases that will be used as examples were all treated in the same service and manifested the same kind of need. The service is the Centre for Families[1] which was set up recently in the region of Italy in which we live and operate. Its task is to connect the needs which pour into the public Social Services, with the resources of voluntary work in the territory.[2]

The choice of cases, which express the same type of request, was made so

as to focus on how the same type of need may require different kinds of interventions according to the interpersonal and social context within which the need emerges and the intervention is carried out.

Typology 1. These users are people who are capable of and competent in taking care of most of their needs and who manifest economic and socio-relational needs with respect to specific areas or situations. They are people who are going through a period of financial crisis (e.g. unemployment, redundanty, unexpected debt due to health or other reasons). They belong to categories that are disadvantaged from a social point of view (e.g. the elderly, people who live alone, etc). They are those who, due to their personal or environmental situation, do not have the contextual resources to solve their problems (lone mothers who start work before school hours, families who do not know how to look after their children in the case of hospitalization, etc). The requests that these users make to the service are not necessarily different from those of others. What characterizes this group of subjects is that on the one hand, they have an image of themselves as people who are capable of coping with material and non material problems of everyday life, while on the other, for contingent or contextual reasons, they find that they are unable to provide for a particular need. They are the people for whom the request made to the social services is seen as an active search for a solution to their problems, and therefore, a testimony of their capacity to cope with it. Mara and Stefano are an example.

Mara is a housewife of about 40, who suffered multiple fractures in an road accident and was forced to stay in bed for 40 days. Her husband Stefano is a builder and, due to the present difficult employment situation in this country, could not ask for leave without the risk of being sacked.
The couple have two children: one is 13 years old, attending middle school and the other is 6 attending the second year of primary school.
The family lives in an isolated area, outside town. To catch the bus to school, the younger son must walk 2 kms along a very dangerous road. None of the members of the family can go with him and there are no neighbours they can ask.
Mara and Stefano applied to the Social Service for assistence.
The social worker got in touch with the Centre for Families and through them a person was identified, Agnese, who offered to accompany the boy

to school in the morning and bring him home in the afternoon. After a few days, a feeling of solidarity had been created between Agnese and the family so that the help was extended to housework and daily shopping. Agnese regularly accompanied Mara to the hospital for checks until Mara had completed the functional rehabilitation of her limbs, after which she was able to take over the running of her home again.

This is an example of those cases in which the relationship that is established between the operator and the user is represented as a relation between beneficiary and provider of services. It is a complementary relation between two competent parts who strive to solve a problem one of them has. The user does it by turning to the services, the operator by finding the necessary resources.

Apart from the needs that are related to an economic crisis, for which it may be necessary to provide contributions of money, other needs emerge from the concurrence of two factors: 1) a context characterized by isolation and 2) the lack of availablity of money on the part of the subjects. The two elements together determine the need. Because of the lack of economic means it is not possible to compensate the lack of relational support with professional help. If Mara and Stefano had been able to rely on friends, relatives or neighbours, they would not have had to apply to the services, likewise if they had the economic resources necessary, they would have been able to hire a taxi to take the child to school.

In this sense, the finding of resources for cases such as these is seen above all as the activation of a network of social solidarity rather than a search for money. Furthermore, the process that is triggered off by the intervention of the services proves to be evolutive because the action of the social operator is not seen as a transfer of resources, but it creates the conditions within which the user may define autonomously the ways of access to the resources.

Even with this specification, the path in each case proves to be linear:

request -> identification of resource -> offer -> possible solution to the problem.

The intervention may be defined as **supportive.**

What we wish to stress here is that supportive intervention helps to construct an evolutive path only in the cases described here, that is, in those cases in

which the persons apply to the services with an image of themselves as adequate and in which the need expressed originates from within a context characterized by a lack of economic and socio-relational resources.

Typology 2: Some people apply to social services with a sense of total inadequacy with respect to the possibility of coping with the problems they manifest.

For example, Sonia is a single woman, who with great difficulty has found work that will keep her occupied from 3 to 6 o'clock in the afternoon. Her son, Carlo, who is 6, is about to start primary school, which ends at 4.30; no provision has been made after school hours for the children of those who work late. The acquaintances Sonia turned to cannot help her. She applied to the Centre for Families and told them of her problem. Having made a few enquiries, they found a recreational organization that organizes a Play Centre from 4.30 to 6.30 and which has a bus service to take the children from the school to the Play Centre. The operators of the recreational centre, however, require that the children who use the bus service attend the same school. Unfortunately, Carlo's school is too far away and due to the time factor involved, the operators of the recreational association cannot pick Carlo up. There seemed to be no way out of the problem and Sonia appeared to become more and more disarmed and worried. She was told that, for reasons of work, a parent can ask for a child to be transferred from the school assigned on the grounds of residence to another that is more convenient in terms of the hours and transfer that the job imposes. Since Carlo has not yet started lessons, the transfer would not involve any change of context and at the same time would be a solution to their problem. Sonia was also informed of the bureaucratic formalities she would have to complete in this case.

In view of this, Sonia was not at all relieved, indeed, she appeared all the more alarmed. She did not know what she should do, how she should go about things, who she should speak to, and above all, she seemed to be very frightened of the idea of applying to the school authorities. She maintained that she was not capable of explaining herself, and asked the operators to help her. The latter did not underestimate Sonia's worries, since she had behind her a whole life at the edge of the social community. she had a very low level of education and has lived on social

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security, getting odd jobs and making ends meet. She has never been able to rely on any stable personal relationship. The inadequacy she expresses is that of someone who has experienced institutional authorities as distant from, if not even against her. Therefore, the operators did not underestimate her preoccupation, but at the same time meditated on the risks that an acceptance of her request would involve. On a relational level, it would mean confirming her incapacity and the intervention would prove to be resolutive of the contingent problem, but not evolutive. On the other hand, understanding Sonia's sense of inadequacy implies that the operators should not expect from her actions that she does not feel she can carry out, leading her to failure, and subsequently, to a confirmation of her sense of inadequacy. Consequently, they decided to negotiate with Sonia what they would be able to do to help her to provide directly for the transfer of her son from one school to the other. And so, the operators decided together with her that they would notify the school authority she would have to apply to beforehand, and this reassured her.

Sonia has, in fact, managed to have her son moved to another school where the operators of the Play Centre can pick him up and look after him until his mother returns from work.

Sonia is part of a group of users who are competent people, whose abilities however, concern contexts other than those in which they find themselves at the time to act. They are those who lack "models for the use of resources" since they have not had the opportunity to acquire social strategies which are appropriate to the new contexts into which the demands of life have led them. Immigrants who have not yet learnt the social organization of the country they have moved to, youths having to cope with new tasks, people who have lived in welfare structures or in any case at the edge of the social community are all examples of such services users.

They are people for whom the very formulation of the request for help may constitute a problem, since it in itself is a strategy that is dependent on the context.

These are cases which place the operators at a crossroads leading either to a path which constructs dependence or to one which constructs autonomy. They are cases with respect to which it becomes important for the operators to ask themselves how much help in solving a problem contributes to maintaining

the conditions within which the problems emerge.

This second group of users highlights the need for the Social Service to identify the most suitable methods of teaching the various people in relation to the knowledge of their previous contexts of learning.

The operative path, which is still relatively linear, might be described as

> **need-> knowledge of learning resources of the user-> setting up and activation of a pedagogical project -> possible solution to the problem.**

The intervention may be defined as **pedagogical**.

Typology 3: The case of Albertina, which is described below, highlights how the paths illustrated so far, in their very linearity, may prove to be inadequate in other contexts, not only because they do not solve the problem that is presented, but because they might even make it worse.

Albertina is a single parent who lives with her 5-year-old son, Mark.

Her story is studded with periods of depression. Recently she found a job with a public service where she had to start work at 8 a.m. every morning, Monday to Saturday. She applied to the Social Worker, noting that because of her work, she was not able to take her child to school and did not know where or who to leave him with on a Saturday morning when schools are closed. Through the Centre for families a university student was contacted who was willing to provide the help requested. When the Social Worker informed Albertina of this, she refused the proposed solution. In her opinion, the person Mark was to be entrusted to in her absence should be a man, because, since she was a single parent, the child needed a male figure. Her reaction appeared debatable but reasonable too and it was decided that, before opposing a refusal, they should look for a male student for the task in hand. It did not take long to find one, but Albertina refused again and this time explained that she already had a baby-sitter who would do the job for money and that the service should pay him.

It would be easy at this point to judge Albertina as exploiting the service, or as being creazy and to see that she was trying to manipulate the situation. Yet, starting from the premise that Albertina must have had her own reasons for making that proposal, consideration was given as to what

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her "good motive" might be. Considering her situation, a hypothesis was formed that Albertina was lonely and felt she could rely on the man she had identified as a possible baby-sitter of her child, both as a mother and as a woman. Within this hypothesis, Albertina's proposal at least seems plausible and resolutive of more than one problem (her loneliness as a woman and the entrusting of her son in the hours in which she worked), while the proposals of the operators proved to be limiting and, therefore, from her point of view, to be refused.

Although the Service could not simply accept Albertina's proposal, any alternative proposal had to take her point of view into account.

It was therefore decided to clarify the hypothesis with Albertina and discuss with her how much the man she had indicated could really be supportive or he was simply the addressee of non-reciprocal hopes and expectations.

The possibility of facing the problems separately was discussed with her: accepting the availability of the student to accompany her son to school and looking after him while she was at work and consulting the social worker about her loneliness and possibly trying to see how she could fill her sense of emptiness.

The example of Albertina allows us to introduce another typology of user: people who are incapable of using the resources because they are involved in relational contexts that do not allow them to. People who have "always failed" because of an inability to release themselves from their family of origin, or they are not self-sufficient because they are tied to a distant partner "they must always need", etc. These are people without any significant pathologies, who may be defined as "normal" but however for them social, economic and relational resources take on meanings different from those that most observers assume. In fact, they take on meanings which emerge from within their specific relational contexts. Consequently, for these people, the possibility of using social resources arises in the change of the relational context they are involved in.

For these reasons, these are cases for which the linear paths described above end in failure. In planning the intervention, it becomes then necessary to look in detail into and make hypotheses about the relational situation of the user and the meanings that the latter attributes to the interventions proposed.

The operative path becomes complex and could be descibed as follows:

> **need --> supportive and/or pedagogical response --> failure of intervention --> hypothesis about the relational context of the user and his/her systems of meaning --> new proposal tending towards a solution.**

The intervention may be defined as **socio-therapeutic**.

Case example:

Mariolina is 43 years old and is separated from her husband, by whom she has two daughters Wilma aged 16 and Mirka aged 9. The former lives with her and the latter with her ex-husband. She also has a son Gianni aged 6, who lives with her and her elder daughter. gianni's father lived with Mariolina for a period only.

Wilma has been helped by the Social Services since she went to middle school, because she was getting very low results at school. She manifested antisocial behaviour and often stayed at home from school. After her 3rd year at middle school, she stopped studying, did not find a job, and spent most of her time with her little brother. She took him to school and brought him home. She talked with his teachers and helped him with his homework as if she were his mother. Maintaining that these tasks were too heavy for her and kept her from creating a secure future for herself, the Social Worker proposed she should enrol on a hairdresser's course, knowing that this was a job that Wilma would have liked. The course required attendance for a whole day.

The proposal was welcomed by the girl with less enthusiasm than expected. When Mariolina was informed, the latter tried to oppose, expressing various preoccupations, among which was not knowing how to solve the problem of Gianni. In actual fact, the child finished school at 4.30 and she worked in a bar in the afternoon until 8.30 p.m. Her worry was shared by the Social Worker who tried to find resources that might respond to this need through the Centre for families.

Two women were found who could look after Gianni for the whole afternoon until 8.30 p.m. For her part, Wilma started going to school and, in order that she could make the most of the opportunity, she was released from any duties regarding her little brother.

After some days, Mariolina went to the Social Worker to complain about one of the two women who had volunteered to look after Gianni. The

Social Worker did all she could to "explain" to Mariolina how kind and available that person was. Mariolina again returned to say that it was not working out, she maintained that things had been better when Wilma helped her and the operators tried to convince her of the opposite. On the other hand, the voluntary worker told the Social Worker that Mariolina could have changed her shift from the afternoon to the morning, thus solving the problem, but she maintained that she did not do so for her own convenience. The operators tried to negotiate on this and asked the voluntary worker to take into account the difficult situation. One day, Gianni burst into tears at the home of the woman who was looking after him and said he did not want to stay with her anymore, and mother was called away from work. For mother, this is proof that the person chosen was not the right one and the solution adopted was destined to fail!

In an attempt to understand what may have happened, questions were asked regarding the reasons that may have forced Mariolina, who knows only too well how to use her resources, to gamble away one of the main resources made available to her. The hypothesis that was formulated was that Mariolina and Wilma had formed an iron couple from the time of the separation from her husband. This bond was, for mother, a ready support which she perceived as vital, even more so after the failure of the second union. It is thought that Mariolina, faced with the intervention proposed by the social worker in view of the children, felt abandoned by everybody. It was like saying: Wilma has a Social Worker who sees her "path towards autonomy", Gianni has the women who volunteer to look after him while his mother is at work and Mariolina is deprived of Wilma who is her only support. Within this hypothesis, the decision emerges, not to replace the person who looks after Gianni so as not to give the idea that someone will respond to the needs of the family under every circustance; to intensify the relationship between the Social Worker, the other person involved in managing Gianni, and Mariolina, in order to make her feel that she is not alone; to help her to reconstruct "her usefulness" as a mother and to favour all the occasions in which she and her daughter can do things together that have nothing to do with "looking after Gianni". The idea is to construct through actions a context within which new work prospects for Wilma do not mean that she will abandon her mother, but "just" undergo a change in the relation of reciprocal support.

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Cases such as that of Albertina and Mariolina highlight how an intervention which is supposed to transfer resources linearly from the service to the user without taking into consideration the context within which the need is expressed, is not only destined to fail, but also risks triggering off a process of socially constructing pathology. In actual fact, the failure of the interventions carried out according to the first or second model described above, faces the social operator with the choice of, on the one hand, co-constructing with the user categories in which he/she is seen as "inadequate", "mad", "deviant", or, on the other hand, trying to understand the user's view and from there modifying with him or her, the context in which the need emerged.

Typology 4: Lastly, there are those people who fall within socially predefined categories, which already imply, in their shared meaning, an incapacity to achieve self-sufficiency, e.g. the mentally ill, those with a handicap, drug addicts, etc.

These are cases in which the various kinds of poverty interweave. Material needs are accompanied by relational and social needs and an incapacity to use the resources available or made available as such. The diagnostic categories that designate them define them as "lacking". They are assisted by various services: the social services and services for the treatment of specific pathologies. These services provide multiple interventions, from therapeutic intervention in the strict sense of the term to economic, social and relational supports carried out by the various operators.

As we have already had occasion to write (Fruggeri et al., 1985; Fruggeri and Matteini, 1991; Fruggeri et al., 1991) we do not think that some interventions can be defined as welfare and others as therapeutic. The difference, if anything, lies between interventions effected verbally (interviews, psychotherapy) and interventions through behaviour (economic subsidization, employment, home help, etc). The relationship that draws them together is not hierarchical but interdependent. Furthermore, the therapeutic valence of all interventions is not tied to the context of the relationship between each single operator and user, but to the ecological system that emerges from the process comprising the relationship between all the operators involved and their relationship with the user.

In this case, the operative path appears to be very complex and might be described as follows:

> **need --> hypothesization regarding the relational context of the user --> proposal and negotiation of a complex therapeutic path (social interventions + psychotherapeutic intervention + pharmacological programme, etc.).**

The intervention may be defined as **psycho-therapeutic**.

Case example:

Veronica is 50, is married and has two children of 23 and 20 years. In the flat above her live her father, mother and single brother.

The Mental Health Service came to hear of Veronica when she was admitted to a Psychiatric Clinic. Although, Veronica was very ill, she thought that without her, her family would not be able to survive, the children would stop studying, her husband wouldn't eat, etc. During the time she spent in hospital the situation did not improve much. When she left hospital a project of intervention was arranged with her and her family according to which she could attend a day hospital in the morning and the family would participate in a series of interviews. When, at the end of the day spent at this Hospital, the nurse took Veronica home, she met with a disastrous situation. The house looked like a tip, the walls were brownish in colour and chipped in various places, the furniture was broken and the colour of the bed linen was indescrivable...

It was decided that the service commitment should be increased and it was proposed that Veronica should be assigned two home helps, who for two afternoons a week would help and support her in tidying up the house. The husband was also asked to finance the necessary repairs. The family accepted, but said they would let the services know when they were ready to start.

Days went by, but no-one, neither Veronica nor her husband made any mention of the plan for home help. Indeed, when the operators brought Veronica home and made as if to enter the house, Veronica politely kept them at the door.

In the meantime, during the meetings with the family, it emerged that Veronica's parents had always been against her marrying Salvatore, whom they considered unsuitable. On his side, Salvatore had even had some good career chances, but he had never made the most of the opportunities given him. In the course of the interviews, the story of Veronica and Salvatore's family seemed more and more like a history of

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failures and the prophecy of Stefania, Veronica's mother, more and more realistic. But conversations about these topics never really got off the ground. On her part, Stefania often telephoned the service secretly to say that Salvatore was responsible for the situation, that he should be the one to keep the house in order, and do what her daughter no longer could do, due to her illness. At the Day Hospital, Veronica appeared to be much better and was always ready and willing to take part in the activities proposed, but at home, she spent every afternoon, Saturday and Sunday in bed.

The home assistants continued to be politely refused permission to enter the house. They felt frustrated and began to think things like "perhaps they have something to hide..", "Veronica's husband and children are worse than her...". The family therapists began to think in terms of long-term treatment and of the fact that if she was fine at the day hospital but not at home, then the family might not be a resource, but an obstacle to her recovery. The Social Services raised doubts as to the usefulness of keeping two home assistants as they were not used, and they had so many other requests to satisfy.

The operators involved took a more and more dualistic view which proved to be of little use since its consequences were shutting off room for intervention. At this point it became necessary to call a meeting with all the operators involved.

The reflection concentrated on the different behaviour of Veronica at home and at the Day Hospital. Indeed, it was from here that the dualisms emerged. "Which was the real Veronica?" "Is the family a resource or isn't it?" "Can Veronica be cured or not?" "Is the home service useful or not?" The operators concentrated on the dual behaviour of Veronica, but this time, they formulated different kinds of questions. The dualistic question "which is the real Veronica?" was replaced with another "Within which relational context do the opposite behaviours appear coherent?"

From this kind of discussion emerged the hypothesis that Veronica, through her relational experiences, had come to feel the roles of daughter, on one side, and wife-mother, on the other, as alternative. She could not choose one without loosing the other. Now she had found a way of connecting both: the run down state of the house physically represented the faithfulness of Veronica to her original family, and so to her role of daughter, while the improvements shown at the Day Hospital

were evidence of her faithfulness to her nuclear family, and so to her role of wife-mother.

From this point of view, the attempt to introduce contra-symptomatic operative changes obviously appears destined to fail at least until problems relating to their dynamics are faced in the individual and/or family interviews.

A new context had to be constructed, a context within which Veronica could be a "person", instead of being a "role". Daughter, wife, mother are feminine roles, but, overwhelmed as she was by the dilemma of being either one or the other, she had neglected her being a woman. It was decided that the home helps should stop trying to enter the house, but be ready to do so when Veronica requested it, but they also suggested that Veronica go to the hairdresser's, buy things for herself, take part in cultural activities, etc. Veronica accepted these proposals with enthusiasm. Her husband, who had always replaced her in the albeit few household chores, now began to complain that he was being neglected and to speak of his mother-in-law's hostility toward him, for the first time.

A new phase of therapy could begin. Family sessions started, while the home assistants prepered their withdrawal from the case.

Final Considerations

We shall conclude by listing a few ideas that guide us in our work. They are like a compass which helps us in territories which we know, from experience, to be impassable and which we consider, respectfully, to be unknown:

- An intervention of help that does not recognise the capacities of the user, risks triggering off an interactive process that constructs the inadequacy of the person who is being helped.
- An intervention of help that does not take into account the interpersonal and social context within which the need of the user originated is in danger of maintaining such a context.
- Lastly, an intervention of help conducted without reflecting upon its constructive valence may prevent us from seeing that it is helping to maintain the situation that we wish to change.

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[1] We thank the whole team at the Centre for Families in Modena and in particular, Dr Pierliuigi Olivieri and Ms Chiara Rubbiani.

² Due to this contextual collocation, all the cases reported use the help of volunteers as a resource, but the same kind of consideration could be made regarding the traditional resources of the Social Services, such as economic aid, finding jobs, profession home helps, etc. Nearly all the cases focus on the needs of women, since the burden of the organization of the family is still prevalently on their shoulders, but the analysis of the situations is made taking into account the whole family nucleus and its social context, as a possible site of relationships, but also as a possible site of responses of solidarity.