Sessione 15 / Professioni sociali e mutamenti del Welfare: tensioni e possibilità

«Effetti corrosivi?»
Problematizzare l’impatto del New Public Management e della governance sui social workers del settore pubblico

«Corrosive effects»?
Problematizing the impact of New Public Management and governance reforms on social workers

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Abstract

Il paper costituisce un tentativo di comprendere l’effettivo impatto delle riforme ispirate al New Public Management (NPM) e alla governance sui lavoratori sociali del settore pubblico (State social workers, Jones, 1983) con particolare riferimento alla loro posizione dentro le partnership pubblico-privato per la gestione dei servizi socio-assistenziali (PPPGS).


Nel complesso il paper sostiene l’importanza di pluralizzare le variabili di traduzione pratica (non solo path-dependent) quando si affronta lo studio dell’innovazione della PA prodotta per riforma e cerca di costruire un ponte teorico tra il neo-istituzionalismo sociologico e l’Actor-Network Theory.
Introduction

This article aims to understand the existing relationships between the reformer paradigms of New Public Management (hereafter, Npm) and governance and the reconfigurations of social work and social services. It is obviously a very complex aim that must be delimited.

Three references circumscribe the field of this article. Firstly, with reference to the actors, I will focus on state social workers (Jones, 1983). Secondly, with references to the social service and social work, I will focus on a specific organizational shape of contemporary social services: the public-private partnerships for providing public services (hereafter referred to as Pppps, while Ppps will be used to indicate the public-private partnership in general). Finally, with regard to my intentions, this article contains the results of a research study designed to (a) define an approach to studying the effects of the reforms on social services and social work(ers) and (b) analyze some findings and some methodological issues in some recent studies on various national cases.

Many other issues could be dealt with concerning the relationship between the reformer paradigms and social work and services; however, in the debate, the reflection on the possible approaches to observing the way in which a reformer paradigm weighs on social services and social work(ers) seems to be weak, if not absent.

My interest in focusing on the weight of reformer paradigms on social work(ers) originates primarily from a definition of the stake. Some directions of Npm and governance (for instance the Pppps) tend to question the position of state social workers as a «crucial point of the welfare systems» (Facchini, 2010a, 12). The increasing presence of private organizations in the providing of public services introduces a new intermediation between the State and the user-citizen: does it simply produce the marginalization of state social workers? Does it erode their role? Or does it valorize state social professions? If state social workers operate at the «border» between social policies and users (Ferrari, 2010) then an examination of the reconfiguration of their work is no doubt also useful for an understanding of the effects of the reformer paradigms on the users (Ruggeri, 1991).

The article develops in three steps. The first paragraph focuses on Npm and governance: I will underline their potential innovation regarding the typical functionings of democratic welfare systems and I will define the position of the Ppps at the crossroads of the reformer paradigms.
The second paragraph is an attempt to fix some coordinates of an approach to the study of the impact of the reforms on the state social workers and on the organizational contexts in which they operate. The third paragraph is a critical exposé of the results of some studies that have focused on the restructurings of social work following the reforms inspired by Npm and governance. The case of Italy will be useful to understand some issues concerning the effects of the reforms and the ways to study them.

**The reformer paradigms of public administration: ruptures, convergences and critique**

As is well known, the shapes and the devices of public administration have been undergoing restructuring since the 1980s in all western democracies (and not only) with the expectation of solving the crisis in efficiency and legitimacy of the State (Pierre, 2000). The renewal of public administration has been driven by ideas and prescriptions collected anew under two major labels: New Public Management (Npm) (Hood, 1991) and governance (Rhodes, 1997). Although these reformer paradigms are in effect ambiguous, multi-tasking, and, finally, contradictory in their formulations (Hood, 1995, Rhodes, 2000, 2007), they have helped to create and make available a rhetoric of renewal. In this rhetoric, Pppps are a recommended tool (easily transformable into myth, see Meyer-Rowan, 1977) to solve some problems in efficiency and legitimacy of the old Welfare State.

As is well known, Npm reforms have generally been characterized by using market principles and devices against the inefficiency of the State. Osborne, Gaebler, 1992 («the Bible on Npm», as Power, 1997 noted) assign to Pppps a key role in the field of welfare in «reinventing government». Citing a large number of “best practices” of US new public administration, they have suggested that the state agencies give up providing tasks, instead purchasing welfare services from contracted private providers and specializing in steering functions (Osborne, Gaebler, 1992, 25). Framed in the Npm paradigm, Pppps are an instrument of the new efficiency in public administration (for the weight of instruments in public policies see Lascoumes, Le Galés, 2004). The expectation has been to save public money and, at the same time, to increase the quality of welfare by services more geared towards the users, more creative and flexible, less stigmatizing for users, and more empowering for the community, with very effective
communicative formulas: to offer less administration and greater capacity for guiding and to make other subjects pull their weight, to do better with less.

The Ppps also constitute a crucial element for the paradigm of governance. Less prescriptive of Npm formulations, the contributions on governance have focused on the way in which non-state actors participate in designing and implementing public policies, beyond the traditional shapes of representative democracy (Mayntz, 2003). In this case, the core idea is the «shift from government by a unitary state to governance through and by networks» (Rhodes, 2007, 1246) that should contribute to the finding of better and more legitimate solutions to public problems.

Although differently, for both of the reformer paradigms the overcoming of the crisis of public administration seems to pass through a redefinition of the relationships and the borders between “public” and “private”. Npm and governance tend to exercise a force towards the dissolution of the separation between the interests promoted and protected by public actors and the interests of organized private actors (Clarke et al., 2000, 3). In this frame, Ppps are an appropriate tool (March, Olsen, 1989) to design and manage more efficiently and legitimately - with some risks involved, according to the critics.

The claim and the diffusion of Ppps have had many consequences on the organizations and the actors typical of welfare systems (see for example Evers, 2005, Meade, 2005). The reconfiguration of the relationships between public and private interests is the topic of some scholars who have criticized the «post-democratic» character of the new structures of public administration (Crounch, 2003). In their opinion, Ppps risk a de facto breaking of the constitutive connection between service provision, general interest priority and social citizenship principles (Marshall, 1976). The growing power of private interests questions the public statute of public policy choices and makes particularly opaque the relationships between users, public authorities and private providers, confusing the responsibilities (Crounch, 2003, 114). Italian studies have observed that the involvement of the Third Sector in providing welfare services has taken place under the rhetoric of goodness of the immediate relations among equals that risks levelling the politicization of the welfare questions (de Leonardis, 1998, 49-74, Pennacchi, 2008, 105). According to Crounch, 2003, 112, Pppps have a strong anti-institutional impact partly because they would progressively empty governmental competences, advantaging private contractors. These theses cannot leave us indifferent.
Post-democratic theses question authoritatively the restructuring of public administration, although they face much more often the reformer paradigms (with their cultural and political origins) than their translation into practice in specific contexts. So they risk being used like another - potentially more convincing - rhetoric instrument. Reflecting some formulations of Npm and governance, they risk trivialising and rendering absolute the power of reformer cultures and models without considering the existing active forces in the contexts “hit” by reforms.

The reforms in practice: how to study the impact on state social workers

Authoritative scholars of public administration have recently underlined the need to consider seriously the weight of the specific contexts in evaluating the effects of Npm and governance reforms. Pollitt (2007, 111), has argued that local translations of Npm «frequently involve not merely the editing of standard statements and propositions, but also the subtraction of old meanings and the addition of new ones». With regard to the studies on governance, Rhodes, 2007, 12 has pointed out that «patterns of rule arise as the contingent products of diverse actions and political struggles informed by the beliefs of agents». This kind of focusing on the reforms is rooted in some important issues of contemporary organizational thought. They can be very useful to study the impact of Npm and governance on state social workers.

(a) The problematization of organizational and institutional change

One of the most important results of contemporary organizational thought is the growing distancing from mechanistic views of organizational and institutional change. A large number of studies have demonstrated that the functionings of complex organizations do not respond to the strong rationalistic paradigm but are profoundly influenced by cognitive components. Organizations in practice are contexts of actor/system co-determination (Crozier, Friedberg, 1977), in which the different actors bring to the scene emotions, motivations, interests, cognitive maps, professional identities or entitlements that are often situational and interdependent (Lanzara, 1993, 115-121), conflicting and incommensurable (Catino, 2001, 22-23).

The organizations “hit” by new orders are not a void to be filled but, potentially, they are a full space to be emptied. A complex organization tends, in fact, to be structured in routines, i.e. ensembles of reciprocal relationships between agents (actors and artifacts) that, with practice and
time, have achieved a standard statute (Lanzara, 1993, 66). By embedding a reservoir of implicit practical knowledge, on the one hand routines permit us to save cognitive energies in classifying behaviours, actions and problems; on the other hand, they train for incompetence (Merton, 1949) in that they disable the capability to imagine and to find other reasonable ways to act (Lanzara, 1993, 60-65). Contrary to what change planners might desire, organizations are particularly full and it is not very simple to change them.

The cognitive shift in organizational studies complicates the approaches to understanding the impact of Npm and governance on state social workers in a way that seems to question the importance of changing plans and programs. Plans can accompany the comprehension of current actions but «this comprehension is not contained in the plan: it must be continuously realized by actors with actions» (Lanzara, 1993, 82).

(b) Reforms as learning and actor-building processes

The «cognitive shift» in organizational analysis has prompted new ways to study innovation processes and reforms in Public Administration. The actor-network theory (Law, Hassard, 1999) has recently been applied by Italian organizational scholars to study the reformer processes in public administration (Gherardi, Lippi, 2000, 2002). They maintain that a reform (or generally a public policy) can produce practical consequences only along complex and uncertain trajectories that imply two fundamental movements:

1. **transferring** the reformer inputs from the centre (where the reform is decided) to the various peripheral areas (where the reform is put into practice);

2. **translating** the reformer volition into the operative codes of the actors who deal with the reform (Gherardi, 2000a, 62).

Peripheral actors who receive the reform can promote or oppose it. In any case, they practice a re-elaboration originally connected to their resources and to the specific structuring of the field where they act. The practical translation of the reform is a knowledge situated process where those who receive the reform are not simply receptors but in effect some of the most important protagonists (Gherardi, Lippi, 2002, 184). The translation into practice is a «local re-signification» of the reform (idem).
The actor of the translation can be seen as an emerging, plural and unstable actor-network composed of all the different figures who are involved in the re-signifying process of reform (Gherardi, 2000a, 63). Even if they are only partially conscious of it, in the mean time the peripheral actors are re-signifying the reform, they are building a new local collective actor (Gherardi, 2000b, 42). This kind of collectivization is made by learning reciprocal processes. An organizational change is a collective learning process where the members of a new organization build and fix new ways to cooperate and conflict, restructuring the field in which they work (Crozier, Friedberg, 1977, 21). In the terms of Wenger, 2000, a reform tends to redefine, locally and originally, the borders of a community of practice, i.e. what some actors put in common as standard. As Gherardi, 2000b, 36-38, has underlined, a collective learning process in an organization is no different from the daily organizational functioning and the work of their members: «work, organizing and learning are not distinct activities in a practice»

(c) Reforms and the power of street-level bureaucracy

The issues of sociology of translation prompt a study of the reforms from below, looking to the (potential) reconfigurations of work practices in situated, binding and changing contexts. According to these, we should believe that, although their actions are bound by routines, frames, regulations and principles, workers maintain a daily “translation power” in public administration. In other words, they influence the outcomes of the reforms even without thematizing the proactive/reactive role of workers in changing social policy (Banks, 1999a).

In this way the reflection as to how to study the reforms in social services meets the topic in public administration studies of the role of street-level bureaucrats in public policies (Meyers, Vorsanger, 2003, 245-255). As is well known, according to Lipsky, 1980, 13-26, street-level bureaucrats practice so much discretion that they should be considered as real and ultimate policy-makers. For Lipsky, it happens because they occupy front-line positions in a specific work-field - the relationships with the users of social services - that is characterized by unpredictable human factors. Smith, 2003, 354 has argued that, even in coercive organizations, the power of street-level bureaucrats persists and exceeds the interpretation of the orders of superiors: they make the difference in the success of the reforms inspired by Npm. Specifying his own approach to the study of governance, Rhodes, 2007, 12, has written that
It explores the diverse ways in which situated agents are changing the boundaries of state and civil society by constantly remaking practices as their beliefs change in response to dilemmas.

In Italy, Manciulli, Potestà, Ruggeri (1986) have argued that a serious consideration of the subjectivities at work prompts us to treat in productive terms the discretion of the front-line workers, as a «functional failure of the standard»: the knowledge emerging from work practices can be the source for a creative and intelligent violation of formal codes with which the substantial aims of the organization can be better achieved.

Public administration restructuring, Pppps and state social workers: some recent empirical evidence

The interest in the understanding of the effects of Npm and governance on social work(ers) has rapidly increased since the end of the 1990s. The literature on the subject is nowadays so copious that a systematic review is extremely difficult. However, it is possible to establish some achievements with regard to the results and the approaches, and to find three main theses as to the effects of Npm and governance reforms on state social work(ers).

(1) Npm and “Third Way”: «corrosive effects» on state social workers

One of the most clearly emerging pieces of evidence from the studies is the negative weight of the reforms on the work conditions and professional identities of state social workers, especially in English-speaking contexts.

From the Australian context, Healy, 2009 has argued that Npm has a «de-professionalizing agenda (...) and corrosive effects» (ibidem, 415) for state social work(ers). The importance attached to the accountability of performances in the neo-Tayloristic view typical of Npm (Baines, 2004) tends to marginalize the professions that are least readily codified into tasks and standards. They become «semi-professions» (Healy, 2009, 407). The outsourcing of many services to the non-profit organizations can be interpreted as a strategy to circumvent protections in the regulation of labour relations. In the face of inadequate forms of representation of social
workers, the result is to lower their wages and to increase their flexibility (ibidem, 403). In short, Npm is an «attack on social professions» (ibidem, 402) and Pppps are functional to this attack.

Focusing on the British context of child services, ten years previously Hall, (1999), had expressed a similar position. The framing of social services in Npm has produced a degeneration of professional practice. It has fragmented it into instrumental tasks (ibidem, 141) and deviated it from the priority attention to people (ibidem, 135). The managerial need to avoid litigations with ‘users’ (if the term is right, see Heffernan, 2006) tends to develop an attitude focused more on defensible decisions than on the right ones (Hall, 1999, 135). Managerial control increases and the efficacy of service decreases. Banks (1999b) has confirmed this view, criticizing the degenerative effects of the outsourcing of social services to the private sector. It promotes the managerialism of social workers: they tend to be involved in assessing financial compatibility of the services (ibidem, 151) and, like brokers (McLaughlin, 2009, 1104), in choosing, case by case, the best (i.e. the cheapest) private provider. This role transition risks limiting the professional discretion of state social workers and replacing typical professional values with homogeneous procedural rules typical of public administration (Banks, 1999b, 165). Thus, loyalty to the profession and to the organization tends to diverge, with the result of making social work schizophrenic (ibidem, 151).

Studying the effects of Npm reforms in three Canadian areas, Baines, 2004 has reinforced this degenerative scenario. De-qualification, brutal standardization, almost total loss of autonomy, bureaucratization in internal communication, the loosening of the relationships with users, and a drastic deterioration in economic and working conditions (ibidem, 277-288) are some of the worst consequences of Npm for Canadian social workers. Baines is even more critical of the use of voluntary work in public services: almost 60% of volunteers involved in social services are the same professional social workers whose managers ask them to do unpaid overtime, exploiting their sense of guilt at the worsening service (ibidem, 286).

A similar thesis has been argued regarding the effects on state social workers’ conditions under Third Way reforms whose manifesto mentioned the utility of «partnerships with agencies in civil societies to foster community renewal and development» (Giddens, 1998, 39). Jones, 2001, has collected many opinions on the impact of New Labour reforms and his conclusion is rather distressing. Introducing the results of interviews with 40 state social workers, he writes: «I
was not expecting to find a happy story, but I was not prepared for the extent of stress and unhappiness that I came across» (ibidem, 549). The main source of the stress to state social workers derives from the frequency, the aggressiveness and the senselessness of the demands of management that make state social workers «proletarianized» (ibidem, 551-559). Daily tasks of social workers are so strictly ruled that the profession becomes hollow: «it’s not social work» affirms one of those interviewed by Jones (ibidem, 554). For Ferguson, 2004, 7, the results of Jones, like those of many others, make it «a commonplace to say that social work in Britain is currently in a state of crisis» after New Labour modernization programs. The study of Fawcett, Hanlon, 2009, regarding the Australian Third Way, is not so far removed from Jones’ conclusions. Albeit less violently, Australian Third Way reforms are faithful to Npm principles, only adding a rhetorical and ambiguous attention to the community (ibidem, 435-437).

These contributions constitute an authoritative basis for saying that, since the 1990s, the reforms have had some negative effects on state social workers in English-speaking contexts. Moreover, Pppps seems to have been a degenerating instrument for social professions. The strength of these analyses seems to be the clarity, the high level of reciprocal confirmation and the plurality of the sources. On the other hand, one of their weak points may be found in the absence of local “translation variables”, which levels the differences between cases. This “family” of studies tends to remove the mediations between the reformer principles and the effects on social workers, rendering absolute the power of the ideas.

Although the «corrosive effect» of Npm reforms on social work should be considered as clear evidence, this influence could be better articulated with regard to different existing factors that operate between the reforms and social workers. While acknowledging the regulatory power of Npm and the ruptures that it has generated in the British welfare system, Clarke et al., (2000, 7), recommended avoiding too simplified an approach in studying the impact of the reforms: «the impact of these ideas has been more uneven, contested and complex than can be accounted for in a view of a simple shift». Many comparative studies on current transformations in public administration have stressed the need to consider local institutional features to understand the real effects of Npm and governance (Flynn, 2000; Pollitt, Bouckaert, 2002; Bevir et al., 2003).

With regard to the impact of the restructuring of public administration on social workers, the comparative study of Leicht et al. (2009) shows that institutional traditions can offer professional
groups different resources to respond to reformer volitions (ibidem, 598). Using neo-institutionalist arguments (Powell, DiMaggio, 1991), similarly to Flynn, 2000, 38-42, Leicht et al. argue that the reforms inspired by Npm «have met with nation specific professional contexts to produce distinctive organizational responses» (ibidem, 586). In short, professional groups are active forces and their ability to fight institutional battles «depends critically on mediating state and societal institutions» (ibidem, 586).

(2) More continuity than rupture? The case of Italian state social workers

The importance of institutional features to understand the impact of the reforms on state social workers can be captured and developed by looking more profoundly into some national and sub-national cases of reforms. According to the recent results of a national-wide survey (Facchini, 2010b), in Italy institutions have an impact on many relevant characteristics of the profession of assistenti sociali (access to the profession, economic conditions, specialization of functions, variety of users, composition of the staff, weight of the different operations performed). Moreover, institutional influence is not homogeneous. It depends on political-institutional cultures (different in the southern, central and northern part of Italy) and on the demographic size of the municipalities.

It is possible to compare the results of this survey with a similar one carried out ten years before (Censis-Cnoas, 1999). The periodization of these two surveys is very significant. In fact, between 1999 and 2010 the most important reform in the contemporary history of Italian social assistance was approved (L.328/2000) and, consequently, until 2009, new regional regulations had been adopted (Costa, 2009). The features of change in the working life of assistenti sociali subsequent to these regulations inspired by Npm and governance principles show fewer ruptures than we might expect.

*Tab.1 - Number of Assistenti Sociali employed in state and private sector (Sources: Censis, Cnoas, 1999; Facchini, 2010b).*

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Sector</th>
<th>1999</th>
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<tr>
<td>Public</td>
<td>85.3%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Private</td>
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<td>15.6%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>0%</td>
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<td>Total</td>
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In the face of the reforms geared towards the decreasing role of the State in the direct provision of social services, the proportion of assistenti sociali employed in public and private agencies has not significantly changed (Tab.1), while the number of assistenti sociali registered in the Professional Order has been constantly increasing since 2001 at an annual rate of 3%.

Moreover, the data seems to disprove the hypothesis of a specialization of assistenti sociali employed in the public sector in coordination and planning tasks. As shown by Graph 2, the expectation is almost reversed: the number of assistenti sociali employed for these tasks in private agencies (almost all non-profit) increased in 1999-2010, overtaking those who are employed in public agencies. With regard to administrative work, although its weight cannot be considered as being similar to the “degenerative” state reported for the British context, the 1999-2010 comparison marks a clear trend in Italian social work: it increases clearly, especially for state assistenti sociali.

*Graph.1 – Mean utilisation of the weekly working hours of assistenti sociali in 2010. (Source: Facchini, 2010b, my reworking).*
In short, these data complicate the expectations that can be derived from the assumptions of Npm and governance. They confirm, for Italy, the relational matrix of social work and its values (Facchini, 2010c, 183), show the growth of administrative work, and refute the hypothesis of the increasing role in the coordination and planning of state assistenti sociali. In addition, they reveal the dissatisfaction of assistenti sociali with their own economic condition and the growth of instability in public jobs (Fiore, Puccio, 2010, 157). According to these data, the Italian scenario seems to be less revolutionised than the British one, albeit in transition.

Comparative and quantitative studies offer a sizeable contribution to the understanding of how the profession of state social workers is evolving under the pressure of the reforms of public administration. One of their strengths is to introduce “translation variables” connected to institutional and territorial factors. On the other hand, one of their weak points is that they sometimes do not make possible the consideration of actor-dependent “translation variables”. Kirkpatrick, 2006, 14 has drawn the attention to the persistent role of social professionals in orienting the implementation of the reforms in welfare services.
Because social services have been, and to a considerable extent continue to be, provided by professionals within specific forms of organisation in which they hold key positions, the effects of change have been not always what was expected. The capacity of these groups to negotiate or ‘capture’ change in ways that minimise disturbance to their day-to-day activities should not be under-estimated.

With regard to British social services, Evans, Harris, 2004, 890-892 have argued that «discretion is present in social work even in areas of practice that are bounded closely by policy and guidance» and that, paradoxically, a stricter regulation can increase, instead of decrease, the discretion of social workers. More recently, regarding the same context, Evans, 2009, 9-11, observed that management and social workers agree on fundamental professional values and that organizations often call on social workers to exercise their professional discretion.

(3) The weight of actor-dependent variables on the reforms in practice

Other contributions have recently considered actor-dependent factors in studying the impact of Npm and governance on social workers. Overall, according to these studies, state social workers maintain an interpretive and strategic capacity (rooted in their personal and professional values and in their organizations) that is used daily to influence the practical translation of the reforms.

Analyzing the effects of British health Pppps on “public ethos”, Hebson et al., 2003, are very critical about their forms of public accountability (ibidem, 490, 498) and confirm the negative effects of Pppps on the conditions and motivations of social workers. However, albeit with high levels of frustration (similarly to Baines, 2004, 284-285), they overcome the tasks and the standards of the new protocols. They maintain the traditional values of public service (ibidem, 494), in opposition to their new employers and contrasting the appropriateness of the logic of profit in public services.

The study of Sawyer et al., 2009, on a multiprofessional service for elderly and disabled people in Victoria (Australia), shows a very differentiated scenario of the effects of the reforms inspired by Npm on state social workers. The difference is produced by the way with which the state social workers interpret the new standards. The standards do not exist per se; to use the terms of Weick, 1995, they are «enacted». Some workers of the service studied by Sawyer et al. see the new standards as an attack on their own profession, others as a chance to defend it and
reinforce it. Thus, in the same institutional and organizational context, the effects of the restructuring of public administration on state social workers are not homogeneous: the latter are «actors negotiating new structural conditions, rather than individuals acted on and transformed by new structures» (ibidem, 377). Those who develop critical reasons against the new standards do not only denounce their inappropriateness. They exercise a positive discretion, knowingly violating the protocols to reach what they see as a better public service (ibidem, 372-376).

The contributions in Guidi, 2009, have studied in depth ten cases of Pppps in Tuscany (Italy), with the aim of considering a plurality of translation variables. There are many reasons to “territorialize” them. After the reforms of 2000/2001, the Italian welfare system took on a regional structure (Kazepov, 2009, 2010). Italian territories express different political-institutional cultures that influence the ways of receiving and translating the reforms and use some instruments of new social policies. Thus, although the new Tuscan regulations contain many principles of Npm and governance similar to those of Lombardy, the Tuscan and Lombard Pppps have very different regulations and actors (Bifulco, Vitale, 2006). Guidi, 2009, vol.1, 172-179, has suggested pluralizing path-dependent variables, considering not only the path of public institutions but also that of the private actors who are most involved in Pppps. In the case of Tuscany, the historical structure of the non-profit sector has a significant importance in orienting the decision making of the regional public entities concerning the regulation of health and social services.

The study of ten Tuscan cases of Pppps shows an extremely non-homogeneous scenario regarding the effects of the reforms. The subjectivities in action (from both sides of the Pppps), the capacity to use different sources of legitimation inside the formal regulation and the existence of conflicts among different actors about “what is a good service” play a key-role in determining the substantial results of the Pppps. The work practices of state assistenti sociali in the Pppps tend to restructure themselves following very different paths. We have observed three main paths in the Tuscan Pppps:

1. a path towards their disappearance from the Pppps with a substantial delegation of public service to the private provider;

2. a path towards the “administrativization” of their tasks with a sclerotization of the Pppps on formal aims;
(3) a path towards the development of promotional and planning skills with a clear improvement in the Pppps.

**Conclusion**

Studying the impact of the reforms inspired by Npm and governance on social workers is not all that easy. The way that seems most adequate calls for

(a) a detachment from a trajectory that flows directly from the principles of the reforms to the social workers;

(b) a pluralization of translation variables (both path-dependent and actor-dependent) in the trajectory from the reformer paradigms to the practical translation of the reforms.

The weight of translation variables is high, hence an evaluation of the good or the bad effects of the reforms on social workers per se is quite inappropriate. Two trends seem to be confirmed: (1) the increasingly administrative nature of state social workers’ tasks and (2) the increasingly flexible nature of their work conditions. However, these consequences are perhaps not truly attributable to the reforms, but to some more general trends. Penetrating inside the restructuring of work practices of state social workers in a typical instrument of Npm and governance, the public-private partnership for providing public services returns a very differentiated scenario.

Although the thesis of the «corrosive effects» of Npm on state social workers has had many confirmations (especially in English-speaking contexts), comparative studies tend to problematize it, clarifying the importance of institutions. Moreover, there is much evidence for considering as still alive some features of Lipskyan power of street-level bureaucracy: a reform inspired by Npm and governance is not an automatism. To exist, it is necessarily performed (Callon, 2007) in institutional and organizational contexts, by collective professional groups and by individuals with personal and professional values. In the terms of sociology of translation, there can be no reform without its local (and uncertain) resignification.
References


