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PRACTICING ALTERVISION

In the previous bite, the theoretical premises of Altervision has been considered. This paper, on the other hand, describes the operational dimension of Altervision, focusing on the roles, characteristics and stages of the process. This bite is based on a lecture held by Professor Gui in Turin, on the 10th of October 2021, during a HOOD training event that involved all the project partners and on his book "Altervisione. Un metodo di costruzione condivisa del sapere professionale nel servizio sociale", published by FrancoAngeli in 2018.

Creating the Altervision setting

According to what was elaborated by Luigi Gui, professor of sociology at the University of Trieste, the Altervision setting has some distinctive characteristics.

First, it is a question of forming a horizontal group, ranging from 5 to 12 people maximum. In the group each participant is equal, and there are no hierarchical organizational roles. The groups are homogeneous at a disciplinary level: this is particularly useful for bringing out the implicit knowledge shared within the same community of practice. Gui's many years of experience in this regard highlights how particularly interesting are groups formed by people who belong to different organizations. Among colleagues, there is a very high risk of reproducing the setting of a team meeting aimed at defining action strategies, and not at the emergence of implicit knowledge and learning, as occurs in Intervision. Furthermore, among colleagues it is more difficult to avoid role or hierarchical differences being reported within the group, compromising the horizontality of the group.

Time and place are two other important elements of the Altervision. A dedicated space is needed, where service users do not pass through. A dedicated but sustainable time is also needed: the experience of Gui's team claims that it is better to organise sessions of an hour and a half, with a periodic cadence that is approximately every month and a half.

The last item to organize is the roles. The Altervision provides for the presence of some defined roles, which at each meeting can be covered by a different person. These are:

- The **storyteller**: the person who tells the dilemma on which the session will focus;

- The **note-taker**: a person in charge of taking notes, and, at the end of the meeting, writing a summary of the salient points that emerged;

- The **facilitator**: in charge of guiding the success of the meeting, taking into account the time, trying to moderate the interventions, and allowing everyone to participate.

Phases of Altervision

Altervision begins with the **narration of a "dilemmatic situation" by the storyteller (phase 1)**. This situation is a concrete example of the situations of uncertainty that social workers always find themselves facing. Gui points out that "being in the condition of not knowing what to do is not really the same as not knowing. What appears apparently as a void, an absence of operational indications, a tabula rasa is actually a crowd of thoughts" (Gui, 2018, p. 108). Social workers, in fact, in these situations are not faced with a "void", but with a "full": a tangle of judgments, ideas, possibilities, among which it is impossible to choose. None of the operational possibilities, proposals or judgments in the mind of

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the social worker has priority over the others. The dilemmas can concern daily operations, and confrontation with recipients, but they can also be linked to the relationship with colleagues or with one's superiors, or to the difficulty of reconciling work and private life. They can be operational, ethical or ideological dilemmas. Often different levels overlap in the same dilemma: among others, the cognitive, emotional, affective, and ethical levels.

Furthermore, according to Gui, it is not necessary to prepare the narration for the Altervision in advance. On the contrary, the dilemma must be something "alive" in the head of the social worker. It is brought into the group precisely because it is still active, not already processed or solved. It is also alive because the social worker knows that he will have to act and that he has the responsibility to choose the face of the dilemma.

> **"What appears apparently as a void, an absence of operational indications, a tabula rasa is actually a crowd of thoughts"**

After the dilemmatic situation is told, **the other participants can ask questions to help clarify it (phase 2)**. It is precisely these questions that make it possible to clarify the true nature of the dilemma, as well as the possibilities that open up before the storyteller and from which he cannot choose.

The third phase of Altervision is called by Gui the phase of "analogies". Participants are called to narrate analogous dilemmatic situations they have experienced, describing how they acted on those occasions and with what consequences. By "analogue" situations we mean episodes that are similar in substance to the dilemma, not so much in the form: you don't necessarily have to find an example that speaks of the same type of target or service, but that shares the deeper nature of the dilemma narrated. This phase is the one that can generate the most difficulties for social workers: accustomed to other forms of collective work such as team meetings, they may be tempted to propose solutions inherent to the specific case brought, rather than sharing stories of similar situations experienced.

This phase marks the specificity of Altervision: this approach is not aimed at the collective definition of a strategy, or the negotiation of a decision. It is aimed at broadening the repertoire of possibilities when faced with a dilemma, fostering learning and raising awareness of social workers.

It is starting from the stories of the other participants that the group can prefigure, **in the fourth phase, the possible work paths to be adopted. These are "prefigurations"**: on the basis of the group's past experiences, the possible paths to be taken are identified, imagining the potential consequences.

The fifth and final phase of Altervision is aimed at promoting the development of social workers' reflexivity: it is the learning phase. To complete a session the participants will be able to share learning gained during the meeting from the comparison with others. This phase requires individuals to reflect on what emerged from their professional subjectivity and background. Furthermore, listening to the learning of others broadens collective awareness and favours the learning dynamics of the process.

Conclusions

Altervision, therefore, does not offer solutions. Luigi Gui says that faced with this approach, social workers initially experience a situation of disorientation: they do not receive what they initially expected. In reality, after initial disorientation, over time they tend to acquire greater serenity and confidence in their professional self. Altervision supports social workers in recognizing that there is not the right choice when faced with a problem, but a horizon of possibilities for action, which expand and become clearer along the way. Social workers also recognize how dealing with uncertainty is the hallmark of their work. The experience of inadequacy that this generates is transformed by the practice of Altervision into a greater awareness of the nature of one's work and of the professional expertise that matures over time, thus promoting the empowerment of social workers.

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