

# THE UNCERTAINTY OF SOCIAL WORK: PREMISES OF ALTERVISION

During the HOOD project, we dealt with the Intervision methodology: a method of peer support alternative to the classic supervision that involves an external expert in the working group. As we approached the methodology, we met Professor Luigi Gui from the University of Trieste, now an associated partner of HOOD, who developed a particular modality of Intervision, called "Altervision". This meeting led us to question ourselves, deepen our awareness of the method and decide to operationally explore both modalities. This bite and the following bite n. 12 deepen the theme of Altervision, starting from a training held by Professor Gui in Turin, on the 10<sup>th</sup> of October 2021, during a HOOD training event that involved all the project partners.

## Dealing with uncertainty

In the 1900s, an ideal of a specific professional took hold: a technically capable person who knows how to intervene and what to do. This is the way of understanding the knowledge of the Modern Age, against which even illustrious thinkers such as Ivan Illich have argued. Today this image is no longer so solid. In social work, for example, we continually discover that the professional does not always know, can, or solve everything. However, confronted with the modern ideal of "professional", social workers can feel a sense of discomfort, uselessness, and incompetence in the face of this uncertainty.

We can instead consider a new idea. We can think of true competence not as knowing everything, nor solving all problems, but as welcoming uncertainty, knowing how to navigate and taking charge of it. What happens to social professionals is precisely this: they find themselves in uncertainty and, nevertheless, they must assume the responsibility of facing it together with the people they accompany on their journeys.

But how to deal with the inherent uncertainty of social work?

To develop the Altervision approach, Professor Gui started with a concrete experience. He had been involved in a cooperative in a training for social workers. The team in question was very unhappy with the training opportunities that the organization offered them. They were asking for better training. The managers of the organization worked very hard to respond to this request, but the team was always left unsatisfied. This situation revealed the paradox of training: instead of increasing the empowerment of the participants, training seemed to make them less and less capable. According to Professor Gui, this happens because social workers find themselves in difficulty in their daily work and hope to receive precise and certain instructions from expert people. They aspire to receive solutions. These answers, during the training, are clear. In the classroom, on an abstract level, everything works perfectly. However, when social workers find themselves having to adopt those abstract theories in everyday work, the maths doesn't add up. Thus, the frustration returns even increased: I trained myself and I still don't have solutions.

For this reason, Professor Gui has chosen to reverse the perspective. Instead of adding knowledge from the outside, he thought it was important to discover the internal knowledge from which social workers already draw elements for making decisions in unclear situations. To this end, he experimented with a range of social professionals, but also studied the mechanisms of knowledge production.

**“We can think of true competence as welcoming uncertainty, knowing how to navigate and taking charge of it”**

## Exploring the knowledge-production

Charles Peirce, a mathematician, studied how scientific knowledge develops. Peirce distinguishes between deductive and inductive knowledge. Deductive knowledge is that knowledge for which we have abstract, general knowledge about reality, from which we *deduce*: we bring this knowledge down into concreteness in order to understand. We name things starting from a theory.

However, we do not always have a theory available to relate to the reality we meet. Sometimes we encounter elements that are not described by our theories. In that case, the logical procedure becomes *inductive*. I observe carefully what I see, I try to understand if in different realities or other theories, there are similar elements, and I formulate a new theory, a new generalization, even if uncertain.

Pierce, however, adds a further element: intuition. Sometimes we may understand things without knowing how. I can't say what elements are there before, but I sensed that reality. In social work we often act like this: we don't know exactly why we make a choice, but we think it's the best one in the given situation. We think we have guessed it.

Pierce is not satisfied with this explanation, so he introduces the concept of "abduction". Abduction is that formulation of our thought that allows us to understand a fact of reality even if we don't have a sure theory that describes it to us, nor an inductive process. On a scientific level, we would say that we have created a hypothesis. In everyday life, we are not always aware that we are proceeding by hypothesis. We need to orient ourselves in reality and therefore we often use abduction: we create provisional formulations of understanding of reality.

Most abductions are based on what Pierce calls "beliefs." In addition to formal, rational, cognitive thinking, we have also "empirical thinking": a thought that arises from the relationship with reality. It is a thought that is not linguistic, it has another form. These are "perceptual judgements", which Pierce calls "beliefs": I can believe that things proceed in a certain way. I have a belief about the reality that allows me to face it more serenely. The belief lasts until reality denies it. It is precisely on these accumulated and uncontrolled beliefs that we make our abductions. It is beliefs that allow us to make assumptions about the reality around us.

## Implicit knowledge



In social work, we find ourselves continually in new situations. And we act from a number of perceptions and beliefs that we have accumulated. Based on these, we make uncertain choices, of which we are not sure. Karl Polanyi argues that our knowledge is much more implicit than explicit. Even our explicit knowledge is based on a large number of subsidiary elements of knowledge which remain implicit and which, nevertheless, our mind uses.

Another scholar, Donald Schön, provides a further element: relevance. Schön argues that professionals adapt elements of theoretical knowledge to the particularity of the cases and do so by bringing "relevance" into play. This theoretical choice is pertinent: it fits well with this fact of reality and is also consistent with the theoretical elements. Relevance is articulated starting from what Schön calls "repertoire", but which we could call with Pierce "baggage of beliefs". It is an archive of memories, a wealth of experiences and metaphors that we can use to approach a new reality and face it.

Based on these theoretical premises, Professor Gui argues that social workers use a large amount of experiential knowledge that they bring into play with intelligence, even if it is not explicit intelligence. However, if it is not explicit, they have greater difficulty communicating it, transmitting it and consciously accumulating it.

The Altervision moves precisely on this double level: uncertainty and the wealth of knowledge to be extracted from our knowledge. We already have a wealth of knowledge, we must learn to extract it in order to share it. Also, when we can make knowledge explicit, it becomes clearer for us too. Therefore, Altervision is a work of shared construction of professional knowledge. There is no supervisor, no expert because knowledge is already present among peers, who must learn to make it explicit and share it. It is an equal, horizontal operation, carried out by a small group of social workers faced with a situation of uncertainty. It is as if we were going to browse many books in a library and each of us is a book from which to gather elements of knowledge to face uncertainty.

Professor Gui points out that in Altervision there is no idea that there is a right thing to do. Rather, we try to open the horizon of things that can be done. There is no evaluative perspective present: this choice is better, this one worse. Altervision simply opens up the horizon of possible things to do. One doesn't leave an Altervision meeting saying: this is what I have to do, but in the face of this situation of uncertainty I could act in these different ways. The responsibility for choosing how to act remains with the individual.

**“Altervision is a work of shared construction of professional knowledge”**

According to Gui's experience, this approach is initially disorienting for social workers who are looking for precise answers, formulas, and rules. However, over time it becomes reassuring, it allows social workers to recognize that there is no right choice, but there are a series of possible choices, among which each one of them will choose.

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