

Academic Training and Competence Analysis of Social Work

Laura Carli Sardi

Department of Quantitative Methods, Siena University, Italy

Summary. In this paper, we present a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the competences and employability of graduates in Social Work. Our approach follows the methodological lines of the Credits project, which includes the statistical analysis of interviews with experts, such as teaching staff and entrepreneurs, mail questionnaires, focus groups, and the textual analysis of documents. Our target is the entire population of social workers in Tuscany. We expect to create indicators of the competences required by the job market, verify the efficacy level of education and training, and create an interactive systematic relation between academe and the labour market.

Keywords: Academic training, Competences, Social work.

1. Competence and performance

In the following, we refer to *competence* as a new concept and not as a derivative of the ancient latin term *competentia*, which applies to the sphere of jurisdiction. The English word *competence*, as Chomsky (1969) used it in linguistic epistemology, is to be considered a developmental process of knowledge, while *performance* names what is put into action. *Competence* is the acquisition through experience, on a knowledge basis, of the ability to act (Smelser & Baltes, 2001).

The transition from university to work has been the object of several scientific studies (Dolton *et al.*, 1993; ISFOL, 1994; Mariani & Tronti, 1994; ISTAT, 2000; Biggeri *et al.*, 2001; Fabbris 2003) and the relationship between graduates' competences and professional roles has been the object of a number of empirical research projects (La Rosa, 1984; Carli Sardi, 2002). These studies helped to interpret and link individual, institutional and market factors with the elaboration and experimentation of particular learning models.

The need of worker's knowledge and the interactive relationships with the organisation take us back to Likert & Murphy (1938) definition of the worker as a person with 'emotional maturity' so that it is necessary to take into consideration a set of psycho-social processes which may change his or her cognitive structure, motivation and capacity for action. The question concerns all formative agencies, from school to university, from profession to workplace, be it a public institution, a private company or a professional office.

Wittorski (1998) has broken down the competence as a function of work into components of the training process. The components are cognitive, affective and social, each of which concerns actions which imply a number of dimensions which are cross-occupational, subjective, inter-subjective, objective, thus defining a complex concept of competence, measurable through a set of indicators and evaluation procedures.

The core components of competences have been sufficiently theorised (Boyatzis, 1982), but there is a certain fragility going from description to definition and to identification¹.

From the theoretical point of view, competences are not just behaviours, even though they may be expressed through individual behaviour. Competences are the expression of knowledge, abilities, and attitudes that express a potential capacity of the individual that can be realised and powered within a work context. Therefore, knowledge, experience and motivation refer to specific contexts.

We want to draw the attention to the competences that are necessary to realise a "regulated profession". They are different from the professional business skills because the work contexts are different and vary according to economic activity and size of the company.

In the following, we will refer to the professional profile of the *social worker*. This profile has been under consideration since the first normative law of study programmes in Social work². A syllabus was first organised during the period from 1960 to 1970 in six "special university schools". In the last years, a ministerial norm regulated the training of social workers with rigid curricula, until the university diplomas and the current three-year first-level programmes were born (Carli, 1996). The common denominator in all these phases has always been the distinction between knowledge (*savoir*), expertise or skills (*savoir faire*) and attitudes (*savoir être*).

The relationship between education and competences has generated a vast multidisciplinary literature with an applied psychology perspective.

¹ The links between professions and the market have been studied by Sarchielli (1993), Levati & Saradò (1998), Ajello (2002). Advanced statistical methods for the analysis of competences have been experimented by Buscema *et al.* (1999), Authier & Levy (2000), Fabbris (2003), Bolasco (2003).

² A programme in Social work was first formulated by Senator Ossicini, professor of Psychology at the University of Rome "La Sapienza".