

THEORIES AND PRACTICES IN SOCIAL WORK
Practitioners' Representations of Contract Work

Silvia Fargion

PhD in Social Work
University of Edinburgh

2001



DECLARATION

Hereby I declare that this dissertation, entitled THEORIES AND PRACTICES IN SOCIAL WORK. PRACTITIONERS' REPRESENTATIONS OF CONTRACT WORK, has been composed by myself; that it presents exclusively the results of my own work; and that it has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification but the Degree of Philosophy in Social Work from the University of Edinburgh.

Silvia Fargion
Department of Social Work
University of Edinburgh

Edinburgh, 31 January 2001

ABSTRACT

This dissertation analyses the relationship between theory and practice in social work, focusing on practitioners' accounts of a particular methodology, contract work. It revisits scholarly debates in the social work discipline (ch.2) and elaborates an alternative approach, based on Wittgenstein's notion of "language game" and its re-elaboration by the Edinburgh "strong programme" in the sociology of knowledge. This perspective (ch.3) posits that the meaning of categories and concepts corresponds to the use that concrete actors make of them as a result of on-going negotiating processes in specific contexts. Therefore, meanings may vary dramatically across social groups moved by different interests and holding different cultures. Accordingly, we may reformulate the issue of theory and practice in terms of the connections between different language games. The main research question becomes, how does theoretical language relate to practitioners' broader frames, and how does it shape their making sense of their own experience.

This broad analytical strategy is applied to a specific empirical case, representations of the concept of contract. Focusing on contract is appropriate as this concept has become common currency in practitioners' language, while at the same time establishing itself as a crucial concept in scholarly literature in the field (ch.4). As such, it allows the analyst to identify different uses of the same term among social work practitioners as well as to contrast practitioners' representations to academic ones. The empirical material comes from accounts by twenty-two social workers based in services for family and children in Milan and Turin (ch.5). Two in-depth interviews were conducted with each practitioner. One explored their images of contract as a concept. The other analysed "critical incidents", i.e., specific instances of applications of contract work.

Data presentation follows the same logic. Two main general interpretations of the word "contract" are identified, which both refer to the same formal definition, yet stress very different elements of it. One sees contract as an instrument providing the work process with a clear structure, the other relates contract to the process through which an agreement is reached between practitioners and their clients (ch.6). This distinction is found to correspond to two different concrete uses of the label. One focuses on contract as a tool to secure client's commitment to a clearly defined work plan (ch.7), the other on contract as an on-going negotiation (ch.8). Finally, the systematic analysis of differences in concepts and applications leads to the identification of two broader cultural landscapes. Rather than by available dichotomies in social work literature, their traits are best captured by Mannheim's classic distinction between "Romantic" and "Enlightenment" styles of thought (ch.9).

Scholarly treatments of the theory-practice link in social work (ch.1) seem to polarise around two positions: one posits a hierarchical relationship between theory and practice, and expects the former to guide the latter; the other tends to deny relevance to theory and to focus instead on social workers' practical wisdom and expertise. The evidence collected for this research supports a call for more empirically grounded and more finely tuned views of the relationship. Theory neither steers practice nor is irrelevant to it: instead, it appears to provide social workers with resources that are then creatively adapted to specific cases of practice, in the light of social workers' broader cultural frameworks.

Contents

List of Figures and Tables	iv
Acknowledgements	v
1 Introduction	1
2 The Debate on Theory and Practice in Social Work	11
2.1 <i>The Common Trait: A Debate over Words</i>	
2.2 <i>Tendencies in the Debate</i>	
2.3 <i>The First Tendency: Theory Guiding Practice</i>	
2.4 <i>The Second Tendency</i>	
2.4.1 <i>Social work as artistic practice</i>	
2.4.2 <i>The moderate positions</i>	
2.5 <i>Summary</i>	
3 Theory and Practice: a Matter of Words	43
3.1 <i>Linguistic Relativism</i>	
3.1.1 <i>Words and meaning</i>	
3.1.2 <i>Meaning finitism, classifications and beliefs</i>	
3.1.3 <i>N and S designations</i>	
3.1.4 <i>Language games and interests</i>	
3.2 <i>Reconsidering Theory and Practice in the Light of the Reflection over Language</i>	
3.2.1 <i>The debate as expression of a struggle around the boundaries</i>	
3.2.2 <i>Languages and the theory and practice Issue</i>	
3.3 <i>Summary</i>	
4 The Case of the Contract	69
4.1 <i>The Concept of Contract: Theoretical Sources</i>	
4.2 <i>The Concept of Contract in Social Work Literature</i>	
4.3 <i>The Development of the Concept</i>	
4.4 <i>Evidence of the Efficacy of Contract</i>	
4.5 <i>Clients' Rights</i>	
4.6 <i>Contract Work in Practice: Controversies and Divergent Positions</i>	
4.7 <i>The Contract as an Example of the Impact of Theory on Practice</i>	
4.8 <i>Summary</i>	

5 Research Design and Methods	88
5.1 <i>The Context of the Research: Social Services for Families and Children</i>	
5.2 <i>The Research Strategy</i>	
5.2.1 <i>The cases</i>	
5.2.2 <i>Data collection instruments</i>	
5.3 <i>Access to the Services and Contacts with the Respondents</i>	
5.4 <i>Data Analysis</i>	
5.4.1 <i>The first model of analysis</i>	
5.4.2 <i>The analysis of interviews and the use of NUD*IST</i>	
5.5 <i>Summary</i>	
6 Representations of Contracts	108
6.1 <i>Some General Features in the Use of the Concept</i>	
6.2 <i>Agreement and Definition of the Work</i>	
6.3 <i>Two Representations of Contract</i>	
6.3.1 <i>Contract as agreement</i>	
6.3.2 <i>Contract as work plan</i>	
6.4 <i>Comparing Two Definitions of Contract</i>	
6.5 <i>Summary</i>	
7 Practices Labelled 'Contract': Contract as a Work Tool	142
7.1 <i>The Contract as Part of a Structured Approach to Work</i>	
7.1.1 <i>The Rossi family</i>	
7.1.2 <i>The case of Ms Bianchi</i>	
7.1.3 <i>Comments</i>	
7.2 <i>From a Definition of the Situation to the Contract</i>	
7.2.1 <i>The case of Ms. Ben</i>	
7.2.2 <i>The Righi family</i>	
7.2.3 <i>Comments</i>	
7.3. <i>Organisational Rules and Contract</i>	
7.3.1 <i>The case of Amanda</i>	
7.3.2 <i>Comments</i>	
7.4 <i>The Contract as a Work Tool</i>	
7.4.1 <i>The sequence in narratives</i>	
7.4.2 <i>The approach to understanding</i>	
7.4.3 <i>Images of clients-practitioners interaction</i>	
7.4.4 <i>The contract as a tool</i>	
7.5 <i>Summary</i>	
8 Practices Labeled 'Contract': the Contract as an Ongoing Process	181
8.1 <i>Acting on Feed-backs</i>	

8.1.1	<i>The Case of Ms Verdi</i>	
8.1.2	<i>Comments</i>	
8.2	<i>The Structure as Emerging from the Work</i>	
8.2.1	<i>Ms Gure</i>	
8.2.2	<i>Ms Neri</i>	
8.2.3	<i>Comments</i>	
8.3	<i>The Contract as an Ongoing Process of Negotiation</i>	
8.3.1	<i>The sequence in the accounts</i>	
8.3.2	<i>Understanding the situation</i>	
8.3.3	<i>Clients and practitioners</i>	
8.3.4	<i>The contract</i>	
8.4	<i>Summary</i>	
9	The Emergence of Two Professional Cultures	211
9.1	<i>Two Organic Worldviews</i>	
9.2	<i>Romantic and Illuministic Styles of Thought</i>	
9.2.1	<i>Mannheim's model</i>	
9.2.2	<i>The two styles</i>	
9.3	<i>Representing Social Work</i>	
9.3.1	<i>Rules and logic vs. peculiar sequences of occurrences and regularities</i>	
9.3.2	<i>Understanding and acting</i>	
9.3.3	<i>Different conceptions of 'understanding'</i>	
9.3.4	<i>The place of specialist knowledge</i>	
9.3.5	<i>Views on change</i>	
9.3.6	<i>Conceptions of time</i>	
9.4	<i>Opinions on Theory and Practice</i>	
9.5	<i>Summary</i>	
10	Conclusions	241
	Appendix	251
	Bibliography	255

List of Figures and Tables

Figures

Figure 6.1 Figure and Ground Reversal	116
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Tables

Table 5.1 A Preliminary Typology of Contract Uses	103
Table 6.1 Images of Contract: Basic Traits	141
Table 8.1 Two Ways of Representing the Work Process	211
Table 9.1 Two Styles of Thinking Social Work	240

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the many people who, in different ways and at different times, have been there to offer their support, and to whom I feel indebted for having been able to conclude this work.

First of all, thanks to my supervisors who have followed my research all along: to Chris Clark, for the careful reading and for the intriguing questions that have guided and stimulated the development of my work; and to Alex Robertson, for his comments and criticisms, not always easy to accept, but very helpful to take some distance from my work, and learn “the rules of the game”.

I am very grateful to the social workers in Milan and Turin who, despite being often overwhelmed by their workload, have trusted me, and devoted time and energy to participate in my research. Maria Carbone, Amelia Caneva, and Piera Toletti of the City Council of Milan have been precious for the information they have shared with me, and for having done all in their power to facilitate my access to the services.

I am also heavily indebted to my previous teachers and colleagues at the School of Social Work in Milan, particularly Rita Dutto, Millina Secchi, Milena Canevini, Franca Ferrario, Maria Mormino, and Tilla Sgorbati. In different ways, they have been close to me while I was proceeding with my work, and alleviated my feelings of loneliness. They have encouraged me, provided me with insight and ideas, read and commented the drafts of my work.

I want to mention the many friends in Italy and Scotland, whose affection has been so important, and who cannot wait for me to finish this work and thus, hopefully, move to other more exciting subjects of conversation. Special thanks to Elspeth Wardrop, who has made her best to transform my writing into acceptable English.

My family has paid the price of the huge change and unsettlement, brought about in my life by my choice of going back to study after being a practitioner and a teacher for almost twenty years. My son, Stefano, who does not exactly regard school as his idea of fun, found it difficult to understand all the attention I paid to this work. Yet, he has forgiven, and done his best to cope with an often absent-minded mum. My husband has well digested my strong reactions to his making a mockery of my perennial shifting between the anti-intellectual social worker and the Wittgenstein devotee roles. He has never given up on his efforts to bring me back to earth, and to convince me not to take myself and my work too seriously. He has been an invaluable help for the final editing of this work.

1 Introduction

When I think of [this approach], I think of working with the client, it is a way to treat myself and the client on the same level, not a situation where I dictate the rules and the clients comply Clients must feel they have a part, that they are protagonists..... (Lucia)

[This approach] is a tool which allows you to understand how things are proceeding with a certain person. When I do not use it I feel that I am working on one of those cases where you do not know where you are going. It is a guide in relation to what you are doing, and to understand reciprocal expectations. It is a map: if you lose your way, you can always find it again. (Donatella)

Lucia and Donatella are two social workers in the Family Support Unit of a big city in Northern Italy.¹ They are talking about a method that they often use in their professional practice. Their descriptions are very different. One could even argue they are hardly comparable: Lucia is talking about a way to relate to her clients; Donatella, about a tool she uses to give structure to her work. Lucia contrasts two different ways to interpret practitioners' and clients' roles; Donatella opposes a well structured approach, with goals clearly defined, to an unfocused and ultimately unclear style of work.

And yet, for all the differences, Lucia and Donatella have something in common: they are actually talking about the same thing. Better – and this is a substantial qualification indeed – they are using the same word to designate what they do. They are answering the same question, and presenting the key elements of the same approach: the one focusing on the contract between practitioners and clients. This is a widely known approach, which has been exhaustively treated in social work literature, has been the subject of extensive research and experimentation, and has gained wide popularity among practitioners. What should we make, then, of the striking differences between Lucia's and Donatella's accounts? Should we attribute them to their cognitive deficiencies in grasping the basic elements of contract work? Or should we rather take those inconsistencies as a suggestion that in real practice things might not be as clear-cut as formal definitions would like them to be?

¹ Throughout the text, names of interviewees have been changed to preserve anonymity.

This project addresses these questions. As such, they are not new at all. They relate to the much broader debates on the relation between theory and practice, which have characterised the social work profession since its early developments (Sibeon, 1991). A practice driven by an established body of knowledge, and the development of scientific methods to tackle practical problems, have been regarded as essential requirements for any practice to qualify as a professional activity (Freidson, 1986; Hugman, 1991). Moreover, the theoretical foundations of a practice have been traditionally regarded as strongly linked to other important elements such as training procedures, their location in specific organisations, in particular, in higher education institutions, the status of the discipline and its practitioners (Davies, 1981; Hugman, 1991; Dominelli, 1997).

How can we make sense of the differences between Lucia's and Donatella's perspectives in the light of dominant positions in the debate on theory and practice? On the one hand, we find approaches suggesting that good practice should be driven by theory, and regarding the gap between theory and practice as inherently problematic (Howe, 1986; Sibeon, 1991; Lerma, 1992; Milana, 1992). This entails a strongly negative view of practitioners. They are faulted for not being interested in their theoretical training, nor prepared to allow theory to guide their conduct (Sheldon, 1986); for taking 'anti-intellectual stances' (Howe, 1986); for acting in a 'normless' way (Ferrario, 1996b). From this perspective, we might treat the diversity illustrated by Lucia and Donatella's excerpts as further proof of practitioners' poor training, of their indifference to formal theories, of their loose and sloppy use of theoretical concepts.

On the other hand, we may also find in the literature positions that are far more critical of the potential impact of theory over social workers' concrete practices. They recognise the importance of knowledge developed through concrete experience; they consider theories, and in general the outputs of academic work, as less relevant than other forms of knowledge; they regard practice itself as an ongoing research process, rather than the implementation of models elaborated elsewhere

(Cellentani, 1995; Sheppard, 1995; White, 1997). People in this line of thinking might take the differences between Lucia and Donatella as further proof of the irrelevance of theoretical models as guides for action. They might take the use of the word 'contract' by practitioners as an attempt to stick technical labels to largely pragmatic, ad hoc practices. Far from reflecting practice in everyday life, references to 'contract' would represent an attempt to force one's concrete work into the categories of official theoretical language, largely for social legitimisation purposes (Paley, 1986). From this perspective, the lack of comparability between Lucia's and Donatella's views of contract work would be hardly surprising.

This preliminary summary of different approaches to the theme is, admittedly, cursory and, in many ways, simplistic. And yet, it is enough to remind us that, while the relation between theory and practice has been universally regarded as relevant, it has also been mostly considered an elusive topic, hard to define and address unambiguously (Clark, 1991). It also well illustrates how difficult it is to go beyond principled statements about the importance of taking practitioners' perspectives into account, and to explore their so-called 'practical wisdom' without drawing upon interpretative frameworks which are largely estranged from such practice. It is indeed quite common for practitioners' position to be represented and made sense of in the light of theoretical frameworks which are peculiar to academic styles of thinking.

This project addresses the relationship between theory and practice by recognising the centrality of the interpretations of that relationship, provided by those 'in the front line', those who directly experience all the difficulties and complexities of the relationship with social work clients. It does not make sense of differences in work descriptions and in the use of even the same basic terms, as illustrated by Lucia and Donatella, by treating them as problems or inadequacies to overcome. On the contrary, it attempts to go beyond the limitations of current approaches by taking those differences seriously, and searching for patterns among the variety of definitions of concepts and representations of practice.

An exploration of how theory relates to practice in practitioners' accounts, and of different uses of concepts, may start with the assumption that academics' and practitioners' perspectives cannot be conflated. The existence of two clearly distinct perspectives is somehow implicitly acknowledged in the recognition of a persistent gap between theory and practice. More specifically, however, it is the internal structure of the professional community that makes multiple membership an extremely rare occurrence: those who enter the academic community cease any direct involvement with concrete practice, while practitioners in the field have very limited opportunities to engage with theoretical debates. Academic and applied social work actually seem to constitute two different and neatly separated domains, despite being both part of the broad same disciplinary community. While links between the two milieus undoubtedly exist, and moves across their boundaries actually take place, yet shifts from one to the other are more complex than it has usually been acknowledged: they require substantial adaptation to the frameworks used to make sense of experience and interpret communications in the two fields.

The attempt of this research to acknowledge the complexity of communication within the social work community draws upon a perspective that one could define as 'linguistic relativism'. Such perspective is ultimately inspired by the second stage of Wittgenstein's work, best formulated in his *Philosophical Investigations* (Wittgenstein, 1967 [1953]), and by the re-elaboration of his insights undertaken by the so-called 'strong programme' in the sociology of scientific knowledge (Barnes, Bloor, and Henry, 1996). Here, focus is on language, or better, on languages as dynamic systems structuring language and knowledge. Categories and concepts are analysed as conventional practices that members of social groups develop through interaction in order to relate to the world. The world appears as an intricate web of similarities and differences, in which everything is similar and at the same time different from everything else. This complexity leads to the under-determination of any system of categorisation. From this perspective, what similarities or differences will affect how people discriminate among worldly occurrences is ultimately a social construction. It is the outcome of agreements which are the object of permanent negotiation among the members of a given group. The term 'language game'

adequately evokes how agreements be carried through continuous communicative exchanges between group members. In that sense, the meaning of words, categories, and concepts corresponds to their use in a community, and languages can be regarded as forms of life, ways to construct the world in which we live.

This perspective enables us to redefine our problem and make it accessible to empirical investigation. We can indeed think of 'theory' and 'practice' as ways to nominate two different 'families' of language games, conducted in two different regions of a broader community. The relationship between theory and practice then can be approached from the point of view of the connections between two families of language games, dominant respectively among academics and practitioners. More specifically, this project investigates the relationship between academic languages, to which practitioners are socialised through their training, and the languages used to organise and make sense of concrete work experiences.

The basic elements of my approach are therefore a focus on languages, a view of words as mere tools open to different uses, and an attention for the different combinations and concatenations of terms, which emerge out the act of describing experience. On this basis, we can identify a specific empirical material for the study of issues such as theory and practice, or the frameworks and structures of meaning dominant in the social work profession. These cease being abstract, hard to grasp entities, and take the concrete form of different representations, styles of talk, descriptions of the work process. By identifying redundancies in the use of specific terms and by contrasting different descriptions of work practices, our search for the role played by theoretical terms allows us to bring to light what is usually invisible: namely, what is taken for granted by people, what represents, so to speak, the solid ground on which we stand, and like all constant stimuli, tends to be no longer perceived.

Practitioners' descriptions of their own work provide the ground where the interaction between different language games may explored. The identification of a shared term like 'contract', which plays a key role in both families of languages,

allows us to explore differences and analogies between the two languages. Far from being a deviation from some expected 'normal' representation, differences like those illustrated in Lucia's and Donatella's accounts become a worthy object of investigation in their own right; they also provide the starting point from which to explore connections between, and constellation of, terms, and changes in their meanings.

The concept of language games also enables us to go one step further. The investigation of different uses of the same concept, and of different ways to connect it to other terms frequently used in representations of work, allows us to analyse the structures of meaning and the frameworks, developed by practitioners on the ground to make sense of their own practice. In this sense, studying the theory-practice relation drawing on practitioners' representations provides us with access to the capital of professional knowledge and expertise elaborated by practitioners in their concrete experience. Due to practitioners' modest involvement in theoretical debates, such capital has often been dismissively labelled as 'professional folklore', and is mainly accumulated and transmitted through verbal communication (Sheppard, 1995).

How does this perspective relate to current thinking on theory and practice? I start with revisiting the debate in social work literature (chapter 2). Admittedly, the restriction to the social work field was not warranted – after all, contributions in that area are just part of a much broader discussion on related topics (Schon, 1983, 1992; Williams, Faulkner, and Fleck, 1998). However, I chose to focus on the social work literature from the very beginning as the project aims at contributing primarily to that particular version of the debate. A comparison between different positions is not facilitated by the limited agreement – one might even speak of open conflict – surrounding the definition of the key concepts in the debate, in particular, the concept of theory (Clark, 1991). My reconstruction of the debate acknowledges this problem. It does not account in detail for all the different positions in the discussion, rather, it identifies two main trends to which different positions may be related, albeit with a varying degree of approximation. One trend assigns a prominent role to theory

elaborated in an academic context, and regards theory as the guide *par excellence* to good practice. The second trend limits the role of theory, at least as an accomplished and systematic intellectual construction. In contrast, it assigns priority to forms of knowledge which originate from concrete experience, and shifts attention away from integrated, abstract theoretical models to the epistemological approaches that provide the foundation for the development of practical knowledge.

This is the framework for my research. On the one hand, it is an expansion of the latter trend in that it explores and takes practitioners' representations seriously; at the same time, though, it does not ignore 'ready-made' academic theories nor dismisses their potential significant impact on real practices. Chapter 3 introduces the theoretical perspective which allows this synthesis between apparently irreconcilable orientations. It originates from a reflection on what practitioners' representations can tell us about their acting and their use of theory. Hence the incentive to revisit some key points in the broader reflection on language as a form of thought, on words and their meanings, on different types of designations, and on the relation between language, social groups and interests. Hence, in particular, my already mentioned interest in Wittgenstein's work and its re-visitation by the Edinburgh school. This perspective not only prompts a re-discussion of the theory-practice relation in the light of different uses of the same terms; it also sets the scene for a new definition of the problem itself.

Focusing on language games – in particular, on language games which to some extent relate to each other – allows us to study the theory-practice relation (or, better, theories-practices relations) through a concrete example, i.e., through a term, 'contract', which is shared by two main language games in the social work community. In chapter 4, I illustrate the reasons for this choice. I chart the development of the contract-based approach in social work literature. I identify two main sources of the concept of contract. They refer on the one hand, to visions of practitioners' roles as mediators between institutionalised definitions of problems and clients' personal demands, on the other hand, to images of human nature, underlining the goal-oriented element in human behaviour. I then document the

multiple facets of the concept in the literature, the importance of research for its success, the controversies about concrete uses of contracts, and the diffusion of contract work among practitioners.

Chapter 5 introduces the research design. In other words, it illustrates how the theoretical perspective introduced in chapter 3 has been translated into an empirical research project. The context of the research is introduced, along with a profile of family support services in Italy, the criteria defining the relevant cases, and the tools used for data collection. Altogether I conducted two in-depth interviews with each of twenty-two practitioners, located in Turin and Milan. One focused on respondents' perceptions of the term 'contract', the other, on their application of the method to specific cases, or 'critical incidents'.

The empirical analysis starts off with an analysis of broad references to the term 'contract' among practitioners (chapter 6). The term turns out to be used in a rather generic way. It is rarely associated explicitly with relations with clients, and it covers indiscriminately both formally structured practices (even in written format) and informal, purely verbal expressions of agreement between clients and practitioners. However, the first impression that contract be for practitioners a vague term, 'good for all seasons', is substantially rectified by a deeper analysis of practitioners' representations. Some basic elements of contract (the presence of an agreement, and a clear definition of the structure of the work process) are found to feature in all representations analysed. However, those elements are assigned different importance by two different descriptions of the same term. One describes contract mainly as an agreement, and places the structure of the work process in the background. The other takes the opposite approach, and identifies the main trait of contract in its capacity to provide clear and unambiguous definitions of the work plan. We can thus identify two different constellations of concepts, which differ in the emphasis placed on one or the other element.

The identification of two distinct images of contract offers an important clue to the analysis of how the same label is concretely applied to the work process. In

particular, chapter 7 explores uses of the 'contract' label by practitioners who primarily associate contract with the definition and the structuring of the work process. Empirical evidence shows that in that context 'contract' designates mainly a work tool, used at a particular phase of the work process. Related to this particular view of contract, other themes emerge, which also contribute to a better understanding of the specific meanings assigned to the word. These include treating problems as objective entities; a view of the profession and its clients which underlines the asymmetries in the two roles; the aspiration to control the uncertainty in the work process, through strategies which try to bring risks and chances of mistakes down to a minimum.

On the other hand, when contract is mainly viewed in terms of agreement (chapter 8), the term designates a negotiation between practitioners and clients, which runs through the whole relationship and characterises the work process as a whole. Contract here does not refer to a work tool, rather to a specific style of work based on continuous re-negotiation and redefinition of the situation. The same themes appear, which were presented in the previous chapter, yet organised in a very different way: problems are interpreted from the perspective of the protagonists' subjective experiences; there is an attempt to minimise role asymmetries; uncertainties and risks are acknowledged as inevitable components of the work process, which is regarded as based on trials and errors. In the cases discussed in chapter 7 the understanding of the term 'contract' was shaped by a broader view of the job, the profession, and the problems it deals with – it was, in other words, assigned a specific, circumscribed role. Here, in contrast, the same term is used to cast a particular light on the work process taken as a whole.

How to make sense not only of the two different images of contracts, and the two different ways to use the term, but of the broader constellations of themes which emerge from practitioners' illustrations of the work process? The final chapter attempts precisely this task. Differences in practitioners' representations of contract and, more broadly, their work, provide the basis for the identification of two languages in the professional community, two ways to organise and structure

experience, in other words, two styles of thought. The main inspiration here comes from Karl Mannheim's (1953) classic study of 'romantic' and 'enlightenment' styles of thought in modernity. Although attempts to relate the emergence of the social work profession to the spread of the main ideas associated with modernity are not new in the literature (Howe, 1994), I am not aware of any analysis drawing explicitly on Mannheim's contribution. Drawing on a typology developed outside the social work academic profession enables us to look at the language games within the profession from a more detached perspective. This is a substantial advantage as similar typologies elaborated within the profession have often been affected by their proponents' taking side in professional conflicts, praising one of the models and negatively stereotyping the other. Reference to Mannheim allows me to identify two different frameworks among practitioners, and to grasp the complexity and internal (relative) coherence of both. These languages represent a sort of conceptual network, of which the term 'contract' is just one node. They provide the background against which different uses of the same professional concept can be properly understood.

The dissertation concludes with a summary of the main lessons we may learn from the analysis, and the identification of a few lines of development for further research.

2 The Debate on Theory and Practice in Social Work

The relationship between theory and practice in social work has been the object of a rich and complex reflection, which has characterised social work from its first steps as a professional practice: acting on the basis of an autonomous, esoteric and abstract corpus of knowledge has been generally accepted as one of the first necessary traits of a practice to be defined as a profession. Being guided by theory has been strongly associated with the effectiveness of practice. Rightly or wrongly, the assessment of the substantial impact of the profession on the problems tackled, as well as the very possibility of measuring the effectiveness of social work, has been variously connected to the use of theory in practice. The debate has also been variously linked to the more concrete matters of social work training and of the establishment of social work as an academic discipline.

Nonetheless, scholars who have engaged with this theme have often been confronted with something of an elusive issue: what the relationship is between theory and practice, how the concepts of ‘theory’ and ‘practice’ are to be defined, and how the issue can be studied empirically have from the beginning been major objects of discussion. In a sense, it appears that there are no common grounds on which the different positions have developed.

In the next sections, I am going to introduce one of the key features of the debate, namely the uncertainty that surrounds the main terms of the debate (2.1). I will then present a possible way to organise the different positions expressed within the debate itself (2.2, 2.3, 2.4).

2.1 The Common Trait: A Debate over Words

A coherent and systematic synthesis of the current thinking on theory and practice is an awkward task, not least because of the very high number of contributions which directly or indirectly tackle the issue. The quantity and variety of contributions

presents the reviewer with a kaleidoscope of positions. Each author and each contribution appear to offer a complete and coherent new way to look at and sometimes tackle the issue. Contributions are often presented as introducing a new and original synthesis of the argument, and at the same time as attempts to mediate between different positions. No one seems to agree with anyone else, and no author presents his/her contribution as a development of a line already introduced in the debate. At the same time, strong and direct oppositions, which would in a sense provide the discussion with a structure, are quite rare. It could be said that, at first glance, there is no evident polarisation of the debate.

One of the main initial difficulties can be identified in the lack of general agreement over the terms used (Pilalis, 1986; Clark, 1991, 1994).

Before embarking on a discussion of social work theory, it must first be accepted that a wide range of signification is validly attached to the concept of theory. It can mean almost anything from a specific scientific explanation to metaphysical speculation: it is inclusive to the point of self contradiction. (Clark, 1991, p.17)

Thus the terms are seen as difficult to use and vague; and of course this is not confined to social work literature. If they are subject to closer examination they seem to lose any clear meaning:

To subject the notions 'theory', 'practice' and 'integration' to any degree of serious scrutiny, is to enter a bewildering and uncertain world, in which the glib inadequacy of one's previous thinking is alarmingly exposed. Use of the words seems to imply that each refers to some discrete, unambiguous concept, but closer examination reveals each to be complex and ill-defined, and their interrelation to be highly problematic. (Blith and Hugman, 1982, p. 61)

Actually, if there is a common feature in the reflection, it is to be found in the effort to define the terms, to identify ways to connect the crucial words to unequivocally clear concepts, which can be used to understand and illuminate social work reality.

Nearly all contributions start with an attempt to define the terms (Turner, 1974;

Howe, 1986; Payne, 1991; Thompson, 1995, and many more). New terms and concepts are introduced in order to clarify and introduce distinctions, such as 'theory for practice' and 'practice theory', (Evans, 1976; Hardiker and Barker, 1981; Howe, 1986) or 'theory of social work' and 'theory for social work'. The point is that apparently, all attempts seem to fail, and no new definition is perceived as acceptable by the academic community (Sheldon, 1978).

A number of inter-related themes can be distinguished in the literature about social work theory. Perhaps inevitably, nearly everyone who tackles the subject feels obliged to give a definition. ... It would be sufficient to record some trends amidst the diversity, and realise that there is no consensus about what 'theory' means or what theory is. (Clark, 1991, p.18)

Clark goes on to comment that, in fact, all efforts have just added confusion to confusion. Analysing the main definitions of the concepts that have been produced in social work literature, he observes how they in turn are vague and often used inconsistently. For instance, some authors who define theory on the lines of an empiricist tradition, then consider as theories, constructs that would not be accepted as such in the very empiricist tradition they have adopted¹.

Nonetheless, the effort to find a way to define theory, practice and the relationship between them, appears to most authors unavoidable. Concrete and pragmatic definitions, such as that which identifies theory as what is written in the books, while practice is what social workers do, or the very similar one given by students, that theory is what is done in college courses, while practice is what is done in placement, are dismissed as rough, simplistic and unacceptable (Timms and Timms, 1977; Sheldon, 1978; Pilalis, 1986; Clark, 1991; Marsh and Triseliotis 1996). Previous failures in finding workable definitions are attributed to mistakes in the process, not to the process itself. Particularly different positions are accused of lack of

¹ Other authors claim to use 'theory' in a broad sense, but then, while considering the relation between theory and practice, take a much narrower view of it. Sibeon, for instance, invokes a broad use of the term as encompassing 'all formal academic knowledge' (Sibeon, 1991, p.7). On the other hand, in relation to the theory and practice issue, he uses the term as synonymous with sociology, ignoring the large theoretical production in social work, as well as the contribution of other disciplines – e.g., psychology or law - to the social work 'knowledge base'.

epistemological clarity, but it is taken for granted that conceptual clarity is an essential starting point. This is implicit in the attempts at a preliminary definition of the terms which characterise most of the contributions, and it is explicitly stated and pursued by some authors. In 1986, Pilalis wrote:

The need for a closer examination of theory and practice in social work then, seems overdue. To proceed with this task we need first to clarify the meanings attached to 'theory and 'practice'. We need to be clear about the nature of the factors which are being related, or ultimately integrated. (Pilalis, 1986, p.81)

And some years later Clark echoed:

There is little to be gained from lamenting this vagueness and untidiness (in the concept of theory), but it is definitely necessary to establish a more precise conception if we are to make any progress at all on the issue of the relationship of theory to practice. (Clark, 1991 p.17)

In a sense one could notice that if there is any agreement among those interested in relating theory and practice, this is to be found in the common acknowledgement that the issue itself is relevant, if not crucial for social work. But at the same time, all acknowledge that the 'key words' are ill defined, and that no reflection on the issue can take place without an 'a priori' better identification of the crucial concepts. Up until now, though, no new definition has succeeded in gathering consensus.

2.2 Tendencies in the Debate

The vagueness of the issue, and of the constant attempts to better redefine the terms of the question, make it hard to compare different contributions. Nonetheless, as Clark observes (1991), there are recurrent themes, and common basic issues, which can be seen as underlying the whole debate. And it is by referring to these basic issues that it is possible to identify trends and to find an acceptable way to cluster the different contributions.

The first theme is the relationship between 'thinking' and 'doing'. This is sometimes the direct subject of discussion (Pilalis, 1986; Clark, 1991); elsewhere it is taken for granted as the background of the reflection. In any case, comments on this issue are invariably present in the contributions. The second issue, closely associated with the first, is the relevance given to rationality, awareness, and verbalisable thinking on one side, and intuition, unverbalsed knowledge and skills on the other. Again, these aspects, and their relevance to practice, are sometimes directly discussed, other times only mentioned, but they appear to constitute the grounds on which reflection on theory and practice develops: different positions often set out from different ways of viewing these aspects. The third is the degree of distinction between, and respective value of, scientific or academic theories on one side, and 'common sense' or experiential knowledge on the other. Connected to this are the relative relevance and positive features attributed to theories and/or experiential knowledge in relation to practice.

The way these general themes appear in different contributions opens up the possibility of identifying two broad and conflicting tendencies, which cut across the whole debate. If it is difficult to identify clusters of positions, it is nonetheless possible to look at the different contributions as expressions of one or the other of the two broad tendencies.

The first tendency can be defined as an attempt to put practices under the control of academic theory. It is based on the assumption that thinking and doing are to be seen in hierarchical position, or at least this is how it should be for professional practice. Effective action is guided by thought, and not for instance by external stimuli or by instinct and feelings. The importance of a rational and conscious process of thinking is emphasised. Strictly connected with this line is a strong distinction between scientific theories and common sense beliefs. Scientific theories are viewed as superior; they should replace common sense, and inform both professional understanding and doing. There is a stress on the superiority of action based on and organised by explicit theories, over that based on intuition and implicit assumptions.

The second trend is characterised by a more flexible view of the relationship between thinking and doing. Thinking and doing are not necessarily seen in hierarchical terms. There is an emphasis on the role of 'thinking' in terms of reflection, more than on its role of direct guidance. Less importance is given to rationality, while intuition and unverbilised competencies are perceived as highly relevant. Scientific theories and common sense beliefs are perceived as on a continuum, rather than as strongly differentiated, and common sense is often highly valued.

In the following sections I am going to review and present two groups of positions which can be taken to represent the two trends. Positions which I group together as expressing the same tendency, can be quite different from one another: the criteria used to identify the two trends are quite broad. I ended up banding together authors who, in other respects have expressed different views. In the first trend this is the case of Fisher, Sheldon and Howe, the first two being openly linked to logical positivism, while the third openly expresses his adherence to an interpretative paradigm. In the second trend I put side by side authors like Sheppard and White, who have directly conflicted over the realism of the former and the closeness to relativism of the latter. My justification for associating these authors is that, even starting from different perspectives, they end up with quite a similar position on the issue of theory and practice.

2.3 The First Tendency: Theory Guiding Practice

The first line of thought in social work can be traced back to the early days of the professionalisation of social help, and became dominant in the '70s. This process has been characterised by a strong emphasis on the necessity of rationalising action and on bringing the feelings of compassion which underpinned charity work, under the control of rational thinking:

...the impulse to do good may, if untrained, lead straight to evil doing...the good heart unschooled by the good head will probably fall into dangerous paths... (Urwick, 1904, p.180, quoted in Sibeon, 1991)

One of the main goals of the Charity Organisation Society, generally seen as having initiated the professionalisation of social work, was precisely to transform charity work into a systematic endeavour. The idea was that personal help had to be planned and organised so as to become effective (Payne, 1991, p.25).

The process toward rationalisation has been variously linked to the Protestant tradition as opposed to the catholic one, or to the connection between the origin of social work and modernism. Timms and Timms (1977) refer, though in critical terms, to the distinction made on the two traditions of 'giving':

The first was identified with Roman Catholicism and stressed the benefit to the giver and the rather gratuitous and even haphazard nature of the activity. The second tradition, identified with Protestantism, saw giving (as in the giving of alms) as a rational activity directed toward the achievement of certain objectives in the receiver. (Timms and Timms, 1977, p.44)

Hardiker and Barker connect it to the liberal tradition in which 'self-conscious calculation is believed to be better than blind and deaf assumption' (Hardiker and Barker 1981, p. 4; see also Bailey 1980).

Howe (1994) connects the development of professional social work to the rise of modernity, with its trust in reason as the means to discover truth and with its utopia of progress and of building a better, or even perfect, society, through the knowledge of the 'laws upon which people and society operated'. As far as social work is concerned, in Howe's view, its cornerstones, care, control and cure/change can be connected to the great projects of modernity. Particularly the ideas of cure and change are grounded in the trust that modification and improvement in people's behaviour can be achieved through scientific rational treatment:

Cure and change require the social worker to bring a scientific outlook to bear on problem situations. Systematic observation, experiment and analysis reveal what 'makes people tick', which in turns tells practitioners how they might improve, fix and cure those who are not functioning well. (Howe, 1994, p.518)

The assumption that what human beings do is determined, or at least strongly influenced by what they think or believe etc.), becomes a dominant assumption in the reflection on the issue of theory and practice. There are here some signs of the trust that mankind is not at the mercy of supernatural or natural forces, but able to dominate nature through reason.

On this line one of the main points made is that good practice is rationally planned and structured. Planning entails a clear definition of goals and means:

...the most crucial aspect of structure is planning. This involves careful assessment, formulating goals, developing programmes and sequenced steps, choosing methods and establishing criteria against which the outcome can be judged. (Howe, 1986, p.6)

It appears that structured practice is that which follows predefined rules, or predetermined questions, which must be addressed in sequences. Rational thinking appears again as crucial in relation to effective practice. And the necessary basis of good practice, one which is structured, is, as a matter of course, a systematic theory:

If drift and purposelessness are to be avoided, practice needs to be set within a clear framework of explanation, the nature of which leads to a well articulated practice. (Howe, 1986 p.17)²

Here again it is taken for granted that 'thinking' guides action and that if thinking is unsystematic, so will be action, and vice versa. Hence the stress many authors in this group place on the importance of being aware of the assumptions guiding the intervention. Our 'doing' is always perceived as intrinsically determined by our

² It is quite interesting to notice that Howe supports his argument by claiming that structured practice, guided by a systematic use of formal theory, is what clients appreciate. He supports this claim by referring to the outcome of several clients studies, particularly Sainsbury's (Saisbury et al., 1982) and Mayer and Timms' (1970). The point is that while certainly from both these studies it emerges clearly that clients appreciate being able to understand what is going on, being listened to, and practitioners' efficiency, there is no proof whatsoever that all this is the product of practitioners being guided by an explicit and systematic formal theory. On the contrary, a systematic reference to formal theory can be hypothesised mainly in the cases and/or circumstances in which clients express dissatisfaction.

'theories':

However the choices we make (even when they are associated with our social/emotional/physical characteristics or with our location in a particular agency) are based on theories. Theories embody an explanation of reality. Whether these explanations are implicit or explicit, and whether they have been tested or not, when we make a choice it is based on some thought that 'x' is related to (or causes) 'y'. (Specht, 1977, p.29)

So a common point of this tendency is to maintain that the problem in social work practice lies in which theories influence practice, not whether to use a theory or not:

The choice for the practitioner is not whether to have a theory but what theoretical assumptions to hold. (Briar and Millar, 1971, p.53)

It must be noticed that here the word 'theory' is used in a loose sense, standing for any set of beliefs. The point made is that if the set of beliefs are common sense assumptions, or even theoretical suggestions, maybe not tested, maybe implicit, uncoordinated and unorganised, then the outcome is poor practice, one which is inconsistent, disorganised and ineffective. On the contrary, acting on the basis of an explicit and organised theory or set of theories is perceived as crucial for effective professional action.

In this sense the idea of 'practice theory', one which is derived from experience and which is defined as the 'common sense' or home-made theory (Evans, 1976), appears to many authors as highly suspect. Hardiker and Barker observe that, given the undeveloped status of this knowledge, it is an 'act of faith' to think that it can be called theory as it is:

... whether they like it or not, social workers use knowledge in their daily practice. However a lot of this knowledge is used implicitly and remains largely unarticulated, uncodified and undocumented as the profession's practice wisdom ... a lot of social work knowledge is unarticulated in the form of concept and theories, so it is rather an act of faith for us to assert that there are theories of practice in social work. (Hardiker and Barker, 1981, pp.3-4)

Hardiker and Barker's work is in fact an endeavour to trace back how formal knowledge is used by practitioners, and at the same time to systematise social work knowledge, with the goal of making this use more aware, planned and systematic. They think that only if this goal is achieved will it be possible to say that there is theory for practice as well as practice theories.

Other authors are more substantially critical of the very notion of practice theory. Hearn (1982) maintains that the notion of practice theory encourages and legitimates social workers' tendency to ignore more formal knowledge. Howe (1986) sees in the notion of practice theory a dangerous tendency to equate common sense with formal theory. To define common sense as practice theory is a way to legitimate sloppy ways of acting:

If the distinction (between theory of practice and practice theory) is maintained, we are dangerously close to confirming *ad hoc* common sense as acceptable occupational theory. This simply maintains the confusion that befuddles clients and social workers alike. It sustains the claim that theoretical ignorance is a virtue. It is not a virtue, it is an excuse for sloppy practice and technical dishonesty. (Howe, 1986, p.17)

Here we see another important common feature of the series of positions I have grouped into this first trend, namely the superiority attributed to formal scientific theories over the so-called 'ad hoc common sense' or practice theory, which might be called the professional's wisdom. There is some inconsistency here. Most arguments' starting point is that to act a-theoretically is impossible: thus, common sense beliefs are equated with or treated as theories. But after this point has been made, then strong qualifications are made and common sense beliefs are no longer treated at the same level as formal theory.

The authors who most clearly and straightforwardly advocate the superiority of formal theories and scientific methods are those who are most directly identified with logical positivism (Fisher, 1981; Sheldon, 1978, 1986, 1998; Thyer, 1987; Brekke, 1986, to mention just a few). In this case, the superiority of scientific theory is justified by its having overcome severe validity tests, by its being expressed in terms

of falsifiable statements, and by its having been proved as efficacious (Sheldon, 1978). For the authors considered here, not all academic format theories are to be preferred to common sense. Criticism is not just addressed to practitioners not using theory, but also to theoreticians and teachers who have referred to and proposed models and theoretical understandings because of their interest value and plausibility:

The main bases for selecting approaches to practice, both in social work education and in actual practice, seemed to be faith, comfort with what already was known, the charisma of certain theoreticians or respected practitioners, or consensus among peers. Such 'criteria' tended to ignore use of systematic, rigorous, rational criteria of selection. (Fisher, 1981, p.200)

Fisher optimistically contends that there is an on-going silent social work revolution (the reference to the scientific revolution is here explicit). The trend he identifies is toward a much more rigorous approach, one whose effectiveness can be proved, measured and generalised. In fact, Fisher advocates a sort of fusion between social work practice and research. A 'single system design' research model is presented as a tool that each social worker should use in order to test scientifically his/her own practice. It is noticeable, though, that Fisher seems to avoid the word 'theory' and refers mainly to nomothetic research, or to research on effectiveness. What he advocates as a social work knowledge base, the knowledge that has to be integrated into practice, are research findings and techniques whose success has been rigorously tested.

Sheldon's optimism seems more measured. With Fisher he identifies a decrease in the tendency to select theories on the basis of what 'we happen to find congenial'(Sheldon, 1986, p. 240). But he describes also very clearly a 'practice subculture which is quite resistant to the process of making social work a scientifically based endeavour'. And in doing so he underlines indirectly, what are the his main points in relation to the issue:

The practice subculture offers a more attractive, if less reliable, product. The emphasis here is on the individuality and uniqueness of the subject matter rather than on general patterns and degrees of uniformity. The favoured

product is the impressionistic case study or report, which is often seen (mistakenly) as theoretical statement - and all the better for it. The question: 'What shall pass for evidence?' produces different answers here. The investigator's involvement with his subject matter, not his detachment from it, is seen as the important test of verisimilitude. Evaluation of service is based largely on the subjective opinions of the deliverer, and on the uncontrolled verbal reports of the recipients. (Sheldon, 1978, p.3)

More complex to understand is the justification of the high relevancy of formal theories, and of their superiority to 'common sense beliefs', by those authors who appear closer to what has been defined as an interpretative paradigm (Howe, 1986; Hardiker and Barker, 1981; Payne, 1991; Specht, 1977). The definitions of what has been variously called 'practice wisdom', or 'home-made theory', are somewhat denigrating: yet more 'aristocratic and sophisticated' theories are often defined in such a way that they appear very close to the lay attempt to make sense of the world. See for instance Howe's definition of theory: in this case theories are described as constructions, attempts to put some order and make sense in a world which has none. They create rather than reflect a reality:

Theories are not absolute notions of the way things really are, but so long as they account for what appears to be happening in a way that satisfies the observer, they are retained. Theories provide 'workable definitions' of the world about us ... It will be apparent that one of the functions that a theory should serve is that of preventing the observer from being dazzled by the full blown complexity of natural and concrete events. (Howe, 1986, pp. 10-11)

So theories are certainly not seen as attempts to represent or even approximate to the truth, as they are in the logical positivist tradition. And in the arguments, there is no reference whatsoever, nor importance attached to the empirical bases or grounds on which theories are built. The same carelessness appears while considering and classifying what are held as relevant approaches to social work. Different approaches are classified and presented with a total lack of regard for their different empirical grounds (this can be seen for instance in Howe, 1986).

From such a line of reasoning, one would expect praise and not dismissal of 'common sense home made theories'. The argument in favour of formal theories guiding practice seems weak. It is not clear why social workers should give up, or

strongly discuss and change, their 'theories', namely the collectively developed ways that serves them to make sense of the world. These theories certainly 'satisfy' them (since they retain them) and have provided 'workable definitions' of the world around them. If empirical grounds or research methods had been underlined, the superiority of formal theories could have been identified in their providing a way to enlarge practitioners' contextual experience. Given that this is not the case, one is left with the impression that the superiority of formalised theory in this case lies simply in their being produced in the context (academic) which is socially legitimised to produce theory.

Whatever the justification, and however sound it may appear, all authors mentioned above claim (or take for granted) the superiority of formal theories over common sense. And a last common trait of these positions is precisely that they all tend to be prescriptive as to how formal theory should be variously related to practice. The main idea is that theory should guide, or inform, or be integrated into practice (Specht, 1977; Hardiker and Barker, 1981; Howe, 1997; Timms and Timms, 1975; Siporin, 1977; Sheldon, 1995).

Siporin, for instance, explains how theories have to be operationalised and translated into practice theories (here practice theory is used with a different meaning from that highlighted earlier in this section) and practice principles. These can then be used to direct understanding and intervention. Several years later Howe maintains (1997, p.171) that theory has to be the guide of observation ('it tells what to see'), of description ('it provides a conceptual vocabulary and framework within which observations can be arranged and organised'), of explanation ('it suggests how different observations can be linked and connected'), of prediction ('it indicates what can happen next'), and of intervention ('it suggests things to do to bring about change').

Prescriptions can be highly different, but what they have in common is an underlying belief that the selection of theories to inform our practices is a matter of at least potentially rational choice. This is already explicit in a quotation from Miller and

Briar above: social workers cannot choose whether or not to have a theory, but it is taken for granted that they can choose which theory will guide their actions. In other words, what we believe, is seen as a matter of will and rationality. Timms and Timms offer directions to guide the choice, Sheldon defines criteria that must be applied in order to select a theory, Howe organises and categorises social work theories so as to guide a conscious choice.

The most interesting strand of research to be connected to this trend is probably the experimentation of approaches or models of interventions. This is quite a well-established type of research. However, a main problem with this kind of research is its limited impact on practice. In some cases this reaches the point where the very practitioners involved in the experiments do not adopt the approach they have learnt and used in the experiments in their daily practices. In fact, in this picture the main contrasting position, the target of many attacks, is actually very often identified in the anti-intellectual or pragmatic stance attributed in general to practitioners by most authors identified in this group.

Howe starts his book with a critical description of practising social workers shivering at the mere mention of theory (1986). That practitioners' culture is mainly, or often, anti-intellectual, seems to be something of a commonplace in the literature (Turner, 1974; Sheldon, 1978, 1998; Hardiker and Barker, 1981; Timms and Timms, 1977; Sibeon, 1991; Marsh and Triseliotis, 1996).

Turner (1974) refers to a common prejudice which sees 'human concern' and an interest in theory as incompatible. Smith (1971) considers this as an 'endemic tension' in social work. He quotes a paper by Bosanquet in 1900, in which the tension is already expressed: Bosanquet presents her argument in favour of training as contrasting to the pervasive practitioners' prejudice against 'reading and learning of any kind', based on a view of helping in terms of just 'doing'.

It is hardly surprising that this position has almost never appeared directly in the literature and that one has to rely on descriptions of it by its academic opponents.

One of the few exceptions is an open letter to 'Social Work' by a practitioner, from which Smith's article took inspiration. In this letter, the practitioner complains about the trend toward making social work a theory-based, scientific practice. She argues that practice is mainly about experience and feelings, and that the risk is to end up with an 'unspeakable language and unreadable literature', very far from clients' needs.

Smith, taking inspiration from this letter, identifies two types of mentality among practitioners: head work and heart work. The head work mentality is characterised by its positive orientation toward the theoretical, the evidential, the abstract and the general; the heart work mentality is more oriented toward the practical, experiential, holistic and idiosyncratic. Smith's article is a passionate defence of the head work mentality. The heart work orientation is presented as utopian, and concealing or distorting relevant features of the reality of social work practice.

One generally has the impression that this group of authors identify their opposition not in other academic positions but in the mentality of practitioners. The assertion that practitioners frequently have a negative attitude toward theory has sometimes been based on the outcomes of research (see Stevenson and Parsloe, 1978; Carew, 1979; Barbour, 1984; Waterhouse, 1987).

However the outcomes of these studies can be, and have been, interpreted in many different ways, and they have been used to support different positions. The same quotation of a social worker's reply to the question about the place of theory in her practice:

If you asked me to state a theory here and now, I wouldn't have a clue but my thinking and approach have been formed by them..... I often think that I am acting far more from instinct than from knowledge or skills... (Stevenson *et al.*, 1978, p.134)

has been used both as a demonstration of how 'For many social workers the mere mention of theory leaves them cold' (Howe, 1986), and as supporting the position that the relationship between theory and practice is complex and cannot be defined in

abstract and simplistic terms (Clark, 1991; Paley, 1986; Secker, 1993; Pilalis, 1986).

2.4 The Second Tendency

A position which denies any relevance of theory for practice, has - unsurprisingly - never been expressed in the academic community. Looking at the different positions relating to the issue, though, it is possible to identify a second line of reflection. This perspective is characterised by less emphasis on thought and beliefs as guiding action and more attention to actual practice. This goes with a major stress on unverballed skills, and on intuition over rationality. Other distinctive traits of this second trend are a tendency to underline continuity between professional and informal help, and continuity between scientific or academic theory and experiential knowledge or common sense.

The roots of this position can be traced back to the first stage of social work reflection. Turner refers to this stage as 'pre-theoretical' (Turner, 1974, p.8) and mentions Richmond, who defines social work as 'the art of helping' and the use 'of common sense in uncommon situations'. From the 1980s on however it has appeared in the literature as a more developed approach to the problem of theory and practice, certainly influenced by new ways of looking at expertise, and particularly by the contribution of Schon and his view of reflection in action (1983). Schon becomes quite an inevitable reference in all contributions to this issue.

Among those sharing this perspective, England (1986) deserves special consideration. His position, which defines social work as an artistic rather than a scientifically based endeavour, has been considered quite extreme, and most academics have distanced themselves from it. Nonetheless, the idea that social work practice has to do with art as well as, or even more than, with science, has been a continuous thread running through social work reflection. What characterises England's work is not to have introduced a new idea but to have taken this hypothesis to the extreme. Because of this, England's work highlights particularly well some of

the features of the approach presented in this section.

2.4.1 Social work as artistic practice

England starts from an understanding of social work practice which is focused on its holistic and complex character and on the peculiarity and uniqueness of subjective human experience. For England, social workers' practice is unified by its dealing with people struggling to cope with problems. Coping itself can be understood only in terms of the personal and cultural world view of the individual client/s, or in other words in terms of meanings.

This rather unfamiliar and philosophical ground seems to be the arena for practice: the common constant element in social work seems to be a focus upon the understanding and communicating of meaning. (England, 1986, p.20)

Understanding is perceived as crucial, because it represents the core of social work intervention, sometimes the only or main thing needed by people facing difficulties in coping with their problems. But even when material provision, or other kinds of interventions, seem to be the focus of the work, England identifies understanding as the core of social workers' practice (England, 1986, p.25). He underlines how the understanding in social work is not, at least is not mainly, concerned with crude data or facts. He presents it as a creation, not as a discovery, and as a distinctive process which each time engages the peculiarity of each individual situation and client.

This understanding of the social worker is a subtle and complex creation; its elements are rich and varied - facts and feelings, experiences, associations and attitudes, the infinite variety of elements that constitute our mental life. It is also, of necessity, a unique creation; it is not only a blend of great diversity, but is created always on and for one occasion, for it must always be exact in circumstances which are always distinct. (*ibidem*, p. 27)

As the author points out, this understanding cannot be the product of a rational and sequential process of analysis. First of all, there is far too much information to be consciously considered and analysed. Understanding is not based on splitting the

situation into manageable parts. It is always concerned with the wholeness of experience. And because of this it is presented as both selective and synthetic. Not all information can be taken into account, but the picture emerging from this process has to be a picture of the whole experience, not of selected manageable parts. And it cannot be the product of a conscious use of over-imposed frameworks, it cannot be other than an intuitive process:

The worker's choice will be guided - to an extent - by his formal knowledge, ideology and philosophy, but the specific process will be one which is intuitive. (*ibidem*, p.29)

Throughout his work, England emphasises the place that intuition takes in developing an holistic understanding of the client experience and of the meeting between client and social worker. On this ground, England criticises several authors, such as Timms and Timms (1977) or Sheldon (1978). These, having acknowledged that intuition plays a part in the social work process, nonetheless tend to consider its part as limited or circumscribed. England considers intuition as the only possible way to reach an understanding. He strongly distinguishes between the rational assessment of client situation, difficulties and resources, and the understanding which is at the basis of all work. Understanding is immediate, it takes place within the interaction with client, not afterwards:

This emphasis upon the worker's capacity to create his own picture of the clients' world - his creativity - is necessarily an emphasis upon intuition, for the process of making order is not only a necessary but a necessarily spontaneous process. We may sometimes review and revise our creation, and we may sometimes attempt deliberately to alter our general guiding constructs, but the process of selection and synthesis is an immediate and intuitive process and cannot be otherwise. (*ibidem*, p.30)

On top of that it must be taken into account that understanding is not preliminary to intervention; it is on the contrary seen as the core of the work. In this sense it fulfils its fundamental function as long as it is transmitted and communicated within the encounter between social workers and clients:

This communication has, in part at least, to be immediate, for the need arises

in the course of conversation and the worker is shown to be understanding (or not) by the quality of his next reply to the client. I am helping according to the way I 'am' now, not to the way I will reply next week. (*ibidem*, p.30).

One can notice here also a shift of attention away from the process considered in abstract terms as a sequence of phases, as it is mainly described by the authors of the first group. The latter describe the process as a sequence of assessment, plan etc. Social work practice is considered in its abstract, more or less logical, structure. England on the contrary looks at the concrete process, he focuses on the actual specific interaction between client and practitioner, on the concrete meetings and interviews which take place. Understanding is seen as something which comes out spontaneously, not as a matter of rational, cold decision or choice. It has to do with the flow of consciousness, but it is not the outcome of a conscious process:

The worker must thus draw his communication directly from his consciousness, so it is inevitably an expression of intuitive meaning (*ibidem*, p.30)

It also emerges here clearly how intuition, creativity and imagination, which are the substance of understanding, cannot be seen as a matter of intellectual performance. Understanding is not, or not only, a mental act and it cannot be equated to thinking and to what one thinks. It is not only holistic, it has to do with grasping a reality which is fluid and which cannot be represented in fixed terms, and this requires full personal involvement.

England compares social workers' understanding to the understanding of a piece of art work as it is sometimes described by art critics. Poetry or literature are described themselves as being fluid and in movement, something that resists rational examination. Access to this fluid reality is seen as possible only if the whole person and not just his/her intellect, is fully engaged:

... it requires a full and adequate response from all faculties of the percipient - not just the 'intellectual generators', but the sensory, intuitive, imaginative, and emotional ones have to be deployed '....' it is only by their combined use that man can ever experience and understand the world. Social workers are engaged in getting access to the same 'fluid reality' and their task requires a

similar subjectivity; their work must therefore demand the possession of a similarly developed, distinct sensibility. (*ibidem*, pp. 103-104)

If, on one hand, social work understanding is compared to the approach to an art work, on the other the boundaries between the way professionals and 'common people' understand and make sense of the world seem to fade. As it is described in the previous quotations, the way practitioners make sense of their experience with the clients is not different from the way all human beings make sense of their life. Common sense, which was looked on as suspect by the authors presented in the previous section, becomes highly relevant. Actually it is considered the relevant knowledge base of social work:

To identify social work as a process of understanding the meaning that people give to their experience is to emphasise the ordinary character of social work. Social work does become a matter of 'common sense', just as its critics have often alleged - although it will become evident that social workers must have an uncommonly good common sense. (*ibidem*, p.33)

The boundaries between social work and other professional activity also seem to become more uncertain. The distinctive feature of social work is to be focused on a competence, understanding meaning and communicating, which must play a part, though not as crucial, in all professional activities:

... social work is seen as an activity which can never be exclusive; not only does its practice rest upon the fundamental 'human' ability to understand meaning, something which of itself cannot be professional at all, but the use of meaning must underlie the communication of all professions. (*ibidem*, p. 35)

Within this view then, the way theory is seen in relation to common sense, and the place it is given in relation to practice, is bound to be radically different from the dominant one in the first group. First of all England, quoting Rickman, underlines the continuity between the endeavours of the social sciences and the struggle of common people to make sense of the world. The understanding of human problems requires the refinement of the same 'cognitive processes' that all human beings use to understand the social world. That theories are creative ways to put some order in a

world which has none, is not something so new in social work (see Howe quoted above). The point is that England draws the consequences of it, he compares what social workers do to the scientist's endeavour (*ibidem*, p.81).

Here we see another important feature distinguishing this second trend of reflection, namely a substantive attention to the epistemological bases of social sciences. Epistemological reflection, more than social science theory, is considered relevant to social work. Given the place attributed to the concrete process of understanding, and also the peculiar and idiosyncratic nature of the synthetic image produced by this process, it should come as no surprise that substantive attention is paid to the bases and characteristics of knowledge construction at the price of a focus on formalised systems of knowledge. England goes so far as to state that on this subject social work not only has something to learn, but also has something to say:

It is almost as if the tables have turned; social work may have as many insights for the social sciences as have those disciplines for social work. (*ibidem*, p.82)

This is not to say that England dismisses both formal theory and training. The point is that within his perspective, theory and theory learning are seen in a different light. Formal theories are not given the role of guide for action, but they can influence understanding:

The role of the worker's 'defined' knowledge is to inform his understanding; he will understand quicker because of his professional learning Their knowledge is to inform their understanding not to dominate it (*ibidem*, p.35)

And on top of that, theory learning is defined as something quite different from a mere intellectual endeavour:

but this is the use of such knowledge - to anticipate experience; and it is useful only in as much as it is incorporated into the worker's general (perhaps personal is a more apt word) knowledge, and available to inform his intuitive knowledge. (*ibidem*, p.35)

This point is further developed in the emphasis which is put on enlarging the range of

suggestions to be given in training. Particular relevance is attributed to literature and narrative in social work training. But, as is well known, England's interest in art goes much deeper than just giving it a place in training; it goes to the point of defining social work as an art.

What is interesting is the different view of the professional language which this perspective entails. While most academics are involved in a discussion on how better and more precisely to define terms and concepts, England states that social work cannot use other than a general and vague conceptual framework, one which is directly connected to everyday life and to human experience. Certainly not the language of science (or the more traditional academic language). Narrative literature and poetry are in this sense better sources of inspiration than science. Quoting Elizabeth Irvine's article on art and social work, England observes that in social work, as in literature, an imprecise but evocative language is much more suitable to deal with the 'fluid reality' of the meeting with clients. This reality cannot be expressed with the precise but rather fixed language of science.

And certainly England thinks that a 'fluid reality' is the core of what practitioners have to face. So a new attitude toward language is required. In relation to practice, England observes that language has to make sense and be understandable in everyday terms:

The worker has to be able to get across his sense of creation, which is rich, subtle and varied, and he has to do so in a way which will make sense in everyday terms. His language will have to be expressive, personal, evocative and concrete. (*ibidem*, p.30)

Thus, as far as social work theoretical reflection is concerned, the issue of language has to be contextualised in the indefinite, indefinable nature of the profession. England maintains that attempts to be conceptually precise and rigorous are just a way of paying respect to a scientific culture in which social work hardly fits.

2.4.2 The moderate positions

England's position has been subject to many criticisms (e.g. Clark, 1991). One should at least notice that it only seems to take into account marginally, if at all, the context in which social work is mainly practised, the public administration, and the power social workers have over their clients. One cannot help noticing that any image of bureaucracy makes a strident contrast with the picture of social work presented above.³

Nonetheless, England has the merit of presenting one of the few clear-cut stances about this issue. Other positions, which can be seen in line with the second trend, are more balanced, as its main themes tend to be articulated in a less consistent way by different authors.

A common trait of the authors I will consider in this section is, however, the decreased importance assigned to thinking and intellectual activity over practical action. At the very minimum, thinking is not viewed as a linear separate process guiding action. Schon's work is particularly influential, and in accordance with his position, a view of thinking as separate from acting is replaced with the idea of reflection in action. Practitioners' activity is described as an engagement and dialogue with a unique situation, which keeps being mentally designed and re-designed.

On top of that, reflection has been influenced by new ways of looking at expertise, as connected to a 'tacit dimension' which is developed through repeated experiences, not to intellectual contact with theory. Expertise tends more and more to be connected to the development of 'patterns of recognition' more than to theory implementation (Mayhew, 1999).

Associated with this, there is less stress on rationality. It is not that rationality disappears from the scene. Rather, it is seen more as an attempt to find ways to

³ Indeed England has given a very deep, rich, and three-dimensional picture of the 'heart work' as roughly sketched by Smith (1971), including its utopian side.

organise an uncertain, fluid and contextualised process. It is not described as an application of abstract coherent principles (Clark, 1991; Pilalis, 1986; Harrison, 1991; Sheppard, 1995, 1998; Martinez-Brawley and Mendez-Bonito, 1998).

Creativity and imagination acquire new importance. They become relevant subjects of study and reflection (Rapoport, 1968; White, 1997; Smale, Tuson, and Statham, 2000; Haley, 2000). It is worth noticing here that creativity, like some of the other traits mentioned here such as intuition, is not totally ignored in the works presented in section 2.3 (see Timms and Timms, 1977; Sheldon, 1978) but, as England noticed, these elements were mostly just mentioned as inevitable components of the work. The difference is therefore quite substantial. From the marginal roles they were attributed by authors in the first group, creativity and imagination take the centre of the stage in the view of several authors:

Beyond being only art or only science, social work is a collage of perspectives and opportunities. It has been suggested here that if social work has to live up to its own identity it must openly and unapologetically acknowledge that, in nurturing and caring, the rational is not more important than the intuitive, the systematic is not more valid and truthful than the a systematic. (Martinez-Brawley and Mendez-Bonito, 1998, p. 210)

While contributions presented in section 2.3 were concerned with the definition of theory in the first place, here the effort shifts to trying to catch the distinctive features of practice. Certainly, one cannot say that there is homogeneity among positions in relation to this issue. On the contrary, there are consistent differences. The polemical exchange between White (1997) and Sheppard (1995, 1998) in the *British Journal of Social Work* illustrates well some of the main differences in the approaches to creativity and systematic work, and illuminates the substantive issues underpinning the different positions.

Sheppard describes social work as an intrinsically systematic process. This does not make social work different from any other human process of knowledge and action. What makes the work systematic is not a super-imposed set of rules. On the contrary, Sheppard (1995) tries to illuminate the natural rationality employed by practitioners

in their work: a rationality which can always be described in everyday words, not just in technical terms, as it characterises all human beings. Systematisation is the product of a constant need to check the truth of hypotheses and conclusions against reality and new information. Sheppard calls this process 'retroduction', the mixed strategy of checking deductively conclusions which are inductively built. The goal of this process is to avoid 'jumping to conclusions' and to act on the basis of the most probable hypothesis.⁴ While creativity and intuition take a major part mainly in hypothesis-generation, on the other hand the whole process of testing against reality is largely systematic. Indeed, Sheppard underlines that, as far as the latter is concerned, qualitative researchers and social workers do not differ substantially from ordinary people in their daily procedures.

White (1997), on the contrary, puts creativity at the centre of social work practice. She sees social workers' endeavours as creating and negotiating 'stories' with their clients. In open polemic against Sheppard's realism, White argues that 'stories' are ways of representing the situation, which are equivalent in all respect. Stories tend naturally to be internally consistent and coherent, and there are no objective standards to measure which is the best or the true one. The closeness to and respectfulness of clients' stories, and the degree to which a story prove helpful and hopeful are the only valid criteria in social work to prefer a story to another.

White's examples illuminate her position. She questions the merit of saying to a mother, who is going through a difficult time with her over-crying baby, that she is depressed (who says that this is the true problem and not just another way to represent the situation?). White observes that such feed-back or assessments often have a negative impact: their effect is to make the mother just feel more guilty and

⁴ One might suggest possible analogies between this position and those of Sheldon (1978) and Fisher (1981). Nonetheless, I think that there is a substantial difference between the rationalism of the former and the realism of the latter. What Sheldon and Fisher propose is a logical 'scientific' sequence. Sheppard on the contrary describes, albeit in formal terms, a process which human beings naturally follow. And the test is made against reality, not coherence. His position, as will be illustrated further on, leads to a consideration of theory and practice quite different from the one expressed by the authors identified with positivism.

anxious, and, because of this, even less able to face the situation. Sometimes a shift onto baby colic as the cause of crying may calm her down and provide more hope. Sometimes it does not. In White's view there are no stories which are in themselves more hopeful and helpful: to find the best story is a contingent and creative process.

Of course this position is underpinned by and leads straight to relativism, and White is well aware of this. She actually claims that relativism provides the best basis for practice. Her point however is that relativism in practice has limits. There are stories which are unacceptable, which 'stink' to use her language, and that cannot and should not be endorsed.

Sheppard's reply (1998) is quite sharp. If one accepts relativism, then there are no limits to the acceptability of 'stories'. Any story, as long as it is internally coherent, is bound to be acceptable. In his view, epistemological relativism leads directly to ethical relativism, and to an 'anything goes' approach which he considers unacceptable. He reaffirms his realistic stance and clarifies his concept of 'practice validity' as the standard against which to assess the validity of specific hypotheses.

While Sheppard and White offer very different pictures of social workers' activity, nonetheless they both try to define the nature of practice, more than to look at how practice should be, and what should guide it. Both, though with a different view, make reference to everyday processes of making sense of the world. The attention to social science here has definitely shifted from the substance of social science theories to their epistemological suggestions (Clark 1991; Martinez-Brawley and Mendez-Bonito, 1998; Sheppard, 1995).

Even if not openly affirmed, it appears that the 'use' of ready-made theory in practice, far from being desirable, may have a negative impact. Paley (1986) observes that there is no evidence whatsoever that theory-guided practice is in any sense superior, as there is no proof that practice can be improved if 'integrated' to theory. White (1997) mentions that in the light of the same theory, opposite conclusions can be derived from the same state of affairs. This seems to imply that

theory can be used to legitimise any decision, more than to improve understanding. On top of that, White's support of the need for 'epistemological reflection' in practice, as a means to remove obstacles to understanding, seems to suggest that theories as well as beliefs can work against and not facilitate understanding, by providing prejudices rather than keys to access the clients' world. When theory is not mentioned as having a negative impact on practice, at least formal theory is considered as being on the same level as other ways of making sense of experience:

The aesthetics of social work are not based on purity and rigour, but on its ability to find use-value for theories and explanations, better still, to find perspectives, whether they have been arrived at in the sterile lab or in the excitement of the street. (Martinez-Brawley and Mendez-Bonito, 1998, p.207)

Other authors underline that claiming to follow a theory or to be guided by it, is not the same thing as being guided by it. A distinction is made here between the so-called 'espoused theory' and theory in action (Argyris and Schon, 1976, Clark, 1991).

Sheppard (1995) observes that most of the problems identified in the literature on linking theory to practice originate from the disproportionate attention given to theories, which are the product of the scientific endeavour. He notices that this position comes from a strong distinction between the work of scientists and the work of practitioners directly involved in tackling social problems:

The notion of applied social science is based on the application of knowledge derived from the process of social research. The theory-practice separation, where social workers' presence in the 'real world' is contrasted with social scientists' abstracted, conceptualised version is, though less commented upon, neatly reflected amongst many social researchers. (Sheppard, 1995, p.269)

Sheppard explicitly discusses the distinction made; the connection between social work and the social sciences can be much more fruitfully identified when identifying the commonalities between the social scientist and the social worker. Those commonalities can be summarised in the methods used:

Social workers, when conducting assessment and attempting to make sense of situations, have much in common with qualitative social researchers. Indeed they may be considered in many respects, to be practical qualitative researchers ... The linking factor is the common methodology for understanding and reflecting upon situations. (Sheppard, 1995, pp.268-269)

Many connect social workers' endeavour to the endeavour of the ethnographer as well as the qualitative researcher. This is not meant to be merely another way to 'lift up' or ennoble the practice. Coherently with England's position, it is a way to bring social scientists down to earth:

... the social researcher cannot possess the privileged position of the 'outsider'. It is quite simple: as human beings social researchers are necessarily part of the human world they study. This is not a matter of methodological commitment, but an existential fact. A further implication follows: that they (the social scientists) cannot avoid relying on 'common sense' knowledge. ... However distinctive the purposes of social research, the methods it uses are merely refinements of those used in everyday life. (Sheppard, 1995, pp.270- 271)

This shift in how social sciences are looked at has many consequences. It has always been widely acknowledged that social work theories have been developed partly taking suggestions from the social sciences, and partly as a result of reflection over experience. What is substantially peculiar and characteristic of the authors of this second trend, is the nearly exclusive focus on practice as based on theory building and not on theory use (Mayhew, 1999).⁵

With this goes a revaluation of the knowledge developed by practitioners. This knowledge is not considered, either in fact or in ideal terms, as in any sense superior to the average common sense, or as inferior to scientific theory. What is underlined here is its specificity, due to being the outcome of the peculiar social work experience. It is defined as practice wisdom, practice-based knowledge, practitioner

⁵ However, even considering social work practice as a 'theory building activity' is not a new interest too. Fisher (1981) and Sheldon (1978), for instance, propose a single case experiment which could represent a reference for social workers in order to build theory. The point is that, as Sheppard (1995, 1997) observes, in these cases social workers' theory building is seen as possible in so far as they apply a rigorous 'imported' scientific method. The new trend on the contrary look at theory building as something which takes already place in practice, and which has to be studied.

culture (Paley, 1986, Sheppard, 1995,1997, Martinez-Brawley and Mendez-Bonito, 1998).

It is a revaluation of social workers' perspective: the social workers' positions and stance, as well as the so-called anti-intellectual position, are revisited and looked at in a new light:

Yet practitioners continued to assert that not all they knew and put into action was rational or codifiable, that they knew more than they could tell and that, perhaps, what they were describing was art. This often gained practitioners the reputation of being a-theoretical when, in fact, they were only practical and not necessarily anti-intellectual. (Martinez-Brawley and Mendez-Bonito, 1998, p.209)

One of the effects of the differences in attitudes from the first trend (a different way of conceiving, doing and thinking, a different place given to rationality, the major role attributed to creativity and imagination, the focus on epistemological issues, the stress on social work as theory building more than theory use) leads to a different way of conceiving the role of academic reflection, and to a much less prescriptive approach. The authors who express this second trend tend to have a much more humble attitude toward practitioners. They do not think that academic reflection should provide guidelines for practice. Paley (1986) for instance clearly states that academic research should provide better descriptions and understanding of practice. Sheppard for instance thinks on the contrary that the point is to build a practice-led theory, as opposed to theory-led practice. Practice-led theory should provide the basis for social work to become an autonomous discipline (Sheppard, 1997).

In fact positions such as the ones illustrated in this section have provided inspiration and the basis for a new strand of research in theory and practice. The main feature of this trend, in negative terms, is that it is not dominated, to put it in Paley's terms, by the question 'do social workers use, or do they don't use theory?' (Paley, 1986). On the contrary, there is a tendency to study practice, refining an understanding of it, and reconstructing how different levels of knowledge are developed and intertwined in it. (Harrison, 1991; Clark, 1991; Secker, 1993; Fook, Ryan, and Howkins, 1994; Fuller,

1992; Olsson and Ljunghill, 1997; Sheppard et al., 2000). In several cases (Harrison, 1991; Fuller, 1992), the issue of theory is not even directly addressed in the subject of the research, and it is looked at as it arises spontaneously. The new line is also reflected in the interest in different research techniques, such as case studies, critical incidents (Harrison, 1991; Secker, 1993; Fuller, 1992), vignettes, direct observation or even the use of materials derived from supervision (Olsson and Ljunghill, 1997).

These researches have produced some outcomes that go beyond the observation that practitioners do not use or do not want to use theory in their practices. Analysing practitioners' accounts and observing their practices, Clark (1991, 1994) has underlined how practitioners actions are directed by a set of 'action beliefs and disposition' derived from their life experience (not just related to professional practice), not by rigorous theory.

In his study of accounts of practitioners, Harrison (1991) identifies three approaches to the use of knowledge in practice. The first is based on use of available categorisations which allow to match specific situations and needs to available resources. The second is based on the application of broad models, such as the unitary model, to make sense of problems and situations. The third, defined as 'heuristic', is characterised by the ongoing search for new ways of making sense of complex problems and situations, by taking different perspectives into account.

Looking at how theoretical training affects students in their practical experience, Secker (1993) has identified three uses of knowledge. The 'every day social approach', is based on common sense, knowledge derived from personal experience, and does not draw on theories. The 'fragmented approach' combines theoretical inputs and everyday knowledge, but the outcome is an ongoing conflict between different interpretations of occurrences and different possibilities of action. The 'fluent approach' is characterised by a creative synthesis of different sources of knowledge.

The outcomes of these researches, and the difficulty to build upon them, reflect the still tentative stage of this strand of research, the difficulties inherent to redefining the issue of theory and practice in a way that makes it accessible to empirical exploration as opposed of prescribing what should be the case. The definition of key terms and their use emerge here as highly problematic. The need of a better specification of the terms of the question seems to come back as one of the major tasks that all research projects address.

2.5 Summary

In this chapter, I have mapped current thinking on the issue of my research. I have identified a common acknowledged problem in the difficulty of defining the concepts of theory and practice and their relationship (section 2.1). Within the kaleidoscope of positions, I have identified two tensions, which the many contributions on the theme of theory and practice can be viewed as an expression of (section 2.2).

Positions close to the first tension are characterised by a view of good practice as implementation of principles of rationality, by considering ‘doing’ as somehow guided by a theory, by a strong divide between common sense belief and formal academic theory. The latter are considered intrinsically superior to the former and formal theory is seen as the best guide for acting and should replace common sense beliefs. Positions close to this tension tend to be prescriptive (section 2.3).

Positions close to the second tension see thinking as a constituent part of acting, tend to attribute more importance to intuition and creativity. They pay more attention to reflection over the process of building knowledge, epistemology, than to theories. They tend to look and learn from practices and practitioners more than being prescriptive toward them (section 2.4).

What has emerged, in a nutshell, is how a tension between putting theory over practice or vice versa draws the attention of the authors on different aspects and

themes. The contributions considered range from a few extreme positions at either pole, with a larger number of more moderate positions in between, some mediating between different positions, but all tending towards either the theory-led or the practice-led pole. The identification of two trends in the debate is backed up by the presence of two strands of research: one putting the stress on an 'ought to be' theory-guiding role, and the other focused on practice and on how the issue of theory appears from this standpoint.

This review provides the landscape in which my research takes place. My research, which looks at the issue of theory and practice through practitioners' representations, and which puts practices at the centre of the stage, can be connected to the second tension. At the same time it is an attempt not to drop or undervalue one of the terms of the question: theory. While the first strand, particularly in the case of quasi-experimental research, is well established, the second still consists of a multiplicity of approaches: it is still looking at perspectives and ways to explore practices, still tentative and not yet well-developed. The next chapter is going to address this issue and introduce a perspective which allows to consider both terms of the question.

3 Theory and Practice: a Matter of Words

The literature review conducted in the previous chapter illustrates how the discussion on theory and practice has often been driven by concerns with the ambiguous and inconsistent uses of the key terms. As many others before (Pilalis, 1986; Clark, 1991; Harrison, 1991), this study acknowledges the failure of attempts to specify the meaning of the terms 'theory' and 'practice', and the confusion that has resulted. However, instead of engaging in a new attempt to specify the concepts through speculation, trying to overcome the previous ambiguities, it tries to draw some lessons from past failures. Instead of representing problems to be cleared before engaging with substantive analysis, ambiguities and inconsistencies in the use of terms become the very core of investigation.

Drawing upon Wittgenstein's philosophical work on language, I argue that 'theory' and 'practice' can be used to designate two families of languages spoken in different but contiguous communities. The whole issue of theory and practice appears now as a manifestation of the connection between two different families of languages and language games, 'spoken' in different, but interacting social communities. This connection can be studied by looking at how theoretical terms become part of practitioners' talking and thinking about their work. Social workers' descriptions of their work become the 'locus' of the practice/theory relationship (Paley, 1986). Consequently, descriptions will not be treated as a means to reach a deeper understanding of something beyond immediate grasp (namely, the theory and practice relationship), which they can unveil: the relationship between theory and practice, in this perspective, is what appears in the descriptions themselves. Descriptions become the direct topic of research.

In the following sections, I introduce some key themes in Wittgenstein's work, with particular reference to the interpretation of his work by authors adhering to the so-called 'strong programme' in the sociology of science (3.1). I then reconsider the debate over theory and practice, and the search for the most appropriate way to

explore it, in the light of that theoretical position (3.2).

3.1 The Reflection on Language

My perspective is grounded in the sociological reflection on language inspired by Wittgenstein's work and its re-elaboration by the proponents of what has come to be known as the 'strong programme' in the sociology of knowledge (Bloor, 1991; Barnes *et al.*, 1996). The complexity of Wittgenstein's argumentative style, which proceeds in a non-linear way, has prompted endless and radical discussions about how his thought should be best understood.⁶ Obviously, systematic reference to that debate is neither possible nor necessary in the context of this project. However, I still regard it important to present some of the core themes of this perspective in a quite extensive way: they are crucial to my redefinition of the issue of theory and practice, and they are not routinely treated in social work literature.

3.1.1 Words and meaning

Critical thinking about language sets out from a discussion of the nature of meaning, and of the very possibility of identifying something, an entity, independent from the words themselves, and capable of infusing words with life. What is at stake here is what makes words different from 'dead signs', and what is discussed is an unquestioning belief that words are different from dead signs because of something, a meaning, which is added to, or associated with them.

The thought is that meaningful sounds and marks differ from others in being *accompanied* [Stroud's italics] by something. They either produce something, or are produced by something, that is not present among the 'dead' signs. (Stroud, 1996, p.297)

Wittgenstein proceeds by demonstrating that taken-for-granted views and definitions

⁶ The radicalism of this position has attracted widespread criticism both from opponents and other sympathetic interpreters of Wittgenstein (Lolli, 1998; Nagel, 1997; McMullin, 1984; Linch, 1992).

of meanings are unsound and do not solve the problem of the special nature of words. The argument opposes two main ideas: the notion that words refer to something in the world (objects, facts); and the notion that words refer to something in the mind of the speaker: mental images, intentions. The lines of argument against these two notions are quite linked and intertwined. In fact the strongest point against meaning corresponding to mental images is that to introduce mental images between objects and words, is to add no more than a further passage. One could always ask what mental images are and where they come from. Wittgenstein proceeds by inviting the reader to substitute mental images, or whatever is mental, with concrete objects, what is inner with something 'outer': e.g. the image of red with a red sample. What we have then is something dead, a dead object or another dead sign. How could this impart life to 'dead' signs? And how can the theory of mental images solve the problem of abstract entities, such as numbers? What kind of mental images can numbers be? The theory of meaning as corresponding to mental images leaves these questions open and unsolved.

The same style of argument is used to rule out the theory that the meaning of words corresponds to objects in the world or to facts. In this case, words would refer to concrete objects. The point is how the connection between word and object is made and explained. When one is asked the meaning of a word, say tree, one can resort to a verbal description of the object. Nonetheless, a verbal description involves the use of other words. To explain the 'meaning' of these words, one would have to use other words, and the regression from a description to other descriptions could go on forever. What is challenged here is the view that at the end one arrives at simple objects in the world, primary elements, which can just be described through their names and shown (Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigation*, .46 - .64). If words refer to objects, it should be possible to explain the referent of a name, such as tree, pointing to an object. To resort to a single act of ostension presents the same problem as a verbal explanation. What pointing a finger to something refers to, or what it is that the finger points to: it could be the shape, the colour, the dimensions, a particular or the whole ('...an ostensive definition can be variously interpreted in *every* case': P.I., .28).

Meaning as the use of a word in a language

One way to address the question is to consider the way a child learns language (Barnes *et al.*, 1996, pp.49-53). Teaching is done through not one, but repeated acts of ostension in which the word is spelled while pointing to something. What the child has at the end of it is a finite cluster of examples in which the teacher accepts the use of the word. And this finite cluster of examples represent the starting point when facing new examples. No understanding whatsoever plays a part, at least not an understanding of what the world is like. Rather than teaching, one could define this process as training. Learning a language is being trained to the use of words, or/and acquiring a finite cluster of examples in which the use of the word is accepted within the community. Nor does the teacher know much more than the examples s/he gives. The teacher may also just have a wider, but nonetheless finite cluster of examples.

There are two problems here: the first is how examples are clustered in the first place, and the second is how a finite cluster of examples can sustain any new use of the word. The point is how it is possible to go from a finite cluster of examples of use, to the use of the word in any new situation.

As far as the first problem is concerned, Wittgenstein points to the fact that the cluster cannot be explained as being based on criteria. Criteria cannot be other than words, words that require to be explained, or through other words (which involves an infinite regression from words to other words), or through pointing to another finite cluster of examples. This, however, produces a circular argument: it implies the use of a finite cluster of examples as an explanation, when a finite cluster of examples was exactly what had to be explained.

Clusters of examples cannot be other than concrete groups of examples, and, in Wittgenstein's view, examples are gathered together on the basis of 'family resemblances'. Looking at the different ways we use the word game, Wittgenstein

comments: 'And the result of this examination is: we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail.' And in the following paragraph he adds 'I can think of no better expression than 'family resemblances'; for the various resemblances between members of a family: build, features, colour of eyes, gait, temperament, etc.. overlap and criss-cross in the same way.' (Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigation*, 1967, .66.67). As in a family, whose members are similar in different aspects, examples are gathered on the basis of different successive evaluations of resemblances.

If this is the case, one has to consider that each new use of a word involves a judgement: the world is not organised on the basis of our groupings. Each new use of a word starts from a past experience of a finite number of examples; but previous examples are just a resource, they cannot determine new uses. We go from one example to another, and the new use of words is not determined by its past use. It is, in a sense, a creative action. Wittgenstein invites us to think of words as tool kits whose use is not predetermined and which can be differently used in different contexts.

Language and social groups

This picture of language and the meaning of words would leave open the problem of how the use of words can acquire the minimum stability necessary for their use in communication. This is one of Wittgenstein's main arguments: language is conceived in terms of a social practice and it is unthinkable in individual terms; a language can exist only within a community; agreement within the community gives a certain degree of stability to individuals' use of words. Reciprocal adjustments in the infinite number of actions and reactions between members of the community produce constraints and boundaries in the use of words.

This is a fundamental point in the approach. To give the due importance to it, allows us to address some of the criticisms that have seen this approach as an extreme

version of subjectivism (Lolli, 1998; Nagel, 1997). In fact it would be a form of subjectivism only when looking at communities in an anthropomorphic way, as if they were individuals endowed with a perceptive apparatus, a will, and capable of selecting among several possible uses of words. What is described here on the contrary is a natural process: cognitive orders, languages, spring out of an infinite number of reciprocal adjustments among individuals (who are endowed with a perceptive apparatus, etc.); they are not the product of will, whim, rational decision.

In a sense, to say that objectivity comes out of a conventional order is not the same as equating subjectivity and objectivity. And to say that the distinction between what is subjective and what is objective, what is true and what is false, is the product of ongoing negotiation and adjustments among the members of the community, is neither to say that it is arbitrary, or to negate the distinction (Hughes, 1990, p.158). Wittgenstein often treats words as 'objects of comparison', sort of measuring rods (P.I. 130, 131) 'It is one thing to describe methods of measurement and another to obtain and state results of measurement' (P.I. 241, 242).

A good example of how objectivity comes from agreed conventional practices and standardised ways of judging can be found in something which is usually treated as objectively existing independently of any human intervention or interpretation, such as mountains. If one thinks of it, it is quite difficult to state what a mountain is. A satisfactory way to define it, among others, could be to say that a mountain is different from a hill because it is higher than one thousand meters. Where is the objective natural divide here? Nonetheless, when a conventional unit of measure, as well as agreed practices of measuring, are established, then it is possible to say that Ben Nevis is 'objectively' a mountain while the Pentlands are hills and everybody in our community would agree with this. But one has also to acknowledge that 'mountains' do not exist outwith our language games and related practices. And nature will always present us cases which do not fall precisely in our categories.

The fact that any new use of a word involves a judgement should not be seen as contradicting the view that the use of words is not a matter of decision. Wittgenstein

does not describe the judgement as a conscious choice or decision (Bloor, 1982). When we learn a language we learn a customary way to judge new instances in the same way as other people in the community do. 'If the language is to be a means of communication there must be agreement not only in definitions but also (queer as this may sound) in judgement.' (Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigation*, 242). And probably the previous example of the 'mountain' can show one of the many ways we learn to judge the same way other members of our community do.

Hence Wittgenstein's famous assertion: 'For a large class of cases - though not for all - in which we employ the word 'meaning' it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language.' (Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigation*, 43). And to understand the meaning one should not 'think' but look. There is nothing behind words that has to be grasped, and all that is relevant lies in front of our eyes.

In this perspective one can look back to the debate over the key terms, theory and practice with other eyes. There is a new possibility for instance to make sense of the feeling of discomfort some authors have expressed while trying to 'uncover' the meaning of the words through speculation (Bailey, 1982; Pilalis, 1986).

Different uses of words (concepts and categories)

Bloor has seen a strong analogy between Wittgenstein's perspective on language and Von Mises' interpretation of price formation in a market economy. What is underlined here is that a final or a 'correct' price does not exist; prices are re-defined in a continuous way by an infinite number of transactions. For the individual who participates in these transactions, prices can appear as external and objective. But prices are the product of his/her own transaction and other innumerable transactions:

'The notion of 'real meaning' of a concept or a sign deserves the same scorn as economists reserve for the outdated and unscientific notion of 'real' or 'just' price of a commodity. The only real price is the price paid in the course of real transactions as they proceed *von Fall zu Fall*. There is no standard outside these transactions. Nor could a price be created by a single

transaction. Not just once in the history of mankind could someone sell a commodity. Similarly the only way for identifying meaning is by reference to the actual use of the sign in the course of a sequence of collective applications. What the meaning will come to be, in the future, is not determined by past applications. These yield at most a set of resources and contingencies and precedents.' (Bloor, 1997, pp 76,77)

Pushing this analogy further, as the notion of 'just' price is useless, there being no standards by which to calculate the 'right' price, so is the notion of 'wrong' price. Wittgenstein strongly attacks the attempt to look for mistakes in relation to the customs of communities. If a whole community uses a concept in a certain way, the only thing that can be said is that this is the way it is within this community; to talk of mistakes in absolute terms is impossible.

For example, one could think of a community where the distance between two lines is measured along the segment which meeting the lines forms two corners of 80° and 100° degrees. If people within this community have adjusted their practices on the basis of this use of the concept of distance, then this is what distance is in this community and nothing more can be said. In such a community the individual who treats the distance between two lines as we do, would be the one who makes a 'mistake'. But within the picture described until now it would be more appropriate to regard this individual as deviant in relation to the concept of distance in this community (Kripke, 1982). If this same individual manages to produce a change in community practices that is in line with his/her use of the concept of distance, this same individual is going to be regarded as an innovator. Nonetheless, neither before nor after the change, can one identify one use of the concept of distance as correct and the other as incorrect in absolute terms. Nor can one argue that one use is better than the other in absolute terms: the only possible reference we have is the actual use of a concept, which is agreed upon within a given community.

In the last section of this chapter I will show how this whole argument connects to the 'theory and practice' issue. Even now, however, some preliminary considerations are in order about, for instance, the use of words (or concepts) in different communities. In the social work community, certain terms and concepts are likely to

be used by practitioners in a way which is not recognised by academics. Some research has explicitly identified this as a problem (Stevenson and Parsloe, 1978; Marsh and Triseliotis, 1996). In contrast, the perspective presented above suggests that, whatever use of theoretical concepts is made within the practitioners' community, it cannot be regarded as wrong or inappropriate, as long as this use is accepted within the community itself. Differences between formal academic definitions and concepts used by practitioners simply highlight the differences between the academic and practitioner communities and their respective languages.

Language as a fabric

This leads to another consideration. The example made above of the distance between lines could be misleading, like the whole line of argument so far. It could make one think of a word used in isolation from other words. The picture Wittgenstein gives is quite different. Words acquire and change their meaning (the way they are used) within language games.

The mistake we are liable to make could be expressed thus: we are looking for the use of a sign, but we look for it as though it were an object coexisting with a sign. (One of the reasons for this mistake is again that we are looking for a 'thing corresponding to a substantive'). The sign (the sentence) gets its significance from a system of signs, from the language to which it belongs. (Wittgenstein, *The Blue Book*, p.5)

Barnes, while looking at scientific culture, uses for languages the reifying metaphor of a fabric or a network:

It is always possible to reify the verbal component of a culture as a conceptual fabric, a structure made up of generalisations which connects concepts into a single integrated whole..... To use a concept is to appraise an instance in terms of an entire fabric' (Barnes, 1982, p.71 and p.73).

Barnes warns however against taking this reification too seriously. It can be very



convenient, but something gets lost with it. What gets lost in particular is the dynamic character of language: language within this account can be viewed only in terms of an on-going process. What creates stability is continuous movements (use of words) not something solid we recur to.

Another connection to the research can be made here: the study of the use of concepts and labels cannot be interpreted as a study of the idiosyncratic personal ways of using single 'words' by individual practitioners. It is too easy to judge that terms and labels are used in a random or anarchic way, if their use does not correspond to the one of academic language. On the contrary, it is fairly likely to find stable uses of terms or labels, although different. Certain stable uses of labels such as 'crisis intervention' or 'family therapy', make sense within whole language games, and in this sense they can say something about practitioners' cultures. Identification of patterns and recurrences in uses of terms say something about the social groups and dynamics, rather than about the personality or the subjective views of the individual practitioner.

3.1.2 Meaning finitism, classifications, and beliefs

One could derive from this approach that it involves a nihilist position about reality. If our categories are the product of an agreement within the community, in other words they are conventional, then reality might not play any part in them. This would be like saying that reality and the world do not exist: there is no world independent from our constructions. This is not Wittgenstein's position however, nor, on the whole, the position of the interpreters of his thought to whom I have mainly referred.

What is discussed is not the presence of a world independent of our views, but that there can be an absolute and unique order, independent of our conventional cognitive order.⁸ The point is that the world and experiences present us with an infinite,

⁸ Of course, the absence of an absolute order is just an unprovable assumption, in itself neither stronger than weaker than the alternative rationalist assumption that the

complex criss-crossing of similarities and differences. Nothing is totally alike to anything else, and nothing is totally different. It can be hypothesised that human beings have a generic disposition to perceive differences and resemblances in a constant way. But neither the world nor our nature dictates the lines (differences and resemblances) along which the world should be cut. The way it is sliced is based on a certain community agreement and it can be - and indeed is - continuously revised.

It is as if the world is a cake, ready to be cut in any number of ways, indifferent to how it is sliced. We decide on how to do the slicing, but once it has been done the status of everything in the world is fixed, and we must subsequently proceed as the conventions 'require'. Reflection on the empirical process of classification suggests a better metaphor. We have put our knife into the cake in a certain way. But nothing determines how we should continue to cut: we do not have to cut in a straight line. And indeed there is nothing to stop us pulling back the knife some way and starting again. In so far as classifications are conventional, it is our selected ways of applying our terms which will determine what form the conventions have and will have. (Barnes *et al.*, 1996, p.55)

This way of looking at categorisation contrasts at the same time intensional and extensional definitions of classes and categories. Intensional definitions cannot play any role in categorisation because whatever criteria are identified, they cannot be other than other conventional categories; this way a convention would be identified by other conventions: to check whether an instance meets certain criteria would require the same complex judgements of sameness and difference to check whether it is an example of the category itself. Criteria and verbal definitions can only play a part as reinforcement in training in the use of categories, and for people who already know the language. Criteria cannot substitute repeated acts of ostension or exemplification.

world is ordered, and that language simply tends to reflect this order. While the assumption behind the language approach presented here gives a causal account of knowledge, the assumption that there is a natural order has a teleological view of knowledge: for instance, it tends to interpret the scientific endeavour in terms of the progressive discovery or approximation of the natural order. Ultimately, though these are just assumptions about how the world is, and the adherence to one or the other cannot be a matter of rational choice, and can be based just on contingent evaluation of plausibility (Bloor, 1991, p.12).

At the same time, a category cannot be identified as the class of all objects that belong to it. Within a finitist account, this class cannot be other than open ended: all one can have are a finite number of instances and these instances are the bases for future applications of the category but cannot determine them.

Again, within a finitist approach, categories and their use cannot be seen as obeying any supra-ordinate rule. Mathematics and formal logic are other conventional language games played in our community; they cannot provide any superior absolute rule that we have to obey when using our categories, and they cannot provide any sort of absolute standard, so that we can claim to be correct or incorrect in our reasoning in absolute terms. Logical rules are ways to describe, more than determine, the usual way of reasoning and usage of categories. When they are treated as compulsions they have the same authority as all other laws in our society: 'Logical necessity is a moral and social relation, Wittgenstein is quite explicit on this point. Of course the laws of logic can be said to compel us, he says, 'in the same sense, that is to say, as other laws in human society' (Bloor, 1982, p.121). And just before that, commenting on Dummett's criticism of Wittgenstein, Bloor observes: 'For Dummett we have responsibility to the sense of existing concepts. For Wittgenstein this ultimately reduces to a responsibility to the users of the concept' (Bloor, 1982, p.121).

In this picture, categorisations as well as categories are seen as contingent: as they do not obey any order in the world (there is none), so they do not respond to any supra-ordinate and absolute system of rules. As words cannot be used in isolation so one cannot use categories in isolation from one another: when on the basis of resemblances we judge something as an instance of one category, at the same time on the basis of an evaluation of differences we judge it as not being an instance of another category.

Again, from the perspective of my research, this leads to the hypothesis that meeting a different specific use of one or more categories by different groups entails a difference, more or less substantial, in the entire 'network'. A different use of

categories could be used to identify different ‘languages’ spoken within a community (e.g. academics and practitioners can be said to speak different languages, different languages can be identified among practitioners).

3.1.3 N and S designations

So far, all categorisations have been treated indistinctly. Barnes, however, has introduced an interesting distinction (Barnes, 1983). He observes that for some categories it is possible to identify not only a word designating them, but also an independent pattern used in order to operate the designation. He ‘reifies’ this idea, imagining a sort of designating device that possesses a template. Objects are introduced in the device and, if they fit the template, they are labelled with the appropriate designation. One can imagine a designating device for flowers. Objects are introduced in the machine and, if they correspond to the template, they will emerge with the label ‘flower’; if not, they will be labelled as ‘not flower’.

The process of designation does not have a particular impact on the object itself, except for the label. Barnes calls these kinds of designation ‘N designations’ where N stands for Nature. There are however other designations for which it is not possible to identify a pattern distinct from the words used for designating. In a sense, when objects are put in the designating device they will be designated with the label or not, on the basis of the choice of the one who is in charge of the designating device. In this case the label directly affects the object labelled in the sense that the object becomes, through the labelling process, what the label says.

Barnes defines this kind of designation as ‘S designation’ where the S stands for social. A good reification of this labelling process is marriage; a couple become married purely as a result of going through a sort of ‘designating device’, namely they are called married by somebody entitled to. The two persons were not married before the designation and they become so afterwards. From now on, as long as they do not go through another ‘designating device’ which labels them differently, they

will 'be' married. So S designations do not have an independent pattern and they are performative. In a sense they can be looked at as self-referential in all respects. While for N designations one can show a pattern, for S designations the pattern is created by the designation itself.

The main point of S designation, observes Barnes, is the priming. S designation cannot be thought of as primed by individuals in isolation. They involve a community. Barnes identifies two ways in which the priming of an S designation is made. One way involves the presence of a 'cognitive authority' which can prime whatever s/he wish as an S. From then on, for the other individuals in the community S will be all things labelled as S by the authority. The second way involves a community of individuals who communicate among each other. In this second situation a particular item will acquire the label S after having been designated as an S a certain number of times. So if many members of the community designate something/someone as an S, an S it will become.

What Barnes observes then, is that in relation to N designations, as there is a pattern, one can make inductive inference, namely study what other independent patterns are connected to the original one (certain birds make eggs of a certain shape). Operating with S designations, on the contrary, only allows what Barnes calls 'bootstrapped inductions', which in a sense would be like discovering that married people are the ones who can show a certificate of marriage. In a more subtle way, this could be described as using the outcome of a self-fulfilling prophecy to confirm the prophecy itself. As with prices, bootstrapped induction means to identify connections, which, on the other hand, we participate in creating.

Of course N and S designations are presented as stereotypes, and one can always observe that in reality we find the two intertwined. Nonetheless, as far as the designations closer to pure S are concerned, it is pointless to try to define what they 'really are'. While this operation can make sense for an individual to whom they can appear as external, from the point of view of the whole, as there is no previous pattern, one would simply arrive at a tautology.

From the perspective of this research, the designation 'theory', like most concepts in social work theories, can be treated as a S designation, and ultimately it corresponds to what in a certain social group is called theory. Attempts to identify common characteristics in what is designated as theory, in order to understand better the 'nature' of the concept 'theory' and to discriminate in a more coherent way, would be pointless as these characteristics have been attached to theory, and were not there before the designation. They can be better seen as creative moves in a negotiating process on the use of the label. What can instead be a worthwhile object of research, within this perspective, is again to look for the use/uses of the term in a certain community, or in different communities. Within this perspective, while studies and speculations about the nature of S designations are bound to be trapped in bootstrapped inductive inferences, and will merely confirm the relations we contribute to create, empirical studies of S designations can become interesting as studies of different languages and cultures.

3.1.4 Language games and interests

Language games have been presented here as entailing a necessary element of self-reference. If the distinction proposed by Barnes might apparently offer a different picture, this is not really the case. The distinction between N and S designations does not distinguish between wholly self-referential and wholly non self-referential designation (words or categories). As the world is described as an infinite complex criss-crossing of similarities and differences, N designation patterns can only reflect a contingent and conventional judgement of what resemblances and differences count and what can be ignored, and in this sense is self referential.⁹ Accordingly, N designations are no less social products than S designations, and they are to be

⁹ Self- referentiality is defined as being somewhere in between independent reference and the total absence of reference: 'Between reference to an independent reality, and having no reference at all, we have self-reference, i.e. reference to a reality, but a reality which is dependent on the very acts of reference that are directed at it.' (Bloor, 1997, p.68)

connected to a community agreement. Alternatively, one could say N designations are based on judgements over differences and resemblances as they are perceived in the world, while S designations create them.

One could think that language games, since they are treated as self-referential, are also described as totally self-sustaining: reality and the world is perceived as not affecting how our categories and words are used (the world is indifferent to the way we cut it up). In this perspective, no 'message' from reality, no refutation or falsification of our generalisations, seems to be assigned a role in language games, nor in every day language, nor in science. In fact as our system of categorisation is conventional (it is a possible and creative way to cut the cake actually in use, not an identification of how the cake is 'naturally' cut), whatever generalisation can be made about categories is bound to meet counter examples. Sooner or later the world will present instances for which the generalisations do not apply. Nonetheless, such instances cannot be said to determine anything within the languages, nor do they dictate to human beings how they must be treated. They can be ignored as irrelevant, or looked at as accidents or monsters; they could lead to the creation of another category, to a radical change in the language, or to the limitation of the scope of the generalisation. As Barnes puts it, 'The unexpected can always be routinely dealt with by adding a further memory to the store. If anomalies evoke crises and revolutions, the question is why those responses are preferred to more conservative alternatives.' (Barnes, 1982, p.99).

Any dynamic, change or development could be seen just as connected to particular cases seen as a sort of creative process within communities. This does not reflect, however, the position I am presenting here, particularly not the developments of Wittgenstein's thought by the 'Strong Programme'. This group has developed the perspective along a thread which was present in Wittgenstein's thought, though not developed in full, namely the part played by interests in language games (Wittgenstein pointed to needs). Within this perspective, language games cannot be explained by how the world is, by an intrinsic authority of concepts, or by being collective habits and routines (we change our habits and these changes are among the

facts that call for explanation). ‘Unless one opposes finitism, and invests concepts with intrinsic powers, one has to look beyond words for proper explanations’ (Barnes, 1982, p.101). In other words there are no ‘reasons’, but causes to explain category uses and changes. Within this perspective, categorisation as conceptualisation has to be explained as determined or caused by the interplay of interests within a community.¹⁰

‘To understand concept application we must unpack the notion that people develop usage ‘as they see fit’. We must turn to the goals and interests which inform judgement when concepts are applied and usage developed. It is by reference to goals and interests that particular modes of concepts application, selected from and preferred to innumerable alternative options, can be made intelligible’ (Barnes, 1982, p.102).

3.2 Reconsidering Theory and Practice in the Light of the Reflection over Language

In the previous chapter, we have seen how the debate on theory and practice is characterised by disagreement and uncertainty about the definitions of those very concepts. It has also been shown how it is possible to identify two tendencies in the debate. The question now is whether the perspective presented in section 3.1 may cast new light on the whole discussion, and help us to connect different issues, themes and trends in a novel way. Addressing that relationship will allow me to reconsider the position of my own research, and to illustrate how the reflection on languages can be connected to my work.

¹⁰ To give a very simple example, one can imagine a tribe who classify animals into two broad categories: dangerous and not dangerous. One cannot say that this categorisation ‘creates’ a difference in nature; it is based on a perceived and experienced difference. At the same time, there are virtually limitless additional differences, on which classification and categories could be based. The fact that this difference has become the one along which categorisation is made, cannot be connected to anything ‘already there’ in nature, but is to be explained in connection to the tribe's struggle for survival.

3.2.1 The debate as expression of a struggle over boundaries

To this purpose, we have to shift our focus from the theory and practice issue to the professional community and its internal segmentation. That professional communities be internally divided on the basis of conflicting interests has been extensively argued in reference to other professional groups (Freidson, 1986; Atkinson, 1983). The question here is, how can we revisit the debate presented in chapter 2 from this particular angle.

We have shown that some themes and issues appear to be constantly present over time, though being assigned different importance and different meanings. One that can be used as example is the discussion about whether art or science can provide a paradigm for social work. The main character of the debate is the different definition of a quite specific set of factors, e.g. thinking and acting, scientific knowledge and common sense, and the consequent different way to relate these factors to one another.

I suggest that an interesting perspective to look at the whole debate and at the two trends identified is to see them in terms of definition of boundaries and/or as a struggle around the boundaries. In a sense, different definitions and different uses of the terms and concepts can be linked to different definitions of the groups (practitioners, academic social workers, employers) and their relations.

When one starts looking at the different positions in these terms, the underlined or overt dominant presence of the issue of defining boundaries between groups, associated with introduction or blurring of distinctions and differences in the terms, appears as striking. The authors close to the first tendency for instance see a strong divide between scientific theories and common sense beliefs. This divide is much more uncertain, discussed and criticised by the authors identified in the second trend. It is inevitable to see how these different ways of drawing distinctions have a direct

impact on different definitions of the relationship between academic social workers, the academic community, and the practitioners' community.

And at the same time it has an impact on the connected different ways of drawing frontiers between the professions, informal lay helpers on one side and other professions on the other. To see the concrete impact of different ways of drawing boundaries in this case, one need merely think of social workers negotiating wages or careers on the basis of the possession of an 'uncommon common sense', or, on the contrary, on the basis of an esoteric theoretical knowledge.

Given the concrete relevance of the definition of boundaries, it is plausible to think that behind this complex definition of boundaries there is a complex interplay of interests. Several authors have connected the emergence and differentiation of positions to the different interests of the different groups involved. For instance, Payne (1991) declares that behind the pragmatic position there is a struggle of power over the control of practitioners. He does not go further than that, but one naturally thinks of the struggle of agencies (Lee, 1982; Dominelli, 1997) to take control over social workers' training, in order to employ more manageable and less autonomous social workers: in other words, practitioners who are well informed, but not influenced by the theoretical 'bubbles' and radical ideas which seem to be hegemonic in the academic context, particularly in sociology.

Many authors connect the debate over the integration of theory and practice to a struggle by academic social workers to be accepted in the academic community and at the same time to take control over the practitioners' community. Sheppard (1998) and Sheldon (1978), though in complete different ways, notice that, particularly in order to be accepted in the academic community, academic social workers seem to have lost contact with the specificity of social work practice. This goes with the fact that, in order to be accepted, they have taken a subordinate position from other more established disciplines in the social sciences.

Among others, Karger has definitely focused on the interests and power struggles

which are identified as the moving forces of this debate (Karger, 1983). His polemical target is 'scientism', which he sees as increasingly dominant among social work academics. Karger sees the debate about the transformation of social work into a scientific practice as an under-cover struggle between practitioners and academics. Science is merely the 'symbolic rubric' which, in a sense, masks the struggle:

It is a struggle between the researcher-academicians and practitioners for control of social work - a struggle between values, beliefs, and the *weltanschauung* of the researchers in contradistinction to the practitioners' perspective. (Krager, 1983, p. 202)

Krager remarks that the relevance given to science, though masking a struggle for the definition of a hierarchical relation between different social groups, is not irrelevant. There seems to be a wider political dimension to this choice. The division of labour it entails reflects the division of labour in the wider society. On top of that, science and research are seen as ways of producing 'stories', spectacles to see and interpret reality and events, which are consonant with and confirm existing social paradigms:

The earlier stories were shrouded in religion and today's are scientific, but both make claims of legitimacy. The function of both stories is to reinforce the existing social paradigm in a society. (Krager, 1983, p. 203)

There are many signs of the presence, within social work reflection, of the perspective that sees the debate as a struggle over boundaries and in terms of interests. In fact, when interests, and particularly vested interests, have been called into play in the debate, this has often been as part of attempts to disqualify opponents' positions.¹¹ On the contrary, within the perspective I am referring to, the whole debate can be looked on as part of a negotiating process over the reciprocal position of different groups. Different views can be considered different strategies that the academic and the practitioners' community may adopt to negotiate with each other as well as with third parties, such as employers or other related professionals.

¹¹ See for instance Payne, who attributes vested interest to the 'pragmatics', while seeming to describe academic social workers as moved by the higher goal of improving social work practice.

Looking back at the two trends in terms of negotiating strategies, it appears that the first trend entails a quest for the recognition of social work within the academic context. This entails assuming a subordinate position in relation to more established disciplines, and a control by academics over practitioners. The advantage of this strategy for practitioners would be elevation to the level of other, more accredited professions. In this trend, boundaries are mainly of a vertical type, and they identify a hierarchy.

The second trend, on the contrary, tends to underline differences and peculiarities more in qualitative terms, but along continuous lines; boundaries are mainly horizontal. Here, the alliance between academics and practitioners becomes crucial, and, in relation to the academic context, the struggle is for social work to be accepted as different, but on an equal level among social sciences. See for instance the stress put on social work as an autonomous academic discipline (Shepard, 1997).

The 'debate over words' illustrated in the first section can be understood in a different way: it can be connected to the development of trends. The negotiating strategies in fact are built up over different uses of, and meanings attributed to, the crucial terms. Most of the inconsistencies underlined by Clark (1991) can make sense if the positions are seen in terms of strategies for negotiating relationships among groups. Likewise, many ambiguities in the different positions can be looked at as concessions to one group or to the other, an instance of this dynamic being the ambiguous use of the term 'practice-theory'.

3.2.2 Languages and the theory and practice issue

A review of the debate in terms of different negotiating strategies for boundary definition, whether between academics and practitioners, social work and other professions, or else, illustrates the complexity of research on theory and practice. More specifically, it reminds us of the fact that any new definition of the issue is bound to be a step in a negotiating process, and in doing so, it sets the scene for this

research.

But the reflection over languages also prompts another observation. The struggle to define what is theory and what is practice through a speculative exercise - which many argue as being the first step for a research - appears destined to create more confusion than clarity. Likewise individuals' attempts to create abstract definitions, abstract lines of discrimination between different kinds of knowledge, are likely to remain abstract definitions: formal rules do not carry rules for their application. One can acquire the ability to repeat abstract definitions in a way which is recognised by the other members of the community, and to discriminate them from other abstract definitions. But this is different from being able to use the labels in connection to specific situations in a stable way, namely in the same way as other members of the community do.

Theory and practice, rather than abstract entities which cannot be captured, can be concretely described as families of language games, which imply a certain stable use of 'words written or spoken' (concepts), and certain connections between words. The point is not to establish and define what the terms mean, but to look empirically at how they are used in different contexts. In this sense the definition given by some students that 'theory is what one does at school and practice is what one does in placements', which has been often dismissed as simplistic, is more helpful than abstract classifications.

The issue can be re-defined in terms of what impact theoretical academic language (learnt at school and through training) has on practitioners' language/s, namely on the cognitive order by which they make sense of what they do. To explore the issue of theory and practice in practitioners' representations, can be seen as an exploration of practitioners' languages. Accounts and descriptions of the work are more than a means to understand a reality that lies beyond, they become the direct object of research. Descriptions can be treated as samples of language games, and it is at this level that the connection between theory and practice can be found.

This approach is not new in social work. Paley (1986) observed how within the more traditional perspective, the issue of theory and practice appears quite difficult to handle. In his view the question whether social workers do or do not use theory is to be avoided. With a reference to the sociology of knowledge, and particularly to 'the strong programme', he observes that in the first place theories cannot be treated as fixed entities:

We think of theories as represented by words, written or spoken; but it will be evident [...] that words do not 'carry' the rules for their own application, their meaning must be embedded in practices. [...] In different cultures, therefore, we can expect different understandings - and different particular applications - of the same theoretical terms. (Paley, 1986, p.172)

Paley observes that when looking at the theory-practice issue in terms of languages, most of the outcomes of previous research could be reinterpreted. His hypothesis is that most practitioners' statements about theory express a resistance to accounting for their practices in theoretical terms, and at the same time the belief that they should be able to do so. The 'unconscious use of theory' or the different approaches to theory (e.g. Barbour, 1984) are in Paley's view all variations on the same linguistic theme. He hypothesises that in social work as in other fields (Gilbert and Mulkay, 1984), it is possible to identify two linguistic repertoires: the official one, which entails the use of theoretical terms, and the contingent one, which is the one used in daily practice. One of Paley's suggestions is that it could be more interesting to study the contingent language, rather than to ask questions that elicit the official one. This is in tune with many recent pieces of research in which the question of theory and practice has been set aside, and which directly explore practitioners' descriptions of their work.

While assuming the same perspective, I disagree with Paley on many points. It is a matter of fact that practitioners play different language games while speaking with their clients, chatting with colleagues, or presenting their work in a meeting or to an interviewer. However, Paley treats some language games as more 'authentic' than others. To me, this seems like a new version of the dichotomy between language and

reality: a certain repertoire becomes the 'true one', while the other only performs a legitimising function. However, language should not be reduced to mere representation of an external reality. Languages are better conceived as 'forms of life', i.e., the way through which reality is constructed. And it is at recurrent, pronounced differences and similarities in the uses of words and their combinations that we are looking, not at nuances or personal, subjective uses of words.

Secondly, Paley seems to imply that academic language has no impact whatsoever on the contingent repertoire. What theory provides, in Paley's view, is 'just an unpopular, and severely limited, form of accounting'. Here one has to remember though that when talking about theory and practice, one is considering the impact of studying on practising. Paley's position would imply that years of training and contacts with the academic community do not have any sort of impact on the way practitioners think, or rather, on practitioners' language and frames. If this were the case, it would be better to abandon altogether any reflection on training: professional courses could be seen as mere rituals one has to go through in order to acquire the proper designation, namely to qualify as a social worker.

On the contrary, while acknowledging that social workers who account for their practice in terms of specific models are probably something of an exception, the picture changes when we consider concepts or terms used for describing the work, clients and so on. One can find that many terms used to account for practice are those used in social work literature.

Exploring the use of common terms or concepts in the two different languages can represent a good way to explore the issue of theory and practice. This way there is the possibility to address a question which is relevant for practitioners without dropping one of the terms of my research question (theory), as other researchers have done.

In this context, a term which is considered crucial both in the literature and by practitioners, can be the starting point for an exploration of the issue. The use of a

common term, such as 'contract', can be assumed as an example of how theoretical language becomes part of the way practitioners make sense of what they do.

When looking at the issue in terms of language games, what elsewhere has been treated as a problem, namely, the differences in the use of theoretical terms by practitioners, becomes here the focus of interest. The interpretation of differences in the use of terms and concepts as 'distortions' has to be seen as claiming authority for academics over practitioners, an authority which apparently practitioners do not accept. When this claim is set aside, similarities and differences can show the transformations of use that a term goes through when used within different community. In this sense the analysis of similarities and differences in uses of the same term, and of its linkages to other terms within broader systems of meaning, enable us to access the different languages spoken within the practitioners' community in their globality. While abandoning the idea of measuring the correctness of the use of a term compared to academic standards, this analysis can yield an inside understanding of social work subcultures and frameworks.

At the same time, on top of the above considerations, to address the issue through a particular concrete example can provide a chance for practitioners to express opinions about how they connect theory to practices in a specific way. Indeed, the vagueness of the answers to the question of how theory affects practice can be ascribed to the vagueness of the questions from practitioners' perspective. Starting from a specific case facilitates a more manageable and focused discussion of the issue. The point becomes how, in relation to a defined 'object', they connect what they have learnt from books and courses to something learnt from experience, and how they do make sense of their practice.

3.3 Summary

In this chapter, I have introduced the main problems attached to an empirical investigation of the 'theory and practice' issue. Considering that one of the recurrent issues in the debate is related to the use of the key terms, of concepts and words, I

suggest looking at the issue of theory and practice as a language issue. The foundations of this approach lie in the reflection over language in the sociology of knowledge.

Introducing some key themes of this reflection enables me to offer a different interpretation of the debate and to redefine the object of the study in terms of the relation between two interacting social groups 'speaking' different languages.

By defining 'theory' and 'practice' as two families of language games, different uses of a specific term, regarded as relevant within a specific community, become a relevant object of investigation. They provide us with an important clue to undertake the empirical study of the problem. The next chapter will introduce the specific term selected for my analysis: namely, the term 'contract'.

4 The Case of the Contract

Although the perspective of this research, and with it the definition of the object, have changed along the way, the decision to address the theory-practice issue focusing on specific examples was taken from the beginning. This was a way to handle the vagueness and uncertainty of the subject: if one considers the relationship between theory and practice in abstract terms, one has nothing to get one's teeth into in terms of research, so the issue has to be translated into more concrete terms. Relating theory to practice entails considering the reciprocal impact of two different sets of experiences: attending courses and lectures, and/or reading books and articles, on the one hand; making sense of social work in practice, and organising its routines, on the other. Hence, starting from a specific example, instead of attempting to tackle the issue as a whole, appeared since the early stages as a promising starting point.

The original plan was to consider a specific approach among those usually included in training programs, such as the task-centred model or crisis intervention. However, informal contacts with managers and practice teachers suggested it might be difficult to find social workers willing to describe their work in relation to a theoretical approach or a formalised model. In other words, coherently with the outcomes of previous studies, it emerged that practitioners were reluctant to admit they were 'using' an approach, whatever 'use' means.

In a sense, none of the approaches considered seemed to provide a satisfactory subject for empirical, concrete investigation. However, early informal contacts found attitudes to be radically different if the use of specific terms and concepts was discussed in relation to practices. For instance, one of the recurrent words used to describe practice was 'contract'. Many practitioners would describe their practice, or crucial aspects of it, in terms of 'contracts' or 'contract work', and would connect their 'use' of contracts to their training experience.

Therefore, 'contract' was identified as a possible bridge between academics' and practitioners' language. Other terms might have possibly worked as well;

nonetheless, 'contract' was the one that emerged spontaneously in the first informal conversations I had with practitioners and practice teachers. It appeared from the beginning as a most appropriate object of investigation, given its seemingly crucial role within practitioners' descriptions of their work and in relevant social work literature.

In this chapter, I will present what the literature has to say about contracts and contract work, the definitions of the concept, and the relevant research. I will introduce the main elements of the debate that has developed in relation to the concept of contract, and will justify the choice of this concept for my research.

4.1 The Concept of Contract: Theoretical Sources

Several authors (Maluccio and Marlow, 1974; Corden and Preston-Shoot, 1987b; Davies, 1995) trace the origin of the concept of contract in social work literature to a very early stage. Elements of contract work are seen as present in writings on group work and casework between the forties and fifties (Hamilton, 1951; Perlman, 1957).¹¹

The success of the functionalist school in social work is seen as one of the most important factors for the development of attention to the concept of contract (Corden and Preston-Shoot, 1987b). Contract appears as a crucial concept in connection to a functionalist definition of practitioners' roles and their relationship to clients. One of the innovative contributions of this school had been to shift the attention away from the specific encounter between clients and social workers, towards the context in which these meetings take place. There is emphasis on how a public agency influences both the role of practitioner and the nature of the relationship. What is underlined is the intrinsic conflict between the rather fixed and stable definition of needs and resources, which characterises a bureaucratic social service, and the

¹¹I particularly mention these two texts because their Italian editions were among the main textbooks in social work schools during the 1960s.

peculiar and dynamic way in which people perceive their needs and problems. In relation to this intrinsic conflict, practitioners essentially operate as mediators. Mediation is connected to the multiple accountability that characterises the practitioners' position as employees of an agency, facing clients' needs and problems. This is the background to the introduction of the contract as a basic and crucial tool for social work practice.

Alongside the development of the functionalist school, psychoanalysis was in decline as a unique or even a major theoretical reference for social work. This was influenced by a growth of interest in theories very often in contrast with the basic principles of psychoanalysis. Some examples are the Otto Rank model, Rogers's humanistic approach, cognitivism, and ego psychology. These theoretical approaches, although substantially different from one another, share several main basic assumptions:

- a. the importance given to the purposeful nature of human action;
- b. a view of behaviour as motivated by intentions and not determined by inner drives;
- c. the emphasis on conscious processes in mental activity;
- d. the stress on human resources, and socially acceptable ways of coping with problems, rather than on deficits and pathologies;
- e. the view of human beings as capable of taking responsibility for their actions.

This change in the theoretical trend can be seen as substantially conducive to the concept of contract. All the points summarised above can be considered as a theoretical frame of reference basic to contract work. The concept of contract in social work presupposes a view of clients as adults able to face their problems, to take responsibility on decisions, and to hold and express a valuable point of view about their situation. It entails treating clients' intentions and conscious opinions on the same level as those of professionals. And, it entails considering clients as capable of taking an active and responsible role in the interaction. In other words, the contract becomes a crucial concept, within a framework in which practitioners are no

longer viewed as the ones who 'know better' (who take charge of the solution of clients' problems), and are rather seen as mediators between different, and differently competent, subjects.

4.2 The Concept of Contract in Social Work Literature

In this cultural atmosphere, the contract, particularly since the 1970s onward, has become an essential ingredient in any discussion of social work and its methods (Davies, 1995; Neve, 2000). The concept has been elaborated within most of the several approaches developed in these years, sometimes becoming an object of study in its own right. While there are certainly differences in the definitions, and there are critical positions about the use of contract, nonetheless the concept has been treated in the literature as quite uncontroversial:

In social work the contract has generally been defined as an agreement between client and worker that sets forth the purpose of their interaction and the processes through which that purpose is to be achieved. (Seabury, 1976, p.16)

From this general definition, one can see that the concept of contract focuses on two aspects of the intervention (Sills, 1997). The first is the agreement, which entails negotiation of the content of the contract. As such, contract has been seen as a potential bridge between clients' and practitioners' clashing perspectives, and a way of redefining the practitioner-client relation (Lishman, 1994). The second is the specification of a detailed structure for the agreed plan (definition of goals, tasks and timing). In this respect, contract is interpreted as an improvement over vague and purposeless work styles (Davies, 1995; Coronelli, 1995).

In addition to this, the distinctive features of contract work identified in the literature are quite similar (Maluccio, 1974; Seabury, 1976; Corden and Preston-Shoot, 1987b; Davies, 1995; Lishman, 1994; Ferrario, 1996b). They can be summarised in five main aspects: mutuality, honesty, flexibility, adherence to reality and introduction of a focus.

Mutuality. To be considered a contract, a pact should be based on mutual agreement. 'Mutuality' means that the agreement must be recognised as meaningful by both parties. It also implies that clients' points of view and intentions are as crucial information as practitioners' and should be considered as equally important, even though they are the product of different perspectives. In a sense, mutuality introduces an element of reciprocity to an interaction that is considered intrinsically unbalanced. It acknowledges clients' preferences and intentions, as well as the limits to social workers' power, and to their ability and right to judge and assess one's situation in place of the subject.

Honesty and open communication. A contract requires goals as well as plans to be openly declared. Practitioners are expected to declare and discuss openly their own evaluations and goals, instead of acting directly on their basis. Every important element must be the object of open communication. The agreement, to be considered a contract, must be explicit. Communication in this picture becomes an important focus of attention.

Flexibility distinguishes the contract in social work from the legal context: it is a dynamic agreement, not fixed and binding from the outset. On the contrary, it must be verified and revised throughout its course. It can be changed and adjourned if the situation is modified. When anything goes differently from what was agreed, the validity of the contract itself should be discussed again.

Adherence to reality. Contract must be realistic in that the feasibility of the agreement must be checked against reality. On the one hand, the terms of the agreement must be within the boundaries that limit the range of action of social workers. On the other, they must offer clients a real opportunity to fulfil them.

Introduction of a focus. Although there are different positions on this point, nonetheless it is widely recognised that a contract should define boundaries and provide a clear sense of direction.

4.3 The Development of the Concept

Since the 1970s onward, the concept of contract has been developed and studied within different models and approaches, including the unitary model (Pincus and Minahan, 1973), task-centred work (Doel and Marsh, 1992; Ferrario, 1996b), cognitive behavioural intervention (Sheldon, 1995), and the empowerment approach (Lee, 1994).

Yet differences in definitions of contract do not seem very great. Slight diversities can be found over the main function attributed to contracts: some authors stress the efficacy of contract work (e.g. Reid 1972; Sheldon, 1995), others stress ethical considerations which justify the approach (Corden and Preston-Shoot, 1987b).

There are also differences about what constitutes the necessary content of a contract. Some authors espouse a more generic definition of the content: the agreement must consider all the main aspects of the intervention, including, where relevant, the method to be used (Corden and Preston-Shoot, 1987b; Doel and Marsh, 1992). Other approaches, for instance some presentation of task-centred work, are more specific: focus, goals, tasks, expected outcomes and length of the intervention are necessary ingredients of a contract (Ferrario, 1996b). In that case, it is emphasised that the contract provides a clear structure for the work, as it 'forces' practitioners to work within clear and openly defined boundaries (Coronelli, 1995).

Apart from that, definitions in different approaches still have many points in common. First, the recognised functions of contracts are:

- a. to respect clients' rights to self-determination;
- b. to make interventions more structured and focused, and to help set realistic goals;

- c. to transform clients' roles from that of a passive receiver of benefits to that of active subjects, prepared to take their responsibilities in the solution of their own problems;
- d. to enhance clients' motivation to face their problems;
- e. to make social workers more accountable, especially to clients;
- f. to secure that practitioners and clients have a shared understanding of target problems, goals, and proposed solutions.

As it may be observed, contract is not usually presented as something that naturally takes place between practitioner and clients. On the contrary, it entails a set of abstract rules and prescriptions, which should be followed in order to tackle certain problems that have been identified by social workers' assessment. It is often presented in opposition to traditional, unstructured ways of working (Davies, 1995).

Nonetheless, the contract cannot be considered as a sort of ideal, abstract concept as opposed to actual practice. Over the years, advocates of contract work have found justification of the relevance of this approach in empirical studies, which demonstrate the efficacy of contract work in one form or another. On the other hand, reflection over contract work has developed in connection with a developing definition of citizens' rights and entitlements in relation to their contact to social services and social workers.

4.4 Evidence of the Efficacy of Contract

Three strands of research can be connected to contracts: studies of continuance in casework, client studies, and experimentation with social work methods. In the first strand, the evidence of efficacy of contracts is based on studies over discontinuity

and continuance in social work treatment. Pincus and Minahan (1973) argue that contract negotiation is a major tool for social work interventions because, in addition to other considerations, there is evidence that continuance in casework is significantly related to the presence of an agreement between clients and workers over the target problem/s, goals, and ways to reach these goals. These authors base their argument on the evidence gathered by Cartwright and Zander (1968) and on George Levinger's (1960) review of research into continuance in casework. Seabury (1976) cites several studies in the 1960s, which connect the agreement between social worker and client with continuity of treatment. Among them was Lake and Levinger's (1960) research at a Child Guidance Clinic, which found 82% of 'continuer' clients to agree with the social worker on the problem to be treated and on the services to be provided. Only 32% of the clients who dropped out claimed to have reached such an agreement. All available studies demonstrate that contract work provides an important precondition for the success of any form of treatment: without an agreement, clients are more likely to drop out at the early stages.

Further support for contract work comes from the results of many pieces of research on clients' perceptions and evaluations of social work intervention. Clients' satisfaction cannot be considered as an indicator of effectiveness on its own. Sometimes researchers have found that clients were satisfied with their contact with social workers even in the presence of poor measurable outcomes (Fisher, 1983). But it is widely accepted that client satisfaction is an important factor to be considered when assessing the success of interventions and methods.

Mayer and Timms's classic research (1970) shows how clients' satisfaction arise from the consideration given by social workers to their point of view, and from their understanding of what is going on. On the contrary, dissatisfaction is usually connected to a clash in perspective between social worker and client over the interpretation of the situation (Lishman, 1978), the problem that has to be treated, and the goals that have to be reached. It also provides evidence of how lack of explicit discussions about those aspects produce unease and misunderstanding among clients, in turn facilitating dropping-out.

Analogous conclusions come from Sainsbury, Nixon, and Phillips (1982); among other results, they underline the negative effects produced by discrepancies between clients' and practitioners' perceptions. In particular, the authors point to the difficulties that arise from undisclosed purposes on the part of social workers:

These difficulties became apparent in three ways. First, the style of work (i.e. the means for achieving ends rather than ends themselves) sometimes felt partly irrelevant to the clients; some clients complained that they did not know what was going on (....) Second, some clients began to complain that the work seemed aimless. (...) Third, we received worrying reports from some clients of loss of morale following earlier improvements in this respect... (Sainsbury, Nixon, and Phillips, 1982, pp.171-172)

Results show quite clearly that clients want to be listened to, to be given information, and that they want their points of view to be considered. However, available research shows some ambiguity as far as the will to participate in the process is concerned. For example, in their review of studies of clients' experience of social work, Rees and Wallace (1982) identify two main positions among clients in relation to the sharing of power and authority, a key issue in contract work. The first position sees the social worker as a sort of colleague, and expects some degree of equality in the relationship. Clients sharing this position want their point of view to be considered and they appreciate participating in decision-making, or even taking decisions in their own hands directly:

What all those clients have in common is a special appreciation of the professional and his or her 'expertise' and a willingness to act for themselves and to make their own decisions once they have the benefit of the social workers' specialist knowledge. (Rees and Wallace, 1982, p.40)

This position has been found among many groups of clients: multi-problem families, families in poverty, foster families etc. (Silverman, 1969; Schwartz, 1970, cited in Rees and Wallace, 1982; Perlman, 1975; Rees, 1978). However, in different pieces of research these groups show a common cluster of characteristics: good level of education, previous experience and confidence in dealing with authority and professional social workers, and a good degree of control over their own lives. Those

clients should be the ones who most appreciate a contractual approach from social workers.

In many client studies analysed by Rees and Wallace, though, another position was detected. Many clients consider the social worker as an expert whose role is to take all responsibility for the intervention. These clients expect to be told what to do and to be directed. If this position seems to be in contrast with the idea of contract work, a consideration of the reasons behind it could lead to different reflections. Those clients seem to share low levels of self-esteem and little trust in authorities in general:

Many of these people, though not all, tend to be submissive when confronted by officials and authority. They are usually poor and they feel they have little control over their own lives. Past experiences with people representing authority lead them to believe that passive acceptance is the least distressing way of interacting with such people (...) They assume a relationship of knowledge and power. The social worker is an expert whom it is inappropriate to challenge. The nature of their relationship with the social worker is that of giver and receiver... (Rees and Wallace, 1982, p. 41)

One could argue that contract work should be useful particularly with these clients. On the other hand, the fact that it does not correspond to their expectations certainly represents a major problem. How can one reach mutuality with someone who does not look for it, and does not want it? However, overall, research on clients' opinions has shown that clients appreciate the features of contract work.

A third area of research connected to contracts consists of experiments or quasi-experimental research into social work methods, meant to evaluate their effectiveness. The use of contracts is a common feature of the methods that experimental research has revealed to be the most effective (Sheldon, 1986 and 1995). Sheldon reviewed studies on social work effectiveness and summed up the characteristics of the methods that had positively passed the test of effectiveness. He emphasised that:

Open negotiation with clients regarding ends and means appears also to be an influential factor, as is contractual style or the use of written agreements. Ends-means confusions are rife in therapeutic work (revealed particularly in social work by client opinion research) and regular reviews of progress against pre-negotiated objectives appears to be our best means for keeping them at bay. (Sheldon, 1995, p.17)

Some studies have given special attention to the correlation between the presence of an agreed contract and the results. For instance, the experiment by Sinclair and Walker (1985) in two intake services demonstrates first that failures were correlated mainly to a clash in perspective between practitioner and client, which had not been overcome in the work process. Successes were, on the contrary, correlated with the reaching of an agreement over goals and tasks. Even in those cases in which initial disagreements and positive outcomes were associated, it emerged that a later agreement had occurred: either social workers accepted the definition of clients even while not fully agreeing, or the clients at the end were convinced that social workers' suggestions were worth considering and testing.

4.5 Clients' Rights

Another justification for the use of contract work is related to ethical principles and to a growing awareness and attention to the rights of citizens who come in contact with social services. Clients' studies are at the same time a signal and a reinforcement of this growing awareness. Clark and Asquith summarise a typical list of the rights of clients as they are defined in social work literature. Some of them provide a basis for the justification of contract work (Clark and Asquith, 1985, p.29):

- the right of clients to be treated as an end;
- the right of self-determination;
- the right to be accepted for what one is, and not encounter a condemnatory attitude;
- the right to be treated with honesty, openness and without deception.

Referring to the current debate, Corden and Preston-Shoot (1987b) identify four areas of rights that can be connected to contracts. The first area is related to the rights citizens have during their first contacts with services. These are mainly connected to clear information about their legal rights and duties, about the options they have, about the provisions they are entitled to and the criteria adopted to determine people's eligibility for each service.

Information is seen as a basic precondition to enable people to make their own decisions or, if this is not possible, at least to participate in decision-making, which represents the second area of rights to be considered:

Given the dangers of token efforts to improve participation, recommendations have been made that clients should be able to negotiate a contract to govern the form in which they are helped... (Corden and Preston-Shoot, 1987b, p.21)

Those rights should also be respected, as far as possible, in dealings with involuntary clients. Those rights are recognised for instance through the right of children to be heard on any issues or decisions which affect them, the rights of parents to participate in child protection case conferences and to take part in the review process when children are under compulsory measures of care.¹²

The third area comprises citizens' rights to open information about the assessments made concerning their situation and the plans in which they are involved. This implies open access for clients to their files. This right has been widely recognised, even though it raises many dilemmas, for instance when files contain private information about third persons.

Finally, Corden and Preston-Shoot consider citizens' to complain about the help and provisions they receive and to appeal against decisions taken by statutory agencies. This right can be respected only with the creation of channels through which clients can complain, express their disagreement, and where clients can have their

¹² See e.g. *Child Protection Guidelines*, 1994; *The Children (Scotland) Act*, 1995.

complaints seriously considered by third parties and not by those who were involved in the first place.

According to Corden and Preston-Shoot, the use of contracts by social workers can be considered a substantial contribution to the implementation of these clients' rights. Research has shown the potential effectiveness of contract work. However, ethical considerations over the respect of clients' rights lead these authors to the conclusion that this approach should be applied as widely as possible prior to any assessment of its effectiveness:

The justification of contractual approach should rest on ethical rather than clinical grounds. (Corden, 1980, p.153)

4.6 Contract Work in Practice: Controversies and Divergent Positions

While the concept of contract has acquired a status in social work literature and is mostly used in an uncontroversial way, the picture becomes more problematic when considering the implementation of contract work. Many problems still appear unsolved, e.g., to what extent this approach can be put in practice, or, what clients and what situations are appropriate to contract work.

Many authors have stressed that contract work is not applicable in several prominent areas of social work, for instance with involuntary clients. In these cases, which form a considerable proportion of the practitioners' caseload, agreement seems rather difficult if not impossible. Another problematic situation develops when the client is not an individual but a 'multiperson system', where the members of the system are in conflict with each other (Seabury, 1976). The third difficult situation occurs when clients cannot be considered as subjects able to take decisions in relation to their situation and to take responsibility for their actions. This is the case of small children, and of severely mentally disabled clients.

For advocates of contract work, these limits in the use of contracts are problems which can be faced partly through the development of negotiating techniques, and partly with a different use of contract (Corden, 1980). Several authors point out that in the case of small children and the severely disabled, social workers are involved in working with families or guardians with whom a contract is possible (Seabury, 1976; Corden, 1980). Corden also warns against social workers' too simplistic evaluations of their clients' incapacity. He suggests that attempts should be made in order to test the presence of even a limited ability to decide for themselves. Even in cases where practitioners have to take on themselves the responsibility of a choice, contract work can give guidelines, for instance as far as respect of clients' wishes, openness and explicit recognition of disagreements are concerned.

While the same advocates of contract work have identified several problems and offered ways to tackle them, another, more radical position has emerged in the debate over contracts. In a well-known and frequently quoted article, Rojek and Collins (1987) question the very possibility of contract work being other than a utopia based on an idealistic (or ideological) view of the interaction between clients and practitioners. They assert that contracts merely have the function of mystifying and masking the real nature of the relationship between social workers and clients, which is actually determined by power relations.

First, they notice that the imbalance of power between practitioners and their clients is based on structural factors. Such imbalance seems unlikely to be reduced by the mere use of a different approach. How can one balance a relationship in which one side has knowledge, information, experience, and institutional backup, while the other is in a very weak position because of his/her problems, lack of competence, and isolation from any supportive agent?

Second, one has to recognise the lack of freedom that characterises the position of social workers and clients when defining a contract. In particular, social workers are held accountable to many quarters: superiors, managers, the community etc, and not only to clients (e.g. Clark and Asquith, 1985). They have a duty to protect the

interests of third subjects, i.e. children, who are involved but often are not direct clients of social workers, and moreover are not eligible for contract work, as they are legally considered incapable. In supporting families and children, social workers cannot accept deals that do not take into account their duties to protect the rights of children. All this puts severe limitations on the possibility of considering the client's perspective and intentions.

Third, social workers and clients refer to different signifying systems in their communication: they give different connotative and denotative meanings to words. This makes open and unambiguous communication impossible, as it is impossible to overcome the existing clash in perspectives between practitioners and clients, demonstrated by many research projects. Clients are not even in the position to understand what contracts in social work are, as the language used by social workers to explain them refers to a signifying system they are not familiar with.

Rojeck and Collins (1987) maintain that in this context, imagining any sort of fair deal between clients and social worker is illusory, either towards oneself, or towards others. Contract can only be used to conceal the very nature of the relationship between clients and practitioners: it implies the utopian possibility of keeping society out of this relationship. And because of this, it allows social workers to forget, or set aside, the much more concrete and substantial commitment to confront the structural causes of social injustice and inequality.

Corden and Preston-Shoot's reply to this attack (1987b) re-affirms the positive features of contracts. Contracts, far from being 'idealistic or dishonest', can be seen as the best – possibly, the only – means of dealing with many of the problems underlined by Rojeck and Collins. Corden and Preston-Shoot recognise the limits of the approach, for instance the difficulties of reaching mutuality or the fact that misunderstandings between practitioners and clients are endemic etc. On the other hand, they advocate a more positive attitude aimed at finding ways to overcome or take these problems under control, instead of using them to drop the approach without proposing any alternative option.

As far as the imbalance of power is concerned, Corden (1980), who himself raised the issue in the first place, deals with this problem through a reference to the legal definition of contracts. Contracts are in any case considered valid even when there is an unequal distribution of power between the parties involved. There are legal means to protect the weaker parties. For instance, contracts are not considered valid if the agreements between parties are reached using duress and undue influence. Duress consists of the use of coercive methods, threat, etc.; undue influence corresponds to inappropriate use of a person's professional influence and power to put pressure on someone in order to reach agreement. Corden argues that these defects of contracts can be avoided in social work, if due attention is given to them during the negotiations.

The second main issue is related to the lack of freedom that characterises the position of social workers and clients when defining a contract. Corden (1980) refers once again to the legal definition of contracts, which does not imply complete freedom from constraints; after all, the law never guarantees individuals complete freedom. He acknowledges that the mutuality between client and practitioner as proposed by Maluccio and Marlow (1974) is very often an ideal in social work. As the purposes of social workers and clients are very seldom identical, mutuality can be reached only over limited areas. Corden states that:

Social worker and client can agree a contract even if they disagree quite markedly about the cause and origin of a person's difficulty. [...] They might also disagree quite markedly about their ultimate objectives in coming together. [...] It is however essential that there is some overlap of agreement about short or medium term objectives, if a contract is to be established, and that this agreement is freely entered into by the client without the threat that non-compliance will result in the deprivation of discretionary rights. (Corden, 1980, pp.152-153)

As far as the criticism of keeping society out is concerned, Corden and Preston-Shoot reverse the issue: the commitment to social change cannot be considered as the exclusive domain of social work. Efforts to bring about social change are not to be

seen as the domain of social workers alone. Contract work aims to involve clients too, if they are willing to consider those efforts worthwhile:

Thus contract work does not 'keep society out' but rather, where that is the outcome, the participants contrive to produce this result and the contexts in which they operate' (Corden and Preston-Shoot, 1987b, p.541)

Certainly, though, it is widely acknowledged that the problems raised by Rojek and Collins are far from being fully addressed. For instance, the problem of misunderstandings between practitioners and clients emerges as crucial from many pieces of research. A small-scale study conducted by Preston-Shoot (1994) over the use of contracts shows how clients do not understand what a contract is, nor, after further explanation, do they acknowledge having reached any sort of agreement with practitioners.

On the other hand, Jordan (1990) has underlined that in social services the term contract is often used in a distorted way, compared to the formal definition. The use some departments have made of contracts in relation to child abuse cases is actually deeply flawed:

Far from being negotiated agreements based on fairness, some of these are clearly unilateral, imposed plans, drawn up by officials according to their own professional standards, and presented to the clients in a deliberately intimidating way, in the manner of binding legal agreements. (Jordan, 1990, p.95)

Apart from any other considerations, what emerges here is that the label 'contract' is far from being used in a clear, uncontroversial way by different subjects and in different contexts. This makes it a particularly interesting object for research.

4.7 The Contract as an Example of the Impact of Theory on Practice

The versatility, relative simplicity (at least in abstract terms) and other valuable aspects of contract work have all contributed to the spread of this approach through

the literature and in social work training programmes, to an extent rarely matched by other approaches. Most of the textbooks address this approach whether directly, by devoting a chapter to it (Lishman, 1994; Lee, 1994; Davies, 1995), or indirectly, i.e., within the presentation of approaches which refer to contracts for decision-making.

In Italy, contract work has diffused through the unitary model which is the most frequently adopted in social work literature and in schools programmes (Giraldo, 1996). Without exception, the most recent theoretical work introduces the contract as basic or as an important aspect of social work method (Ferrario, 1995; Dal Pra Ponticelli, 1987; Campanini and Luppi, 1988; Masini and Sanicola, 1988; Lerma, 1992). It is now considered one of the key words of the profession (Bartolomei e Passera, 2000; Cesaroni, Lussu and Rovai, 2000).

As far as practitioners are concerned, several research studies have shown that social workers, when describing their practice, only seldom refer to formal approaches. This does not seem to apply to contract work. Preliminary contacts have shown that 'contract' is often mentioned spontaneously, when referring to direct intervention with clients. Several agencies have formally adopted contracts as a basis for interacting with users. In many respects, the word 'contract' seems to have become part of the professional language. Contracts are widely used in relation to particular aspects of social work, such as foster care, or projects involving young people. Several social services have introduced the written contract between practitioners and clients as the base procedure for access to service provisions (see for instance the SERT, services for persons with drug addictions problems)

At the same time, 'contract' is also a word used in other contexts - ordinary language as well as other professional languages - in a less specific or even different way. The controversies about the use of the label, as mentioned in section 4.5, contribute to making the contract an interesting object of research.

Of course, the focus on practitioners' use of language entails limiting the scope of this research, thus excluding any comment on the effectiveness or viability of

contract work, as it is defined in the literature. This study cannot provide the basis for any evaluation of a contractual approach, nor will it offer an independent view of what goes on between clients and practitioners, when practitioners say they have made a 'contract'. As said above, what it can offer is a kind of insider's understanding of practitioners' cultures or subcultures, and their relation to academic culture.

My position is quite different from that of the authors who have acknowledged the controversy in the use of the label (see for instance Jordan, 1990, who notices that in social services the 'contract' refers to practices that have little in common). The formal definition of contract in this research is assumed just as a term for a comparison, not as a standard to evaluate the appropriateness of practitioners' representations.

4.8 Summary

In this chapter I have introduced the example used in this research to explore the issue of theory and practice. I have reviewed origins and developments of this concept in social work literature, and identified the most accepted definitions. I have considered the research connected to contract and the debate that has developed over the uses of contract by practitioners. I have then provided the elements that support the choice of the 'contract' as a good case for this research.

The assumption on which the present study is based, as illustrated in the previous chapter, is that the meaning of a word is its use in a language, and languages can be considered as social cognitive orders, ways to look at the world elaborated within social groups. Coherently with this assumption, the task of the study is to look at the different ways the word is used by practitioners. Next chapter presents how the research question has been addressed, by introducing my research design.

5 Research Design and Methods

In the previous chapters I have addressed the debate to which this research is intended to contribute, explained the perspective adopted, stated the research questions, and introduced the specific example through which these questions are tackled. In this chapter I shall explain the research design developed to address the research questions.

The initial research question about the relation between theory and practice in social workers' representations of their practices, was specified in terms of how theoretical language becomes part of practitioners' language and how it is used to make sense of the work experience (see chapter 3). In relation to the specific example, the contract, this breaks down into the following questions:

- How is the concept of contract used by practitioners; what meanings are attached to it?
- How is the term 'contract' connected to other relevant terms or categories used by practitioners?
- How is the label used in describing practices?

This has been conceived as an exploratory study, aiming towards an understanding of practitioners' languages and of different uses of theoretical terms in these languages. Although the perspective adopted has in the intention of its proponents a strong explanatory power (Barnes *et al.*, 1996; see section 3.1.4), I also found it useful as a descriptive tool. The present study sets the scene for an application of an explanatory model, rather than addressing that task directly.

The research was carried out in the context of social services for families and children in Milan and Turin. From preliminary informal contacts with social workers, practice teachers and managers, the term 'contract' came out as very frequently used by practitioners in order to describe relevant aspects of their work. At this point I conducted four more formal interviews with the following people: a leading social

work scholar in Italy, who has had a prominent role in the introduction and diffusion of contract work in Italy; the co-ordinator of social work training in Milan, who is involved in organising and leading in-service training and supervision of practitioners for Milan city council services; and two experienced managers of Milan social services. I also discussed the project with the general manager of social services in Milan and with the manager of social services for elderly people, in order to define better the context of the research. Finally, I had a conversation with one of the leading scholars on contract work in Britain (see Appendix 1 for details).

The preliminary study was designed to explore the use or uses of contracts by practitioners. Although I was already inclined to focus on services for family support, I was also keen to test the validity of this choice. In addition, these early contacts were meant to generate names of practitioners using contracts, who would represent the cases for the research. I then expanded this first group following the suggestions of the first practitioners involved. This first exploration also allowed me to develop an initial analytical framework (section 5.5.1), which was modified with the analysis of the core cases.

During this phase I also contacted three practitioners in order to test the instruments for data collection. These were then included in the larger unit of analysis, as the instruments were on the whole confirmed. The main phase of data gathering took place between April 1998 and January 1999. The analysis proceeded concurrently and was substantially completed by October 1999.

In the next sections, I will present my research design in greater detail, and explain my approach to data treatment and analysis.

5.1 The Context of the Research: Social Services for Families and Children

Social services for families and children were chosen as the context of the research for several reasons. First, of all branches of the social services, practitioners in services for families and children have proved among the most interested in in-service training on specific social work methods, approaches and theories. In Milan, a working group of practitioners has been created to reflect and provide guidelines regarding social work methods. In Turin, there has been a long-term project of in-service training in social work methods and theories. There is an area team supervision project, one of whose goals is reflection over social work methods. I considered it a good starting point to base the research in a field where there was a strong interest in social work theory and methods.

The preliminary study also suggested that social work in this field covers a wide range of functions (from financial support to counselling, from work with voluntary clients to compulsory interventions). Written contracts have been introduced into the procedures for the access to certain resources in some area projects, foster interventions, and domiciliary education interventions.

Although focusing on problems connected to parenting functions, social services for families deal with users experiencing a high variety of problems (from mild adaptive problems to disabilities, to severe mental problems or drug addiction) and presenting different characteristics: all social classes and ethnic groups are represented among the clients of these services. Other social services are much more specialised in terms of problems treated and user profiles. Since tasks, type of intervention, and specific client characteristics, can all affect views of contract work, there is a clear advantage in researching a more diversified context. Basing the research on services for family support has the advantage of somehow circumscribing and limiting the variety of information, but at the same time generating findings which, with due caution and discrimination, can be generalised to other main fields of social work.

The limitation of this choice was that it excluded practitioners operating in services, such as that devoted to the treatment of drug addicts, which have established the contract as part of the procedures to gain access to the service (Ferrario, 1996b). On

the whole however, the advantages of concentrating the research in one context seemed to outweigh its limitations.

The social services for families and children, as they are structured today, were created in the second half of the 1970s, following a law (L.382, 1975 and consequent DPR 616, 1977) that brings all provision for families and children under the same heading, and assigns responsibility for this to the local authority.¹³ This law and all subsequent legislation were inspired by several principles, which inform the regulation of health and social provisions, and which are in line with the development of social services in Europe. First, there was a tendency to integrate the provision of services¹⁴, which had previously been scattered among different subjects and statutory organisations on the basis of an obsolete categorisation of clients. Secondly, there is an emphasis on community; services have to be provided on a local basis, and be organised flexibly so as to meet the specific needs of the local community they serve. The challenge is to build up service units which, though part of a bureaucracy, are not organised in a bureaucratic way. There is a stress on teamwork, as opposed to a hierarchical structure. The importance of prevention and de-institutionalisation is also emphasised.

As local authorities define the organisation of services, there can be quite substantial differences across cities. The following broad profile only refers to the two cities, Milan and Turin, considered in this research. Social services for family and children are composed of several units. The main ones are area teams (21 in Milan, 15 in Turin), an emergency service, a unit for compulsory measures of care, and a unit for children involved with the criminal justice system. In Milan there is also a unit which offers a specialised support in family mediation, particularly in relation to child custody, GEA (Genitori Ancora, which translates as Parents Still, or Parents Again),

¹³ These are complex laws, which reorganise competences of the local administrations. The provision of social services is just one of the matters covered.

¹⁴ Thus in several local authorities, services for family and children do not exist as separate units but are integrated to the other services provided by the local authority. Divisions of tasks are defined within the team and are informal. This is the case in Turin; in Milan, on the contrary, social services for family and children are organised as a separate unit.

and a service which provides a space and specialised professionals for the meeting of children and parents when these meetings are considered at risk.

My unit of analysis was selected among practitioners operating in area teams, so I will concentrate on presenting these units. The area team incorporates all functions relating to child protection and family support, and some functions relating to children in trouble with the law. The three main areas of intervention of these services are:

1. **Prevention of risks.** Social services promote and organise projects for children and young people in the local community, in order to improve the quality of family life. Projects have to be tailored to the problems of the specific area. Most projects are organised in co-operation with third sector voluntary organisations and co-operatives. This area of intervention has expanded considerably in recent years, partly in connection to a national law (L. 285, 1997), which promotes and provides guidelines and financial resources for local projects. These must aim to support parenthood and the relationship between parents and children; to fight poverty and marginalisation; to improve respect for the rights, quality of life, development, and socialisation of children; and to exploit the richness of cultural and ethnic differences in the community.

2. **Family support.** This consists of the meeting of individual needs expressed by voluntary clients, i.e., by families that spontaneously contact social services for help.

3. **Child protection.** This includes a whole range of interventions in co-operation with, and under the orders of the Child Tribunal¹⁵. Services for families and children are responsible for conducting inquiries on behalf of the Tribunal, in case of suspected child abuse and neglect or in case of conflict between parents (all referrals have to be made to the Tribunal, which assesses whether to order an inquiry or not, and after the inquiry decides what intervention is needed). They are responsible for

¹⁵ The Child Tribunal was introduced in 1934, and is the judicial organ responsible for penal, civil, and administrative justice in relation to citizens under 18 years old.

the implementation of all court orders in relation to children. These may range from fairly limited actions of control and support, which entail regular meetings with practitioners and provision of resources when needed, to drastic actions such as taking children into care. Depending on the situation, court orders are in some cases quite generic: then, practitioners are free to work out with the family the most appropriate type of intervention and control. In other cases, they are quite specific and practitioners' autonomy is more limited.

The main opportunities offered to individual clients are:

1. **Financial support.** This can be ordinary and continuative, subsistence benefit, extraordinary and continuative (connected to a particular project or to baby-sitting, when day care centres are not the appropriate option) or *una tantum*, an extraordinary one-off payment in relation to a particular need. Usually financial support is connected to a project aimed at helping the family become autonomous. The project can involve support in finding a job, in returning to education, provision of childcare etc. Therefore, financial support is very often provided in conjunction with other kinds of intervention.

2. **Social support.** This ranges from providing information, facilitating access to other services and resources, or to on-going projects in the area, to counselling, and to provision of day care and learning support for the children. One service which has strongly expanded in the last ten years and which can be considered in the area of social support is domiciliary educational support (ADM). On the basis of a project agreed with the social worker in charge and with the clients, a specialised support worker assists parents in their relationship with their children, or provides the children with opportunities for socialisation that the family cannot offer. All support interventions are designed to prevent the need for residential care.

3. **Substitutive interventions.** These are mainly measures of residential care, foster care or, in extreme cases, adoption. While measures of residential care and foster

care can be defined either by an agreement between the social worker and the family or by a court order, adoption is always decided by the tribunal.

The area units are quite small in size. Teams vary from four to ten practitioners, depending on the population and the needs of the area. However, the organisation differs between Milan and Turin. In Turin, these services are integrated with all the other services organised by the city council at the area level. In Milan, they are formally separate services. There is a social workers' coordinator who usually coordinates two or three area teams, and a central coordinator at the city level.

5.2 The Research Strategy

The research was carried out as a multiple case study. This strategy appeared appropriate to an empirical exploration of such a complex issue as the relationship between theory and practice, 'within its real life context' (Robson, 1993). While this option was relatively straightforward, less so was deciding whether 'cases' should consist of organisations (in particular, local area units) or individuals. Going for the former would have made sense within an attempt to explain practices in the light of organisational features. However, it appeared more promising to focus on description of practices and to leave the issue of explanation open for further inquiry. This led to the choice of individual practitioners as the most appropriate cases to address the research question.

5.2.1 The Cases

The relevant cases for this research were practitioners who used contracts. Selection of the subjects was made through the preliminary exploration. The aim was to select a group of practitioners who would be willing to describe their work or part of their practice as contract work, and who had received training, at school or in-service, on the subject of contracts. When selecting practitioners, I also asked the informants

contacted in the preliminary phase about the range of applications of contract methods, they had come across in their dealings with practitioners.

Practitioners were included in the study because they exemplified different ways of using contract, not because they were particularly representative of the group in relation to the universe it was derived from. As authors supporting case study maintain (see Rose, 1991; Stoeker, 1991; Yin, 1989), cases cannot be treated as a sample and are representative in relation to theoretical propositions, not in relation to a universe:

...case study, like experiment, does not represent a 'sample' and the investigator's goal is to expand and generalise theories (analytic generalisations) and not to enumerate frequencies (statistical generalisation). (Yin, 1989, p.21)

My plan was to limit the study to Milan. I included in the sample five practitioners working in the corresponding services in Turin, following the suggestion of one of the informants. Given the strong attention for contract work which recently developed in that area, it was felt that contacting practitioners there, might have granted access to interesting and original applications of the method.

I initially planned a small group of cases, between twenty and twenty-five practitioners. That size would be large enough to capture the variety of representations of social work practice, but at the same time manageable for in-depth qualitative analysis. After carrying out an initial analysis while gathering data, I stopped my fieldwork when I reached the number of twenty-two (see Appendix 2 for details) as I considered there were enough cases to support the emerging typology.

As observed above, in choosing the subjects for this research, I did not directly consider socio-demographic factors like age and gender, or other traits like length of work experience. Because of this, my cases are not representative in quantitative terms of the universe from which derived. Nonetheless, some brief socio-demographic details of the interviewees may be useful. The unit of analysis included

nineteen females and three males. Two of the interviewees were under thirty, ten between thirty and forty, eight between forty and fifty, and two over fifty. The group of subjects is not balanced, but approximately reflects the universe from which the sample is derived. Social workers are overwhelmingly female. Given the amount of responsibility attached to the specific type of intervention, there is a tendency to enrol practitioners with some experience. On the other hand, the career opportunities into management, and the possibility of early retirement recently offered, have produced a drastic reduction in the number of practitioners over fifty years of age. Although the group was not built as a representative sample, it eventually came out very close to a random sample. In particular, a recent survey of social work professionals in Italy, based on a 1,000 cases sample (Censis, 1999), found 93% of women (vs. 86% among my interviewees) and 42% under 35 years (vs. 36%).

Another characteristic worth considering is the period of school attendance. During the last thirty years, schools have undergone dramatic changes, which have profoundly affected the teaching of social work theory and methods. Until the 1970s, this was fairly traditional. There then followed a period during which a crisis in social work training and student protests led to the teaching of theory being treated marginally in the context of practical teaching. The situation changed again during the 1980s, when social work was reintroduced in the curricula. In 1986, when social work became a university discipline, theory became the subject of a three-year-course organised under the heading of 'social work methods and techniques'. As far as the specific theme of this research is concerned, the concept of contract work started to be taught on social work courses in the 1980s; it was handled within the unitary approach, which has been one of the most diffuse.

In my unit of analysis, four practitioners trained before 1970, five between 1970 and 1980, nine between 1980 and 1986, and four after 1987. The nine practitioners who trained before the 1980s all learnt about contract work during in-service training courses (five in the task-centred, three in the systemic, and one in the unitary approach). Those who trained since the 1980s all studied contract work on their

social work course, and seven of these came across the method again during in-service training.

The diversity of training experiences, and the group's proximity to a random sample, illustrate the spread of the use of contract, which does not appear to be limited to a certain generation of practitioners, nor specifically connected to any particular training experience.

5.2.2 Data collection instruments

The data were collected mainly through interviews and analysis of critical incidents. The interviews were organised as semi-structured conversations about the concept of 'contract' and contract work. The areas explored in the interview (see also Appendix 3) included:

- How 'contract' had been learnt. This question enabled me to explore not only the impact of training, but also of contacts with colleagues and work experience on the use of the concept.
- The main distinctive traits of contract work. Without asking for a formal definition, I wanted to explore what were the most important characteristics of contract work from the perspective of fieldwork.
- The use of contract. This theme was introduced in order to explore whether the contract was considered an integral part of a work style, or an instrument used in certain circumstances.
- The usual process to reach a contract. Here I wanted to investigate whether there was a way of proceeding, routines or rituals, as well as a specific format associated with the contract
- Advantages and problems in the use of contract. This theme was introduced in order to give the interviewees a chance to discuss in more depth the themes mentioned before, as well as to connect the contract with other aspects of their practice.

- The impact of the organisation of the social service on the use of the contract. I aimed at discovering practitioners' views of how organisational structures and cultures might influence the concrete use of a specific method.

Although less popular than interviews, the analysis of critical incidents is nowadays a fairly well-known and well-tried instrument both for training purposes and for research. Flanagan (1954) is considered the one who developed the technique, starting from the study of a device to select and classify air crew in the Second World War. Critical incidents have since been used in many fields, but particularly in the exploration of expertise, of the impact of training on practices, and of the characteristics of good practice in several fields (Cunningham, 1981; Benner, 1984; Klemp and McClelland, 1986; Secker, 1993). Several scholars in social work have adopted this technique to explore social workers' practices (see Harrison, 1987; Fook *et al.*, 1994; Secker, 1993) as they can provide good data for exploring social work practices.

The technique consists of asking informants to describe a particular circumscribed piece of work or episode (it could be an episode of conflict between client and practitioner, or an example of a particular kind of intervention), the actions of the practitioner, and the outcomes. Informants are then invited to comment on the outcomes, on what worked well and what did not (Secker, 1993).

In this study, the analysis of critical incidents focused on uses of the 'contract' label in relation to specific work processes, on its role within work descriptions, on its connections to other aspects of the work, and on what features of contracts practitioners identified as crucial. I asked practitioners for some examples of successful and unsuccessful contract work. I then explored what made the contract a success or a failure, what worked, and/or what did not.

The original design also envisaged a study of documentary material such as personal files. However, preliminary exploration showed that the collection of relevant information related to my research question would have been too complex, if not

impossible. Usually files are used for specific different purposes, e.g. to record relevant information, not to document the work process per se. For instance, although interventions are noted, there is no systematic record of how practitioners and clients reached a decision on what to do, or whether there was an agreement or not. Because of this, exploratory work on files generated poor results. On the other hand, I was able to examine some examples of written contracts, which usefully substantiated practitioners' accounts.

Interviews have been carried on mainly in practitioners' office. The original plan contemplated two interviews to each practitioner on different dates. This did not always prove possible, for practical reasons: on three occasions, the interview on the critical incident followed immediately the one on the idea of contract; on three more occasions, the two interviews took place at different times, but within the same day. While this made the whole exercise quite exhausting, I did not notice any discrepancy between the coherence of these accounts and that of those, collected on different days.

Both interviews were conducted as largely unstructured, informal conversations. I had actually devoted substantial attention to how introduce the different issues to the interviewees. However, in most cases the introduction of the first topic ('How did you come across contract?') was enough to start a conversation which addressed most of the key themes I was interested in exploring. Therefore, my role largely consisted of asking for clarifications, picking on what was spontaneously emerging during the interview.

5.3 Access to the Services and Contacts with the Respondents

Access to the services differed between Milan and Turin. In Milan I asked for and obtained a formal authorisation to interview social workers from the Director of the Social Services. I was also given written authorisation to consult the files. Two coordinators were given the task of facilitating my access to the services and acting as intermediaries between the social workers and myself. Their help in giving me

information and introducing me to practitioners was invaluable. Practitioners in Turin were involved in the second round of interviews, and access was quicker and more informal. I received verbal authorisation from the Director of Social Services and contacted co-ordinators and practitioners directly.

All interviews were conducted at the social workers' offices within the local area services, except two which took place at the Social Work School of the University of Milan. All interviewees were openly informed about the study, its purposes and goals, and the use that would be made of the information given.

A major dilemma arose in relation to the use of critical incidents. Critical incidents involve presenting clients' histories and problems. All clients' cases have been altered so as to become unrecognisable: for example, practitioners changed such particulars as nationality, number of children and age. Files and examples of written contracts I had access to were also made anonymous. While writing the dissertation, I have introduced further changes where possible, without creating distortions in the accounts. Nonetheless, people whose stories have inspired the critical incidents were not informed or asked for consent in relation to their involvement in the research.

The use of real cases for research is, up to now, a perfectly legal and accepted practice in Italy. People consulting a professional, even one bound by a code of professional confidentiality, are expected to know that their cases, once made anonymous, can be used for training and research purposes without further consultation. Some practitioners remind clients of this possibility in initial contacts, but most take this rule for granted and assume clients to be aware of it. In recent years, a growing number of studies and publications in social work has drawn upon real cases (Cirillo and Cipolloni, 1994; Pittaluga, 2000). While all make it clear that personal details have been changed, it is not mentioned whether those involved were asked for their consent, or were informed.

Upon reflection, and despite thinking that this issue require further reflection, I chose to present the examples, although clients were not directly informed, as practitioners'

and my own alterations had effectively turned the accounts into fictitious examples inspired by real cases. Moreover, in this research the function of clients' cases is to illuminate social workers' views, practices, and cultures. They are not and should not be the focus of attention. No comments on the clients' situations and circumstances have been made, nor are expected of readers.

5.4 Data Analysis

Data analysis consisted of two phases. First, I tried to build a model for the analysis of interviews based on the outcomes of the pilot study. This model, which I still consider potentially interesting, soon proved inadequate to the task of making sense of the interviews. The real turning point was when I opted to use QSR.NUD*IST for the analysis of interviews, and when I encountered the perspective presented in the second chapter. This led me to treat the issue of theory and practice in terms of languages, and 'contract' as a term which could be used differently within different language games.

I will present here the first framework derived from the interviews to service coordinators and social work scholars. I will then illustrate the problems met in the analysis of interviews and cases and the evolution of the analysis along with the use of NUD*IST. I will then introduce the analysis of critical incidents.

5.4.1 The first model of analysis

One of the goals of the preliminary investigation was to explore different uses of contract work. The four formal interviews with managers and scholars paid special attention to the identification of different uses of contract. Originally I came up with nine types, which I was able to reduce to four by exploiting their similarities. More specifically, the analysis of how informants discriminated between different ways of working, allowed the identification of two main dimensions in the interviews:

1. the commitment to method, that is, the importance attributed by the practitioner to the formal model as a system of rules for treating cases;
2. the commitment to the peculiarity of each encounter with a client and his/her circumstances.

Table 5.1 presents the four types which emerged from the combination of these analytical dimensions. The *rigorous* type corresponds to high commitment to the model and low commitment to the individuality of the case. In this case, the use of contract is described as a sort of fixed step-by-step process that is carried out in the same way irrespective of specific circumstances. Sometimes it is described as rigid, or as ‘the enforcement’ type of using contract.

The *flexible* type is characterised by an effort to conjugate high commitment to the formal model with strong attention to the individuality of the interaction and situation. Practitioners close to this type seem to adapt continuously the model to their specific circumstances. They are described by one informant as self-reflective, using the model in order to structure their reflection on the process, rather than as a direct guide for action. Another informant defines this type as a ‘natural or spontaneous’ way of using contract.

The *elastic* type subsumes descriptions of ways of working characterised by low commitment to the formal model but high commitment to the individuality of the situation and interaction. It is described as elastic because the term contract is used in relation to a wide range of practices or actions in a way that is not easily recognisable by other people nor by the clients.

Table 5.1 A Preliminary Typology of Contract Uses

		High Commitment to the Model			
		Rigorous	Flexible		
Low Commitment to the Individuality of the Case				High Commitment to the Individuality of the Case	
		Bureaucratic	Elastic		
		Low Commitment to the Model			

Finally, the *bureaucratic* type was clearly associated with one informant only, and is characterised by low commitment to the formal model and low commitment to the individuality of the situation. In this case, a contract is implemented as a formality, often in correspondence with certain service procedures. Although acknowledging this as a modality of work sometimes present in services, informants expressed the opinion that this type of work is not a feasible option in services for families and children: the work in this context appears scarcely manageable through standardised procedures.

5.4.2 The analysis of interviews and the use of NUD*IST

This typology guided my first approach to the interviews. Despite presenting several points of interest and providing a good starting point for the analysis, it soon proved

too limited to make sense of the way practitioners addressed the issue of contract. Most seriously, the categories on which the typology was based failed to capture the richness of the specific definitions of contract, put forward by different practitioners. In particular, the dimension ‘commitment to the formal model’ turned out to be complex since the very beginning. Apparently, there was no single model to refer to.

The choice was therefore between ignoring these difficulties and standing by the original typology, and exploring these differences, making them the main subject of the study. I went for the latter option as I found it more interesting in terms of providing an understanding of practitioners’ frameworks. The perspective illustrated in the second chapter provided the theoretical background to this exploration, while giving greater depth to the analysis of different uses of the same term.

The analysis of interviews was conducted with the support of QSR.NUD*IST . This package is specifically designed for qualitative data, and enables the analyst to : a) identify relevant categories used by interviewees so they can be split into sub-categories; b) identify connections between categories and networks of concepts; c) analyse texts by searching for phrases or words frequently used; and d) explore the context in which they are used. Therefore, I was able to explore different possible interpretations of the interviews.

The first classification of materials identified the broad arguments in which the term ‘contract’ appeared. These were partly connected with the layout of the interview. At this level I identified sixteen categories which were then themselves partitioned into further sub-categories. The main categories included:

- ‘traits of the contract’ - all comments related to what a contract is in social work and what distinguishes contract work from other ways of working;
- functions of contract - all comments and bits related to what a contract is for;

- use of contract - all comments related to the format of a contract, and to the circumstances in which contract was used;
- process of making contract - all descriptions of making a contract;
- outcomes of contract work - comments on the impact of a contract on the work process;
- problems in the use of contracts.

I also separately collected comments, opinions and views on other related subjects and themes, such as the theory and practice issue, the impact of training on the work, and views on the organisational setting.

This first categorisation was mainly instrumental, as it allowed me to organise the reading of the texts; but it also made it possible to identify recurrent words such as agreement (*accordo*), clarity (*chiarezza, chiarificare*), limits and boundaries (*limiti, confini*) and frequently used phrases such as work plan and task division (*piano di lavoro, divisione dei compiti*). These words and phrases appeared in terms of sub-categories in most of the first categories identified. From this first categorisation, it was possible to explore the different ways of treating the same words, and different networks of categories, which will be presented in chapter 6.

Although the package gives the impression of a totally inductive process starting from the text of the interviews, the process of analysis has seen a continuous shift from the categories identified to possible ways to organise them and to select recurrent ones. Analysing texts, one by one, without any idea of a model to organise the categories, leads to the identification of a very high number of categories and to the risk of facing an unmanageable amount of information. If texts are analysed one interview at a time, the result is nearly infinite possibilities of categorisation. At the same time, the attempt to catch the point of view and the categories which are crucial from the respondent's perspective, requires a continuous reading of the whole text and not just of bits, as the package requires. As other NUD*IST users have noticed (McKenzie, 1999), there is a continual need to go back to the whole texts, as in many

cases the meaning of fragments can be grasped only in the context of the whole interview.

Reports of critical incidents were analysed as wholes, and I included in the analysis with NUD*IST only the general comments on contract made in relation to the examples. In the analysis of critical incidents I tried to establish connections with the first model presented in the previous section and the emerging outcomes from the analysis of interviews. I used critical incidents to test, develop and partially modify the emerging framework to make sense of practitioners' views on contract. This work was strongly influenced by reflection on models of narrative analysis (Riesmann, 1993; Mishler, 1986), primarily because of the importance I have attached to the analysis of accounts of cases. As Mishler (1986, p. 68) observed:

...there is a wide recognition of the special importance of narrative as a mode through which individuals express their understanding of events and experiences.

The choice to report and analyse specific examples in full (chapters 7 and 8) reflects the importance attributed to the accounts of work and to stories as potential ways to access practitioners' frameworks. Although all the cases were subject to systematic analysis, and contribute to the identification of themes, only a limited number of them could be presented in full. Coherently with the premises of the case-study approach (Stoeker, 1991; Ragin, 1992), which ignores issues of statistical significance in favour of the capacity of specific cases to enlighten the fundamental traits of a given social process, I chose to focus on a few individual accounts. These were selected because of their potential to illustrate themes and elements that might also be found, albeit not so fully developed, in the other practitioners' accounts. While I have not adopted any particular method of analysis, reflection on narrative styles (Bruner, 1991) has provided good suggestions for identifying relevant fragments and typical sequences of accounts (chapters 7-8).

5.5 Summary

This chapter has been devoted to the presentation of my research design. I have started with a short account of the preliminary investigation that laid the ground for the research project proper. In section 5.1, I have then illustrated the reasons which led me to choose social services for family and children support as the context in which to investigate applications of contract work. I have also introduced the main traits of this type of social services in Milan and Turin, where the research has taken place. In section 5.2, I have discussed the methodology adopted (namely, case-study), principles of case selection, and data collection instruments. I have then moved to issues of access to, and relation with, both social services and individual practitioners (section 5.3). Finally, I have presented the tools I used during data analysis, and the various steps of the process (section 5.4). In the next chapter I begin my illustration of the main research results.

6 Representations of Contracts

Descriptions of contracts provided the initial illustration of differences in practitioners' ways of relating concepts to practice. Interviews display a complex mixture of traits, themes and elements associated with contracts. Among the first points to emerge is the difficulty of connecting social workers' discourses on 'contract' with formal descriptions of it. Common points can be identified, but they appear treated in a different light, and the whole images appear different too.

Given the perspective of this research, this should hardly come as a surprise. Academic social workers and practitioners are viewed as two different social groups, and should be expected to speak different languages and to use words differently. Moreover, 'contract' seems closer to a social designation than to a natural one (see the distinction made by Barnes and presented in section 3.1.3). There is no independent pattern designated as 'contract'; the pattern with which the designation 'contract' is associated is itself socially created through designation. The different uses of the word and of the concept simply emphasise the lack of authority of academic literature and formal definitions over practitioners.

Overlooking formal definitions, though, is somewhat disconcerting: one finds oneself wandering among representations without clear points of reference. One almost ends up feeling that, 'contract' being a formalised model, practitioners should refer only to its formal conceptualisation, sticking to the official definitions when referring to it; failure to do so would result in an anarchic, individualistic situation in which practitioners use the term to denote whatever meaning they choose to give it.

It is only when we dare to abandon the supposed authority of formalised definitions, though, that things can be looked at in a different light (see chapter 3). If one acknowledges differences in the definition of 'contract' as it appears in the literature and in practitioners' language, then differences can become an interesting object of enquiry. It is in this sense that differences in the use of the word, far from creating a problem, constitute a main object of the research.

Regularities in definitions, albeit not directly connected to formal definitions, start to emerge, as well as recurrent types of representations, and common traits. Then, one gets to realise that the word 'contract' is associated with certain clusters of actions, attitudes and circumstances, on the basis of practitioners' accepted ways of communicating and thinking about their experiences. Likewise, it becomes apparent that the transformations or changes introduced are not random or personal, totally subjective interpretations of the concept. On the contrary, they are somehow coherent parts of a whole fabric woven by practitioners' language games.

In other words, after setting aside formal definitions, one does not find anarchy, but different rules and a different grammar in the use of words. In this perspective the understanding of different definitions and conceptualisations of contract becomes a way to access different professional subcultures. At the same time, transformations and changes provide insights into how practitioners relate to formalised theories.

In this chapter, I will first introduce some general features in the use of the word 'contract' by practitioners. These features provide an understanding of the rules in the use of the word mainly in negative terms: they show that practitioners feel free to use the term 'contract' in reference to a practice which is not labelled as such with clients, and which does not have a specific format (section 6.1). This suggests some degree of vagueness in the use of the term. From there I will present two general and broad features which always appear as essential traits of 'contract': an 'agreement' (*accordo*) and a definition of a structure of the intervention (*definizione dell'intervento*). I will show how these features are differently addressed and described by interviewees (section 6.2). In section 6.3 I will explore the hypothesis that differences in images of 'contract' can be ascribed to different ways of organising and connecting these same two features. I will show how descriptions and connected themes differ in relation to the focus of attention, the agreement or the definition of the intervention. I will then illustrate those differences in reference to the accounts dominant in two sets of interviews (sections 6.3.1, 6.3.2). Comparing these outcomes, I will show how the hypothesis of two systematically different

perceptions of contract work is carried in the analysis of interviews, and underline the different themes associated with contract work (section 6.4).

6.1 Some General Features in the Use of the Concept

Before engaging with the differences in the use of the concept I consider here some general features which have emerged as common in the use of the term. Some of them can be better expressed in negative terms. Certain characteristics that one would have expected to discriminate between 'contract' and 'non-contract' work, and even to differentiate between types of contract, are in fact deemed by all interviewees as irrelevant.

It is striking that, with only one exception, using or not using the word 'contract' with their clients is not relevant to the practitioners interviewed. Social workers use the word 'contract' when thinking back to their cases, talking among each other, sometimes in files and in official relations. In contrast, they are reluctant to use it directly with clients. The following statements provide some illustration of this attitude:

Well, it is quite rare that we explicitly name what we do as a contract... you clarify what the situation is, what are the tasks, but you do not give a name to what you are doing...You say 'Well, let's take a decision' and 'This is what we have agreed'. I look at the situations I am dealing with...I would have to explain what contract means, you cannot spend too much time on this ... you risk losing the focus. (Sofia)

In other cases, they seem to use other labels indifferently:

Well, I may call it a contract, or a pact, or agreement...Maybe I do it and that's it...I try to explore the reactions of the person in front of me, not that I sort of take a box from a drawer and put it on the table...(Barbara)

Even when directly using the word 'contract', there is a certain reluctance to call what they do a contract:

Well sure, when we use the written form, I say 'Let's make a sort of contract'...When it is just a verbal contract I do not think I use this word...it does not come natural...Maybe I call it reciprocal commitment.. Maybe it is because it is not a habit. There is always a difference between what I think and what I say. I think: 'Now I want to arrive at a contract', but what I say is different, I try to talk in a simpler language...One thinks that people would not understand. (Lucia)

The phrase 'kind of contract', instead of directly 'a contract', could itself be treated as evidence that the word is treated with a certain circumspection. As appears in the previous quotation, while interacting with clients most interviewees say they use words that are more connected to everyday language and better characterise their interactions with clients. They mainly refer to the contract as a pact, as an agreement, as an agreed plan. In other cases they just do it and explain what it is without any sort of label: they summarise the decisions taken during the interviews, the tasks to be performed and they check if their summary is approved by clients. They very often consider that this is enough to underline that there is a commitment on both sides.

To many interviewees, avoiding the use of the term 'contract' is not accidental. Nearly all social workers express the opinion that to use the label 'contract' explicitly would create problems in their relation with clients: in ordinary language, this term is associated with different contexts from social work. One interviewee explicitly mentions the legal context and the kind of bonds that a contract creates between parties in this context. Others associate the word 'contract' with a market metaphor. This metaphor is currently invading all fields, but is considered highly inappropriate to describe social workers' interaction with their clients.

I do not use this word (contract) because it does not fit with the work I am doing. It evokes other situations, it makes me think of house purchase or rental contracts ... other kinds of contracts. (Rita)

More generally, there is a shared opinion that the word 'contract' is difficult to understand in social work terms, and would arouse suspicion and mistrust. As one practitioner underlined in a quotation above, it would have to be explained, involving considerable time investment.

Similar remarks apply to the format of contracts. A contract can be written or verbal. Nearly all social workers say they have used both forms. Nonetheless, not only is format not considered as discriminating between contract and other approaches, but it is not even seen to discriminate between a more or less proper use of the contract.

I very seldom use written contracts with all the points of the agreement and so on... I often work with people who do not like written communication. To give a piece of paper listing the points agreed looks in most cases meaningless. It is much more crucial that we are convinced, the word given...then I take notes for myself to remind...(Sofia)

The criteria claimed for using a written or a verbal format are various, but they are connected to other aspects of the job or to certain traits of clients, not to the correct application of the contract.

Well I have made some attempts to make written contracts, but...well it is difficult for people to understand the reasons for putting things in writing ... Many of our users have not had good school experiences, they don't feel confident with writing. Then many are foreigners, they often already ask for help to understand written documents... To give them other written stuff...if it is not in their mother language it doesn't make sense. (Irene)

Very often, social workers declare that the use of written contracts arouses distrust in clients, precisely because of the meanings usually associated with the word and with written agreements. Several interviewees declare that written contracts are mainly useful with adolescents or young people. The written form makes young people feel important, that they are being treated with respect. On the contrary, there is a shared belief that adults would not understand, would feel belittled and/or not trusted.

With adolescents [written contracts] work very well...for them it is important to have something written down. It has a symbolic value, it means that you are taking them seriously. They accept and appreciate written contracts. For adults it is different, it is more difficult. There is more distrust, a sort of idea of being deceived. But it is also my problem, I do not feel at ease in making something written with adults...it would seem to me like saying: 'I don't trust you, maybe you are going to forget...' (Alberta)

Some others acknowledge that this could also be viewed as a recurrent prejudice among social workers in relation to clients' cognitive ability:

Well, I think that in general maybe we have a tendency to undervalue users' ability to understand. For instance I often think that users will not appreciate or, for instance, they will not want to sign a written contract. But when I have decided to do it, it has worked without problems, and we both had a basis for assessing what was going on. (Lucia).

Whether these are to be considered prejudices or not, all interviews suggest that specific formats of the contract are chosen following an evaluation of their potential impact, either on the intervention, or on clients' attitudes.¹⁶ No specific format is regarded as more appropriate than others (this is partly compatible with the position taken by many authors, including Corden and Preston-Shoot, 1987a; Reid, 1972).

That the label used with clients and the format are not discriminating traits of the contract, is consistent with contract work being frequently, if not always, considered a sort of 'natural practice' in social work. Certainly, it is acknowledged that training has an impact on the use of contracts, but this is rarely perceived as decisive. Training encourages awareness of the contract, and a reflexive attitude to it. Most interviewees refer to the contract as one of the possible ways to deal with their work and their interaction with clients. Though it is not perceived as the only possible way of working, contract work is perceived as spontaneously developing from social work practice. For one interviewee (Cinzia) there is a natural basis for contract in social work practice. Many others (Grazia, Assunta, Ester, Tiziana, Sofia, Rita, Irene, Claudia) state that they learnt contract from experience, and that training was relevant to improve their use of it. In this sense, from practitioners' perspective 'contract' appears, at least partly, as a natural designation (see section 3.1.3; Barnes, 1983)¹⁷.

¹⁶ This can be seen as providing an understanding to what Ferrario defines as 'practitioners resistance to introduce rituals in the intervention (Ferrario, 1996b, p.25).

¹⁷ This view is in sharp opposition to the positions of those scholars who underline how contract is contrasting usual practices (Davies, 1995; Ferrario, 1996b).

6.2 Agreement and Definition of the Work

If concrete and visible aspects of the work are not deemed by social workers as crucial aspects of the contract, one is left with the impression that the word 'contract' is used by the interviewees in a very broad, even vague sense. One might hypothesise that contract is nowadays a fashionable word which is used in a rather indefinite way. It is just of word of an official language (Paley, 1986). It can be given any sort of meaning and it can be used to describe any sort of practice.

In fact, the picture changes when one moves away from more concrete and visible factors to more general features and characteristics attributed to contract work. If one starts to consider broader aspects which appear in descriptions, the impression changes quite radically. All descriptions appear to bear broadly common features. Themes mentioned, and traits attributed to contracts are always the same ones. The first impression is that all representations are somehow connected to the formal model. At the same time, though, themes and traits are developed in a totally different way. All interviewees discuss the same broad themes, but the ways themes are presented and discussed are so different that, at first glance, they are hardly recognisable as the same.

A good example can be found in the following quotations from the first description of what contract is:

I think that the agreement circumscribes who does what. Often the client tends to delegate to the social worker. 'Contract' means to define what you can do, but also what the person can do. You can activate people's resources; I always give them tasks to do. Because maybe people expect to go to the social services and have all their problems solved. It also helps [us] not to feel omnipotent, because sometimes I think that I have to fix a person's whole life. But we don't have a magic wand, maybe it is not even our task to turn people's lives upside down, given that they accept having their lives turned upside down. So I think that a clear contract also helps us to say: 'we have to arrive there and that is it, we do not have to go further'. (Sonia)

The next interviewee names the same aspects but in the context of her description of contract work, they appear differently, as the whole image which emerges seems radically different:

‘Contract’ is part of my idea of being a social worker, not as one who solves other people’s problems, but as one who stimulates people to tackle them. Well the contract...things can change, but as a way of working it is like my style of meeting users, always taking into account that they can do things, maybe they could do them better, if I manage to reach an agreement with them, if it is not ‘throwing’ tasks at them,... but...we decide together.. it is like giving dignity back to a person that maybe up until now has just had to accept decisions taken by others. (Barbara)

Looking at these two excerpts we notice how the two interviewees introduce many themes that are very close, yet in a different way. These themes are both present in the literature over contract (see section 4.2). Both social workers talk about an agreement and about clients taking active part in the work, about a division of tasks. Nonetheless the factors are presented in a completely different light, and the whole image of the contract also looks different. In the first quotation, agreement is just named; the division of tasks and the identification of boundaries in the goal look crucial. In the second, task division and assigning clients an active role acquire a different meaning, as these appear strongly related to an agreement, to a decision taken together. It is explicitly connected to acknowledging people's dignity. A contract in the first case is seen mainly in terms of better organising the intervention; in the second case it is tied up more with the kind of relationship established between social worker and clients.

The initial hypothesis is that the same themes are treated differently depending on where the interviewee focuses his/her attention. Looking at the interviews this way, it is possible to identify two broad themes, which appear in all interviews, as crucial to describing a contract and the relevant features of contract work. All interviews contain references in one form or another a) to the contract as an agreement, and b) to a definition of the intervention in terms of goals, tasks to be performed by the two parties, and the like.

Differences in representations can be understood if connected to the ways the same factors are organised and related to one another. A good metaphor to illustrate what has been said up so far can be found in the study of the perceptual organisation of ambiguous images. The most eloquent and best known example is provided by what is usually referred to as the 'figure and ground reversal' effect. The description that observers give of the black and white image reproduced in Figure 6.1 below may be completely different, depending on how perception is organised: if the black part is perceived as the figure, observers will see two black, stylised profiles looking at each other against a white background. If the white portion is perceived as the figure, observers describe a cup against a black background. The part considered as the figure is well described and given a meaning, the background merely a colour; and the two descriptions could not be more different. Anyone unable to see the picture directly would think that they refer to two different pictures: and nonetheless, both descriptions are perfectly appropriate to the same picture.

Figure 6.1 Figure and Ground Reversal



An analogous process seems to take place in descriptions of contracts and contract work. In a sense, the picture all social workers represent is the same, and on the whole it corresponds to the image one can derive from literature (section 4.2). At the same time, the way portions or particulars are presented and related to each other in descriptions makes them appear completely different. And the whole images that emerge from descriptions in many cases could not be further apart from each other.

Two interviews in particular provide good illustrations of the opposite poles. Cinzia starts with defining the contract as an 'agreement between parties'. She identifies the main feature of the contract in the process through which the agreement is reached. She thinks that what is crucial to making a contract is to manage to understand one another, to find something over which mutual agreement can be possible:

To me the important trait of the contract is the process through which we reach an agreement... This is important because if there is not a clear definition of the meanings, of what I think is important and what the other person thinks is important...then maybe we will be able to identify a third thing which takes into account both, and from there you can start... otherwise you have an agreement over words, and experience shows that you can be good in convincing people, but then the plan is very weak, at the first puff of wind it collapses'. (Cinzia)

In Cinzia's view, the agreement is something problematic: a 'yes' or simple acceptance cannot be equated to an agreement. Acceptance could come out of misunderstanding. It could just be due to the client's need to please the practitioner. She distinguishes between a substantive agreement and a formal one. When things go wrong, she goes back to the agreement as the likely source of problems.

Cinzia names the plan, but just in direct relation to the agreement. Though not at the beginning, she does deal with the subject of tasks and the content of the agreement. However, the main reference point is the agreement. For instance, the main feature she names in relation to tasks is that they have to be 'simple tasks', expressed in simple terms, so as to be clearly understandable by both.

Marco's main point, on the contrary, is a well defined set of goals and tasks. The way Marco relates agreement and plan emerges clearly from the following quotation:

The main feature of the contract is that it goes into the details of the content of an agreement... the social worker always reaches an agreement with the client, what distinguishes the contract is that the plan and methods are defined in detail.

In Marco's view, what characterises the contract is its being specific in the definition of what has to be done. Further on in the interview, he specifies that a contract helps in splitting complex problems into manageable parts, allowing the drafting of a practical working plan that can be reviewed. So the contract makes both parties, but especially the clients, accountable, as tasks are defined and their fulfilment can be checked. The agreement is only considered marginally, as the usual background of social work practice. Any acceptance, any 'yes' on the client's part is equated to an agreement. When considering situations in which the contract has failed, the agreement is never questioned. Instead, Marco tends to connect any failures to lack of dependability on the part of clients who, after having accepted a plan, do what suits them better at the moment.

These two representations show the contrast of different perceptions of figure and background. The features seen as the figure are described in a sophisticated and complex way, the background just roughly sketched. It is interesting to look at how differently the word 'agreement' is treated. Even though the meanings given by the interviewees to the word are different from one another, these meanings are not, nonetheless, imprecise or idiosyncratic. On the contrary, the three most frequent meanings considered are all present in the dictionary. In the dictionary the words 'to agree' and 'agreement' are actually defined as: 'To be, or come to be, of one mind (with)', 'to harmonise', but also 'to assent' (which is defined as 'to express agreement or acquiescence') and 'to consent' or 'accept'. (*Chambers English Dictionary*). Again differences in the use of the word could be explained by the position of the word 'agreement', in how the concept of contract work is perceived. If, as in Cinzia's case, the agreement is in the forefront, the concept is thoroughly analysed, the three meanings are considered, distinctions are made and the word is used in a quite specific way. On the contrary, when the agreement is in the background it is less deeply analysed; the three possibilities of use, mutual agreement, passive acceptance or a simple 'yes', are taken together without considering subtle distinctions. In this case, one could say that the use of the word is closer to the indefinite one, proper to every day language.

The same could be said about the work plan, the tasks and so on. Marco goes into depth, giving examples. Not all generic plans can be called contracts, and he criticizes his own work on this basis. For instance, he declares that telling a parent

s/he has to be in regular contact with the school is not specific enough; frequencies of meetings and a timetable should be specified. In contrast, Cinzia mentions several time plans and tasks, but in a more generic and approximate way.

6.3 Two Representations of Contract

Looking at the interviews and considering the two possible different organisations of the concept has made it possible to identify two groups of interviews. In each group, one kind of representation appears clearly prevalent, and a conglomerate of themes appear to be connected to each representation.

In this section I will show how ‘contract’ is differently represented, and the different themes which are connected to it, depending on how the common ingredients of the contract, agreement and work plan, are connected to each other.

I have made reference to two groups of interviews in which the different descriptions are more clearly identifiable. The same number of interviews (nine) is considered in each group; this being a qualitative exploratory study however, numbers cannot be given any particular meaning, as they are not a representative sample.

I will show how in correspondence to different representations, it is possible to identify different themes connected to contracts, and different ways to connect contracts to other relevant aspects of practice. This supports the hypothesis of the presence of two different images of contracts in the interviews, while allowing a more in-depth understanding of the two images themselves.

In order to support my argument I will use quotations unevenly: certain themes are illustrated by quotations drawn from some interviews, other themes by others. This is for purely practical reasons: in certain interviews particular themes are treated directly and in a way which allows extrapolation, which is understandable on its own. In other cases, on the contrary, themes appear in connection to examples or more indirectly. The unbalanced use of quotations should not be interpreted in terms of internal differences between interviewees classified in the same group. Differences are of course present and themes are presented personally and in

different ways. Nonetheless there is quite wide homogeneity among interviews in the same group.

6.3.1 Contract as 'agreement'

In this section I will illustrate representations of contract work which put the agreement at the forefront.¹⁹ Here, contract is seen mainly as a way to influence the relationship. This is always given a central position in connection to the contract. The contract itself is often seen as dependent on the establishing of a good basic relationship:

I do not remember having used contracts in the first stages, certainly we have to know each other, to establish a relationship, (...) Also because a negotiation between people who do not know each other...it is really difficult, there is no reciprocal trust so that we can say: 'We do this, we do not do this...' (Lucia)

In most cases in this group, situations in which it is impossible to make a contract are described in relational terms. Difficulties are mainly connected to problems in the relationship, such as clients' unwillingness to establish a minimal degree of cooperation with the practitioners, a high level of initial aggression which cannot be overcome, and the like.

If a certain level of relationship is seen as the essential precondition, at the same time the contract is perceived as a means to substantially affect the kind of relationship between practitioner and client:

The contract is to work with people without considering them as 'objects'...It is to create a relationship, because otherwise, if the relationship is not a quality relationship, then the agreement that one can reach, over goals, or over what to do, or on the resources to be employed, can collapse, there is the risk of manipulation... (Alberta)

¹⁹ Quotations for this section come from the interviews to Cinzia, Irene, Tiziana, Rita, Lucia, Sofia, Barbara, Alberta and Maria.

Alberta's statement suggests that the contract implies a particular kind of relationship. Participation of clients is seen in terms of 'being part of the game' not just as clients 'doing things'. It implies a particular view of clients (not objects).

Rita, who says she had to start to work more definitely on a contract basis at a certain point in her career, illustrates with even more emphasis the point that a contract in her view is connected to relating in a different way:

The first thing that changes is the relationship, the quality of the relationship, automatically. I am not the one who offers solutions which may or may not suit the client, but we can try to deal together with the problem, to set goals... I am there to help with finding a solution, but it is not me who offers the solution, we try together to see what I can do and what the other person can do. ...To me it is a completely different conception of the relationship, which is connected to the contract: the client is not a passive target of action, he is a protagonist. This is a crucial point to me.(Rita)

In the above quotation, factors that can be connected to a work plan, such as goals or tasks, are certainly mentioned and considered, but at the same time they seem to shift into a secondary position; they do not seem to be treated as distinctive features of the contract. They just happen to be there, and acquire a specific importance as long as they are agreed by the parties.

Going into more depth about how the relationship is affected or changed by the contract, one element which emerges is that a contract is seen as affecting the imbalance of power between client and social worker. A contract is connected to the reduction of asymmetry between practitioners and clients, or even explicitly to the development of a more egalitarian relationship.¹⁹

This emerges in some cases as in contrast with models of social work learnt at school. As a social worker trained before the seventies puts it:

¹⁹ This theme is widely discussed in the literature on contract (as illustrated by the discussion between Rojeck and Collins on one side and Corden and Preston-Shoot on the other in section 3.6) .

At school you were taught a different model, the role of the social worker was to direct the life of others, the relationship was not conceived as between equals, a contractual relation... (with a contract) the client should not enter into contact with the service in a subordinate position ... (Irene)

In this case, contract is definitely seen as implying a whole model of how a social worker should be. This is contrasted to a more traditional one, which fits very well the model that in the literature has been described as 'the fixer' (Howe, 1986).

More concretely, other interviewees connect the change in the relationship to the particular and even practical features of contracts:

This way (with the contract) the asymmetry between client and social worker is reduced ... both have tasks, they can monitor each other... the positive side is that as the client has an active part in the process he has also the possibility of criticising...there is this reciprocity. (Rita)

A more egalitarian relationship is in many cases intrinsically connected to the image of the contract itself, it is the main idea associated with contract:

When I think of a contract I think of work with the client, it is a way of considering myself and the client on the same level, not a situation where I dictate the rules and the clients obey The clients must feel they have a part, they are protagonist. (Lucia)

In other cases though, the connection appears less strong and limited to particular situations. It depends on the problem presented by clients, and very often the situation can change if children and the Child Tribunal are involved. Many social workers for instance declare that in relation to child protection, they have a precise responsibility and cannot withdraw from it. In these cases, contract work implies trying to be more 'democratic'. Only in particular circumstances is it possible to talk of equality:

When the problem is a practical one, the use of a contract is different. It is

more like sharing tasks...it is more a relationship between equals, simply I see myself more as an expert in relation to problems, and less as the one who is responsible for everything. (Barbara)

Whether it is direct or indirect, it is already apparent that the image of a contract as an agreement is somehow connected to a particular view or image of social work, as well as to a particular view of clients, often referred to as 'protagonists' (this will appear more clearly in the analysis of critical incidents in chapters 7-8).

The reduction of asymmetry can often be expressed in terms of reciprocity in the interaction between practitioners and clients. Reciprocity becomes an important theme in connection to contracts, as contract work entails reciprocal trust. It is not just that practitioners have to gain their clients' confidence, they also have to 'dare' trusting clients.²⁰ It is stressed that the contract is a reciprocal commitment. Most social workers in this group link contracts to reciprocal accountability. It is underlined how far social workers become directly accountable to clients: the emphasis is laid on reciprocal monitoring, and it is considered that in this way clients have the means to check whether the social worker has fulfilled his or her tasks.

Reciprocity is connected to the fact that contracts involve open communication between client and social worker. To be able to know what is going on is an important factor which changes the position of both parties:

The contract puts me in an open situation, it makes it easier for people to verify my soundness as social worker, my reliability at fulfilling my own commitments, my dependability.... maybe as the process is more clear, it is easier for the client to discuss what is going on. (Sofia)

Reciprocity is perceived as positive in many ways. Several social workers underline that it is a matter of fairness in the relationship:

[When you introduce the contract] clients become very careful in checking

²⁰ By contrast, in the literature, discussions of trust focus on the practitioner having to gain the trust of clients (see for this Pittaluga, 2000), while the opposite case is seldom and marginally considered (Ferrario, 1996b).

what you have done and if you have fulfilled your tasks...They call you 'Have you done this?' I think this is a correct way of working, I can check what they are doing and they can check what I am doing. It is right, this is a contractual way of working. (Alberta)

Sometimes it is pointed out that reciprocal accountability actually helps social workers, because their clients remind them of their commitments:

This thing (the contract) enables clients to hold me accountable for what I have done and what I have to do, and this is a help to me, it is very useful ... sometimes you happen to be late ... (Alberta)

Rita relates the positive aspects of reciprocal checks to the fact that, in the context of a better relationship, checking is not perceived by either as an attack:

I have been taken aback by this. Sometimes I am late or I do not exactly remember every passage of the agreement, but they are not aggressive about this, I ask them to remind me exactly, and then of course I fulfil my commitment immediately. This is connected to the quality of the relationship. We do not run after the clients to force them to fulfil their tasks, as we used to before, and they do not use our mistakes against us. (Rita)

Sometimes though, reciprocal commitment is perceived as somehow threatening. Very often social workers describe their work as quite difficult to organise and dominated by emergencies. To make specific commitments toward clients raises some worries, and this is connected to a resistance towards using contracts:

To me, there is a little bit of fear about using contracts, because you make a commitment. There are always so many things to be done...certainly one problem is the fulfilment of the contract by the social worker, you are in a context where it (the work) is more and more difficult... (Cinzia)

Another interviewee connects these fears to a wariness in using contracts in a more rigorous way:

If you write things down the client makes a commitment, but you are committed too, and you cannot withdraw. (Irene)

In other parts of the interview, the same person declares the difficulty lies in the fact that social workers are not fully in control of their own time, and it is very difficult to make precise commitments and to stick to deadlines.

The centrality of agreement in this group's representations of contracts also emerges indirectly. Failures are often interpreted in terms of problems at the level of the agreement. Thus, respect of the contract on the client's side is perceived as a problem which can be connected to the initial contract ('sometimes it comes out that the 'yes' was not an agreement after all (Tiziana), and not necessarily to clients' lack of capacity in relation to the contract. In the following case, for instance, a practitioner connects failure to fulfil a contract to the difficulty of giving clients time to express their views:

[The contract] is a reciprocal commitment and it must be negotiated... I think, failures occur because we start immediately with goals which do not fit the client or his interests, his views. This leads to failure in any case... Sometimes we tend to be led by our views and not think of the person we are working with. Maybe this is because with many people reaching some shared understanding requires time, and we never have time. So it is easier to start directly and then to say 'oh it didn't work, who knows why'. When you think back, to me it is obvious. (Lucia)

In any case, failures involve starting back and negotiating something different:

Then there is an assessment, sometimes things have gone partially wrong or completely wrong, at this point you have to make a choice, maybe you have to re-negotiate, maybe the task was too difficult, we have to define something easier, maybe we have made a mistake with timing...(Cinzia)

One interviewee presents her way of working as trying to keep on the alert to whether the agreement will hold or not:

There are many contracts that have been made about a certain plan, and then we have to go back and change them, they are not fulfilled because the problem was not the one considered. Then it is up to you to understand that things are going in a different direction from what was agreed. Then there are signals, sometimes I see that there is something wrong, and I wait to see how the situation evolves and to understand better The signals are important in order not to get stuck but to work in agreement with the person. (Rita)

Whether or not the agreement is directly called into question, there is a tendency to look at the process, rather than at clients' stable traits, as the main source of problems:

Then sometimes the deal is not respected. Maybe we make mistakes and expect too much and immediately. I do remember a situation with a mother, she felt very depressed, she said that she felt under attack from all directions, that there were lots of things to be done, but she did not know where to start. In many situations one risks making a contract without taking into account what the person can do....sometimes the person is unable to tell you that what has been decided is too much for her... (Maria)

This shows an effort to understand the difficulties in the agreement in terms of problems in communication. Very often, when agreement is put at the centre, practitioners tend to go beyond the mere acceptance by clients of the work plan:

This is a problem: sometimes people who come here are easily influenced by what you say, so it can be difficult to make a contract which is based on consensus from both sides, or at least on mutual acknowledgement of the initial situation. People sometimes think that is sort of a duty to agree or to accept, and then they cannot fulfil the commitment. It is difficult to understand these dynamics, what happens when people walk away from my office. (Lucia)

Difficulties are sometimes directly referred to the imbalance of power in favour of authority, which is often present when the courts are directly involved:

The point is that you represent the authority of the court: so it happens that agreement is just apparent...it is a way to fight back. And then you have to work a lot to understand together that if we go on this way we will not get anywhere. (Sofia)

Focusing on the agreement leads to the view that a 'yes', or compliance, does not always mean that the goals and the project are shared. As many of the previous quotations show, there is a tendency to distinguish between formal and substantial agreement:

The preparation of the contract is a an important job, because we start from different cultures, for instance I have internalised that pre-school is important for children, other people think that children do not need anything specific, they just need the basic things (food etc.) ...

Another indirect sign of the importance given to the agreement appears in the importance attributed to open conflict. In this picture, open conflicts, or at least expressions of disagreement by clients, are seen as having a positive influence in the process. Substantial agreement is seen as possible only if clients are given the possibility, and are able, to express their views, particularly when they are different from those of the practitioners:

I think it is easier when there is an open conflict, ...it could seem a paradox, but then it is easier to renegotiate a new contract...if things go smoothly you tend to forget. (Irene)

As many interviewees point out, open conflicts are seen as chance to re-discuss the work, to clarify and / or to re-negotiate:

The conflict can be open, and this is better. Sometimes clients are overwhelmed by our requests, so for instance they come and say 'I am fed up with you and with everything' . But from this we can start again, clarifying why we are working together, what are the problems, how we want to face them. (Sofia)

In a sense, expression of disagreement is perceived as a positive competence of clients. It can be even seen as one of the elements which facilitates contract work:

It is easier with people who are able to say 'No thank you, what you propose does not suit me, I prefer something different...' other clients look less able to express...well maybe it is me the one who is not able to lead them to express their point of view. (Irene)

In several cases, practitioners show attention to potential signals of disagreement. One interviewee explains how facilitating the expression of disagreement is an important part of the process:

Well you see how people react, sometimes they clearly agree, sometimes they say 'well but I do not have time' or 'I'll go but I'm sure that I won't have any reply'. Then you stop, because it is important to understand, maybe this is not the right plan. Sometime it is possible to sort it out on the spot, sometime we need another interview. (Rita)

In another case, a practitioner declares how she has come to appreciate the worth of written contracts, as a chance to express disagreement. When faced with the task of writing down the contract, people find the self-confidence to express their doubts and their orientations:

In certain cases it is only when arriving to the written contract that people find the courage to say that a certain solution does not suit them. And this is positive as we can find another line of action.(Tiziana)

As it might well be expected, this view of the contract entails a strong distinction between working with voluntary or involuntary clients. When the agreement is the crucial feature, the starting point is of course crucial too. Thus, social workers in this group tend to underline the differences between taking the initiative following a spontaneous request for help, or a court order. This is seen as so important that some social workers consider contract work as only practicable with voluntary clients:

I think I have used contracts just with voluntary clients, not with involuntary clients (...) (the situation of contract work) is different from the situation where I give inflexible rules, and my job is to say 'These are the rules of the game and there is no way to change them' (Lucia)

In most cases, however, practitioners tend to see the possibility of working on a contract basis in compulsory interventions simply as different, and maybe more difficult:

The contracts in connection with court cases are very different from those done in relation to a spontaneous request. These are situations where people are forced to come. As there is no request, one has to deal with the problem of understanding whether the client is prepared to collaborate in a plan or not. One has to be very clear, otherwise we risk just making the clients run away, feeling lonely and just threatened by our power (...) The use of contracts in this context is quite peculiar. (Sofia)

As people are certainly unwilling to co-operate from the start, preliminary work is needed in order to create the conditions for the possibility of a contract:

Well, it is much easier with voluntary clients, they come with a request which is much more thought out; when you work with courts it is difficult because the request does not start from the client. Sometimes during the inquiries you can spot resources and start working. But when there is already a sentence, it is much more difficult, not impossible, but.... Nobody finds it easy to accept being under the control of the court, they are in a defensive position...it takes them time to differentiate you from the judge, your work as different from the work of a court. (Irene)

Another interesting distinctive feature with this group is that little connection is made between the use of contracts and a successful outcome. Many interviewees in this group tend to see the outcome as to be ascribed to many different factors (available resources, seriousness of problems etc.) and not necessarily to any particular way of working. A common point, on the contrary, is that contracts are seen as connected to the values and basic principles of social work:

It [using a contract] is an approach which helps you always to consider the principle of respect for the clients. It is the formula which allows me to take into account clients' perceptions, their will to deal with the problems, and gives them the possibility to make decisions about themselves and their destiny, and this to me is fundamental. (Sofia)

[the use of contracts] is connected to many factors, for instance social work values, clients' self determination (.....)the acknowledgement that all people have resources and competences which have to be considered and enhanced ... I think it was natural to me to accept contract work: it is simpler in a way, if one sees the person as having rights and so on... (Alberta)

As it has already emerged from many quotations, contract work is perceived as connected to the view of social work practice held by practitioners. In most cases, contract work is seen as providing a way of working which is coherent with this view and which increases professional satisfaction.

Contracts enhance professional satisfaction, because you give people a chance to use their own resources, and I think that this is my work. (Irene)

Another interviewee regards the possibility of establishing a cooperative relationship as one of the few satisfactions she finds in her work. As many practitioners point out, they often have to deal with serious problems and adverse circumstances, and the chances of having a substantial impact on a client's situation are quite low. In many cases, what they can do is to alleviate problems partially or even temporarily and to provide a positive experience:

To me, being able to find even a small area where it is possible to cooperate in situations where intervention is compulsory is a great satisfaction, I do not have many other satisfactions. (Sofia)

6.3.2 Contract as workplan

The second way of representing contracts connects the contract to the organisation of the work.²¹ A contract becomes a means to work in a more structured way: it makes a difference in terms of a better definition of the work. Contract work often appears as a process directed by the social worker, particularly as far as the definition of the content is concerned. In this picture, agreement and the relationship between social worker and clients are considered, but they are more connected to the usual way of working, and the word 'agreement' is often used as synonymous with acceptance. Coherently with these two features, the interaction between practitioner and client tends to be, more or less openly, described in asymmetrical terms. The contract is perceived as giving social workers the opportunity to monitor the client's behaviour, and not vice versa. The non-fulfilment of a contract is often perceived as the main problem and is connected to characteristics of clients or to mistakes in the first evaluation by social workers.

The contrast with the first group extends to all features discussed in the previous section: there is a tendency to consider the differences between contracts with voluntary and involuntary clients as less substantial in relation to contract work; and there are more references to contract work in connection with positive outcomes. As for the last feature, while contracts are seen as giving the practitioner a more positive experience of social work. They are seen, in other words, as a way to keep at bay the inevitable uncertainty in social work practice, and to diminish the anxiety generated by work on difficult cases.

Many interviews of this group clearly state that a contract is mainly a way to define the situation between clients and social workers. What distinguishes contracts from other ways of working is precisely the fact that things are specified:

The risk is that the term 'contract' be used for any agreement... I think that the contract is something which defines the content of an agreement in great detail and specifies it better.... What is specific to contracts is that the content of the agreement is highly specified. (Marco)

²¹ References for this representation of contracts are mainly drawn from the interviews to Ester, Marco, Sonia, Grazia, Donatella, Assunta, Claudia, Oriana and Giulia.

In other cases, a contract is directly described as providing a structure to the work, or even as synonymous with structure:

I think that the validity of contract is that it is a step between evaluation and intervention which clarifies well all the phases of the work, it gives a sense of direction. With a contract you have to clarify the problem, its solutions, the tasks ahead. You have to specify deadlines and assessments with clients. It rationalises the process. (Assunta)

But, the relevance of the work plan, which is the content of the contract, also appears from the positive aspects underlined. Very often, the contract is described as a map of the situation, which enables you to retrace your path when you get lost:

The element of contract work which I appreciate most is that it clarifies situations: it is a tool which allows you to understand how things are proceeding with a certain person. When I do not make a contract I feel that I am working on one of those cases where you do not know where you are going. Personally, I feel that it makes me feel more confident as social worker, I can assess what we have done... If you lose the way you can always find it again. (Donatella)

In other cases it is also underlined how working with a contract also means recognising the need for open and clear communication of social work basic rules, as well as the fixed elements of the roles involved:

I work mainly with courts, so in this field, where intervention does not start following a request from clients, the main point is to have clear what the court and your agency asks, and to be able to define a work plan with the client, what are the goals, what role do I have, and also to discuss problems and difficulties with clients. (Grazia)

In all cases the agreement is named. But it appears as secondary and it is never considered closely. The following quotation can provide a good example of this:

Well, it is difficult to work without an agreement, without an agreement I would feel confused, if there is not a contract one does not know what direction she is taking, what goals she has. (Sonia)

As one can observe, agreement in this case is used as a generic synonym of contract. But the emphasis is definitely on the contract as providing direction and goals to the intervention.²² And if the relationship with clients is considered, this is usually indirectly: if the conditions of the intervention are clear, clients usually feel more contained, they know better what they have to do, they are more willing ‘to cooperate’, or even be put in a position to co-operate.

Contract work is often connected to setting the boundaries of the intervention. It is seen as a counter-measure to the tendency to make plans that are too broad and ambitious:

As a social worker you cannot change people’s life, ...but you start working from one point, from a specific area. This gives limits that make me feel more confident ..it is like setting boundaries, a base from which the following stages can be defined, for instance you assess the intervention: you do not have to look at the whole world and at all possible areas; this sets limits also in relation to clients. (Donatella)

In this sense, contract work is perceived as a counter-measure to a sense of omnipotence, or as another interviewee puts it, to overcome social workers’ tendency to ‘try and eradicate all the evil in the world’. At the same time, contract work is perceived as a means to face unrealistic expectations from clients:

‘Contract’ means to clarify what you can and what you cannot do. People who turn to social services sometimes expect all their problems to be solved by the social worker. Setting limits is useful for us too. It helps one not to feel omnipotent [...] therefore, the contract is useful because we say ‘we go so far and that is it, we do not have to go further’. (Sonia)

²² These elements are all strongly stressed in contract literature (see section 4.3, particularly Davies, 1995; Sheldon, 1986; Ferrario, 1996b; Coronelli, 1995).

As the above quotation shows, words such as 'clarify', 'clarity' and so on appear quite often in association with this group's representation of contract. What makes the difference between contract work and a different way of working is often identified with the fact that the work plan, roles, rights and duties are clear to both parties:

'Contract' is to clearly identify where we start and where we head for, what the roles, the rights and the duties are. But it has to be clear to both parties, if all this is clear just in my mind we cannot say that there is a contract. (Claudia)

When contract is perceived as a way to provide structure to the work, as in this second group, it is also often presented as a process strongly directed by the practitioner. The definition of the contents of the contract is particularly crucial here. Social workers are the ones who define what must be done, while the clients' role is quite often described as 'following' the practitioners' directions:

Generally, I try to reach an agreement. Maybe at the beginning people do not like what I propose, but I have seen that if you put things in a certain way, if people do not feel judged, then they follow you... (Sonia)

Social workers present themselves as the protagonists, the ones who have to understand the situation, evaluate and decide what has to be done by whom:

The important thing that the contract gives is the opportunity to say to the person what it is appropriate to do, who has to do things, what part do I have and what part the person has (...) You have to take into account the other person's resources, because you could imagine what should be done... So you have to establish a contract which is appropriate to what the client can do at the moment. (Giulia)

Sometimes, to be directive is presented as a way of working that the practitioner has developed through experience. The point is that, in any case, to take the centre of the stage is not perceived as contradictory to a contractual way of working²³:

I was thinking that my way of making a contract is... I am very directive, so it is a directive way of making a contract, it starts from me rather than being built up step by step with the client... I am the one who makes a suggestion from the start, and then I try to convince the client. (Donatella)

In other cases, it is more frankly declared that the practitioner *has* to lead the game; being the one who knows what has to be done is viewed as inscribed in the professional role:

I am the one who leads the game; I do not think that this is like saying that I overwhelm clients because I listen to them. But I think that when someone addresses a service anyway he asks for this, he recognises a competence.(....) I choose, I can adjust, but I guide the situation, I have the game in my hands... anyway. I think that this is what my agency asks of me, but also people. ...I make plans, I have goals, I can change, adjust, but it is me, otherwise I would change tack all the time... (Ester)

The substance of contract work is very often described, in this group of interviews, as communicating clearly what must be done, and convincing the client to accept the practitioner's plan. Communication between practitioner and client is often presented as a one-way process:

You are the professionals, it is your task to measure the possibilities that they have to understand you, you have to say the same thing broken down into manageable chunks over time. If you say things that are too difficult to accept it is counter-productive. (Ester).

Therefore, contract work allows social workers to check their clients' achievements. There are few or no references to the possibility for clients to check and assess social

²³ This is not considered contradictory in the literature either (Lerma, 1992; Ferrario, 1996b).

workers' interventions. Coherently with this position, the fulfilment of the contract by clients is a crucial point. Sometimes this is implied in the way working to reach compliance is emphasised. In other cases it is openly considered as one of the most important issues related to contract work. The main point of the contract is that it works as long as clients are dependable and fulfil it. One interviewee particularly concentrates on this issue, and underlines as a major point the difficulties in terms of clients' responsibility:

..... because often users know very well what contracts are, they do not know what professional contracts are, but they know legal contracts very well. Very often, not always, but very often they are used not to respect them. The non-respect of contract is a sort of mental habit for certain users. ..(Marco)

Just as the content of the contract is described as being mainly defined by the social workers, another source of problems is to be found in the evaluation by the practitioner, which is seen as a difficult process:

To me it is important to start with a clear evaluation of the resources, but also of the problems and difficulties; we tend to value resources,... but then you have to face nasty surprises... It is like any other contract you make, say when you buy a car, you have to know what the characteristics of the car are.. this is the problem. We are social workers, we cannot understand every aspect.. So to make a contract one would need a more specialist evaluation by others..(Grazia)

In a sense, contract is described as a work plan made by professionals on the basis of their evaluation and information; the clients are convinced, they are in any case described as following. In this picture the differences between voluntary and compulsory intervention appear to be less emphasised and are in many cases seen as not substantially affecting the method of work or the contract:

.... for we have this difference (voluntary and involuntary clients) which is important.... Well, the method is always the same... when there are prescriptions you are immediately obliged to do things, in these cases you have to obtain consensus and collaboration...in these cases in a way the

contract could be already defined, times are different because people need more time to mature... It is a matter of nuances, one cannot draw a neat distinction between voluntary and involuntary clients. (Sonia)

In many cases, interviewees point out the increase in the imbalance of power between social worker and client which is introduced by acting on the basis of court orders, but this is not seen as directly affecting the contract:

When the court is involved I am on the side of the stronger one, you have to communicate clearly that we can reach the goal together, and that I base my evaluation on the elements that they give me, I do not ask of them things that they cannot do.. but if they do not cooperate then I have to go on anyway (...) with users who come spontaneously the work is the same ... the elements are the same, to be explicit about goals, and so on...(Ester)

In this picture, contract work is perceived as having a positive impact mainly at the level of the organisation of the work:

[the contract] implies breaking down complex problems into small parts, and isolating them...so the use of a contract can facilitate the work because it gives a method to deal with problems which are too big to be dealt with altogether, to identify priorities in relation to the different parts of interventions. If one proceeds this way [i.e., by splitting problems into segments] one can also use contracts in a more appropriate way. (Marco)

Another interviewee, on the same line, underlines the positive impact of contracts in terms of efficiency:

Another thing is speed, when you make an assessment, when you have clear what you are assessing, what the contract is about, you are more focused, you have a guideline, so I have the feeling of reaching the goal without any loss of time. (Donatella)

More in general, it appears within this group that the contract has a positive impact on the caseload:

It (organising the work through contracts) has been important for us, because in the field of court work, which is so wide, it has introduced a differentiation of phases, goals and deadlines... the cases now look much more articulated in terms of plans, more structured .. It makes caseload more manageable. (Grazia)

Another interviewee differently exemplifies the impact of the contract on how she deals with her case load: the idea of working on a contract basis has led her to look at cases in a different way, to assess the situation of her case load better and to explicitly close cases which appeared 'stuck'.

The theme of tranquillity and of reduction of anxiety within this group of interviewees is often connected to contract work. This is often seen as enhancing practitioners' confidence :

[The contract] defines the situation better, personally it makes me feel more secure. (Donatella)

This is often explained in relation to the clearer definition of the situation which is somehow induced by contract work and which leads to more clarity in the relationship whichever way the case evolves:

Even in difficult situations, if the task has been well defined, it was clear what the possibilities of the family were, and it was clear what resources had been employed, then when one reaches extreme solutions (adoption) even at critical moments...Well, I am thinking of a court appeal ..one feels more confident and relaxed... I have experienced this. (Grazia)

6.4 Comparing Two Definitions of Contract

These two groups of interviews illustrate two contrasting perceptions of the concept of contract work, which in turn lead to differences in descriptions of how it is put into practice.

Coherently with the attention given to the agreement in the first group of interviews, the client-practitioner relationship is a crucial theme. The content of the contract is considered, but is given less attention. When the view of contract work is mainly focused on its role in providing a structure to the work, on the contrary, attention is focused on work organisation, goal setting, and boundary definition. The relationship is marginally, or secondarily treated as sometimes improving in the context of a more defined structure.

Themes like equality, reduction of asymmetry and reciprocity are strongly connected to a contract seen as an agreement. On the contrary, they are not considered in relation to the contract as a work plan. The relationship between practitioners and clients, in this case, is often described in asymmetrical terms. Here, clarity and open communication on the part of the practitioner are crucial features of the contract.

Communication is described as a two-way process in the first group, as shown by the praise of expression of disagreement by clients, and of open conflicts. On the contrary, coherently to the focus on the work plan, in the second group communication seems to be mainly asymmetrical. As agreement is considered in generic terms, contract work is described as convincing clients or achieving their compliance. The differences here are quite strong, as 'convincing clients' is often perceived as negative by interviewees who see the contract as an agreement.

Voluntary and compulsory cases appear more strongly differentiated in the first group than in the second. Again, this can be understood in connection to the different focus. It is more difficult to reach agreement in a compulsory context. On the contrary, the presence of compulsory measures is less disturbing if the point is to define the situation in a clear way and to reach clients' compliance. The back-up of the court in this case could even appear as something which facilitates contract work: contracts in compulsory interventions are sometimes described as 'stronger'.

The connection between contract work and social work values or professional satisfaction, can be seen as consistent with an approach to contracts in which the agreement is crucial and the contract is mainly seen as a way to organise the interaction, to improve the practitioner-client relationship and to act in a way which is consistent with a certain view of social work. Similarly, the importance given in the second group to work organisation and to the reduction of uncertainty and anxiety is consistent with the focus on contract as work plan.

While in social work literature agreement and structure are both central (see sections 4.2 and 4.3, and particularly Sill, 1997; Ferrario, 1996b), social workers' representations are focused on one or the other. The main traits appear reinterpreted too. When agreement is the focus, there is a stress on themes connected to mutuality and flexibility of the contract. On the contrary, when structuring factors are seen as crucial, the definition of boundaries, the introduction of a sense of direction, and open communication on the side of practitioners are the characteristics of contract which attract most attention.

6.5 Summary

In this chapter, we have started to analyse how the concept of contract is treated by practitioners. First, common aspects have been underlined, such as the indiscriminate use of the term in relation to more or less formalised practices, and to practices not labelled as 'contract' with clients. Second, we have identified and illustrated two main representations of the concept: one, in which the main figure is an agreement, the other, which puts at the centre of the stage structuring factors of the contract. We have considered, and subsequently contrasted, two different networks of themes which are connected to the two representations.

Table 6.1 below summarises the main traits of the two different representations of contract work, which have emerged from the interviews. In the next chapter, I will illustrate how these differences affect uses of the concept of contract in professional practice, drawing upon practitioners' accounts of critical incidents.

Table 6.1 Images of Contract: Basic Traits

Contract as Agreement	Contract as Structuring Factor
Focus on the relationship	Focus on the organisation of the work
Focus on reduction of asymmetry and reciprocity	View of the relationship as asymmetrical
Contract based on a two-way communication process	Contract based on a one-way communication process
Voluntary and compulsory interventions strongly differentiated in relation to contract.	Voluntary and compulsory interventions only mildly differentiated in relation to contract.
Contract work connected to social work values	Contract work connected to a better organisation of the caseload
Contract work connected to professional satisfaction	Contract work as a way to bring uncertainty and anxiety under control

7 Practices Labelled 'Contract': Contract as a Work Tool

In this chapter, I examine uses of the label 'contract' in relation to descriptions of instances of practice. The analysis of interviews prompts the identification of two different representations of contract, which differ in how its salient features are organised and connected. The agreement between client and practitioner, and the definition of a work plan, are key aspects of contract that are always identified as relevant. However, they are presented in a different light depending on whether they are the focus of attention or the background. It has also emerged that different ways of organising the concept emphasise different themes connected to it.

The second stage in data analysis consists of looking at how differences in the organisation of the concept can be connected to different descriptions and implementation of contracts in relation to concrete examples. The main data for this analysis consist of the examples of contract work produced by social workers in the second interview.

Looking at examples of contracts it is difficult to isolate 'contracts' from the whole context of the story of the 'cases' in which they are embedded. The importance of context had already emerged in the interviews focusing on the concept. The interviews on critical incidents were meant to be shorter and more straightforward than the first ones. In fact, the opposite was the case: informants found it very difficult to produce intelligible examples of contracts without introducing the history of the intervention and many details of the circumstances in which the contract had been implemented.

Indeed, the data gathered through the second interviews could be better defined as detailed case histories, rather than specific critical incidents of contract work. This has directly influenced the analysis as well. Differences in the use of the label 'contract' make sense if considered within the different ways of describing the work

ways of describing the work process, the approach to problems, the interaction between professionals and clients, and so on.

In a sense, the style of presentation in the next two chapters reverses the one adopted in the previous chapter. There, the analysis set out from the different understandings of the contract. In the next two chapters, the analysis moves from broader descriptions of the work process. Differences in representations of contract work will be the final point of the analysis, rather than its starting one.

The analysis will show that the examples produced by practitioners are largely consistent with the different definitions of contract illustrated in the previous chapter. It is therefore advisable to present examples, produced by practitioners whose perception of contract focuses on the structure it provides to the work process, in a separate chapter from examples produced by practitioners who view contract mainly as an agreement.

In this chapter, I summarise and analyse in depth selected examples from the informants. They illustrate how contract is regarded by some practitioners as a tool providing structure to the work process. Section 7.1 introduces accounts which underline a highly structured way of working; the following section (7.2) presents work descriptions in which a certain definition of the situation plays a crucial role in the accounts; section 7.3 highlights features of the organisational structure as crucial to the work.

Presenting just a few, selected accounts of critical incidents allows an extensive and detailed presentation of the cases. As anticipated in chapter 5, I consider this important. Social work cases often appear in the literature in a simplified and stereotyped form in order to illustrate models. They have often been used to show how models could be implemented or, in other cases, bits have been extrapolated to support easy criticisms. During this research I have gathered over forty complex detailed accounts of examples of work. To present a high number of examples would have entailed reducing them to a sketchy format, which would obviously have

appeared very similar to the exemplary cases which already proliferate in the literature. Focusing on small number of cases is essential to provide an in-depth, detailed presentation of the complexities faced by those working on the ‘fire line’. Therefore, I will summarise and comment on just five cases. They represent the most clear-cut instances of themes that, nonetheless, can be found in accounts from 18 practitioners.

7.1 The Contract as Part of a Structured Approach to Work

I will present here two examples of contract work produced by the same practitioner. This interviewee (Ester) has described the contract as setting goals, defining clearly the roles that different actors play, and the tasks to be performed. What distinguishes contract from other kinds of work is that everything is communicated clearly to clients. When she mentions agreement she always refers to the fact that clients accept the plan made by the practitioner. The core of contract work is seen in the endeavour to induce clients to accept the plan drawn by the expert.

This interviewee has produced many examples with the explicit purpose of showing how her approach is stable and independent of specific circumstances. Looking at just one example, one might think that certain characteristics are connected to the peculiarity of the situation, or to the fact that the problem dealt with is perceived as serious or not serious. I will therefore introduce two examples that can illustrate the stability in descriptions of the work process.

7.1.1 The Rossi family

This is a case where many social services have been involved; it started with an inquiry, well it is a complex one ... I undertook this inquiry for the tribunal. One of the children, the middle one, of these two parents (there are three children), reports to the teacher that he has been abused, he shows signs of abuse. I make this inquiry, and the family, which was in a very serious situation, declares that everything was OK.

Ester describes the inquiry as a very difficult one as the family tends to avoid all contacts. The situation looks serious to the social worker from the beginning, as she identifies many problems:

The mother is clearly mentally ill, the father is paranoid, the eldest child shows signs of having psychiatric problems, the middle one is the one who would like to improve, but he is deeply mixed up and involved in the family in a problematic way, the younger daughter seems in delirium like the mother. In such a serious situation they were pretending that everything was OK.

After having gathered information from other sources, mainly school and nursery, Ester chooses to inform the judge that the inquiry must be suspended and that a psychiatric diagnosis is essential in order to understand what is going on in this family. Ester says that the mother was not able to talk about any topic for more than one minute, she would always change subject. It was difficult to understand from her speech, as from the youngest girl's speech, what was real and what was just imagined. It emerged that the children were fed regularly, but in a very strange and improper way. The youngest girl was sometimes sent to nursery with a bottle of Coke. The mother would move the furniture around in the house every two days. Ester says that during an interview the mother says that she cannot take her daughter close to the window because she has once seen a kitten thrown out of the window. Tibadi interprets this as a signal of serious danger and thinks she has to act quickly.

So Ester says that the first contract with this family was an agreement about the involvement of psychiatric services. She thinks that the potential ally about this is the father, whom at the moment she values as 'the healthy part' of the family. Her goal is to convince them that they need psychiatric help.

... he was one who started saying that his family was normal, he was a hard worker, he wanted ... but then I said to him 'Well but why do you always come alone and your wife is not with you?' ' I managed to show [him] the difficulties in their situation. You try to talk in a way they can understand what you are saying. This is the first part of the agreement, they accept sending the children to the area psychiatric child unit and the mother goes to

the area mental health service. Well, then I had to work with my colleagues.

It comes out that the mother is severely mentally ill, schizophrenic, and she is immediately put under medication. All three children need to be taken into care as the parents are, and will not be, capable of looking after them.

This will be the outcome of the inquiry. The social worker in her report to the judge suggests that compulsory measures of care would be negative for the children, she suggests trying to reach an agreement about this with the family. The sentence will be in tune with this suggestion and will order for the children to be taken into care gradually. The content of the sentence is then communicated to the parents. And this is presented as the second main contract.

I started working in this direction: I told the parents that there were too many problems, the difficulties of the mother, the difficulties of the father, who has anyway to work and cannot look after the situation, so gradually, over a period of time... . But the meaning of all this is that the children need other accommodation ... with all that I said before about acknowledging the pain of the parents and supporting them. But the plan is that gradually they have to be taken into care. And this is the content of the second agreement.

Meanwhile, Ester is going to organise support so that the situation is taken under control: the area psychiatric team will look after the mother, the Child Mental Health Service will take charge of the three children. Her original plan was to start with the eldest. But the boy, who would be sent into care with less difficulties by the family, does not want to go away while his brother and sister are still at home. They decide to start with the younger girl, who is sent to community residential care and soon after to a foster family.

Ester describes how all interventions are carefully planned. For instance, when the girl is taken into care this is done in the presence of the psychiatrist who is treating the mother, in case the mother needs help. Everything is ready in case Ms Rossi needs to be taken into hospital. The father and the social worker herself accompany the girl into the community residential care.

As far as the elder boy is concerned, the problem is that he already shows signs of severe mental distress. In this situation, the staff of the community residential care service that has been chosen, express doubts about the possibility of looking after him. Ester is going to deal with this problem by obtaining 'one-to-one' support for the boy during the first period in the community, through a domiciliary educational intervention. This is rather unusual as domiciliary educational intervention is conceived as an alternative to residential care: in administrative terms, the two interventions would not be compatible. Ester says that she was able to convince the administrative staff to make an exception. She comments:

If you have a good plan and you are able to justify that it is going to work, people in the administrative staff can understand and support you.

Ester says that it will take six months to take all the children out of the family. Then a next stage starts, which is to support the parents, who at this point have split up, and to help them find a new way to relate with their children.

The following phase was to help these parents to accept and cope with the new situation. The goal was to support the parents in accepting the plan, accepting that they could not look after their children, but to let them understand that they could still be parents in a different way. With the mother we worked towards helping her accept that her children had to be away from her and that they would be in care for a long time. She sees the two sons regularly and the little girl once a month in my office. With the father I had several interviews and managed to convince him to have psychological support. This way he will have a chance to put some order in his mind, and accept that his family could never be together again. Both parents, in their own way, maintain a very intense relationship with the children.

Ester concludes by saying the children are better: the younger two are in foster care and she describes them as going back to normal, the eldest shows more problems but he is improving. She claims she was quite sure from the beginning that the situation was very serious, although she was slower to reach the conclusion that there was no possibility whatsoever of improvement:

I had in my mind from the beginning just after having met them, that for these children there was no room within the family. That there was no hope

of an improvement of the family gradually became clear. These children were so disturbed that they needed to be 'reconstructed'.

The contract is considered a success because it made it possible to work through step-by-step agreements, instead of having to implement compulsory interventions. The social worker says that what made it possible to reach an agreement was to show an understanding attitude in relation to the painful situation of this family:

The father was a person who arrived saying: 'I won't let you intrude in my business, we are a normal family, I work, I provide for my family, I do a lot of overtime'. I replied 'Well maybe this is the problem'. You can get there (make people accept their problem) if a person is in pain and you say that you do understand this, they maybe even start crying. Maybe they just need this, someone who understands, someone who says to them: 'I do understand that you are suffering, very deeply, because it is not easy to be in a situation like the one you are in'.

7.1.2. The case of Ms Bianchi

In this example, the same interviewee illustrates how her method is the same in different cases, and how she 'handles' voluntary and non-voluntary clients the same way. In this case, the client has come to the service of her own accord, following the advice of her children's schoolteachers. She is a foreign single mother of two children.

Ms Bianchi comes here and says: 'I have a problem, the school has called me several times, they say that my children do not perform well, they sent me here'. This woman comes from South America. I replied that the first step was to go to the school; I imagined that the two children probably had language problems. Ms Bianchi says: 'Yes probably this is the case because they have just arrived in Italy'

Ester starts her inquiry. She has an interview with the teachers of the children. They say that the problem is not connected to language competence. Had this been the case, they would have handled the problem themselves, and would not have sent this parent to the social worker. The point is that children show severe behavioural problems.

Ester has other interviews with Ms Bianchi in order to better understand the situation. She reports Ms Bianchi what the teachers said, and adds that although she acknowledges the possibility of language problems, she thinks the difficulties might lie elsewhere. So she asks for more information: the story of these children, how they behave at home, and so on. Ester explains that these interviews allowed her to grasp that there were several problems under the surface. The woman came to Italy several years ago, leaving the children with the father. Then the father died and the children were left in an unclear situation until their mother was able to go back and take them with her to Italy. It emerges that the children also have problems at home and that the younger boy has nightmares every night. Ms Bianchi works hard and does not have much time to look after them. The social worker describes the following stages in terms of completing an evaluation of the situation, giving feedback and proposing a work plan, a contract.

I told her 'Well, maybe there is a language problem too, but things have also happened to these children, you left them there with the father, then the father died, these things have made them suffer. They do not trust adults, they do not know who to trust. You have brought them here, but you are very busy with your work. So we can do something to help them at school, but this will be useful only if we do other things ... We can make this plan: we can provide you with financial support so that you can work less and be closer to your children. The younger boy, as he has nightmares, has to undergo psychological treatment so that he can be helped. We will provide educational domiciliary help for the two children, though the programme is not just related to scholastic support, but will involve a wider and more substantial support...

This is going to be the content of the agreement and what Ester designates as the contract. Ester says that her approach is based on the experience that people who arrive at the service are not aware of their problems, they are often not clear in their requests, 'they ask whatever'. Often they are sent without any clear idea why, so she has developed her method of work on this basis.

The exploratory phase is quite long, I have this theory, that when you start seeing things, it is like taking away the cover, there are always things underneath: you always find problems, maybe not always very serious ones,

but ... So I do not feel the urge to give an answer immediately, otherwise I risk giving inappropriate replies.

7.1.3. Comments

This interviewee presents her work as highly structured. The structure is presented as independent of specific circumstances. There is a stress on how the way of working does not change while facing different types of situations, and the two examples summarised exemplify this 'uniformity'.

The work is presented as organised in phases and each phase has to be concluded before starting the next. Phases and sub-phases are clearly identified in the description. The complexity of the first case is translated into more stages, not into a different approach. There is a rationale that is followed, and specific circumstances do not change it.

Ester refers to this structure as based on several rules she usually follows: stages follow one another on logical grounds. For instance, the first rule is that she has to have a clear picture of the situation before acting, otherwise she would make mistakes. This clear picture is built up by collecting information, using different sources and, if needed, specialists are directly involved in this phase. In the case of the first family, this phase needs to be organised on the basis of a 'contract' because of the refusal of the family to accept any interference.

The second rule is that, when Ester reaches a clear picture of the situation and is in a position to draw a plan, she has to communicate in a clear way both her evaluation and plan to the client/s, otherwise they would not be able to cooperate. This is presented as the contract. For instance, if in the second example, Ms Bianchi thinks that the educational domiciliary intervention is just meant for scholastic support, she might hinder any interventions by the educator not in this line. The practitioner has to communicate clearly that the children have problems that are more serious. This pattern appears in all descriptions.

An interesting point is that while the way of proceeding looks, within the accounts, quite fixed, evaluations and work plans appear quite specific in relation to the different cases. In other words, Ester's representation, though presenting a fixed pattern, does not show a standardised way of working. Several times, Ester underlines how her plans are not conventional ones and interventions are well adapted to the situation. In other words, her descriptions conjugate a predefined strong logic and non-predetermined moves.

The point is to understand better how [in the account] fixed rules and the specificity of the situation are intertwined in the representation. The impression is that rules are presented as if they could be treated as a sequence of open questions to be addressed to the situation. So, stages are identified on the basis of questions that are fixed and must be answered and the passage from one stage to another is seen as appropriate if the questions of the preceding stage have been addressed and answered. But the answers to the questions are open at least partially, to the peculiar features of the case. This way of proceeding strongly recalls the optimum way of structuring social work intervention as described by Howe (1986). While the sequence of questions seems to be stable and appears in all examples, the answers and the rhythm of the sequence are specific to the situation.

So, for example, the first stage is guided by questions about the picture of the family situation, and the main difficulties this family is facing. When Ester thinks she has the answer to the first question the next stage starts. If after the first inquiry the first questions are still unanswered, as in the first case, further information must be gathered and other professionals may have to be involved.

Even if this interviewee never mentions the word 'risk', it seems to me that it is possible to see in her structured way of proceeding a constant concern to avoid risks of all kinds (e.g., the risk to act without an understanding, the risk connected to anything that can disturb the implementation of the plan). The intervention appears to be thought out and planned carefully to avoid mistakes, false steps, and all possible

disturbance or interference. What happens after the intervention is also thoroughly handled (see the first example).

In a sense, this way of acting reminds one of what is stereotypically ascribed to scientists in a laboratory setting. In both examples for instance, families are looked at in isolation; they are treated as isolated entities, in other words, the situation appears neatly circumscribed. There is no mention whatsoever of the wider context, enlarged family, and friends. Maybe these families did not have any contact, but this lack of contacts is not mentioned. Then the work seems to proceed by identifying and taking under control all relevant variables (the mental illness of the mother, the opposition of the father, the risky situation of the children). Some variables are artificially taken under control (medication to the mother, control of specialists over the children), while others are intentionally manipulated in order to produce the desired change. In a sense, the only movements that appear in the accounts are the intentional, planned interventions, the only relevant events are the desired changes²⁴.

Another element that appears quite constant in the accounts is the way Ester describes her understanding of situations and problems. The work is described as a gathering of information, clues, which are then used to classify people and their problems. Ester makes a wide use of categorising terms while describing the situation (father paranoid, mother mentally ill, serious problems, language problems, behavioural or psychological problems). The use of categorisation seems to play an important role in the definition of the appropriate interventions: if there are psychological problems, psychotherapy is needed; if in the family there are 'serious' problems, children must be taken into care; etc. Yet, while there seems to be a sort of automatism in the connection between the way problems are classified and solutions identified, this does not convey an impression of a standardised way of proceeding. On the contrary, in many parts of the accounts the work is described as highly creative. In the first example, for instance, the intervention provided for the eldest son of the family is not presented as usual or automatic. And in the second the offer

²⁴ There are few exceptions to this. In the first example, for instance, Ester says that the parents split up, and this was, of course, not planned. Although this event is registered, it nevertheless does not affect the way of proceeding.

of non-requested financial support is quite an unusual move. The creativity displayed here, though, reminds one somehow of that displayed by chess players. Starting from a defined set of pieces and possible moves, Ester is always able to construct different interactive sequences, sometimes using pieces and moves in an unusual way, though always staying within the rules of the game.

Another element that characterises Ester's understanding is that problems and difficulties are described as entities 'out there'. One can glean from the accounts that Ester acts towards developing a knowledge that reflects this objective reality. Or, in other words, her aim is to reach a classification of problems and difficulties which reflects how things are. Ester often refers to her work as 'discovering the main difficulties' or 'discovering what the problems are'. She talks about communicating her evaluation to clients in terms of 'telling clients the truth'.

This is not to say that Ester presents her understanding as 'certain'. She sometimes refers to her doubts in relation to her evaluation. Doubts though, are dealt with by consulting other professionals perceived as more competent, or specialists who are perceived as more able to evaluate how 'things really are'. In other parts of the interview, she presents objectivity as the product of a specific task of distinguishing between her own subjective views and how things are objectively, or differentiating her problems from those of the clients:

Supervision is crucial; I have found it essential to have somebody who helps you reflect on situations, someone who tells you 'Why are you working in this direction while the clients are not there? This is your problem not their problem'

In this picture, what is perceived as the practitioners' subjective view is seen as an obstacle or an interference to be overcome. At the same time, the subjective views of the clients are treated as very important data: all descriptions of cases show how listening to clients plays a relevant part in understanding and evaluation, and in finding ways to communicate the problems in a way that can be understood. Often Ester repeats the words of her clients. Nonetheless, clients' positions are treated as

data at the same level as other information²⁵. If the views are not in agreement or contradict 'objective reality' they are to be 'treated' as a problem or changed, certainly not negotiated over. In the interview Ester says:

It happens that people have different views and try to 'escape' from the contract. In these cases if there is the tribunal I have the power ... but it is very rare that they do not manage at least partially to recognise their difficulties.

The point is that, if the definition of the situation reached by the social worker is perceived as objective, divergent or conflicting views are easily seen as expressions of a problem themselves, or even of pathology. For instance, at the beginning of the first example, Ester defines the father as paranoid. But then, when he starts to cooperate, she defines him as the 'healthy member of the family'. The 'paranoid' definition does not appear again in the description of the case. Maybe forcing the interpretation a little, one could advance the hypothesis that the father is defined as paranoid at the beginning, because he considers the social worker as an enemy. This hypothesis would be coherent with the overall position expressed by Ester. Very often this interviewee interprets opposition to the evaluation and plans in terms of psychological defences against acknowledging painful 'real' problems. This interpretation would be coherent with the fact that definition of the situation and the work plan as a whole are never considered as possible objects of negotiation.

From this, as well as from the examples, it emerges that Ester's image of clients is one of persons who have problems and difficulties, feelings (they suffer) but whose understanding of their situation is in a way part of their problems. The request they make is considered relevant as a starting point, as one can see from the second example; it represents an opening for professional intervention. At the same time it is not considered relevant as far as the definition of the situation is concerned ('they [the clients] ask whatever'). To be part of the situation is not seen as a privileged position for understanding: on the contrary.

²⁵ This attitude toward clients perceptions has been characterised by Neve as typical of medical profession (Neve, 2000).

Despite what was just said, Ester's account does not suggest any feeling of practitioners' superiority over clients. On the contrary, she often shows a humble attitude and never displays triumphant tones (see for instance when she manages to convince a client of her line in the first example). If in her view the pursuit of objectivity is the way to make the right move, she presents herself more as the 'servant' of the truth, not as its master.

Coherently with this, I have not found any pejorative attitude towards clients, nor any labelling of the clients as inadequate. Clients are never presented as 'morally inferior', nor described as bad and messy 'children' as suggested in other studies (Pithouse, 1987). On the contrary, they are described as reasonable people, who accept even negative evaluations, if appropriately presented, and who are willing to cooperate, if the intervention is well designed and explained. In another part of the interview, Ester expresses her opinion, based on her experience in child protection, that parents always care for their children and never hurt or damage them voluntarily. If they do so, it is out of their difficult situation, out of confusion, because of a pathology or pathological dynamics in the family. She always tries to find a way to communicate this position to the clients, particularly when there is a referral and an inquiry. This is another rule she always follows.

Ester's position about the client-practitioner interaction does, however, entail a clear division of roles and tasks: clients have problems and give information, social workers have the expertise to develop an evaluation, and plan solutions. This is confirmed by the fact that Ester's description of her relationship to clients is analogous to her description of her relationship to a professional perceived as more expert: she expresses her doubts and problems, and the more expert professional or supervisor offers some understanding. Ester's view does not reflect a general picture of clients of social services as particularly inadequate people, but it is rather connected to a broader view of the relationship between experts and lay people.

To summarise, Ester's account portrays a style work that:

- Is very structured, with a structure that does not change in relation to specific

cases;

- Is not rigid, as the rules seemed to be translated into a sequence of open-ended questions, and there is room for a certain creativity;
- Aims at covering all angles, to avoid all possible risks and mistakes;
- Attempts to reach an 'objective' knowledge through a classification of problems and difficulties, and defines specific interventions in relation to such classification;
- Accordingly, treats clients' subjective views as part of the problem, and social workers' subjective views as interferences;
- Posits a clear, asymmetrical division of roles and tasks between clients and professionals.

How does the contract appear in this picture, what is its place? The first impression was that in Ester's description, the contract came out of the blue at a certain point, as if it were. Nothing in her account of the first approach with the client suggests that the work will be handled through a contract. A contract here is described as something which is detached and isolated from the process; a sort of technical device which is introduced at a certain stage of the work. What happens prior to the contract or after, is presented as guided by other rules; it appears structured on other bases. The role of the contract is illuminated by the whole approach, not vice versa.

This is not to say that contracts appear unimportant or unnecessary in her account. On the contrary, both during the interview and presenting examples, Ester reckons that they are crucial. She shows through examples how an intervention can fail because the problem and the goals were not clearly identified and communicated to the client. Nonetheless, in this picture the contract appears to be a crucial tool which must be introduced at a certain stage, not the basis of the work.

This is consistent with how Ester presents her understanding of problems and cases. As the definition of the situation is based on 'objective knowledge', neither the problems to be tackled nor the solutions are up for negotiation. Mistakes have to be corrected through further inquiries, not through negotiation. As a medical doctor,

Ester would not negotiate the diagnosis of a disease with her client. The contract consists of helping people to face their 'real' difficulties and not of negotiating what the main difficulties are and how they can be faced.

All the organisation of work is planned so as to avoid or limit mistakes and risks (see for instance the thorough inquiry to avoid wrong steps, or the careful plan made for all interventions), and the contract can be seen as part of this strategy: it avoids the risks arising from a lack of compliance by clients.

7.2 From a Definition of the Situation to the Contract

I introduce here two further examples of contract work given by practitioners who present the concept of contract as organised around the work plan. The first example is produced by Sonia, many excerpts of whose interview have been used in chapter 6, to support the analysis of the representation of contract focused on the work plan. The second example was given by Claudia, whose definition of contract is:

I call contract when I work in a goal-oriented way ... This is the basis of the contract, because contract is when you identify a starting point and an arrival point, and the path is clear But it must be clear to both, not just to me. One cannot talk about contract if it is not clear to both what work are we doing...

Which fully falls within the representation of contract considered here. The two examples, although different, provide further elements to corroborate the hypothesis that in connection to an image of contract focused on the work plan, there is a corresponding way of describing the work and using the label in relation to the practice. These cases illustrate how the work can be presented as a sequence of actions logically connected to a first definition of the clients' situations produced by practitioners. In these cases, practitioners spend less time on, and seem to give less importance to, the way this definition of the situation is constructed. But the logic of the sequence of action is presented as strongly connected to the definition, or evaluation, of the situation.

7.2.1 The case of Ms. Ben

This is a situation of an Asian mother with a child, it is a very positive case. This was a 32 year old woman who, a couple of years ago, denounced her husband for abuse, and asked for community residential care for herself and her child. And she had referred her husband to the police, and this is not something to be undervalued, because within the culture she belongs to, men are the ones who take the children after the divorce and it is a culture where women do not have power and very rarely rebel against men. But this woman did it, with the help of a nun. I got in contact with her when the period of emergency was coming to an end, and it was time to make a plan as residential care was not necessary any more. So we made a plan for her to find a job and a house...

Sonia's evaluation is that Ms Ben is very autonomous as far as practical problems are concerned, and she is quite attentive to the material needs of her child. But at the same time, in Sonia's view, she has deficiencies as far as the educational side is concerned. She treats her child (7 year old) as if he was an adult. She is not sensitive at all to a child's need to have fun, play, and engage in any pleasant activities like sports. Sonia says that this was also the evaluation of the community staff, and they had already started working to encourage Ms Ben to play with her child or to cuddle him sometimes. Sonia thinks that this problem is connected to Ms Ben's culture, believing that Asian people treat their children this way. She thinks, however, that as this family lives in Italy, the child could suffer because he is not given the chances that other children have.

Because this person was very appropriate and good as far as practical problems were concerned, work and so on, and she was caring for her child in her way, she was giving him material things, like the house, food... She was much more lacking, because of her culture and education, as far as understanding the needs of her child 'as a child' were concerned; the child for her had necessarily to gravitate around the world of adults, without having special needs as a child.

Starting from this definition of the situation, Sonia describes her intervention as based on two 'contracts' with Ms Ben: one related to the material problems and one

connected to the education of the boy.

As far as the first is concerned, Sonia describes how she worked with the client in order to help her find a flat and a job. The plan involves finding emergency accommodation, then a permanent flat, then seeking a job. Sonia describes Ms. Ben as very active and also able to take the initiative as far as this work is concerned.

Apart from the intervention related to the family's material situation, and partially using the practical problems which emerge as pretexts, Sonia makes other contracts more related to the educational problem. The first consists of agreeing on the intervention of a voluntary worker who will collect the child from school, as Ms Ben's schedule does not allow her to do this. The voluntary worker will have to take the child to a playgroup in a local parish.

Well, I found this voluntary worker in a parish, who would pick up the child and take him to the parish, where he could do his homework but also play, because Ms Ben was certainly not someone who would play with her child, but would not even allow him to play by himself; she neglects these aspects, maybe because of her culture, maybe she did not experience this herself when she was a kid.

Sonia remarks that when the temporary job found by Ms Ben ends, Ms Ben wants this intervention to stop, she thinks she is able to pick up her child and she wants to do it:

Then, when she stopped working, it was really hard to go on with the voluntary worker, because she would have got rid of this (intervention), she said 'Now I am at home, I am free, why has he to go there?' .

Sonia explains how, taking the client back to the previous contract, she manages to continue this intervention. This intervention will end when the voluntary worker moves elsewhere.

The second contract is again connected to a practical problem. Ms Ben has found a new job just before the summer. As the school is closed she needs support for her

son. She asks for a summer centre. Sonia takes this circumstance as another chance to go on with the plan of offering opportunities to the boy. She thinks that the best solution is temporary foster care. This way the child will develop a relationship with an adult who can continuously provide the chances that the mother denies him.

So I tried to convince the mother that she needed somebody to help her, that it was not enough to send the boy to a summer centre, that the child was not like a parcel who can be sent here and there, or maybe even left home alone... So, we made this agreement about foster care; Ms Ben never understood clearly what foster care was, it is difficult to explain because of her culture, and she accepted it out of necessity, because she had to find a place for the child. I found this lady ... who looked after the child during the summer and took him to her summer house in the country side.

This second contract is described as quite difficult. Sonia in fact sees this situation as a chance to give the boy a relationship with somebody who can offer him a 'better childhood'. Ms Ben does not understand the reason why a summer centre is not an appropriate solution to her problem. The difficulty seems to become more evident at the end of the summer: Sonia makes plans for the relationship between child and foster mother to go on, and again Ms Ben does not see the point:

It was hard because I had to justify the proposal on the basis of the immediate need to find something, and not on the basis of the child's need to be given opportunities. And how hard it was emerged at the end of the summer, when in theory Ms Ben no longer needed help from this 'foster mother'.... my plan was to keep the relationship with this foster mother going; it was important, this person had given him (the child) an opportunity to be a child, to ride a bicycle, play with animals, she had provided a more pleasant environment for him.

Sonia again says that she manages to convince the mother using the argument of practical necessity and of the opportunity to keep in contact with the foster mother in case of a new emergency:

I tried to explain to her that it was important to continue this relationship with some regularity, I thought one weekend each month, so that the relationship was not broken, and maybe if next summer she would need again...

Sonia thinks that to explain the true reason for this plan to Ms Ben would be too

difficult. Ms Ben in her view cannot understand her plan, she cannot acknowledge the problems Sonia sees. At a certain point Sonia strongly advises the mother to seek a specialist service and have a psychological assessment of the child. The assessment would be useful for the custody case which was to come to court. Sonia says that the child was assessed as normal, but too mature for his age, in accordance with her evaluation, a sort of 'little adult'. Nonetheless Sonia says that to be explicit or to insist too much on this could have been counter-productive:

... maybe it would have been negative, telling the mother that she was (not adequate in some respect)...she would have felt judged as inadequate. I admit that I was less explicit about this, I played a little bit on the trust she had in me, to be able to make her accept things that were not completely clear to her.

At the same time this interviewee considers this part of the intervention quite important. She identifies a problem, albeit not a serious one, that should better be addressed:

I do not want to say that if we did not do anything this child would have been in a risky situation, at least not in a serious way, but I think that it was right to let him have a better childhood. Also because he is in Italy; had he been in his country this would not have represented a problem, there would have been no reason to discuss [the way he is brought up], but here in Italy he can compare his situation with that of other children, and this could be a source of suffering; the other children have more opportunities, while he is lonely with this mother, in isolation..

7.2.2 The Righi family

Claudia first makes contact with the family after a referral by the school to the tribunal because of the truancy of a seven-year-old boy, Gianni. Claudia starts the inquiry and describes the situation as quite complex. The boy lives with his grandparents and three young uncles. His mother and father live together elsewhere. The father has not recognised Gianni. Now the couple has had a second daughter who has been recognised by the father and lives with them. Claudia says that from the files it appears that this is not the first case of truancy in the family, there was a

previous case involving an uncle of Gianni's. Claudia describes the family as an adequate and caring family: they expect to be rebuked because of the truancy, but, apart from this, they do not want interference.

Nonetheless, Claudia thinks that in addition to the school problem, Gianni is in a situation of slight risk because of the unclear relationship with the mother and father.

There is a severe problem of role confusion in this family. The family is affectively warm, but it is a sort of extended family which is closed into itself, and it is not able to differentiate.

She considers that Gianni needs further support. At school, Gianni turns out to have both some difficulties in learning, and severe problems in relating to the current teacher. Claudia deals with this problem, in cooperation with the school. The child is sent to a specialist service and, after diagnosis, is offered support for the cognitive deficiencies he presents, and moved to a different class. Claudia also proposes to the grandparents the intervention of a support worker to support Gianni because of the difficulties in the family. She says that, having been able to convince the family, she proceeds with a written contract which specifies goals and conditions of the intervention.

Certainly they partly accepted this support worker's intervention and partly not. For them the role confusion, the mother who is not fully present and responsible and the father... all this is not a problem for them as long as they can give the child all he needs. Then the rest for them is irrelevant. Nonetheless I thought I had been able to convince them...to make the grandmother accept that the situation was not a tragic one, but there were problems that could lead to distress for the child.

The implementation has to be postponed however for administrative reasons. After a month, when things are settled, Claudia gets in touch again with the family. But at this point it emerges that the clients have changed their mind and they think that Gianni does not need any support whatsoever. They say that now Gianni is regularly attending the school, so they do not see the point of giving him support.

That's as things stand at the time of the interview. Claudia is considering how to

contact this family again and convince them of the need for some intervention. She does not think that there is a severe risk, but that there are some risks in Gianni's situation, because of the ambiguous relations with his parents ('It is not that this family can be classified at risk. But there is a slight risk for Gianni, and we could avoid it').

In her view, the boy needs professional help to prevent future problems. She thinks that the reason why the contract has not been respected is to be found in the delay of the intervention: had she been able to find a support worker on the spot everything would have turned out well. Nonetheless more than once she says that she knew that the contract was partly imbalanced as the family was not fully convinced of the need for an intervention. She thinks that, probably, the clients needed more time to acknowledge the problem:

Well, maybe the preparatory phase should have been longer. Maybe I used the contract too soon, and people were not aware, not enough... People have to be aware, not just sign a piece of paper.

7.2.3 Comments

I have put these two examples together because, for all their differences, they share some substantial similarity. They illustrate some crucial features which are present in many other cases of this type. First, although there is less stress on it, the work is presented as structured. Both practitioners say in other parts of the interview that they have to reach a clear picture of the situation, and from there a line of action is decided. This logic appears in the examples: in both cases the clients' situation is defined in a certain way and the following actions are logically connected to the first definition. In both examples the situation is presented as less circumscribed and protected from interferences than in Ester's examples. But at the same time new events, not predicted and out of the practitioner's control, as well as disagreements expressed by clients, are presented as interferences which the practitioner has to handle. New events do not produce changes in the line adopted. On the contrary,

particularly in Sonia's description, they are sometimes tactically used to promote the initial goals.

It is in this sense that the description seems to be organised around a definition of the situation. The work is presented as oriented by the social workers' intention to reach the goals they have identified, being able to adjust the situation in the direction they evaluate as appropriate, overcoming or by-passing obstacles arising on the way. For instance in Sonia's case, part of the intervention is directly guided by the goal to offer the child leisure opportunities, and this goal is pursued regardless of new developments and of what Ms Ben may think or understand.

Looking at how problems and needs are identified is also instructive. In both cases, as in other examples, problems are not identified following signals, elements emerging in the analysis of the situation as appeared in Ester's example. The two interviewees do not mention signals of distress or a request, however expressed, in any way as bases of their evaluation. The definition and subsequent interventions go openly beyond the request of all subjects involved.

On the contrary, as definitions and evaluations are often expressed in terms of appropriateness vs. inappropriateness, or adequacy vs. inadequacy, understanding of the situation appears based on a comparison between an implicit, non verbal standard and the actual situation. The standard appears as a sort of hidden term of comparison, it provides a basis for a categorisation of clients and identification of problems independently of the opinions of people involved, or of signals of any sort. For instance, in Sonia's example Ms Ben is considered as adequate in relation to the standard adopted for material needs, while she is inadequate in relation to the standard adopted for educational needs. In Claudia's case the family is appropriate in its response to the affective needs of the boy, but inappropriate in relation to organisational standards (unclear roles, and lack of distinction between enlarged and nuclear family).

It is from the discrepancy between the situation and the standard that problems and

lines of intervention are derived. Both practitioners, independently of any request or explicit signs of distress, appear concerned in relation to the discrepancies identified, and alarmed by the possible problems or risk that may derive from them. In a sense, problems are seen in a foreseeable future, rather than in the present, and in the present they are defined in terms of risks. The practitioners show a deep concern to improve the quality of the life of their clients in terms of introducing new elements or resources, so that it approximates more closely to the standards.

As in Ester's cases, these two interviewees do not describe their clients' understanding or their will as having any substantial impact on the intervention. Not that the way people see their situation is not considered. Sonia spends time describing how Ms Ben views things, and Claudia devotes space to describing the culture of the family and their perceptions of the situation. The point is that, when social workers evaluate clients' situations against a standard, different subjective views are unlikely to play a relevant role in the definition of the situation. Even the practitioner's point of view seems to disappear here. Whether there is a problem, it is not a matter of opinions.

In Sonia's account, the client is not even in a position to understand the evaluation and the goals of the social worker: Ms Ben would feel judged if she were told about the evaluation (this position is expressed in two other examples of contracts produced by Sonia). In a sense, if the client's point of view is taken into account (in this case, Ms Ben's worries about practical problems), this is done instrumentally, in order to increase the practitioner's chances of success in the negotiation. In both examples, as in many other cases in this group, the evaluation is presented in terms that cannot be shared with the clients. At the very least, as in Claudia's case, to share the evaluation is a highly problematic endeavour. This would be quite understandable considering the evaluation as based on a comparison of the situation with a standard: the standard is part of the professional expertise and is not shared with the client. Sonia expresses this position clearly, when she says that her client would not be able to understand her plan. She notices more than once that explaining the evaluation openly may be counterproductive, discouraging and perceived as a

negative judgement, which it is not meant to be.

At the same time, deficiencies are presented as stable traits of the client or their situation. This does not necessarily correspond to a negative judgement of clients: Sonia, for instance, is always careful to justify the client for her deficiencies (in this case it is a matter of culture and personal experience). Claudia openly declares that she always tries to understand the causes of deficiencies and not to judge.

Nonetheless, in these accounts there are no moves intended to support the clients in overcoming the difficulties identified: coherently to the fact that deficiencies are attributed to the client or to the situation as stable traits, the interventions are mainly based on substitution. Sonia in the two interventions she mentions, tends to look for other subjects who can give the child what the mother is not able to. Claudia does not even mention the possibility of working with the family on what she has identified as problems: she offers support directly to the child.

These examples portray the professional as someone who possesses the appropriate knowledge (the standard) to identify problems and find solutions. Sonia, for instance, never discusses or expresses doubts about her own understanding (not in this case, nor in the other two she presents), or in any case not doubts which can be dealt with through a discussion with clients. Again one must bear in mind that this kind of position regarding the professional role is not coupled with a view of being superior to the client or assuming a judging position. Claudia expresses this openly:

I do not think I put myself over people, but there is not equality. I am somebody who has competences; they (the clients) come because they have difficulties. I think it is my duty to help them in a professional way ... also with my ability to see things. On the other hand I believe one should never undervalue or look down on these people. I have had to deal with very difficult clients, but I always try not to judge, but to understand *why* the situation is like that, and to see positive aspects in the situation.

This quotation also illustrates very well a definite representation of the division of roles between practitioners and clients which has already emerged in Ester's example.

In both examples, risk avoidance appears a crucial part of the work. As underlined before, risks appear in terms of future problems which can derive from some present inadequacy of the family, and all interventions are also presented in terms of reducing risks. One could hypothesize that substitutive intervention tends in general terms to involve a reduction of risks for the social worker and a reduction of risks as far as the implementation of the plan, and the achievements of certain goals, are concerned. This position is clearly expressed by Sonia while commenting on the work of another social service which is trying domiciliary support in a case in which, in Sonia's view, the parent was 'inadequate' in certain respects, and a residential care measure was needed:

I think that to leave this boy at home is a risky choice, it may compromise the outcome of the intervention,... strong support should be offered to the mother, but with these psychological interventions one sees the outcome after a long while, and he [the boy] needs to grow up now. Maybe the mother will learn ...she is clever, but if we have to wait until she is able to look after her child then....it could be too late. (Sonia)

In Claudia's example, it is clearly stated that the work is meant to prevent a risk that could develop given the 'muddled' situation of the family.

The main features of these two practitioners' accounts are:

- the whole intervention is described as logically connected to an initial definition of the clients' situation;
- this definition or evaluation seems based on a comparison of the situation to a sort of standard;
- the definition of the situation is made in terms of appropriateness or inappropriateness, it is perceived as difficult to communicate and sometimes it is not openly stated;

- the relationship between practitioner and client is described in markedly asymmetrical terms, and clients' views and requests are not necessarily considered relevant as far as deciding what kind of intervention has to be made.

Again, one has the impression that the contract is presented as a tool which is introduced at a certain phase. It appears to play a certain function, which is mainly to secure compliance. The intervention is organised on other bases and following a particular logic: the clients' situation is defined compared to the professionals' standards and subsequent actions are logically connected to this first definition. As in Ester's example, the definition of problems and difficulties is a matter of professional expertise and is not something that can be negotiated. However, in contrast to Ester's case, as standards are somehow connected to professional expertise and not shared with the clients, the definition of problems is not something which can always be shared with the clients. Moreover, it is the very fact that difficulties are identified in terms of discrepancies from a standard which makes the communication difficult. Problems appear in the shape of inadequacies and are therefore difficult to communicate in a non-judgemental way.

In this picture, the contract is sometimes described as the minimal practical agreement which allows an intervention to be implemented. In a sense, as Sonia observes, it requires a sort of 'blind' trust by the clients.

7.3 Organisational Rules and Contract

This section is based just on one case. As in the cases presented in the previous sections, Marco's representation of the contract is clearly focussed on the work plan. In the following example again, actions and interventions are presented as a logically connected sequence. The logic used in this case, however, is the logic of the organisation of the social service in which the practitioner operates.

7.3.1 The case of Amanda

This was a family we had had in charge for long time; there were financial problems, and a while ago there had been an anonymous referral by neighbours. The police had to intervene, because this referral was about suspected abuse, and the children's tribunal asked for an inquiry. We made the inquiry and it emerged that there was no abuse at all. We were already looking after this family anyway because there were 'educational' problems and the relationship between the mother and the daughter also created concern. And, this daughter was having difficulties in looking forward and making plans for the future. (Marco)

Marco describes how several attempts to make plans with the girl (in her teens at the time) have failed. They have offered her participation in courses and professional training. The pattern of failure appears always to be the same: the girl starts a programme, for instance a professional training course, and then when faced with any problem, she gives up.

Marco quotes a specific project connected to a training course. In this, there was a member of a voluntary association involved as this association had agreed to support the project in financial terms. There had been a verbal contract between all the parties involved, the girl, her mother, the representative of the voluntary association and the social worker. Nonetheless the girl left the course halfway through.

Marco says that the girl quite regularly comes back to the service with different requests. Her requests lately have mainly been for help in finding a job. The educational support worker has tested her motivation by giving her several tasks within the day centre she attends, but she does not fulfil them. Marco, in agreement with the support worker who has been involved in this case, is wary of responding to her requests because of her past behaviour.

We said to the family that we intended to suspend all interventions, because in our view the girl was immature. She asked for things but then she would not show any commitment.

The girl nonetheless comes back asking for a 'work grant'.

Her request was a generic request to be helped in finding a job... Well nowadays young people are quite well-informed of the different possibilities, so instead of asking for help in finding a job, they ask for a 'work grant'...But she wanted something related to finding a job.

The social worker and educational support worker regard this request as inappropriate; however, they identify another opportunity. This opportunity is connected to an EU project; it consists of a training programme that involves both a school course and work experiences, and a grant is attached to it. In the social worker's eyes, this project represents a middle way between the girl's wish to have an opportunity to work, and the evaluation that she is not ready yet and still needs training, particularly as far as her ability to take a commitment is concerned.

At the beginning she was reluctant. She was more oriented toward something more directly close to a job, like the work grant, without any training. But we thought that this project was appropriate for her because it offered young people the possibility to clarify where their talents and interests lay, and it would have given her the possibility to test more options. It was a more flexible project than the 'work grant' and it seemed more appropriate to the girl. In the end she accepted it.

This time, though, the social worker thinks that it is advisable to make a written contract in order to underline to the girl that, in accepting this offer, she is taking a commitment. He wants to do something in order to avoid a repetition of the previous experiences.

They have several interviews in which the project is presented and discussed with the girl, and the past failures are examined:

The use of the written contract played an important part at the beginning. It gave us the chance to go back and reflect over previous interventions, over the contracts made with this family. We openly expressed our doubts and perplexities to the girl in relation to our offer. 'We offer this opportunity to you instead of offering it to someone else, but only if you undertake a commitment; our doubts are based on these observations, so what kind of commitment do you intend to undertake?...and a verbal commitment is not

enough..' and so on.

The social worker and educational support worker prepare the written contract. The parties involved are: the girl, her mother, the support worker and the social worker. The girl undertakes to attend the course regularly, to do her best to reach a positive outcome, to be in regular contact with the support worker, not to give up but ask for help if problems arise, and to follow the advice given by the support worker and teachers.

The mother undertakes to support the girl in her commitment, to be in regular contact with school and social workers, and to do anything in her power to help her daughter complete the course. The support worker takes the commitment to support the girl through regular meetings so that she can successfully finish her course. The social worker agrees to make sure that the contract is being respected by all parties, and to mediate in case of conflicts between the parties.

The social worker comments that this contract is still too general, and that in his view a contract should specify the tasks more precisely, for instance how many times the mother has to meet the teachers. It was difficult to reach a better specification of the contract however, as they did not know exactly how the project would develop, this being the first time it had been tried.

The contract was prepared by the social worker and signed in a meeting where all the parties were present. At the time of this interview the course is ending and the girl has successfully completed the training part and is at the end of her second work experience. Marco rates it as a success that this girl has been able to conclude the experience. He thinks that the contract has worked because the offer was quite structured, there were rules, and the duration of the intervention, one year, was limited in advance. He says that a contract, sometimes written, is quite commonly used in this kind of intervention. He thinks that the use of a contract in relation to interventions such as the 'work grant' or courses is possible and appropriate because the intervention is already structured and this makes it possible to specify its content clearly. Clients' requests in relation to these offers are also more specific and clear. Marco connects the contract in these cases to the fact that these interventions involve

the use of resources which cost the community money; demand far outstrips these resources. So the contract is a way to guarantee a better and more responsible use of these resources:

For instance, the work grant is an opportunity, there are many requests and social services have to consider them... resources are scarce and the requests are far more, so they must be used to best effect, and for that we use them (contracts) in situations where there is greater probability of success.. this is the philosophy of this service, and this is what we told the girl...of course a written contract facilitates matters..... We are a public service, it is our duty that resources are employed correctly.

However, in relation to this specific experience, although he acknowledges that the written contract played a part, Marco claims that the intervention was successful mainly because the girl is more mature, being now nearly eighteen years old.

Well certainly it has been useful to clarify the situation and to help the girl feel responsible ... but also in the past, the contracts were verbal, but they were quite specific and clear....we think that the main reason for success has to be found in the girl's enhanced maturity. To put it down to the contract is, to me, to give too much importance to the contract ...

7.3.2 Comments

Marco's account is very linear and focused. He describes this intervention as a typical example of contract implementation, starting from a client's request. Right from the outset, this request depends on the available resources of the service. The point is to find the appropriate resource to match the request, taking into account the general information and picture of the situation derived from past experience. The information considered mainly concerns the client's habits in relation to past use of resources.

The second step is to present the chosen option to the client and discuss it so as to persuade the client to accept it, even if it is not exactly what s/he wants. Past experiences are analysed in order to limit the risk of a repetition of previous failures.

The contract is the next step: its main function is as a guarantee of commitment. The written form is connected to a lack of trust that a verbal commitment would be treated as binding by the client (this also appears in other examples provided by Marco). The content of the contract is strictly connected to the structure of the project [in which the girl is going to participate]; the contract is perceived by the social worker as generic because the structure of the project is not well defined yet.

The last step described is the implementation of the project and the assessment. This phase is described in quite generic terms, as the major role was played by the support worker. If the client does not fulfil the undertaking, the 'sanction' is the withdrawal of the opportunity or resource given.²⁶

In this way of proceeding I find elements which can be identified as routine work or, at least, can be translated into routines: for instance, the content of the contract being mainly predefined by the structure of the offer, the contract could easily assume the shape of a form to be filled by the parties. The main point that in my view supports the hypothesis that the representation of the sequence of steps can be seen as a routine, is that it seems more connected to organisational features and rules than designed to take into account specific features of the situation.

The logic that informs this way of proceeding is identifiable in principles connected to the organisation of the service and its policy. The main points are to operate a correct selective allocation of scarce resources, to determine clients' eligibility to receive certain resources, and to guarantee a 'good use' of public money and of the opportunities given. The criterion referred to in order to selectively allocate resources is the probability of success. Success in this case is defined as a responsible use of the resource by the client.

²⁶ In the two cases presented by Marco there is quite a stable pattern in the way the failure of the contract is treated: the intervention starts with verbal contracts; if they are not fulfilled the social worker explicitly threatens to withdraw the resource or opportunity already given, or to deny another opportunity. If the client persists in his/her requests, other opportunities are given. This time, though, the contract will be in a written form so as to emphasise the commitment by the client.

In a sense, the whole evaluation of the situation is focused on the assessment of the client's dependability to make good use of the opportunity s/he could be given. All information on past interventions is used to support this assessment. At the beginning, the picture appears quite complex. But the elements of complexity mentioned at the start are not referred to again in the account of the intervention. They are somehow set aside. It could be said that the assessment consists mainly of identifying clients' dependability or sense of conscientiousness. Clients are classified as more or less responsible (mature), and this is seen as a key requirement for access to the resource they are asking for.

In a sense, contract work in this picture is mildly represented as a means to enhance clients' sense of responsibility in their contacts with institutions and in their use of public resources. This educational function is however perceived as limited. In Marco's view, the contract works this way only if the client feels responsible from the start. This way of working is also connected to an attempt to limit the risk of poor use of resources.

In this description, the contract is presented as a tool quite close to a procedure, in the process of selective allocation of resources. If the process is represented as having elements of routine, though, this is not necessarily to be associated with an impersonal and 'cold' relationship: here, procedures are not presented as mechanical routines. They are connected to the importance given to the accountability of social work toward the wider community and to policy principles with which the social worker appears strongly identified.

The last point to be considered is that this representation of the work process is considered by Marco as typical when the social worker's function is to deal with a client's request for a resource. For Marco, this function is just one among social workers' tasks. As he represents it, a contract is both possible and useful, particularly in relation to this function; however, a more rationalised organisation would allow a more extended use of the contract.

7.4 The Contract as a Work Tool

Given their uniqueness, accounts of specific cases and situations also reflect the personality of the narrators, their subjective views of things, and the special meanings they assign to their experience. However, by comparing descriptions we can identify some common traits:

- how the sequence is presented, and how the steps are connected to one another;
- how the situation is understood, what elements are deemed to provide relevant information, and what part understanding and evaluation play in the work;
- what image of clients and practitioners emerges from descriptions, what roles are attributed to them in the interaction;
- how contract practices appear in relation to the whole description of work and in relation to the recurrent themes of risks and mistakes in the work process.

7.4.1 The sequence in narratives

In correspondence with an image of the contract as a work plan, interviewees tend to describe the work process as a fairly stable sequence. Phases or steps are connected by reasons or logical principles: something must be done before the next step can be taken. The principles used to justify and explain the sequence vary. For instance, Marco refers mainly to the organisation of the service, and presents the sequence as strongly determined by service philosophy and rules. Others tend to see this structure as more connected to professional expertise (Ester, Sonia, and Claudia).

Stories appear as coherent sequences of phases, as illustrative of a structure which is pre-established. There is a sort of general logic which is applied, and which is independent of the specific circumstances of the situation. There is a tendency to justify this logic in terms of general rules that have to be followed, just as ways of dealing with the situation are often presented in terms of rules to be followed. However, this does not necessarily give an impression of rigidity, as the implementation of rules is often presented as flexible.

This tendency usually goes along with a reduction of the complexity of the situation, which will emerge more clearly when I discuss the way of understanding the situation. Nonetheless, the case tends to appear as a sort of fixed scenario in which the work process takes place. There is a tendency to predefine the boundaries of the intervention on the basis of considerations that are independent of the specific interaction and the way it develops.

7.4.2 The approach to understanding

Practitioners in this group describe their approach to an understanding of the clients' situation, mainly in terms of fitting it in a predefined system of categories (see Harrison, 1991, for a similar approach). In some cases (e.g., Ester), categories are constructed through a search for that information and those clues, that might help identify the problem. In other cases, the clients' situation is compared with a standard, and evaluated as adequate or inadequate in relation to this taken-for-granted standard. Sonia's and Claudia's examples well illustrate this way of proceeding. Here, interventions are directly connected to the ways in which specific situations differ from the standard.

This procedure generates categories that are quite diverse, yet are substantially related to the resources, available in the unit or in the area. In turn, the categorisation has a substantial impact on the choice of the intervention. In other words, problems

are interpreted and classified in a way that makes it possible to connect them to the available solutions.

Alongside categorisation, there is a tendency toward objective definitions of the situation. Problems and difficulties are assumed as entities out there, which must be discovered and identified. Subjectivity, when considered, is seen as interfering or/and part of the problem. In this sense, 'hard data' such as concrete events, behaviour, or material life conditions, are highly valued. The main common point is that social workers of this group tend to value any 'first hand' information they can get, such as their own observations or information given by other professionals, higher than that provided by clients themselves. Doubts and uncertainty in the evaluation are dealt with by consulting experts. In a sense, being an expert 'outside the situation' is presented as a privileged position to reach valuable, if not directly objective, knowledge.

What comes out from this kind of understanding appears to be a rather schematic and clear picture of resources and deficiencies, strong and weak points in the situation. The picture appears stable throughout the accounts and is presented as orienting actions and interventions.

7.4.3 Images of clients-practitioners interaction

The way clients and practitioners are represented, in association to the image of the contract as a work plan, is characterised by asymmetries. Despite differences among interviewees, there is quite a stable definition of roles, which appear constant in descriptions, and differences are presented in hierarchical terms. Sometimes, differences are related to the institutional position that practitioners occupy (as in Marco's examples), to the information held by practitioners, or to the power and responsibility that social workers have in giving access to resources. But mostly they are connected to professional expertise and knowledge on the side of practitioners, and to the inexperience or limited experience, and emotional involvement of clients.

So, clients are mainly described, as in Ester's examples, as having problems and difficulties, and social workers as having the expertise to understand the problems and to identify appropriate solutions.

Clients' views are very often interpreted as part of the problem: they are seen as an expression of psychological defences or as distorted views, or even attempts to manipulate the worker. The whole interaction, not just the contract, is described as directed by the practitioner, and some interviewees explicitly refer to the opposite situation, where the interaction is client-led (Ester, Claudia) and practitioners follow clients.

7.4.4 The contract as a tool

The analysis of examples of work allows us to make sense of differences in representations of contract. It is within different ways of describing the work that contract practices appear as presented in a particular light.

Coherently to a description of the work as based on a predefined structure, in which problems are treated as objective entities, and which emphasises the asymmetry between practitioners and their clients, a contract is considered as an act, to be performed at a certain stage. It does not affect the overall way of working: the evaluation and interventions are not perceived as negotiable.

Overall, the work process is organised on other bases than contract. These can be derived from a theoretical model,²⁷ or from the integration of different stimuli and working experiences, or can be connected to the organisation of the service. Nonetheless, the contract does not appear to affect the organisation of work: how information is gathered, decisions are taken, or goals and boundaries are established.

²⁷ E.g., the systemic approach has affected the approach of two other interviewees (Oriana and Donatella), whose cases I cannot analyse in detail due to lack of space.

From this perspective, the contract largely plays an instrumental role: it is mainly meant to formalise and take control of what is going to happen afterwards, of what both practitioners and clients will do. In particular, it is clients' behaviour that is taken under control through the contract.

Negotiation is, of course, marginal and related to details: clients' views are perceived as data to be used in order to better understand the objective problems. If the work plan is based on the identification of objective problems and appropriate solutions, it is coherent with this view that the content of a contract not be viewed as negotiable: only marginal issues can be bargained over. But negotiation is very limited, if present at all. In extreme cases, the word 'contract' may even be used when the practitioner thinks the client has understood the practical side of the project, but not its goals.

The making of a contract is presented as a good, or even essential, tactical move by practitioners aiming at taking charge of the situation. This is coherent with a view of professionals as steering the process. The contract also appears instrumental in strategies trying to minimise risks and mistakes. Risks are identified in the clients' situation, which, left to its natural course, could degenerate or cause damage. Or they are seen in terms of the non-implementation of the appropriate interventions. Mistakes are mainly identified in evaluations and moves which are inappropriate in relation to the objective difficulties of the families. In this picture, the contract can be presented as a crucial instrument or tool: it does not appear as a fundamental factor of the work.

7.5 Summary

In this chapter, I have introduced the accounts of practitioners whose descriptions of contract focus on its structuring factors. The crucial elements in the descriptions presented in this chapter are:

- the cases are presented as organised by an independent structure. Steps and

phases in the accounts follow one another on the basis of a predefined logic.

- understanding and evaluation are based on classification and comparison with standards. Problems appear defined in objective terms.
- The relation between practitioners and clients is described as asymmetrical.
- The contract is described as an act, an instrumental move in approaches that are not 'contractual'. It is actually part of strategies aiming to take under control and limit risks and mistakes.

In the next chapter, I will present and analyse ways of describing the work and the contract, which, on many of the above points, contrast sharply with the examples presented here. Those cases will be presented by practitioners, whose representations of contract are focused on the agreement.

8 Practices Labeled 'Contract': the Contract as an Ongoing Process

Examples of contract work produced by practitioners who perceive the contract as an agreement appear very different: looking at the stories of this second group feels like entering a different world. In this chapter, I present and analyse the accounts of three such practitioners.

8.1 Acting on Feedbacks

Maria sees contracts as a particular way to relate to clients. She describes her work as a continuous act of negotiation, and the contract as both influencing, and being influence by, the relationship between practitioner and client. The main basis of a contract in her view is the development of reciprocal trust, which enables clients to discuss problems openly, and eventually to openly disagree with social workers' proposals.

8.1.1 The case of Ms Verdi

Maria chose to present this example, although it was still in progress at the time of the interview, as she considers some of its traits emblematic in relation to her way of working and to her views of contract.

Ms Verdi addresses Maria during the 'intake' service.²⁸ Maria describes the usual intake procedure by her team, consisting of one or two interviews to identify the problem. Then, if the problem can be tackled with a short-term intervention, the client is referred directly to the colleagues who tackle this kind of intervention. If the

²⁸ All area team have to define a time in which people of the area can address social workers and ask questions or information, without having to make an appointment. Practitioners usually take shifts to perform this task. It is a sort of 'open surgery'.

problem is more complex, the situation will be discussed in the team meeting and treated as a long-term intervention. Usually in these circumstances, unless the problem is an emergency, clients have to wait 'to be taken in charge'.

This woman arrives with a very specific request. She asks: 'I want my two elder kids to be given a place in a summer centre'. Then there are two things: she says that she is scared that the kids will be taken away from her and she cries all through the interview.

Ms Verdi starts talking about herself and her life. She tells Maria about of her life and her troubles: two failed marriages, two children from the first marriage, one from the second, in-between a boyfriend who dies in a car accident caused by her when she was driving, and then an attempted suicide (it is not immediately clear whether Ms Verdi was saying that she attempted suicide when the children were present, or tried to kill herself and the children), the loneliness, the lack of any help as her mother is, at present, ill.

And she was going on saying that she was scared that somebody could take away her children... I wondered whether maybe this was exactly what she was asking for, so I told her: 'Are you sure you can bear all this? You are telling me that you are feeling very low, you say you need help just for the summer because there is no school, but.....'

From the way Ms Verdi describes her reaction to the children, Maria derives the impression that the children might be physical abused (she always calls these impressions 'fantasies') and that they are at risk in the family:

She told me 'I cannot go on any more, I cannot even bear to hear their voices and I react strongly'.... So I wondered whether maybe there was also some abuse there ... Usually my interviews last one hour, this time it lasted two.

These impressions encourage the practitioner to openly address the possibility of resorting to community residential care for the children:

So I proposed community residential care. I explained to her what the Child Tribunal was, and the difference between a decision we could take together and a sentence of the tribunal [Maria wants to make it clear that she is not

considering compulsory measures of care]. I tried to explain to her that the summer centre would close at the end of August and that she would find herself alone again, with lots of problems, commitments, organisational difficulties and so on.

However, Maria does not rule out involving the tribunal. She explains to Ms Verdi that this is a possibility, that it does not mean that her children will be taken into care, and that it can be a support, not just a means of control. Maria describes Ms Verdi's reaction to her proposal as strongly negative:

She says: 'I don't know if I'm going to come back, I have to think about it, I don't know if I can trust anybody, if somebody takes away the children from me, if I don't hear their voices any more, even if they upset me.... if they're taken away I will go mad, I don't have anything else to live for'.

Maria thereupon decides to withdraw the proposal and take another line of action: to go back and accept Ms Verdi's request for a summer centre, leaving to her to reflect better on the situation and on the possibilities:

At this point I felt it was appropriate to make a contract with Ms Verdi, because the risk was that she would not come back. In this case I could have referred the case to the tribunal as there were elements of risk for the children, but I thought that there was some room to work with her. Because she seemed very intelligent, she was able to tell me that she was feeling bad, and the reasons why ... So the first contract which emerged is this: 'I will stick to your request, I take the commitment to look for a summer centre... We put my proposal (the community residential care) aside, I won't propose anything like this any more, but, please, think it over as an opportunity'.

Maria describes this step back as very difficult and complex for her. She cannot help regarding the family's situation as risky for the children's safety and well-being. In a sense, she feels that she is acting blindly, because she cannot have clear information about the situation from the beginning. She has the impression that, at this point, it is also difficult for her to ask the manager for advice. Her level of anxiety is quite high (later she will say that in the past there have been cases of clients' suicides in the area) and she would probably have presented the case in a way that would directly affect the advice. She decides to wait and talk to her colleagues at the team meeting the next day:

... even understanding that there was a risk for the children, and even feeling the duty to do something about this, well I kept all this to myself for a day, and then I discussed it with my colleagues at the team meeting So I said let's risk ... had I referred the case, I saw the risk that she could jump out of the window, maybe with the kids. By not doing anything of the sort, there was the risk that for a while she would wake up at noon, get upset with the kids and slap them and so on, but it was still better than the other possibility.

Maria talks quite a while about the risk involved in the family situation but also about the risk of making the wrong move, which could produce disastrous consequences:

It was a sort of calculated risk, because had I referred [her case] to the tribunal, this would really have enhanced the risk that she would do something 'irreparable', and after that you certainly can't make a contract any more.

Nonetheless, Maria repeatedly underlines how hard it is to act on a contract basis when elements of risk appear after the first contact.,

Because if I just thought: 'what is my role, what is my mandate, what are the elements', then I would have referred the case immediately to the tribunal...

She also stresses how much anxiety is involved in assuming the risk of not referring to the tribunal; she says that she has had some 'difficulties sleeping at night' with this responsibility on her shoulders:

... when I called her (after the first interview), and she was not in I felt terrible... we have had some cases of suicide in this area ... well in an interview it is difficult to have enough elements to understand if she is in control of herself or not...

Having made this contract, Maria provides very quickly for the summer centre and she communicates the outcome to Ms. Verdi:

I thought it was very important in itself for the kids, but it was also important to reassure her that I was doing what I said, and I was acting on the basis of her requests..... I think that this first contract was crucial, I put aside what I

would have done if it was up to me..... Instead I made a contract giving her trust, 'You say that this [the summer centre] is enough for you, OK, do you think you are going to make it afterwards?' And then [in the following interviews] she said that she had thought over my proposal and we made other contracts.....

Maria says that Ms Verdi, after this first contract, starts asking for regular interviews with her; she discusses her situation and the problems of the children and asks for advice, and Maria feels that now she communicates her opinions more openly.

... she told me that the first time she came, she was very close to deciding never to come back, but when she received the information about the summer centre, she started trusting the service. Even afterwards this person said to me that she was making all these plans.... and she was sticking to them, because she really needed help, but also because she had come to trust the service.

Ms Verdi is now gradually becoming more open, she gives her more information, and she talks about herself. There are still many things Maria does not understand, but she is starting to develop a picture of the situation. One day, Ms Verdi asks Maria to meet the children and have a joint interview, so that they can talk about the difficult time the family is going through. Maria describes the meetings in some detail. The eldest girl is very willing to have somebody to talk to: the girl is going through quite a hard time, not just because of the family troubles, but also because of the difficult times she is having in relating to her school mates. The girl wants to participate in a plan but she is also very scared:

At the end it comes out that at school boys call her 'monkey', boys can be terrible at this age ... I remember in my teens too it was very difficult...

They are making plans for the autumn. Ms Verdi does not want the children to be taken into care, but she acknowledges that she needs support. The plan is that the eldest child, who is 11, is going to attend a day centre. As far as the second child (who is 8 years old) is concerned, as he does not yet want to talk and express what he wants, they have decided that it is better to wait until after the summer to make plans.

Ms Verdi is now starting to discuss with Maria all her difficulties and problems. They are discussing the children's relationship with their fathers. The second husband has been very supportive, even with the two first children. With the first husband, on the contrary, the relationship is very problematic, and Ms Verdi thinks that the sentence about custody should be revised. They are working in order to obtain legal advice. They are discussing the possibility of a kind of psychotherapy for Ms Verdi after the summer.

Maria observes that Ms Verdi now bursts into tears less and less frequently during their meetings. Looking back at the process, Maria comments:

If you think about it, the situation was very complex and the contract was very circumscribed, but it was not important for the content but for its meaning. This is the reason why I thought it was important to talk about this case.... Future contracts (with Ms Verdi) could fail, but now I am sure that there is a relationship between her and me.

It was a sort of 'trial and error' process. I realised that I did not know what this person was asking of me: for instance, when expressing her fears about the children being taken away from her and all the other things at the same time, was this a way to ask me to do something in this direction? Or, was she asking to be reassured that I, as an expert, thought that she could look after her children even in such a difficult situation? I went for the second hypothesis and this maybe helped her a little bit...

8.1.2 Comments

Maria starts her account of the case without any mention of a particular way of working. As in other occurrences during the interview, Maria expresses what ~~she~~ means through examples. While Ester (see section 7.1) uses them to illustrate a general rule she has stated, Maria uses examples directly to express her position. She starts with saying that this case is emblematic of her way of working, but the reasons

why this is the case have to be derived at the end; they cannot be summarised as a set of general rules.

How Maria sees the structure of her work appears toward the end of the account, as if it was something emerging from the account itself, rather than a pre-existing choice. She openly describes her work as a trial-and-error process, a sequence of attempts where subsequent actions are defined on the basis of the feedback from previous attempts (for instance, at the beginning she proposes community residential care and, on the basis of the reaction, immediately withdraws her proposal).

Summarising Maria's example has proved in fact quite a difficult task as Maria gives extensive and detailed accounts, even of marginal episodes. It is hard to select from them, as all parts are presented as relevant and seem to enlighten the situation in a certain way. Accounts like this give the impression of the 'flow of life' with all its complexity.

In a sense, Maria describes her work as following and taking part in the natural evolution of the situation rather than taking it under control. Note that, in this context, 'following' does not imply in any sense a passive position. Maria describes herself as making many interventions and taking several decisions. But she mainly describes her work as creating the conditions for things to happen and develop, rather than as determining what should happen and how things should develop. Even the choices not to act (not to refer the case to the tribunal in the first place, or to postpone a plan for the youngest child) appear to be the outcome of hard reflective and emotional work, not of a passive 'wait and see' attitude.

The boundaries of the process itself seem to emerge from the interaction with the client. So the first contract is described as 'circumscribed', but its boundaries are not rationally identified by analysing the problem. Maria is quite clear on this, and on the fact that the contract might look disproportionately narrow compared to the complexity of the emerging situation. In Maria's description, boundaries come out of the ongoing interaction and negotiation with the client; they expand and contract

according to how the client relates to her, not according to any abstract principle or objective evaluation.

Maria seems to treat service rules and procedures in a very flexible way. Her account starts with a description of established procedures in the unit. Then things develop quite differently. The path Maria takes is outside the normal ways foreseen by the organisation. Maria mentions in passing that her line of action was approved and supported by her colleagues and manager in the team meeting, but never picks up the point again. One cannot help noticing, though, that compared to the established division of labour, Ms Verdi's situation is described as being neither here nor there: the first contract reflects a typical short-term intervention, but the background situation is presented as complex and would have been definitely classified as requiring long term work. If Maria takes an unusual path, this does not seem to be due to an anarchic way of working, but can be treated as a sign of the pre-eminence given to the peculiar, idiosyncratic aspects of the situation over routines.

In the example, the interpretation of the situation appears to be based mainly on the elements that progressively emerge. Apparently, Maria does not look for more information from other sources, nor does she make preliminary inquiries. She appears to concentrate on dealing with the information that emerges step by step. One could say that her understanding is focused on 'here and now'. This is not to say that she does not consider the clients' story, but that she considers it as long as it emerges spontaneously from the client.

Maria presents her understanding as dynamic, developing alongside the development of their relationship, in a way which recalls England's (1986) views: she presents herself as trying to catch the meaning that people give to their experience, rather than looking for 'hard' facts. She tries to understand what the situation is like for Ms Verdi or her children, and sometimes she explicitly talks about putting herself in their shoes [her comment on the eldest girl's problems is just an instance of this]. Categorisation is present but very broad and generic (the woman is 'classified' as intelligent and aware); it comes up at the end of the description, not at the beginning,

and it does not determine the specific intervention, it merely supports her line of action.

Reasoning is described as proceeding through the formulation of competing hypotheses ('should I refer the case or not', 'is Ms Verdi asking this or that'). When Maria decides to 'go for a hypothesis' she seems to consider the performative side of her choice: when commenting about her hypothesis that Ms Verdi was asking for reassurance, she focuses on the fact that such hypothesis probably helped Ms Verdi, not on its truth or falseness *per se*. Going for a hypothesis is presented here as betting on a situation. It can also have a negative impact; in reference to another case, Maria observes how a client had probably felt overwhelmed by her positive expectations.

In Maria's example, the understanding emerges as accompanying or being part of the action (see again England, 1986). The main rule she mentions as guiding her action could be summarised as 'counting up to ten before acting', as she herself puts it. Maria's modality of taking decisions seems very much a process of letting choices 'mature', rather than of taking decisions coolly and rationally. In the interview, Maria says that on the contrary, it is difficult for her to talk about her work in general terms, because she never clearly plans beforehand what to do, she mainly reflects afterwards. In this picture, the opposite of 'matured choice' is perceived as being impulsive decisions, decisions based on anxiety and fears, and impulsive decisions are perceived as a risk to be avoided.

The comments presented above already provide several insights about clients' roles in Maria's accounts. Their points of view, their own understanding of their experience, are crucial features in the way Maria describes her work. In a sense, this example shows how clients can be considered and become protagonists of the work (coherently with the description given by interviewees who see the contract as an agreement). In the example, Ms Verdi seems to have a major role in defining the interventions, and in determining the rhythm of the process. Elsewhere in the interview, Maria says that she finds it problematic when clients do not express any

sort of request or when they appear severely distressed but cannot seem to make sense of their experience. In these cases, it is difficult for her to find out how to act.

One could say that the image of the profession that Maria holds is of someone who puts her competence, abilities and information at the service of clients' requests and wishes. In the example, Maria appears mainly as giving advice if asked; she asks questions on issues and themes spontaneously emerging from Ms Verdi. Her requests to the client are quite mild (consider what was said during the interview). Maria values very positively the fact that she was able to set aside her own evaluation of the situation and to trust that of the client. Maria does not appear overly concerned with the 'real' problems, and much more focused on the relationship.

In this picture, risk is perceived as an integral part of the work. Maria seems to see a risky side in whatever choice of action she makes, and her work is to 'calculate' the more acceptable risk. Consistently with a description of the work as a 'process of trial and error', mistakes are part and parcel of the work, and they are somehow considered necessary and even useful. Maria says that the contracts she has made with the client could fail, but that she does not see this as a problem. In reference to another case, which she presents as an unsuccessful use of contract, she comments 'The point is not that ten contracts have failed, but that I do not see how they could provide grounds for an 11th attempt'.

In Maria's descriptions of her work, the contract is closer to an ongoing process than to an act. She portrays her work as negotiating each step of the relationship. She considers this negotiation as the basis of her work, not as something that plays a role at a certain phase. Her work is based on discussing and reaching agreements. There are crucial moments when the contract is fixed, but they are strongly intertwined with all the other actions in the process. And it is taken for granted that agreements are going to be revised in a continuous way. Contract work is, in this sense, treated as the basis of the work, inspiring the whole process.

8.2 Work Practice as Source of Structure

I will here summarise two further accounts (by Irene and Sofia) that testify to a similar way of conceiving contract. They both illustrate how a contract be mainly a substantive agreement between the parties. They connect the contract to reciprocity or to a more democratic way of playing the professional role.

8.2.1 The case of Ms Gure

Ms Gure is an African mother, who has been left alone with two children because her husband walked out on them. It appears he was an alcoholic. As they were wardens in a factory, when the man left, the employer sent the woman and the children away too, so they lost the father, husband, source of income and home all at once.

The woman applies to the service in an emergency situation. The family has no home and no income. The first request addressed by Ms Gure is for the children to be taken into care so that she can find a job and look for accommodation. The social worker accepts her request and finds a residential community for the children; meanwhile, the woman finds herself a job (with accommodation) as a domestic helper in a family. As the emergency has been dealt with, a long-term intervention starts. Irene describes the interaction with Ms Gure as based from the beginning on an agreement: they share the main goals, which are to bring the family (mother and children) back together. They are both moving in the direction of finding a solution for the relationship with the husband, who is perceived as dangerous. He is a violent man who sometimes shows up and interferes with the woman's and children's life.

Irene describes the contract as having two parts, which are carried on at the same time but in a sense independently: the first is related to the reunion of mother and children, and the other to the situation with the father. In the first contacts it emerges that the woman could find a temporary solution by accepting the help of relatives of hers who live in Milan. She has tried once to spend the weekend there with her children, but she thinks that this solution does not work. She is particularly unwilling to resort to the help of the ethnic community she belongs to. She says to the social

worker that the price of this help is that there is lots of gossip and she does not want her husband to be provided with information that would allow him to interfere:

She said to me: 'I don't want their help, I want a flat for me and my children'. So I gave the person all the information to apply for a council house, and she did everything quite quickly.

In the meanwhile, since it takes some time to obtain a flat, they make a plan about contact between mother and children. The social worker explains to Ms Gure that it is very important for the children to be taken out of the residential institution during the weekend, but she comments that there was no need to remind Ms Gure of this: 'because we shared the same goals from the beginning'. The social worker observes that Ms Gure is a very active person. She looks after her children well without any need to be reminded. She goes about applying for a house very efficiently and rapidly. She asks for support whenever she needs it. The work is described as based on full cooperation.

After a few months, Ms Gure calls on the social worker because, as she has not yet been given a house, she wants to find another solution to be reunited with her children:

Then the mother came to me and said 'I cannot go on this way with the children in residential care, I see that particularly the younger boy suffers because of this, they have been in residential care for too long..' At the housing department I was told that this woman was entitled to have an apartment but that she still had to wait. So I managed to put her in contact with a voluntary organisation where she was assigned emergency accommodation. I really do not know why we did not think about this in the first place. ..probably Ms Gure herself did not think of accommodation for herself and the children at the beginning...she needed time to look for a job.

Ms Gure will be given the emergency accommodation until she is assigned a flat by the housing department. She applies to the social worker again because the daughter is going through a difficult period at the new school. Ms Gure thinks that the girl needs help but she does not have money to pay for private scholastic support. The social worker and Ms Gure agree to look for a voluntary worker who can support the child. The social worker finds someone (a retired teacher) among the voluntary

workers of the local authority. She thinks she has been able to find the 'right person', who agrees to start work with the girl on the terms required by Ms Gure:

The voluntary worker we found was a very sensitive person, because with people of this ethnic group you have to be careful, they are very proud people, they accept help but they want to set the conditions. So the voluntary worker starts helping the girl at home when the mother is in. The mother later allows her to see the girl when she is not in. After a while this voluntary worker has gained the trust of Ms Gure and because of this the girl is also allowed to receive scholastic support at the voluntary worker's home (which is what often happens from the beginning).

The second part of the work was related to the legal separation of the couple. Irene presents this part of the contract as unsuccessful. Ms Gure is never going to say that she does not want a legal separation, she is going to accept the advice of the social worker, but then she takes time or she fulfils just part of the tasks.

Probably it was something connected to this person's culture... I explained to her what she had to do, I explained to her that it was important for her and for the children, as the issue of the custody would be solved once for all but.... She called me because she was scared of this man, and I offered to go with her to the police and to the tribunal.... But she did not want to deal with these problems, I felt that 'she was not there'.

The social worker says that she has made several attempts to tackle the issue, but each time she comes to the conclusion that it is impossible to carry out the plan made. She then gets in touch with the husband on behalf of the child tribunal in order to define the temporary custody. She gets a completely different picture of the man from that she received from Ms Gure's account. She sees Mr Gure as a very vulnerable man, and his account of the marriage, though completely different, seems to the social worker as plausible as that of his wife. Mr Gure presents his wife as having a very dominant position in the family and as being the one who takes the decisions in the household. Particularly Mr Gure says that his wife had convinced him to leave his previous and much-loved job as sailor, and that since then he has been unable to settle down and has started drinking heavily. In any case, Mr Gure does not show any interest in the children.

The social worker still thinks that the situation should be settled, but as she perceives that nobody in the family seems willing to go in this direction she decides not to persist:

You don't pretend that the problem does not exist, but you put it aside, and you work on something else. If she had asked me... (it would have been different). I tried to say something when she was telling me that the husband was disturbing her, but she was not willing to talk about this issue, and I did not force the discussion in this direction.

The social worker considers this contract a success because a contractual way of working has allowed a good relationship between her and the woman, and because it allowed a 'good use' of the service by the client.

Irene thinks that most of the success of the contract lies in her being able to accept the limits posed by the client. The main points for her were trusting what the client said, being able to tolerate the anxiety and avoid overdoing things or pushing the client to do something:

Maybe what worked was the fact that I avoided doing more in order to solve the problems quickly... You know, when there are two children in care you are in a difficult situation anyway; it is not a good thing for them to stay there, you would like to (act quickly) ..so maybe you have to accept the anxiety ...and to trust what people tell you, to accept not doing more... Yes maybe to accept that you intervene when people ask you to, and not push.... Well there were 'dark sides', for instance the relationship with the husband...but I think that had I pushed in this direction it would have been a mess... It is easy to 'psychologise' problems...I helped her more by sticking to these two things: the house and the problems of the daughter at school. There are still unsolved problems in this woman's life, but maybe she will find someone else to help her, or maybe she will decide (to leave things as they are) ...because this woman maybe is aware of these problems ..."

In other parts of the interview she mentions the fact that it is difficult to trust the client, and it involves taking risks.

I don't know if she was suspicious of me; I was suspicious of her, I thought that things were proceeding too smoothly ... I often said to my colleagues: Is she going to cheat on me? What is there beneath the surface?

Irene concludes:

If I think of this woman I do not see her as if she was a client. Once the case is closed, I would be glad if by chance I met her at the supermarket while shopping. I feel we are on the same level, she could be a person I have met somewhere else.

8.2.2 The case of Ms Neri

Sofia starts her account by describing how she came into contact with Ms Neri during an enquiry following a referral from the hospital for neglect of a new-born baby girl. The baby has slight health problems, probably connected to cocaine abuse by the mother during the pregnancy (the mother has talked about this to the staff). In the meantime, the judge decides that the baby girl should stay in hospital until the end of the inquiry. Sofia describes her first approach as difficult: Ms Neri seems very scared and tries to avoid all contact with the social worker.

At this point I tried a first contract: there is this referral, you let us understand what your situation is, I guarantee that in any case I will let you know and discuss my position. I am not going to act behind your back.

Ms Neri at this point tells her story: her mother was severely mentally ill; she spent most of her childhood into care. Then when her mother dies and she is 18 years old she moves to her apartment (council house), where she lives with her sister and several friends (mainly girls escaped from care). Then the sister marries and she is left alone in the house. She has always worked in an agency that provides locum employees to factories. She got pregnant with an occasional partner whom she did not want as a stable partner and whom she did not consider fit to be a father for her child (it is with this man that she has had the occasional experiences of drug use). She decided to have the child by herself. She appears to be very fond of her baby.

The social worker's evaluation is that this mother is not a 'bad mother'; that she has not been given the chance to try and look after her child. In Sofia's view the problems she has shown in the hospital can also be seen as the consequence of her lack of experience of being cared for when she was a child. On top of that, she does not have anybody able to explain to her what to do and how to deal with the hospital rules.

The judge issues a sentence of control/support: the mother is allowed to take the baby back home, but she will have to take the baby to a community day centre. This order is made in order to take the situation under mild control and as a help to the mother in order to enable her to go back to work. In addition, the mother has to be in regular contact with the social worker in order to receive adequate support.

The social worker describes what follows as a sequence of failed attempts to make a contract. She mentions two instances in particular. The first is connected to the community day centre and the second to a project for helping young people to find a job (this is because at a certain point Ms Neri is unemployed).²⁹ Both fail, following the same pattern: the woman accepts the proposal, a work plan is made, and then the woman does not keep to what was agreed. The social worker offers several explanations as to what happened. First of all, she thinks that the agreement was only apparent, not substantive:

In fact, she was refusing it [the proposal], not saying anything because she could not say 'no' to the tribunal who had given orders. She never developed a trusting attitude toward social services.

On the other hand, the social worker says that the client seemed not to understand the meaning of certain parts of the intervention, and shows some sympathy for her:

Well, the requests of the community centre toward parents are very high, too high, maybe. I would be upset myself, or rather, I was upset.

²⁹ The project is called 'work grant' and it provides different working experiences so that young people can have a chance of a paid training directly in a work place.

The baby girl is then accepted into the local statutory crèche. But then the situation is described as rapidly changing. As the woman is unemployed most of the time, her situation is not clear to the social worker, and at a certain point she refuses all contact with services. Because of this, the social worker has to report the situation to the judge, as the mother refuses all contact.



After a while, the woman is arrested on a charge of drug dealing, she obtains domiciliary arrest, but not at her place, as the crime was committed there. She is then sentenced to three years in jail, but the sentence is to be suspended, because of the baby. The woman is forced to ask her sister for hospitality. In the social worker's view, the two sisters love and support each other. But the housing conditions are very poor and the cohabitation is very difficult. After a while the sister reports Ms Neri to the police for meeting criminals at her place.

Following these developments, the judge in charge of the child tribunal decides to classify this case as high risk, for which compulsory measures of care or even the adoption of the child are considered³⁰. At this point, the social worker observes that the situation between her and the client changes drastically.

Probably the fact that she did not have any other support made her change her attitude toward the social services, so we had two quite important interviews in which we tried to understand what was wrong.

The first attempt is to define rules of cohabitation that allow the two sisters to go on. But soon after the sister's partner leaves the family, and the situation again becomes unbearable:

Probably, Ms Neri thought that she had to change something or she risked losing the child. Even if she did not completely trust us she said: 'I want to stay with my child. Put me wherever, but I want to stay with my child'. I offered a community residential care for mothers and children, and I tried to make her face the two options: to stay there without doing anything, or to use

³⁰ This does not mean that an adoption procedure starts, but just that the situation is considered as highly at risk for the child and that if anything new happens, or if nothing changes, adoption must be seriously considered.

this time in order to understand what was wrong in her life and find a solution.

The social worker observes that this project was a little bit forced on the client by the circumstances, but that Ms Neri accepts the proposal and participates actively in the project. In fact, she uses the time spent in the community in order to settle down and organise her daily life. She regularly takes the child to the nursery, and she looks for a job. She establishes a very strong relationship with a support worker, whom she asks to look after her child in case her three-year-sentence comes into effect.

After a while, the project is proceeding smoothly, and Ms Neri expresses the desire to go back to her place. As her life seems well organised, she is tired of the constraints involved in life in a community, and she wants more freedom. The social worker raises two objections. One practical: the flat, abandoned for more than a year, is in very bad condition and must be refurbished. This problem will be easily solved with the help of the community residential care staff. The second is more complex: the case is still considered high risk. The social worker thinks that this mother still needs support to keep going. Whatever goes wrong, adoption will be seriously considered, and the social worker would feel responsible to have put the person in such a bad situation.

We met (social worker and community residential staff) and we were really uncertain, because had we said 'let's try and dare to trust her', then if something went wrong an adoption procedure would have started...we would have taken on ourselves the responsibility of putting her in a helpless situation. Then we decided to talk to her openly about her situation, she was able to understand. We told her that there were two alternatives, whether she agreed to make a deal with us or not. But in this second case we would no longer be in a position to help her, if something went wrong. And this communication worked.

The project agreed is quite complicated in administrative terms. Sofia thinks that Ms Neri still needs support. She thinks that the best option is domiciliary educational help, but this, due to a lack of support workers, is not available at the moment. On top of that, Sofia thinks that the best person to support this mother is the support worker who has a good relationship with Ms Neri. At the same , to hire this person

formally is impossible. The solution suggested is to provide Ms Neri with a particularly high financial support and Ms Neri will use part of the money to pay the support worker. The support worker will visit Ms Neri in her spare time.

This project was meaningful because there was this person involved; domiciliary educational help made sense because there was this support worker that had established a deep and affective bond with Ms Neri. We did not have support workers available, but also, we needed precisely this person.

This deal is accepted by Ms Neri and by the support worker, and the project starts. Sofia says that there have been problems, but overall the contract has been honoured. The most important thing for the social worker is that from then on, when problems arise Ms Neri would talk to her and give an explanation instead of raising a 'wall of silence'. The social worker quotes several explanations given:

..Ms Neri started saying things like: 'Sometimes it's very difficult for me to get up in the morning. I don't have the guts to face the day ahead'or else she missed an appointment and she explained 'The child wasn't well and my sister called me as she was in trouble. I realised that I had to call and tell this person that I couldn't go, but it was too late and I felt ashamed'...

Sofia comments that earlier Ms Neri would just disappear without a word; she recognises that life is very hard for a single mother without any support.

In the meantime, Ms Neri has asked for help several times in relation to other problems (her child's holidays, a referral for speech therapy as she thinks that her child's language ability is underdeveloped). As she is in and out of work, she has again been offered the chance to be involved in the 'work grant' project. This time the project works. The social worker comments that everything that did not work the first time, now became possible.

Again, when Ms Neri feels she has settled down at her place, she asks for the support worker's involvement to be ended. Both the social worker and the support worker think that it could be useful to go on for a while; they think that the situation could still improve. In particular they feel it would be positive for Ms Neri to participate in a new project in the area and to develop a new network of friends. Her friends are

mainly other women who are themselves marginal and often 'social services clients'. Ms Neri does not agree with this, and wants to go on by herself. There is a last meeting where reciprocal expectations are discussed. No elements of risk for the child seem to be present. The social worker says that she has given Ms Neri positive feedback, acknowledging how her situation has improved and how, at the present, she is able to meet the daily needs of her child. Social worker and support worker express their evaluation that there could be other positive steps to be made. Ms Neri confirms her position that she prefers to go on by herself, and her choice is accepted.

The social worker comments that her client was probably right:

We liked this person very much and we have put a lot of energy in this case. We thought, we hoped to go further, but we had to lower our expectations. Maybe our project was not realistic after all: it would have put the woman in a conflicting situation. She has to live in this context, these are her friends, her network. Had she accepted the project she would have been neither here nor there.

It is only at this point that the judge, following repeated requests from the social worker, issues a third judgement, which rules out adoption and only prescribes a generic intervention of control/support.

The social worker thinks that contract work has been successful because she has always given Ms Neri her trust, even in the first part of the intervention, when Ms Neri was not willing to relate to the social worker. When Ms Neri found herself in deep trouble and scared, this probably played a part in her changing attitude. She refers to what Ms Neri told them:

She told us (support worker and herself) 'I know that I have a bad character, but I have been lucky to have met people who trusted me anyway'

The main difficulty for her was having taken on responsibility for a great risk. This happened when she supported Ms Neri's wish to go back home on her own while the case was still considered high risk. A more usual procedure would have required the woman to stay in the residential unit until the tribunal's decision was modified. Had the woman walked out, then the social worker should have notified the judge, the likely outcome being compulsory measures of care for the child).

If anything had happened they would have asked me 'What have you done?' Who would be willing to listen to the reasons for supporting this plan?... I often asked myself why I did all this. But what I thought was that this woman would have 'blown up' if she was forced to stay in residential care against her will and without good reasons; the point is that it did not make sense to me to act otherwise.

8.2.3 Comments

These two cases share some relevant similarities. Unlike Maria's case, they are both at quite an advanced stage. Because of this, it is easier to see how the whole work process is described. First, as in Maria's example, the process is not described in any way as an implementation of any logic or any normative structure. The social workers' intervention seems from the beginning shaped more by what emerges in the situation, than by a predefined structure. Nonetheless, the work does not appear chaotic, and it is possible to identify regularities and organising factors.

In both cases, the work develops, and plans are drafted, in response to what emerges in the interaction. This emerges throughout Irene's case and in the second part of Sofia's. One could say that, in relation to the work plan, the client's request plays the same role as that played in the cases presented in the previous chapter by the logical structure and the clear picture of the situation, formed by the social worker. Unlike the examples in the first group, here there are no attempts to identify 'the difficulties' of the clients independently from what emerges in the interactive process. In a sense, interventions develop as requests emerge and new events occur; stages can be identified this way. The social worker's understanding and evaluation of the situation is focused on the field identified by the request or by the emerging problems.

It is from requests and emerging problems that a proposal is discussed and agreed upon. This is how Irene describes her work, although negotiation is sometimes less evident because, as she frequently emphasises, in this case there was a convergence of goals between her and the client from the beginning. But the same emerges in

Sofia's case for the community residential care, the domiciliary intervention, as well as the end of the intervention.

As in Maria's example, the first part of Sofia's case is described as a trial and error process (the same may apply to that part of the contract that did not work in Irene's case). The reason why the process is stuck at a certain point is not connected to contract failure, but to the mother's refusal of any contact. Errors, namely contracts not implemented, plans that do not work, are analysed and a new trial starts. Errors are considered inevitable parts of the process. Sofia thinks that the positive developments of the intervention are connected to her perseverance in pursuing an agreement even when the basis for negotiation was very narrow.

In both cases, the work appears focused and bounded. Boundaries are not predefined rationally, but again emerge from the interaction (see the conclusion of Sofia's account, or the second contract connected to divorce in Irene's account). Thus, as mentioned before, the client's requests and views appear in the accounts as playing a major role in the interventions. That elements are not perceived as fixed but as evolving in the interaction with the services renders each intervention quite specific and peculiar. This impression is enhanced by the fact that in most parts of the accounts the intervention is described in terms of putting together specific favourable circumstances, such as a good relationship with a support worker or a voluntary worker particularly sensitive to cultural differences, so as to tailor a highly personalised intervention.

The importance given to clients' requests, views and intentions, is reflected in the kind of understanding on which the work is based. Definitions of the situation appear to evolve and develop along with the work. They are focused on the emerging difficulties or requests. For instance, in Sofia's case information like criminal activity or drug use does not seem to play a relevant part as far as the evaluation of the situation is concerned, at least not directly. She bases her position on what directly emerges in the interaction.

Evaluation is dynamic as long as it is based on attempts to explain and understand the reasons rather than on attempts to classify, and it is more liable to develop during the interaction. For instance, Sofia's first evaluation is based on an attempt to understand the reasons for the difficulties encountered, through linking the client's story and her present situation. She interprets the initial failures as partly due to mistrust in social services (founded on previous bad experiences) and not in terms of a characteristic feature of the client (as in Marco's case reported in section 7.3).

Categorisation is present (in the first case, the client is autonomous and active, in the second, an intelligent and resourceful person), but does not play an important role in the definition of the situation and of the appropriate interventions. Both cases identify the key role subjectivity in understanding and defining problems: points of view and perspectives are part of the grounds on which problems are defined. Irene considers the problem of clarifying the couple's situation in legal terms important, but hard to address as the client does not want to deal with this. In Sofia's example, when Ms Neri wants to leave the community residential care, the situation is defined in a way which takes into account both the client's desire for more autonomy and the professionals' evaluation that she still needs support.

In this picture, doubts and uncertainty over the evaluation can be dealt with through discussion with clients or with other colleagues involved. Evaluations acknowledge the possibility of different views or perspectives in looking at situations. Social workers present their efforts as directed toward an understanding of different perspectives rather than toward an autonomous and 'over the parties' heads' identification of problems. Different perspectives are considered 'legitimate' and taken on board. This applies for instance to Sofia's consideration in relation to the failure of the community day care intervention. The position of the client, who does not understand aspects of the intervention, is considered reasonable and acceptable. It leads to a change in direction, not to a re-proposal in other terms of the same kind of intervention. At the end of the domiciliary educational intervention, the position expressed by the client is considered as probably more acceptable than the alternative position shared by social worker and support worker.

The client is defined as a person capable of developing a meaningful understanding of the situation, someone with intentions that need to be valued and considered. The client is here presented as a subject who can make choices and has to be informed so that he/she can know the possible consequences of the choices. As was said above, these elements are not interpreted but accepted and taken into account; they become the basis for negotiation.

On the other hand, the practitioner emerges as a professional who places his/her competence and expertise at the service of the client, not as one who guides the game. It is interesting to notice here that when considering the issue of authority, this is always connected to the position of practitioners, not to professional competencies in understanding or facing problems.

Like Maria, both Irene and Sofia associate their way of working with the assumption of risks. The main risk seems to be perceived as trusting the word of the clients. The possibility that the clients could cheat is taken into account. Irene acknowledges that Ms Gure might have applied for a council flat on the ground of her two institutionalised children, but then use it on her own. Sofia admits that supporting Ms Neri returning home is in itself a risky decision. She also sees the possibility that, once home, Ms Neri might take the money for herself and refuse the support worker. However, undertaking risks and tolerating the anxiety which derives from this, seem to be considered an inevitable price which is worthwhile paying in order to work meaningfully (a point explicitly made by Sofia).

The main traits of the descriptions presented here are:

- the work process is described as a trial and error process;
- clients' requests regularly affect its structure;
- because of this, the work process seems to be organised on the bases of specific aspects of each client's situation;

- evaluations are partial, and dynamic in so far as they are focused on requests, and aim at understanding the clients' reasons;
- understanding is based on an attempt to connect and grasp different perspectives on situations and problems;
- working is represented as entailing the assumption of risks.

As in Maria's case, in these representations, a contractual way of working is seen as crucial, and informs the whole work process. The view of problems as inter-subjectively defined rather than as objective entities, means that the definition of the situation itself has to be discussed and negotiated with the clients. A contract is not just presented in terms of taking a certain step at a certain point, but is based on a continuous negotiation with the clients about what the problem is and how it is to be handled.

8.3 The Contract as an Ongoing Process of Negotiation

8.3.1 The sequence in the accounts

The differences between these accounts and those presented in the previous chapter are quite striking. Commenting on the findings in chapter 7, I observed that it was possible to identify a logic or rationale which connected the phases and passages to each other. With an image of contract as an agreement, however, a predefined structure does not appear, at least not as a preliminary feature to be explained in order to make sense of the sequence. The structure appears to emerge during the intervention, as a product of the interaction between social worker and client. The phases of the intervention (and of its account) are identified by subsequent happenings, and through subsequent agreements. The goals and boundaries of the intervention are defined through the interactive process.

In the first group, the work process is described in terms of a strategy to avoid or reduce mistakes. Here, instead, the sequence is often presented explicitly as a 'trial

and error' process. This illustrates how differently this group of practitioners perceive mistakes. In the previous group, mistakes were to be avoided, they were seen as signs of superficial evaluation or a sloppy way of working. Here, mistakes are often considered an essential part of the process. The work proceeds through attempts, and could not be otherwise. As Maria says at the beginning, one has too little information to make a proper evaluation, so any decision one takes requires daring. A contract that does not work, therefore, is usually just treated as the basis for a new negotiation.

Descriptions appear as a story in which passages are not connected in rational terms, but through the outcomes of what has happened before. Many events are often presented as taking place at the same time; the scenario is not described as still (not even in ideal terms) but moving. There are no attempts to take the situation under control, as in the previous group, but the work process adapts continuously to unpredicted or unexpected developments (see Sofia's and Irene's cases).

8.3.2. Understanding the situation

Even the approach to understanding appears quite distinct in the two groups. In the examples of the previous chapter, practitioners aimed at producing clear and stable pictures of the situations: this was achieved through categorisation of problems and people, or through comparison to a standard. In a sense, the point was to grasp the general features of the situations.

Here, on the contrary, attention is focused on peculiar and specific features of the situation; problems and difficulties are more easily connected to the client's history or to life contexts. Situations are seen in dynamic terms, and difficulties are interpreted as part of evolution processes, not as static features of clients or their context (see Irene, Sofia). Attention is focused on identifying causes or origins of problems, more than on classifying them. Practitioners' stories never offer clear pictures of the situations, rather, sparse fragments of an understanding that develops

along with the work process. As in Maria's examples, descriptions tend to emphasise the use of information spontaneously emerging in the work, rather than a specific task of collecting information. Clients' views and their ways of making sense of their experience are highly valued and considered; in many cases there are attempts to try to see the situation from within, through the eyes of the person living it. While in the previous group an external position was regarded as a privileged one, here, being involved is not seen as a disadvantage: on the contrary, interviewees often consider their own affective involvement with clients as a positive feature in relation to understanding and working with them. As the understanding of problems builds on clients' subjective perceptions, doubts and uncertainty as how to interpret the information, or about what to do, are usually dealt with through discussions with clients.

8.3.3 Clients and practitioners

From this it is clear that the relationship between client and practitioner is pictured quite differently between the two groups. The image of clients emerging from this group is one of people who hold a meaningful view of their experience, a view that has to be taken into account and discussed. In all three examples, clients appear as protagonists in many respects: their will is highly valued throughout the whole interaction, and all aspects of the case tend to be discussed. There is a much more thorough attempt to understand and take into account clients' reasons; practitioners frequently put themselves in the client's shoes. The starting point is not the client's problems, but the client's position. Problems appear very much defined in terms of the possible agreements and not as objective entities. The position of the social worker is presented as interlocutory. This is not to say that social workers of this group deny their different responsibility and their share of authority in the interaction and process: but the client's share of authority and responsibility is never denied. And the client's responsibility is not substantially different from that of the practitioner: it is not about doing things, but about taking decisions. One could say that, while in the previous group, differences between clients and practitioners are

somehow defined in hierarchical terms, in this group, differences are rather interpreted in terms of the different, yet unranked, functions and roles played: they do not necessarily imply a fixed definition of who should take control of the interaction, nor of 'leaders' and 'followers'. On the contrary, the direction of the process is presented as emerging from the interaction; the ability to follow the client is praised in all the accounts presented, and is a common feature of most of the accounts of this group. However, 'following the client' is never presented as a passive '*laissez-faire*' attitude. It entails the ability to engage with the clients on their grounds. And this trust in clients defining their own problems involves dealing with anxiety and fears, and entails taking risks.

8.3.4 The contract

In this case, the reference to contract is present since the start of the work process: it appears to orient the whole intervention, which is based on negotiation and agreement. In the previous group, problems and solutions were defined objectively and were not subject to negotiation. Here, accounts suggest a different way of interpreting experience: there are many problems, many acceptable ways to view them, and sometimes many different acceptable ways to face them. The definition of the situation and the path to be followed are constructed through negotiation.

Practitioners of this group very often openly associate the making of contracts with risks undertaken by the practitioner. Risks are more widely seen not just as connected to the clients' situation, but also to the intervention: the proposed solutions could create other problems and are therefore a potential source of risk. Working on the basis of agreement often entails taking an unusual path. In this view, 'contract work' means not being in control of the situation. Trusting clients is often perceived as something of a hazardous move. It is not based on a naïve faith, rather, it is presented as a sort of bet that practitioners feel is worthwhile undertaking. Working on the basis of agreement is therefore associated with an enhancement of anxiety and concerns.

In this picture, the act of making a contract appears less relevant. Attention is often directed to the process leading up to it, while the contract itself is often referred to generally, without particular emphasis. In a sense, contract work is described as an ongoing process of negotiation between clients and practitioner, which starts from the first moves. In many cases, as one interviewee (Cinzia) comments, the important thing in a contract is the process through which an agreement is reached. And this process is often considered as the basis of the whole work. If the first group presented the contract as an important or fundamental tool, here contract appears as a way of working.

To sum up, one has increasingly the impression that we are dealing not just with two different positions in relation to contract, but with two different ways of representing social work, and social work practice. In other words, one has the impression that the two different uses of the label 'contract' are embedded into two different styles of describing the work. The two types recall the distinction operated by Bruner (1986, 1991) between the 'argument mode' and the 'story mode' of accounting. In the description presented in the previous chapter, as in the argument mode, the elements of accounts are connected by a certain logic. For instance, if the word 'then' appears, it is to establish an abstract logical connection between parts (Bruner, 1986, p.12). Actions and interventions are rationally connected to the problems: 'if you do not have a clear picture *then* (*'allora', 'quindi'*) you make the wrong intervention'. On the contrary, in the second group's account, the connective 'then' establishes a temporal /chronological relation between subsequent events (*'then* the mother came and said'). In the first group's accounts, subjectivity plays a secondary role, for example the use of categorisation and standards to identify problems makes the evaluation impersonal, or independent from the subjective views of both practitioners and clients. On the contrary, subjects, with their personal perspectives and intentions, are the protagonists in accounts from the second group. Bruner connects the two modes with two 'distinctive ways of ordering experience and constructing reality' (Bruner, 1986, p.11). And indeed, the concept of contract has proved a good key to access different professional cultures.

8.4 Summary

In this chapter, I have presented and analysed some typical examples of contract work presented by social workers who identify the contract with a mutual agreement between client and practitioner. I have contrasted the relevant features identified here to the ones presented in the previous chapter and introduced the emergence of two approaches to the work identified while exploring different uses of the concept of contract. My next step is to revisit the similarities and differences between the two groups identified so far and to offer a possible way of viewing them in terms of two coherent frameworks present in the social work community.

Table 8.1 Two Ways of Representing the Work Process

Contract as Structuring Factor	Contract as Agreement
Work organised by a predefined structure	Work as a trial and error process
Actions connected in a logical sequence by an external principle	Actions connected only to what immediately precedes or follows them; no broader logical sequence
Understanding as classification of problems	Understanding as dynamic process, which evolves with the interaction
Problems perceived as objective entities	Problems defined through negotiation
Subjective views perceived as an interference	Subjective views perceived as relevant
Client-practitioner relation defined in asymmetrical terms	Client/practitioner relation described in terms of qualitative differences
Contract described as an act	Contract described as a process
Contract associated to strategies for minimizing risks and mistakes	Contract is connected to undertaking risks
Contract work as a crucial tool introduced at a certain stage	Contract work as an ongoing negotiation on which the whole work is based

9 Styles of Thought and Representations of Contracts

The Emergence of Two Professional Cultures

The analysis of interviews has identified two different ways of using the concept of contract and describing the work. Last chapter ended with a question about how to make sense of those differences. This chapter addresses this question. It shows how starting from the descriptions of contract and contract work, it is possible to identify two different and organic frameworks or 'world views'. These may be best conceived as distinct language games, reflected in different uses of the same words, embedded within different linguistic 'fabrics' (Barnes, 1982). A study of 'romantic' and 'enlightenment' styles of thought (Mannheim, 1953) provides precious insight in the coherency of the two language games.

As it could be expected, though, while several interviewees tend to use prevalently one language or the other, in most interviews there are shifts from one language game to the other. This does not undermine the hypothesis of the presence of two worldviews. The practitioners I have interviewed work side by side and interact with each other: they are members of one community, not of two tribes not in contact with one another.

Although some interviews show particularly interesting combinations of themes from both perspectives, in this chapter I chose to focus on the description and understanding of the two worldviews. I believe that an attempt to identify coherent frameworks may provide interesting stimuli for reflection, both on the difficulty of communication within social work community, and on some of the dilemmas faced by practitioners.

In section 9.1 below, I will review the picture that has emerged up until now, and illustrate how it suggests the presence of two language games. I will consider possible inspiring models to make sense of these two frameworks, and introduce my choice to take inspiration from Mannheim's (1953) study of enlightenment and romantic styles

of thought. Some key points of the latter will be presented in section 9.2. Finally (section 9.3), I will illustrate how practitioners' representations of their work, as outlined in previous chapters, fit these broader styles of thought. The relationship between theory and practice within a specific profession will then appear as affected by the professionals' broader cognitive frames.

9.1 Two Organic Worldviews

The analysis presented in chapters 6-8 prompts several remarks. On the one hand, it has emerged clearly that social workers basically use 'contract' to refer to the same concept, characterised by two crucial factors: an agreement and an explicit structure and work plan. At the same time, the images which emerge from practitioners' descriptions are strikingly different. This is due to the way the two factors are connected to each another. In a nutshell, the same 'object' seems to elicit different descriptions, depending on how its components are connected and organised.

On top of that, depending on the organisation of the concept (whether the agreement or the work plan were considered the figure), 'contract' is connected to a different cluster of relevant aspects of the work process. When the representation is focussed on the work plan, contract is mainly associated with a better organisation of the work, a clearer definition of boundaries, the achievement of clients' compliance and a reduction of uncertainty. When the image of contract focuses on the agreement, contract is mainly associated with the relationship between client and practitioner, with reciprocity, and with a two-way communication process. Chapter 6 also suggests that different definitions of contracts correspond to, and discriminate between, different types of intervention. For instance, when attention is focused on the work plan, practitioners tend to stress similarities between compulsory and voluntary interventions; on the contrary, when the agreement is put in the forefront, the two kinds of interventions are highly differentiated and require a different approach.

Likewise, examples of concrete practice suggest that the concept of contract is used to illustrate different aspects of practices. When contract is defined as a work plan, the word refers to a specific action, which is performed at a certain stage. When the contract is defined mainly as an agreement, the label is associated to a process: emphasis is on negotiation rather than on the single act of making a contract.

Different descriptions of contract practices make sense in the context of different ways to describe work in more general terms. When contract is described as an act, work is described as an implementation of a stable structure (evaluation, contract, implementation and assessment). On the contrary, when the word 'contract' refers to a process, cases are described as stories, concrete sequences of events, actions and reactions. In the examples analysed in chapter 7 (corresponding to definitions of contract as a work plan), problems are defined as objective entities. On the contrary, in the second group of cases (chapter 8) problems are more often identified with what people perceive as such; it is openly acknowledged that there can be discrepancies and disagreement on defining the nature of the problem. Coherently with the definition of the problems in the first group, understanding is presented in terms of discovering objective problems, often comparing the situation with a standard, or classifying circumstances and people within given categories. In the second group, understanding is much more identifiable with negotiating a common ground between practitioner and client. In the first group, risks and dangers are placed all in clients' problematic situation, and they must be avoided as far as possible. Contract is part of a strategy in this direction. In the second group of descriptions, risk is conceived more widely: there are risks in clients' situation, but also the social work intervention involves unavoidable risks. In this picture, contract work is often associated with practitioners undertaking some risks.

The differences between the two groups, summarised in table 8.1, may be seen as different ways to use words or, in other cases, to discriminate between commonly identified classes of events or situations. This is the case, in the first place, of the word 'contract'. But the same can be said of other words like, for instance, 'problem', which in one case refers to some objective entity in the world, in the

other, to how people perceive the situation. The different way of considering the distinction between compulsory and voluntary interventions can be taken as an example of how the same situations are differently discriminated: in one case, similarities are stressed and the two situations require the same approach, in the other, differences are emphasized and the two situations require a different approach.

However, the main point is probably that the boundary itself between what is objective and what is not, appears to shift. When contract is perceived as an agreement, facts and information are treated as objective, but the way they are interpreted and connected leaves room for cultural differences and subjectivity. When the representation of contract focuses on the work plan, it is taken for granted that there is one only possible 'true' way to interpret facts, to connect them in terms of causes and effects, and this way can only be found by the expert.

The question here is whether the different traits we have found to be associated with one or the other version of contract work combine in relatively coherent configurations, or not. Indeed, the perspective to languages adopted in this research posits that the use of words or categorisations cannot be looked at in isolation. To use a word in a stable way and in agreement to a social group means to participate in a practice. Accordingly, one may wonder if the different uses of words identified in the previous chapters actually suggest the existence of two different language games, i.e., of two distinct 'cognitive organisations'.

When addressing this issue, I found Karl Mannheim's (1953) classic distinction between 'romantic' (or traditional) and 'enlightenment' (or modern) styles of thought particularly useful. By these terms Mannheim refers to broad frameworks that provide actors with coherent and encompassing representations of reality. This distinction has often been regarded as a precursor to more recent developments in frame analysis and it has been used to interpret controversies in, and about, science (Harwood, 1976; Bloor, 1991). As I will show in detail in the next sections, my analysis actually suggests a striking resemblance between certain features of social workers' descriptions of their practice, and these broader frameworks. This is

particularly evident when looking at the part played by rationality or logic as well as at different definitions of objectivity.

That a description of traditional and modern styles of thought contribute to our understanding of different mentalities in social work, should come as no surprise. Many authors have indeed looked at professional social work as a practice developed within a modern framework, yet rooted in traditional forms of social solidarity in the community (Howe, 1986; Smith and White, 1997; Neve, 2000). The emergence of both social services and social work as a profession have been commonly related to attempts to rationalise and control traditional, largely informal practices, at times from a social engineering perspective. In some cases, this has led to a more explicit recognition of the presence of different mentalities or cultures among practitioners, particularly in reference to the theory and practice issue.

Howe's (1987) well-known four paradigms of social work practice (the *fixers*, the *seekers after meaning*, the *consciousness raisers* and the *revolutionaries*) are a case in point. His models are derived from the four social sciences paradigms identified by Burrell and Morgan (1979), and re-elaborated in relation to social work theories by Wittington and Holland (1985). Several elements of this typology are indeed important to the analysis I have conducted in the previous chapters. In particular, the different weight assigned to subjectivity and objectivity in Howe's types closely resonates with (my own reconstruction of) Mannheim's distinction.

The problem with Howe's typology lies in my view in its being based on a classification of social science theories, rather than on the empirical observation of social work practices. As a result, it is rather abstract and of limited use when it comes to capture the different uses of concepts and words in practice. As I observed in the first chapter, Howe identifies only one possible way to relate theory to practice, namely, that theory guides practice. Different paradigms just correspond to different theories guiding practice. In contrast, Mannheim's models were derived from systematic textual analysis and provide more sophisticated tools to capture the complexity of the theory-practice relationship.

Smith's (1979) typology has also attracted attention from many authors in the field (Pilalis, 1986; Hardiker, 1981). Smith identifies two types of mentalities among practitioners, which entail different views of the theory and practice issue. The two types of practitioners are labelled *heart workers* and *head workers*. Nonetheless, what Smith describes is not based on systematic data, it is an impressionistic exploration of the two mentalities. Since the work is a passionate defence of head workers' mentality, this mentality is assumed as a parameter, and the heart workers' mentality is mainly described and evaluated in terms of its distance from the preferred approach. I think Mannheim's model has once again an edge, given its capacity to analyse different styles of thought in their own right, without taking one as a standard against which to assess the deviations of alternative representations.

Despite the promise of Mannheim's model, one has to acknowledge the risks of looking at so broad archetypes of styles of thought. They might indeed be used in relation to any social group whatsoever and to any language within Western culture. Going back to the archetypes of our culture risks turning the analysis into a highly abstract and generic exercise. This objection would hold if my goal was to account for the presence of certain traits of social work cultures in the light of basic archetypes of modern Western culture; if, in other words, my analysis had explanatory ambitions. This would render the project both vague and pretentious. On the contrary, I intend to use the model just as an outstandingly useful descriptive device. Reference to Mannheim's work provides insight into how to connect different traits of social workers' thinking in a meaningful and coherent way. My task here is to exploit Mannheim's model for its potential to make sense of specific different mentalities in the present social work community.

9.2 Romantic and Illuministic Styles of Thought

9.2.1 Mannheim's model

Mannheim defines styles of thought as cognitive approaches to the experience and to the world, which are socially rooted. They are grounded in specific social groups and they evolve, become predominant or disappear in connection with the specific historical destiny of the social groups who carry them. They are to be connected to the 'basic intentions' or interests of the groups in which they are rooted.

Mannheim's analysis focuses on the culture of the first half of nineteenth century and on the opposite positions taken by Enlightenment and Romanticism, particularly in Germany, but with reference to what was happening in France and Britain. He connects the cultural movements to the social dynamic of this period. Particularly Romanticism is described as embodied in social groups such as the aristocracy and farmers who at the time had been marginalised. It is presented as an endeavour to systematise and rationalise the conservative style of thought, characteristic of pre-industrial societies. The two styles are respectively labelled also as *conservative*, because of the connection to traditional culture of the romantic movement, and *natural law*, because of the a faith in science, and in the possibility of discovering the fundamental laws of nature, which characterises Enlightenment.

What defines and differentiates styles of thought is not as much or exclusively their content, but rather the way of thinking. In relation to Conservatism and Natural law styles Mannheim observes

Conservative and liberal-bourgeois thought are not ready-made 'systems' ...; they are ways of thinking in continuous process of development. Conservatism did not want to think something different from its liberal opponents; it wanted to think it differently ...' (1953, p.116).

While Enlightenment's thinkers tend to present their position in terms of a coherent and rational framework, the conservative mood is described by Mannheim as intrinsically resistant to strong systematisation and forced into it in an attempt to avoid being erased from the public scene. For Romantics rationalisation, as the definition of principles or rules, is considered already as a necessary concession to the predominant style, which celebrates the triumph of Reason. Rationalisation is a price paid to the predominant culture, in order to keep alive vital elements of the

previous culture.

My synthesis will consider the main traits of the two styles without making reference to the empirical bases from which they have been derived. In other works they have been described and used as sorts of cognitive frameworks widely diffused in the present times:

Through the steady rhythm of social experience, and the mind's search for structure and pattern, the two archetypes will settle down in each of us and form a foundation and resource for our thinking. (Bloor, 1991, p. 75)

9.2.2 The two styles

Romantic thinking privileges the concrete over the abstract, its view of reality is concentrated on the present, and it is spatially circumscribed. It looks at events and phenomena in their concrete and peculiar manifestation, contextualised in space and time, in all their specific details, as they appear directly to the observer.

In contrast, natural law thinking privileges the abstract; it transcends the actual present and it focuses on abstract possibilities. It looks beyond concrete reality, beyond appearances; events are perceived as epi-phenomena, as if they were just accidental manifestations of an essence that is seen as independent from the context and from history. In this view, peculiar traits and details are held as irrelevant; they must be distinguished from the constant factors and, as they are contingent, they are dropped. From this follows the unconditional trust given to science and scientific methods, which are deemed able to transcend contingent reality and discovering absolute and universal truths. The contrast between the two styles is quite sharp, as romantic thinkers, on the contrary, interpret generalisations and laws as contingent products of our culture.

The particular view of reality of the romantic style of thought is associated with a view of time as a continuous dimension: the present is the last moment of the past;

romantics see events as the products of past influences, traditions and history as they analyse them as contextualised in space and time. The past is seen as still active in the present, in terms of living traditions; continuity and coexistence between past and present traits are emphasised, the flow of time is interpreted in terms of growth, development, or deterioration.

For natural law thinkers, time is a discrete dimension, split up as it is into phases, which follow one another in a linear way. New things substitute for old ones and the present phase replaces the past one. This is associated with a strong orientation toward the future: the present time is the first instant of the future. The sense of continuity between past and present is therefore lost; in its place is an idea of linear progress from one phase to the following. New - better - ways of life substitute for old ones.

As it would be expected, Mannheim presents the approach to knowledge of the two styles as completely different. The conservative approach tends to privilege a holistic perspective. Individuals or units are understood as parts of wholes. Wholes are treated as organic entities and as something that cannot be grasped rationally but intuitively. The emphasis put on the concrete and history goes with the attention given to peculiarity and detail, and to qualitative inductive knowledge.

On the contrary, the Enlightenment style of thought privileges a deductive and quantitative approach. Natural law thinkers split the object of knowledge into its basic units and understand the whole as the sum of its parts and as working in a mechanistic way. It looks for common traits that can be considered in abstraction from the context, there is a trust that wholes can be understood in rational terms, in terms of abstract and out-of-time natural laws. Mannheim illustrate the difference between the two styles through an example:

The conservative picture of things as a whole is like the inclusive sort of picture of a house which one might get by looking at it from all possible sides, a concrete picture of a house in all its detail from every angle. But the progressive is not interested in all these details; he makes straight for the ground plan of the house and his picture is suitable for rational analysis rather

then intuitive representation. (1953, p.111)

In fact, both conservative and natural law thinkers consider both individuals and whole systems, but they conceive them in a completely different way: for the romantic, individuals are peculiar concrete entities which can be understood only as part of an organic historical context. The wholes, reality, are 'irrational' and operate in an unpredictable way. For the natural law thinker, only the common essence of units is relevant: individuals are conceived as abstract units whose characters are absolute and out of time; wholes are the mechanical outcome of the sum of their units, and in this sense they can be manipulated and controlled.

The different way of conceiving change that the two styles entail comes from this different way of looking at reality. For the romantic, contingent situations and processes are the product of concrete, often historical factors; norms are specific and to be found in how things work; changes take place naturally; change is what we face, not something we can voluntarily and rationally control and determine. This can lead to a fatalistic and uncritical acceptance of the present, or to an attitude of cautious change of details or marginal aspects. The progressives, on the contrary, always compare reality with abstract norms and standard. This produces a much more critical attitude toward contingent situations:

One has a quite different attitude to things, persons and institutions, if one always look at them with a demand, with a 'So it should be' at the back of one's mind, instead of treating them as finished and inevitable product of a long process of growth. If we adopt the first attitude, we shall find ourselves barely glancing at given realities of our surrounding, never achieving any attachment which would make us indulgent toward their imperfections, nor any feeling of solidarity which would make us concerned with their survival. But the second attitude will lead us to accept the present with all its defects, uncritically. (Mannheim, 1953, p.110)

One could observe that, while from a conservative position one could at most derive a moderate invitation to accept things as they are, progressive theory is intrinsically prescriptive. In this framework, change is conceived in a much more radical way: there is a tendency to get rid of all things that do not work and even to 'destroy' the whole context in which these same things have been generated. The mechanistic

view of wholes probably sustain the trust that new ‘wholes’, more close to standards and to abstract rules, can be planned and built.

In general terms, it can be observed that the conservative thought gives priority to being over thinking and to practice over theory, while natural law style takes the opposite position (Bloor, 1991). The point is that the use of the terms, and therefore the meaning attached to them, looks different. In a sense within a conservative style, thinking is just a kind of practice, which is complementary, and not super-ordinate to other practices. Reason itself is not conceived as out of space and time, but as something which evolves and change with society, and there can be many kinds of rationality. Theories, as well as common sense beliefs, are perceived as concrete manifestation of historically and contextually grounded ways of making sense of the experience.

Within the natural law system, thinking and being, theory and practice are different sorts of entities. Theories are seen as abstract entities, aiming to universal validity, they are attempts to catch an absolute objective truth beyond contingent appearances. Reason itself, in the first place, is conceived as informed by eternal principles with universal validity.

This view attributes to theory and thinking a superior status over being and practice. Scientific theories and rational thinking are held as standard on which to evaluate practice, they ideally provide the better guide to it. As both scientific theories and common sense beliefs are seen as something about reality, but not belonging to reality, they are seen as something that can be changed when confronted with new evidence. The same notion of progress rests on this strong belief.

9.3 Representing Social Work

It is not hard to find, within social workers’ representations of their practice, several analogies to Mannheim’s styles of thought. One has just to think, for instance, of the

different styles of accounting presented in the previous chapters. The former, that following Bruner (1991) I might label 'argument' style, rests on the identification of logical connections between elements (chapter 7); the latter, places most emphasis on story-telling and the development of events and actions over time (chapter 8).

In this section, I will take the exercise one step further, and elaborate systematically on the analogy between Mannheim's types and the findings of my own analysis. In particular, I will refer to the following dimensions, which more or less explicitly Mannheim refers to when differentiating between enlightenment and romantic styles of thought: abstract rules vs. concrete sequences; abstract constructs vs. concrete processes; orientation toward the future vs. orientation toward the past; change as restructuring vs. change as a natural development.

9.3.1 Rules and logic vs. peculiar sequences of occurrences and regularities

Abstract logic and abstract rules in the work description are a major trait of an 'illuministic' style of thought. When contract is conceived of as a work plan, the work process tends to be described as an implementation of abstract rules. In this perspective there is a logical, necessary sequence between different steps and phases (see section 7.4.1). As one interviewee puts it:

When a user comes to me, either voluntarily or through institutional channels such as the tribunal, I always start with an inquiry, for the tribunal or for myself, in order to understand the case. Then, before starting the intervention, I have to make a contract with the user, by which I mean to define the intermediate goal (the final goal in theory is just in my mind), where do we have to arrive together, what path we have to take, what is up to me to do... this must always be done... (Ester)

The same social worker presents several cases (see section 7.1) to show how, whatever the specific situation, she always follows the same rules. Another interviewee presents her way of proceeding as follows:

The first phase, when somebody arrives to the service, consists of analysing

the situation and evaluating it, I have to make a photograph of the situation, what are the difficulties, what are the resources, and on the bases of what emerges I evaluate what interventions are necessary so that at this stage one can confront the clients and make a contract. (Claudia)

There is a diffuse tendency to account for what is done in terms of implementation of abstract rules. Rules are of various kind such as ‘one has always to make it clear that honesty in giving information is expected’, ‘certain information is crucial and must always be gathered’, ‘one has always to express an understanding for the difficulties people are going through’, and so on. They are mainly connected to rational principles sometimes explicitly derived from generalisation of previous experiences. They are seen as essential to a positive outcome (‘if you express understanding, people will accept your evaluation and follow you’).

On the contrary, interviewees in the second group, coherently with a ‘romantic’ style of thinking, tend to present their work as recurrent patterns, temporal sequences of events that may have some empirical regularity, but no logical necessity. In the accounts presented in the previous chapter there was no mention of a structured way of working: social workers in this group struggle to describe their work in general terms. This position also emerges from practitioners’ accounts of their way of reaching a contract:

Probably at the beginning we have to know each other, I do not know anything of them and they do not know anything of me and of the service ...we explore the request and what the service offers...well, it depends a lot on what this person says, how s/he sees the situation... we arrive to the definition of a possible way out... we explore what is feasible (Cinzia)

In this case, what is presented is a typical story, and it is underlined that the specific circumstances influence what happens. It is not just that the specific intervention is connected to a specific evaluation. It is the way of proceeding itself that is specific and related to the specificity of the encounter between practitioner and client. In most cases it emerges that anyway it is difficult even to identify a ‘typical story’:

Well maybe I start from the concrete situation...because the aspects are always different ...many cases I follow have been in charge for many years,

so usually I look at the files...I make an interview or a couple of interviews, and then ideas about how to handle the situation come up. But it depends a lot on the person in front of me...(Barbara)

In some cases the difficulty of describing the work process in general terms, and the absence of previous rules, are openly stated:

It is very difficult for me to talk about contract in general terms, in theory so to speak.... because while we are talking, a lot of different situations come up to my mind, I could go on talking the all day. Because in fact I use the contract in different ways, depending on the kind of situation, the person, the problem that the person takes, the context. Maybe I cannot give myself any rule. Maybe it is my limit, I am too elastic.... Then, certainly, I have my principles, maybe they are nothing special, the respect of the person, to listen without judging and so on... these are always present, I will stand by these principles until I retire (Maria).

Interestingly, and consistently with a 'romantic' style of thought, Maria does not portray her approach in normative terms. She presents her reluctance to follow specific rules as a matter of fact, open to challenge, rather than as a rule in itself. In this case, professional ethical principles are more likely to provide guidance to practitioners than abstract rational rules (see also chapter 6.3.1, where it was noticed that interviewees of this type tend to connect contract work to ethical principles).

Several interviewees in this second group also tend to derive the rules of their approach *ex post*, i.e., at the end of the presentation of cases, looking back at what has actually happened. They could be better described as regularities, or habits acquired, rather than rules followed. Maria for instance says: 'My work is a sort of "trial and error" process'. Several practitioners describe their way of working as finding a way of 'following the client'.

9.3.2 Understanding and acting

Looking in greater depth at the sequences, as they are presented in the interviews and in the examples, prompts a second observation: the two groups of interviewees differ

in the way they relate understanding of the case and concrete action. This difference again bears some analogy to the two styles of thought described in the previous section. Firstly, those who see the contract as a work plan strongly differentiate between understanding and intervention. Their understanding of the situation and their evaluation appear to precede logically the intervention, rather than being already part of it. This is clear from the previous quotation from Ester's interview (section 9.3.1). She explicitly refers to her work starting 'after the inquiry'. Understanding must be completed before work can start:

The inquiry phase is quite long, I have this theory, that when you start seeing things, it is like taking away the cover, there are always things underneath: you always find problems, maybe not always very serious ones, but...So I do not feel the urge to give immediately an answer, otherwise I risk giving inappropriate replies.

Another interviewee connects directly the evaluation to the contract. An in depth evaluation is seen as a logical necessary step in order to make a 'contract' which works.

In my view there is a fundamental necessity to start with a clear hypothesis, having clarified what are the resources and problems, ...in order to be able to make an in depth evaluation.... it is like any other contract one makes, for instance when buying a car, you have got to know also the characteristics [of the car]. I think that this is a major point. (Grazia)

In many cases, the idea that a clear understanding should precede the intervention is presented as an ideal standard against which to critically assess actual practice:

I have got the impression that sometimes I start without having the in-depth understanding that I would need... I tend to go quite quickly to a definition of 'who has to do what', i.e., of the intervention. Instead, it would be wise to see people more than once, to understand better. Otherwise, one makes an intervention ...maybe not completely inappropriate but... with more in-depth knowledge we could have done something better. (Sonia)

In this description of the evaluation phase, evaluation and understanding are treated as something of a different nature from intervention. The evaluation is often portrayed as consisting of a whole range of actions: interviews with the clients and

their families, interviews with the school teachers of the children or with other subjects in contact with the clients, diagnosis from specialists. Interestingly, these operations are not described as directly part of an intervention, nor as something that can already have an impact on the situation. They are described as something of a different order, which is preliminary to the actual intervention, and shapes its specific contents. A proper evaluation is a prerequisite of an effective intervention.

Here, understanding is connected to action in a very logical and straightforward way. For instance, the idea that understanding should precede action and that the two entities are radically different, seems to rest on taken-for-granted rational premises that it is unwise to discuss. Nonetheless, looking at the other group of social workers, whose approach is closer to a romantic style of thought, one can observe that experience can be represented and organised in a complete different way.

Social workers in this group perceive understanding as an integral part of the intervention. The latter actually begins with the very first contacts with clients. Accounts of the cases do not single out any specific phase devoted to evaluation, nor do they identify 'a clear picture of the situation' as a preliminary requirement for substantive action. See, for instance, how this interviewee describes the start of the work process:

Clients present their request and their circumstances, then I say what the social service can offer. This is how we start discussing what we can do and where we want to go. (Irene)

Moreover, in several cases, interviewees explicitly describe the first encounter as an essential part of the intervention:

Even in the inquiries for the Tribunal, where apparently all we have to do is to make an inquiry in order to understand the situation, and then report to the judge, even then my approach is to try and explain to clients why their situation has reached this point (the referral), to share with them the ideas that come up in my mind, or to consider with them different perspectives from which they can look at things. It is to start a discussion that opens up space for reflection, where users can start thinking of elaborating their own projects. Then, a lot depends on clients' attitudes, and on their choices

among possible options. But it is like starting a mental process, that can open the way to the actions which will follow. (Sofia)

Very often, understanding is presented as developing all along the intervention. For example, in presenting one of her cases (chapter 8.1), Maria explicitly states that she starts working without a clear picture of the situation, and that she develops her understanding while acting and considering the client's feedbacks to her proposals and actions. Acknowledging that one cannot have a complete picture of a case, the only requirement for practitioners is not to be driven by impulse: 'This case was successful because I managed to count up to ten before embarking in the intervention....'.

Consistently with a romantic style, a neat distinction between understanding and acting seems to be lost: understanding itself is perceived as an action and understanding and intervention are presented as strictly intertwined. As the examples presented in chapter 8 show, hypotheses generation and testing is considered as having a performative impact on the case. In different ways, all these examples show how social workers of this group see actions (the contract) as originating from, or generated by, other kinds of actions and not determined by a super-ordinate understanding.

9.3.3 Different conceptions of 'understanding'

It is worth dwelling more on the fact that the two broad styles of thought attach quite different meanings to the idea of 'understanding'. Chapter 7 showed that practitioners who view contract mainly as a work plan tend to portray their understanding as mainly consisting of a process of associating the situation and problems to given categories and/or to comparison to standards. Comparing reality with standards also appears as one typical trait of the Natural law style identified in section 9.2. Understanding is here equated to evaluation.

In a sense, the view of problems and difficulties as objective entities can be

connected with the use of categories and taken for granted standards. In other words, it is when contrasting actual family lives with standards of acceptable family life, that discrepancies appear as objective anomalies. Problems exist irrespective of clients' subjective experiences. This also suggests a preference for a deductive style of knowledge.

Moreover, again coherently with a Natural law style of thought, the same group of practitioners present understanding mainly as 'going beyond appearances'. In one interviewee's terms, understanding is 'like taking off the cover'. The position of clients, what clients spontaneously say, are often considered irrelevant or just as signals of underlying problems which require interpretation:

People do not arrive here saying something like 'I have difficulties dealing with my children' ...They arrive asking whatever, maybe they have been sent by some one in a confused way.... then it's up to you to try and understand... what is the main difficulty this family has. (Ester)

Many interviewees in this group express this position: to understand one has to go beyond appearances, to look behind clients' specific requests. The quotation from Ester suggests that what is immediately visible is sometimes treated as covering or concealing 'reality', rather than illustrating it ('people arrive asking whatever').

On the contrary, in the second type of representation ('contract as an agreement'), understanding is presented as a concrete, relational process. It takes place within an interaction between social worker and client and is perceived as having a concrete impact on the situation. What appears, in concrete terms, becomes the focus of the work:

The problem at times has to be re-defined, but there is a request, which is fundamental, that is the base on which it is possible to start working..... maybe the request needs to be readjusted in relation to clients' expectations or in relation to the service, or maybe we try looking at the problem in different ways...(Sofia)

The crucial role of clients' requests in this perspective is well illustrated by the cases in chapter 8. There, the (concrete) requests from clients play the part that in the

previous group was played by an (abstract) evaluation. Likewise, it emerges from examples that practitioners in that group tend to work with the information which emerges during the work process, rather than attempting to acquire 'in-depth', objective elements beforehand. Elements that emerge during the work process are regularly elaborated, and strongly affect practitioners' views and their managing of the case. In this sense, understanding is not confined to a particular phase but is presented in dynamic terms as evolving along the process. In the previous chapter, we noticed practitioners' inclination to take their clients' views into account and to adapt to their evolving demands, rather than attempting to steer the case on the basis of a stable evaluation of the situation. On this ground, the difference between Sofia's case (chapter 8.2) and Ester's (chapter 7.1) is striking. The latter remarks: 'I have to steer the process... Otherwise I would change direction every day.....'. In this representation of 'understanding', the cognitive restructuring of the situation is the result of the interaction between practitioners and clients, rather than a practitioners' task. It entails looking at the problem from different perspectives instead of going beyond appearances.

Here, one cannot help noticing that Mannheim's example of the different ways of looking at a house, by romantic and natural law thinkers (section 9.1), would very well apply to social workers' presentation of their approach to understanding. The latter goes directly to a schematic picture of the main problems, difficulties and resources, an objective picture which does not leave room for the contribution of different perspectives. The other looks at problems as they appear, considers them from different perspectives, and generates a dynamic, holistic picture in which subjective views of problems appear valuable, if not essential.

9.3.4 The place of specialist knowledge

However, the analysis of differences in the two approaches can be carried further. A view of 'understanding' as grasping what lies underneath the surface also entails the centrality of specialist knowledge and professional roles, regarded as important if not

essential:

We have a strong cooperation with specialist services, especially with the psychiatric unit in the local area, so most of our cases are also looked at by other professionals. This substantively improves on your ability to diagnose situations. Maybe you would reach the same conclusions anyway, but it would take longer... a diagnosis from the specialists allows you to better grasp problems from the start... Otherwise (without specialists) maybe you would have to understand through experimentation, specialists have a different approach they use tests and sophisticated instruments.... (Sonia)

The involvement of specialists here is regarded as an asset because it minimizes the need to proceed by trial and error, a procedure explicitly perceived as negative and involving a waste of time (one will notice that adopters of the other main frame hold the opposite view of the trial and error approach: see section 8.3.1).

The reference to specialists is typical of many interviews that could be classified in this group. Ester's cases (sections 7.1.1, 7.1.2) show how frequently she refers to specialists both for the evaluations and for interventions. Another interviewee in this group declares:

In our situation, the possibility to draw upon other resources is essential also to understand in depth all the different aspects of a case. In order to identify realistic goals it is important to be able to make a social diagnosis, but also to take into account many other aspects.... the social worker can do just a part. (Grazia)

This quotation also illustrates another quite common feature of a natural law style, namely, a view of understanding as the splitting of the whole into its parts. In this, integration comes later, when the different bits of the puzzle are brought together again. Pushing this interpretation further, let us consider here the difference between separating the different sides of the situation from one another, as recourse to different expertise implies, and looking at the situation from different sides, as inscribed in the romantic style.

When understanding is presented as an unfolding relational process, specialists are

never mentioned in relation to evaluation.³¹ Doubts and unclear issues are often directly discussed with clients (section 8.3.3). Social workers close to this model more frequently refer to their reliance on managers and colleagues for advice and support, rather than on specialists:

I think that (my practice) is strongly influenced by my colleagues and by the manager. For we have the team meeting, and we mainly discuss the difficult cases there. It is very useful to have their point of view and opinions. They give advice, but then we have autonomy, one can always decide to go the way she thinks more appropriate. (Maria)

Another interviewee explicitly declares:

When there are children involved, we always work with a colleague. I think that to reflect over situation with colleagues or at the team meeting is very important to me. (Cinzia)

Experience developed in the field appears here much more valued than specialised knowledge.

9.3.5 Views on change

A reflection over the two styles of thought described by Mannheim has drawn attention to aspects not yet considered. One of them has to do with the role of change in social work intervention, and its different representations.

Proponents of a view of contract as work plan mainly represent change as the recourse by practitioners to techniques or resources (e.g., domiciliary support, community residential care for the children, psychotherapy, etc.) which were absent

³¹ The use of NUD*IST allowed me to search my transcripts for references to specialists (in particular I used the words '*specialista, specializzazione, neuropsichiatria, psicologi, test*'). It emerged that people closer to a romantic style of thought in this group never referred to specialists as a resource for social work practice. Specialists only appeared in accounts of cases when they had already been brought in by the tribunal or by clients themselves.

or lacking from a case. The introduction of such techniques is meant to compensate for the deficiencies in a situation or to fix elements of the case that are not working. As Mannheim would put it, here intervention means, first of all, 'replacing' what is not working. Change is portrayed as voluntarily produced by practitioner's intervention. For instance, in Sonia's example (section 7.2.1), the mother is presented as unable to fulfil certain needs of her child and the intervention goes in the direction of substituting her in this function (introducing new subjects who can fulfil these needs). Ester (section 7.1.2) identifies the nightmares of a child as symptoms of something that is not working and has to be 'fixed' through psychotherapy.

On the other hand, interviewees who conceive of contract as an agreement tend to regard change primarily as what naturally takes place in a process. The case presented by Sofia (section 8.2.2) well illustrates this line. She describes her work as following the request of dependency of her client in the first place, and then the desires of more autonomy when they emerge. Tellingly, she reflects on an episode in which another practitioner and herself wanted to introduce new elements – or, to use her words, to go 'some further steps' - with a client, but the client refused:

We hoped to go further, but we had to lower our expectations. Maybe she was right..... our project was not realistic after all: it would have put the woman in a conflicting situation. She has to live in a certain context and she has a certain kind of friends. This is her network. Had she accepted the project she would have been neither here nor there.

Another example reported by Maria (section 8.1.1) shows her as supporting a spontaneous development of the client, rather than introducing new approaches or fixing what does not work. For instance, she does not treat her client's 'depression' as a dysfunction, which has to be corrected. On the contrary, she presents it as a quite understandable state given the context. She does not set herself the goal to treat it, rather, she addresses the issues as they are raised by her client. She presents herself as someone prepared to give advice when asked, rather than acting on the basis of her own evaluations.

It is worth noticing that the repertoire of interventions and actions is rather similar in all the examples reported. The difference lies in the way the same resources are offered by different practitioners. Those who view contract as a work plan will first conclude from their own evaluation of the situation that a certain type of intervention or therapy is needed, and then attempt to convince clients to accept their diagnosis and suggested measures. In contrast, practitioners who regard contract as an agreement will tend to negotiate with their clients the best responses to the latter's problems. Accordingly, several possible options will be considered at the same time and no specific intervention will be presented to clients as the obvious choice.

9.3.6 Conceptions of time

Last, I want to consider different attitudes toward time in the two groups. There are already many indications that those who see contract as a work plan tend to treat time as a discrete dimension, while those who emphasize agreement within contract work are inclined to represent it as a continuous line. Different ways of representing sequences and of connecting understanding and intervention suggest a tendency to split up the process among the former, to underline continuity among the latter (sections 7.4.1, 8.3.1).

We can enrich this picture, though. When conceived of as a work plan, contract is a tool used to keep future interactions under control; it is, i.e., the first step of a forthcoming intervention. Practitioners look ahead at what will result from the contract, and the main issue is whether the contract will be honoured. A strong contract is one in which the practitioner can identify effective sanctions (e.g., the withdrawal of material support) for clients who fail to oblige.

'Time' takes a different meaning when contract is mainly thought of as an agreement, i.e., as the last step of an interactive process. In section 6.3.1, we have underlined how contract is explicitly described as the outcome of a qualitative good relation between practitioner and client. The process that led to the contract is often

the focus of attention whether practitioners are trying to make sense of success or failure. Their sight seems set on the past rather than the future, in their appreciation of what went right and what did not.

9.4 Opinions on Theory and Practice

My investigation of the relationship between theory and practice in social work has been guided by the assumption that practitioners' accounts of their concrete procedures be the best way to understanding it (section 3.2.2), and that this present substantive advantages over an analysis of explicit, abstract discussions of the issue.

Accordingly, the issue of theory and practice was not directly introduced as a theme in the interviews. Nonetheless, all informants made some references to it. In a sense, the issue emerged naturally as practitioners described their use of contract and reflected on how they had come to learn about it. Therefore, it may be interesting to contrast these explicit discourses on the theory-practice link, to the characterisations of the same relationship, generated by the broader accounts of social work practices that I have focused on so far.

The question is, in other words, how do the explicit – if sparse - references to the theory-practice link fit the broader model of the two styles of thought, which has emerged from the integration of practitioners' accounts and Mannheim's thinking? One would expect to find a positive attitude toward theory among those whose representations are closest to a natural law style of thought, and much more diffidence and criticism among those who implicitly seem to adopt a romantic style of thought.

This expectation is reinforced by another consideration. The two world-views identified among practitioners present some relevant analogy with the two tendencies in the literature identified in chapter 2. For instance, practitioners in the first (Enlightenment) type place thinking and doing in a hierarchical order (see the view of

the understanding and acting, section 9.3.2). They portray their practice as the implementation of abstract logical rules. These traits were identified in a group of positions, that also shared a belief in the superiority of scientific academic theories over commonsense, 'home made' theories, and looked at the former as guides for good practice (Howe, 1986; Milana, 1992).

On the other hand, the second (romantic) type of representation treats understanding as a much more concrete, constructive and performative operation (see England, 1986; White, 1997). Thinking is more frequently associated with reflection on previous experiences than with the planning of future action. Rules are treated as regularity in practices, not as the implementation of abstract guidelines. These elements resonate with criticisms of uses of 'ready made' scientific theories in social work literature (Sheppard, 1995).

These expectations are not supported by empirical evidence. Not only that: explicit discussions of theory and practice actually suggest a scenario that is exactly the opposite of what one would have expected. On the one hand, when addressing the issue explicitly, practitioners that we found to be closer to a natural law, illuministic style of thought turn out to be the most critical of the role of theory in social work:

I am not familiar with social work theoretical models... I have done a lot of work, a lot of training, but... something connected to fieldwork, supervisions connected to the work, then.... As far as social work theory is concerned, I feel I am very deficient... it is far away from me.... and I am not much interested in it. (Ester)

This quotation exemplifies some recurrent themes among interviewees in this line of thinking. Theory and theoretical models are described as detached from real practice, and deprived of any practical use:

I have for a long time looked at theory books in search of guidelines, but books portray things in an unrealistic way, our clients are quite different from the clients described in books.... (Italo)

Other interviewees underline how theoretical models portray an ideal context of work, which is very distant from the actual situation in which practitioners operate. On the other hand, practitioners closer to a romantic style of thought reveal far more positive attitudes toward theory. Contact with theory stimulates reflection, helps one to think of one's work in a different way, indicates new ways to interpret reality:

This year we have supervised a student for the practice training. And then I have realised how far my school years were. I have certainly acquired competence, but may have lost a bit of touch with the theoretical level. This student was attending the third year, and she was certainly fresher than us, so she has given us several stimuli, things that have had us reflect over what we are doing. (Maria)

References to the new suggestions, which emerge from participation in courses, are actually quite frequent. For example, the same interviewee adds:

[Courses] are very useful especially as incentives to reflection. It is a situation where somebody says to you 'Look, things could be like that', then it is not a 'must', a diktat, I see them in a positive way. Especially if they are conducted by colleagues... courses are one of the few chances you have to know how your neighbour works, to discuss different ways of working.

We are therefore faced with counterintuitive findings: practitioners who, judging by their accounts of their own practice, seem to be prepared to acknowledge the priority of theory over action, actually express explicit scepticism about it; by contrast, those that by the same token should be hostile to theory, emerge instead as the most willing to engage with it explicitly. This might be a serious challenge to a model that so far had proved capable of combining theoretical explorations and concrete accounts of practice in quite a satisfactory way. How can we make sense of what appears as a striking contradiction?

The contradiction is actually more apparent than real. It can be resolved if we focus on the different roles assigned to theory by the holders of the two views. Let us pay a closer look at the quotation above, from a respondent holding an illuministic style of

thought (Italo). The quotation shows quite clearly that what is asked of theory are guidelines for practice ('I have searched books looking for guidelines, but.....'; 'When I started working I tried to apply abstract theories learnt at school, but it really does not work'; 'to apply social work models, one should restructure social services'; 'if I think of theory about adolescence and I see an adolescent in front of me...well I do not know what to do with the theory.')

In this case, the critical attitude toward theory is due to its perceived failure to provide coherent and easy to implement guidelines for practice. Practice is seen as organised by abstract constructs, and what is discussed here is the capacity of academic or scientific theories to provide such constructs. In other words, while practice is guided by abstract logic and rules, such rules are not identified by recourse to formal theory. Rather, they originate from generalisations of one's experience, from the guidance offered by one's supervisors, and from the very selective use of only those 'bits' of theory, e.g., the idea of contract, which are perceived as of practical use:

Then I have learnt from everybody, for instance, from the systemic approach I have learnt to always give a feed back of what I think, this is a winning strategy, so I use it. Then I have learnt something from every thing. I put together systemic theories with others. Because we work with everybody, and not with everybody can you use the same things, such as introspection... (Ester)

Well, I sometimes use (theory), for instance when dealing with family crises, the systemic model is very useful to gather information and to have a picture of family dynamics. There are cases in which they (the dynamics) are very clear. But you cannot use the same tools with everybody. (Sonia)

In sum, a representation of one's work as a logical, rational, and scientific process is not necessarily coupled with a positive attitude toward available, 'ready made' theories.

Likewise, the positive attitude towards theory, that we found among interviewees closer to a romantic style of thought, also appears consistent with a different view of theory, with different demands and different expectations placed on it. Here, theory

is not perceived as a super-ordinate construct. Practitioners in this group often associate, and put side by side, theoretical inputs and more concrete discussions of practical matters with colleagues. Theory here is just one point of view aside others. The demands posed to it actually seem quite different. For instance, some social workers observe that their dialogue with theory allows them to identify the proper 'words' to characterise what they do:

Well, I came across the concept of contract quite late in my career, through a course. And it has been quite important because I have realised that in practice I have always worked this way, I just lacked the 'right word', the name, and a proper reflection on the agreements I stipulated with my clients.... (Tiziana)

Later, the same interviewee will stress the importance of having names for what one does, in order to communicate with colleagues and to reflect over the work process. More in general, contact with theory, or theories, is important as it stimulates reflection, and enables people to recognise that there are different ways of seeing things. Some practitioners in this group for instance declare that after a course they would notice things that would have passed unnoticed before (Irene, Sofia, Tiziana).

In sum, this discussion should read as a warning against taking practitioners' discussions of theory-practice at face value if we are to understand how they concretely operate. These discussions actually tell us more about their expectations regarding what theory should do – and at times about their resulting frustrations – than they tell us about their concrete style of action. In particular, the priority concretely assigned to general principles vs. the specific process is not coherent with acknowledgements of the role of theory in the abstract. If anything, in my case the relation is reversed: theory explicitly inspires the conduct of those who do not regard action as a deduction from logical principles; by contrast, this very image of practice drives those who deny the explicit relevance of social work theories.

9.5 Summary

Table 9.1 below summarises the overall profile of the two styles of thought discussed in this chapter. More specifically, in the previous pages I have shown how practitioners' accounts of practice may be related to two broader styles of thought; how these styles are best represented by a reference to Mannheim's thinking; and how focusing on actual accounts of practice identifies views of theory-practice which are actually very different, if compatible, with explicit discussions of the issue by the same practitioners. It follows that one should not tune expectations of actual behaviour from practitioners to their explicit statements about theory. In the next, concluding chapter I will assess the relevance of these findings for the current literature in social work, and present some new avenues of investigation that this perspective opens up.

Table 9.1 Two Styles of Thinking Social Work

'Natural Law' Style	'Romantic' Style
Contract as a structuring factor; agreement in the background	Contract as an agreement; work plan in the background
Contract as a tool used at a specific stage	Contract as an ongoing process of negotiation
Practice organised by abstract rules	Rules derived from actual practice
Understanding clearly distinct from action	Understanding as a kind of action
Frequent reference to specialists outside social work	Frequent reference to expert social workers
Understanding as going beyond what emerges in the interaction	Understanding based on what emerges in the interaction
Evaluation distinguished from intervention	Whole work perceived as an intervention
Evaluation determines the intervention	Concrete request, and on going negotiation generate operative contract
Radical changes; substituting interventions	Safeguard of the present situation, supportive interventions
Theories as sources of guideline; critical attitude toward social work theoretical models.	Theories as stimuli to reflection; positive attitudes towards social work models.

10 Conclusions

Having paid so much attention to the problematic position of theory in social work practice, it may be appropriate to start these concluding remarks by stressing the role of theoretical inputs for practitioners trying to make sense of their own work. The role is explicitly acknowledged by practitioners: despite considering contract work as a sort of natural practice in social work, practitioners always mention the influence and importance of the courses they took during their formal training. These courses provided them with the words to define a specific practice, and encouraged reflection about it.

However, there are other, more direct observations that emphasise the role of theoretical inputs. The last chapters have been devoted to an exploration of the different uses of the term 'contract' and to the importance of investigating the practitioners' frames connected to these different uses. What has probably been lost at this point is the observation from which the analysis originally took off, namely, that in the last analysis different ways of describing contract correspond to different ways of organising the same picture. Remarkably, one can identify several similarities between practitioners' accounts of contract and definitions of the concept in the literature (see chapter 4, and particularly section 4.2). Themes that recurrently appear in practitioners' representations (such as the agreement between clients and practitioners, or the importance of the work structure) are also central in the literature (Seabury, 1976; Davies, 1995; Lishman, 1994; Sills, 1997). Even looking at different versions of contract one can notice that, whether the agreement or the structuring features are perceived as the figure or the background, they are all connected to theoretical reflection, albeit in different ways. Let us think, for example, of the importance given to the reduction of the asymmetry between practitioners and clients, which is strongly associated with representations of contract focused on agreement (section 6.2). It resonates with the theoretical reflection on the impact of contract work on the democratisation of the relation between practitioners and clients (Corden and Preston-Shoot, 1987b; Sills, 1997; Ferrario, 1996b; Neve, 2000).

What can this broad similarity between the use of the concept in the literature and in practitioners' language say about the issue of theory and practice? One of the major outcomes of this research is indeed to illustrate the substantial extent to which the two languages relate to each other. The intuitive hypothesis, that theoretical work influence practices more than a superficial analysis would suggest, finds here empirical support. On the other side, the project also tells us about the two-way connection between theory and practice: the concept of contract is relevant as long as it identifies aspects that seem to be naturally present in practices (Parton, 2000).

More specifically, a dialogue – no matter how implicit - with theoretical reflection appears here to provide practitioners with a resource, in this case a concept, which enriches their own professional language. Abstract categories provide practitioners with tools to discriminate between different aspects of a professional practice that otherwise would appear as an amorphous, unspecified, and indescribable flow of events. Accordingly, the term 'contract' becomes a resource in that it enables practitioners to single out relevant aspects of the work process, and turn them into objects of shared reflection. Attention to the theoretical element indeed emerges as a crucial component of the training process, as theoretical training plays an important role in laying the foundations for the development of a professional language.

A 'professional language' is not conceived here as a jargon, peculiar to the practitioners' community, and functional to strengthen its boundaries as well as its role asymmetries. Practitioners actually seem reluctant to use the term contract to characterise their dealings with their clients, precisely because of the misunderstandings that such a term may generate. Nor should professional language be equated to a source of professional status, but rather to a tool that facilitates collective reflection on, and further development of, work practices. The case of the contract also shows how theory may actually present practitioners with new opportunities, in as much as it generates systems of categories that are perceived as meaningful to the understanding of specific practices. From this perspective, recourse to theory is not only compatible with, but indeed reinforces, statements about the importance of two-ways forms of communication between those who are

mostly engaged with theoretical reflection, and those who are instead operating 'on the fire line' (Dal Pra Ponticelli, 1987; Parton, 2000).

Having clarified this point, we can now shift our attention towards the main thrust of the empirical analysis: namely, the identification of substantive differences in the use of the word contract. These differences have been shown to be related to different combinations of the very same traits usually associated with the concept of contract (chapter 6). More specifically, I referred to the well-known metaphor of the perceptual organisation of visual inputs and to the different descriptions the same picture may elicit, depending on which prevails between two different, yet similarly adequate, perceptions of what the image and what the background is. This idea allowed me to illustrate the diversity in practitioners' definitions of contract. Recognition of two different versions of the concept has been the starting point for the exploration of two different systems of categories in which the concept has been found to be embedded, and for the identification of two different uses of the term contract to designate crucial aspects of the work process (chapters 7-8).

Closer inspection of different uses of the same concept has revealed how different practitioners, when referring to contract in their work, actually select and emphasise different elements of the model. Sometimes, they see contract mainly as a set of practical rules and guidelines for action, a tool to draw upon in order to have successful interventions. From this angle, a comparison between the notions of contract outlined in chapter 7 and the positions by Davies and the scholars interested in the task centred model as well as those researching the efficacy of contract work could be enlightening (Davies, 1995; Ferrario, 1996b; see also chapter 4). Other social workers, however, show a radically different approach. They stress the paradigmatic, value-laden dimension of contract work (section 4.5), and use the concept of contract to characterise the whole work process in terms of continuous negotiation (chapter 8). The connection to well established debates in the literature is similarly obvious, in particular to Corden and Preston-Shoot's thinking (Corden and Preston-Shoot, 1987b; Neve, 2000).

This exploration once again prompts the classic question, What is the general lesson we may draw from this specific case? What have we learnt - if anything - which may improve our broader understanding of the theory-practice issue? Let us momentarily ignore the pessimistic remark that the very same term which contributes to the development of some common ground and a common language between practitioners is at the same time a potential source of misunderstanding. It is more fruitful to recognise that theoretical training does not automatically lead to a straightforward and unambiguous relationship between practice and theory. Although the latter introduces tools which are usually recognisable by any practitioner, those tools are then adapted to specific problems and work situations in quite - sometimes, very - different ways. When in the field, practitioners tend to reshape the general principles they acquired during their formal training, and this leads to highly differentiated outcomes.

The importance of reshaping and creatively adapting general principles to specific conditions may at least partially account for the difficulty to grasp the links between theory and practice, that many studies have illustrated (see section 2.3). It is appropriate to refer here again to the famous statement by a practitioner, from which I already quoted in chapter 2:

If you asked me to state a theory here and now, I wouldn't have a clue but my thinking and approach have been formed by them..... I often think that I am acting far more from instinct than from knowledge or skills... (Stevenson *et al.*, 1978, p.134)

This sentence has attracted considerable attention from social work scholars, perhaps because of its sounding as a 'typical' representation of practitioners' point of view. Howe (1987) saw in it an illustration of practitioners' resistance to theory, Paley (1986) one expression of a recurrent theme, the tension between practitioners' distance from theoretical language, and their deep feelings of inadequacy for their failure to engage with it, Clark (1991) as a demonstration of the complexity of the use of theory in practice. My research findings provide the ground for a 'face value' reading of this statement. On the one hand, the anonymous social worker acknowledges the role of theory in generating tools to make sense of concrete

professional reality ('my thinking and approach have been formed by [theory]'). On the other hand, the statement also points at the difficulty to establish an explicit direct link to theory, a difficulty which my research shows to be related to variations in the concrete use of theory ('If you asked me to state a theory here and now, I wouldn't have a clue'). The statement also reminds us that the impact of theory on practitioners' thinking need not entail a practice informed by 'rational', linear styles of thinking. On the contrary, 'theory-shaped' thinking is set aside an instinctive and intuitive action.

In other words, while theory provides the resources for the development of professional language, it neither steers its evolution nor controls its application. Therefore, the limitations inherent to theoretical training have to be acknowledged. Theoretical training hardly does more than providing a flexible tool, a 'currency' that may be spent in several different contexts. Pushing this reflection further, we might suggest the very flexibility of the concepts like 'contract' to lie behind their successful applications in contexts other than those identified by textbooks (where practice is illustrated through appropriately selected and finely tuned, stylised examples) and by the theoretical debate (where emphasis is squarely in connecting abstract categories to other abstract categories).

Although the perspective adopted in this research has made the limitations in practitioners' use of theory more explicit, by doing so it has at the same time highlighted the role of theoretical training in shaping concrete practice. While practitioners comprehensively reject the idea of theory 'guiding' practice, their representations also demonstrate a clear role of theoretical thinking, which provides resources for reflection, practical suggestions (if no 'guiding models'), and food for thought. In this particular sense, this research acknowledges the importance of theoretical training, against interpretations that at least partially devalued it (Paley, 1986). Accordingly, it provides suggestions for both theoretical reflection and training, which may be generalised to professionals using methods other than contract work. Although they are not treated as guidelines, models of practice that are inherently prescriptive may at the same time provide some practitioners with

concrete, specific suggestions, and offer others inputs for self-reflection and a broader re-thinking of their work.

The results summarised so far are consistent with the original hypothesis that professional language incorporate terms and words, treat them as resources, and in doing so shape their practical use. However, the research also identifies issues and themes beyond the original expectations. In particular, it suggests professional cultures substantially account for the deep differences in practitioners' treatment of the same concept. Their impact goes beyond the understanding of technical details of the specific methodological tool but seems to illuminate practitioner's broader interpretations of their work. In this sense, focusing on language games enables us to reassess key questions and crucial elements of the work process, which social work literature has often treated superficially.

From this perspective, identifying different uses of the word contract has provided access to two different professional worlds, two distinct and relatively coherent ways of conceiving work experience, practitioners' and clients' role in it, the features of the work process, and the part played by theory in shaping concrete practice. This has been particularly evident in chapter 9. The analysis presented there identifies as intrinsically worthy two ways of thinking which have grown out of professional practice as a collective experience: these are the very same styles of thinking that academics have sometimes dismissed as banal common sense, other times – more respectfully – regarded as forms of practical wisdom, yet always limiting their assessment to the most superficial aspects.

Looking at ways of organising representations of work practice from a relativistic perspective has facilitated a multidimensional comprehension of those models. It has also increased opportunities to draw general lessons from experience developed in specific practical contexts. This applies both to the style of thought that has been found to share several traits with Mannheim's characterisation of 'enlightenment thinking', and to the style associated with 'romantic thinking'.

The former probably represents the most legitimate and accepted model of professional practice. My findings illustrate its basic traits, in particular its representation of the work process as rational and systematic, but also as flexible to the particular aspects of the specific case. They prompt a better consideration and understanding of the generalisations and rules derived from experience.

At the same time, findings also expose some oversimplifying assumptions, which are less evident in abstract representations of the model. Let us think for example of representations of the role of the preliminary inquiry conducted by social workers when taking up a new case. Representing it, as some do, as preliminary to 'real' action, as if acting was suspended during the inquiry, heavily simplifies the process. Contacts with the school teachers (Ester, section 7.1) or the use of psychological tests (Sonia, section 7.2), as preliminary to action, are presented as not being interventions themselves and not having any potential impact on clients.

Paradoxically, one could even argue that this representation assigns theory a marginal role indeed. Some of practitioners' accounts seem in other words to challenge the strong hypothesis, put forward by many leading scholars (from Siporin, 1975 to Howe, 1986 and 1994; see section 2.3), that the steering of a strong theoretical model be the essential precondition for systematic action. In contrast, practitioners close to an 'enlightenment' style of thought better fit arguments like Sheppard's (1995; 1998), for whom practices are informed by a sort of 'natural rationality'. The forms of such rationality are still largely unexplored, and this research has highlighted some of their fundamental traits. If a practice is presented as guided by abstract constructs, these are never identified with models learnt from books. The general rules followed are presented as the product of a generalisation derived from direct experience. Formal theory is never presented as a framework, but as a source of insights and tools, like the contract, which can be tried and adapted to specific situations and problems.

The other style of thought I have identified among practitioners, the 'romantic' one, resonates even more easily with some stereotypical representations of practitioners

within the academic community. It evokes the image of the anti-intellectual social worker, who operates on the basis of incoherent, commonsensical assumptions (Howe, 1986; Milana, 1992; etc.), in a basically anarchistic and individualistic way (Ferrario, 1996b); an advocate of 'heart' [rather than 'head'] work (Smith, 1971), whose practice is a-scientific and a-systematic (Sheldon 1978). However, deeper exploration of this style of thought reveals the strength of representations of practice that make the most out of the often contradictory information available to practitioners; that accept the unpredictable elements in the evolution of a case and the resulting uncertainty, while still acknowledging practitioners' influence over the process from the start, also when engaged in the identification of the feasible options.

While this representation of acting is sometimes presented as drawing on stereotypes (as reflected, e.g., in Maria's habit of 'counting up to ten' before taking any decision), it is far from being driven by them. To the contrary, it acknowledges the complexity of accommodating both the specific views and subjective orientations of people involved in the processes, and the theoretical perspectives it engages with. In this context, theoretical models are taken as different ways of seeing and doing 'things', which stimulate critical reflection on one's own work. Theories here are not seen as potential sources of practical suggestions or work tools, but as whole perspective to engage and negotiate with.

The exploration of different styles of thought allows us to go beyond the positions that have undervalued practitioners' capacity to reflect on their own work, and have dismissed it as little more than a set of badly connected stereotypes. By recognising the peculiarity of practitioners' representations, it also goes beyond those attempts to re-evaluate practitioners' experience by translating their accounts into academic language without any mediation (Hardiker and Barker, 1981a).

However, the plurality of practitioners' languages and representations of their own practice may also prompt additional reflections. As chapter 8 should have clarified, this project has not identified two different types of practitioners, rather, two independent and largely incompatible styles of thought. This largely explains why,

while we can find elements borrowed from both systems of representation in any practitioner's account, we hardly come across any mediation between the two. We can find here a correspondence between the two styles of thought we have identified, and the main lines of debate on the theory-practice issue, in turn related to dominant paradigms in social work (in particular, the distinction between social work as art or science) (England, 1986; Martinez-Brawley and Mendez-Bonito, 1998; Ferrario, 1996b).

Interestingly, the identification of those fundamental tensions in the profession has been facilitated precisely by the reflection on the concept of contract work. This may be seen as an attempt to integrate the main approaches, combining needs for rationalisation and structuration of the work process, typical of technical work, with creative ways to manage the relationship with clients, driven by the democratic ethos traditionally behind social work (Ferrario, 1996b; Neve, 2000). However, careful investigation of representations of practices suggests that attempts to mediate between, and ultimately integrate, different perspectives have worked much more on paper than in concrete professional practice.

My reconstruction of professional languages raises issues which cannot be related to the search for new mediations between conflicting paradigms. Instead, it identifies the key problems in how the different languages spoken within the social work profession may have affected each other, and changed in the process; or in how we can explain the adoption of one or the other cognitive order by specific (groups of) practitioners, and the shifts in the use of the two by the same practitioners.

Some readers might perhaps expect from the analysis of professional languages indications about good practice, e.g., a discussion of whether a specific way of representing one's practice is preferable to the other, or an attempt to identify the conditions under which one or the other is most effective. I'm afraid I will have to frustrate these expectations. If my research prompts any conclusion in this regard, it is that notions such as 'good practice' or 'effectiveness' are likely to be used in very different ways, and to fit very different criteria, in the two styles of thought. It is

revealing here that the outcomes of client studies have been presented by advocates of both dominant, and conflicting, approaches to contract work in the literature as a confirmation of their own perspective (section 2.3).

To conclude, my investigation of professional languages does not illuminate our search for the most effective professional practice, or for those interventions which best meet clients' needs. Nor does it posit any correlation between indicators of real or presumed efficacy, and the relative status of either style of thought in the professional and/or academic community. This is much more likely to depend on the social dynamics at play within the professional community. What this project ultimately calls for is a study of how cultural models, which are both present in the literature and in the practitioners' community, relate to the different social groups involved with the development of the social work profession, and from which social work practitioners are recruited. Having identified patterns in the variation of professional cultures and languages, we are now in the position of conceiving a detailed investigation of what interests, both within and outside the profession, lay behind their emergence and diffusion.

Appendix 1 - Contacts During the Preliminary Study

Informal Contacts

Piera Toletti - Direzione Servizi Sociali - Milano

M.Grazia Guida - Coordinatore Servizi Anziani - Milano

Michel Preston-Shoot – Professor of Social Work, John Moores University, Liverpool

Joyce Wood – Social Service Unit – Leith, Edinburgh

Bobby Smith - Family Service Unit - Edinburgh

Preliminary Interviews

Amelia Caneva - Coordinatore Servizi Sociali, Milano - 14.01.1998; 14.00

Maria Carbone - Coordinatore Servizio Sociale, Milano - 09.01.1998; 09.00

Franca Ferrario - Docente di Servizio Sociale, Università di Torino- 20.01.1998; 09.00

Millina Secchi - Docente di Servizio Sociale, Università di Milano – 24.01.1998; 14.00

Appendix 2 - List of Interviewees

Milano

A.M.F. - Servizio Sociale zona 7	13.01.1998; 16.00 24.1.1998; 16.00
L.C. - Servizio Sociale zona 3	20.01.1998; 15.30 20.01.1998; 16.30
L.T. - Servizio Sociale zona 16	23.01.1998; 11.00 23.01.1998; 12.00
M.D. - Servizio Sociale zona 7	15.04.1998 ; 09.15 21.04.1998 11.00
S.P. - Servizio Sociale zona 7	10.04.1998; 10.00 10.04.1998; 14.30
C.T. - Servizio Sociale zona 6	21.04.1998; 09.15 21.04.1998; 11.00
E.N. - Servizio Sociale zona 7	21.04.1998; 09.30 22.04.1998; 14.30
M.B. - Servizio Sociale zona 20	03.07.1998; 11.30 04.07.1998; 14.30
R.B. - Servizio Sociale zona 20	03.07.1998; 09.30 04.07.1998; 09.00
S.B. - Servizio Sociale zona 20	15.07.1998; 14.30 16.07.1998; 14.30
L.P. - Servizio Sociale zona 16	06.07.1998; 11.30 14.07.1998; 14.00
I.G. - Servizio Sociale zona 16	07.07.1998; 14.00 14.07.1999; 09.00
L.B. - Servizio Social zona 16	14.07.1998; 11.30 16.07.1998; 09.00
V.V. - Servizio Social zona 1	15.01.1999; 10.30 18.01.1999; 10.30

G.P.B. - Servizio Sociale zona 6	22.07.1998; 09.00 22.07.1998; 14.00
F.Z. - Servizio Sociale zona 5	18.01.1999; 09.00 19.01.1999; 09.00
C.F. - Servizio Sociale zona 1	15.01.1999; 09.00 20.01.1999; 09.00

Torino

C. P. - Servizio Sociale	17.04.1998; 17.30 23.04.1998; 18.30
C.A. - Servizio Sociale	05.07.1998; 10.00 21.07.1998; 14.00
E.L. - Servizio Sociale - Torino	27.07.1998; 10.00 27.07. 1998; 13.00
P.L. - Servizio Sociale - Torino	13.07.1998; 14.00 21.07.1998; 10.00
P.B. - Servizio Sociale - Torino	20.04.1998; 13.00 23.04.1998; 16.00

Appendix 3 – Key Topics Addressed in the Interviews

1. How did you come across the concept of contract?
2. What are in your view the fundamental elements of contract?
3. When and under what conditions do use contract work in your professional practice?
4. How do you manage to reach an agreement with clients about the terms of the contract?
5. What are in your view the advantages deriving from the use of contract?
6. What are the main problems you have faced when using contract?
7. How does the context in which you operate affect your particular use of contract?

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