Chapter 28
Sociological Methods and Construction of Local Welfare in Italy

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Abstract In applied sociology, concepts, theories, models and patterns of explanation are used for the study of social phenomena; they provide a starting point to plan social policies. The methods of social research are designed to identify, describe and explain the social needs of individuals, groups and communities. Giving an "objective" definition of the social needs of people is difficult but necessary. Frequently, the planning of welfare services is not orientated towards the actual needs expressed by the citizens but follows a different course. The role of pre-evaluation is strongly emphasised in the planning and construction of the welfare system. In this chapter are described the methods of analysis of social needs and the models of local welfare in Italy. In the first section I describe the importance of the study of the social care needs of the population for the construction of the local welfare system. In the second section I describe some aspects of local welfare system in Italy.

28.1 Applied Sociology and Social Planning

Applied sociology uses concepts, theories and models with the aim to overcome practical issues. It is involved in the study of social needs and in the planning of social services and interventions. Therefore, applied sociology is a necessary tool in the organisation of the welfare systems: through its social research methods it allows to identify people's needs and to recognise the primary targets for social policies. Sociological research describes and explains social phenomena, analyses needs of people, groups, and communities; identifies cause relations between variables; produces models useful for planning concrete interventions aimed to the

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social change. Applied sociology pursues social knowledge and allows to identify priorities in social intervention; through social research, it takes a leading role in the devising of the local welfare systems. In other words, sociology has an important role in planning and realising social interventions, aimed to improve the wellness of people and local communities.

Sociology is involved in two different areas of social intervention: (a) it describes and explains social phenomena in order to increase the knowledge of the society; (b) it makes this knowledge available to whoever is interested in realising models and practical interventions.

These different areas of social intervention don't always proceed simultaneously. Planning, management and evaluation of policies are aspects of a science applied to the solution of problems. Usually, sociology doesn't produce a knowledge directly involved in interventions; sociological knowledge aims to understand the society and to elaborate theories and models. Applied sociology translates the knowledge produced by the sociological research into actions in order to overcome social issues. What is normally identified as applied sociology is the scientific activity which brings together empirical research and intervention. Applied sociology is involved in all the situation where ideas, theories and models are employed in the solution of social issues.

In these situations, sociology is useful to analyse social problems, conflicts, economic or health disparities, in order to find solutions and create societies capable of responding to people's needs.

Sociological research produces a knowledge which is applied both in planning and social intervention; more generically, in the construction of the welfare systems. Sociology produces awareness of social phenomena, which is used with scientific implications in the planning and evaluation of social, sociocultural and socioeconomic policies, like social services or, for instance, public policies against unemployment and for socio-economic development.

The definition and the planning of social interventions, problem-solving, evaluation of policies and interventions, analysis of organisations, optimisation of the processes and management of changes, are all achieved through sociological knowledge.

Sociology is an empirical discipline that aims to collect data and to measure phenomena. Its goal is to describe and interpret the society in order to build theories capable of explaining social phenomena in their reality. The scientific dimension of the process is given by the ability to combine theory and empirical research.

Sociological knowledge is obtained through empirical research driven by quantitative and qualitative methods. Sociological theories are limits and opportunities that lead sociological research to find methods for the collection and the analysis of empirical data.

Sociological theories are sources useful to evaluate hypotheses and to interpret data collected concerning a defined social issue. Sociological knowledge is the product of a research aimed to describe and explain social phenomena. The study of social phenomena stays within a specific theoretical and methodological approach. The collection and the analysis of data require specific instruments in order to observe the social reality.

Sociology allows to analyse social needs and to identify the main problems which require an intervention, in order to foster the improvement of life conditions for the people, the general wellness and the social, health, economical equality.

Within this conception, in the context of the social policies, the study of the problems and the planning of interventions are important moments in the construction of the welfare. The attention for the society is focused on the welfare policies, when the intervention aims to change people's life conditions. In this cases, social policies are linked with the welfare system, with policies aimed to support the income of people and families, with policies directed to childhood, families, education, elderly, health, immigration, special needs, work, and housing. The concept of social welfare qualifies the systems that provide assistance to the community and is linked with the wider context of the strategies that the society uses in order to resolve people's problems.

Social policies are models and methods to identify and resolve the problems of the every-day life for people, groups and communities. The expression 'social planning' is referred to sectors of the society which are involved in the improvement of the life-conditions for the people in all their aspects: assistance, health, education, and housing. All these aspects of the social welfare are related to the public policies that constitute the welfare system, the intervention of which range from economic support to families in condition of need to the creation of social and health services.

As examples, we can point out either the initiatives aimed at preventing a situation of temporary and permanent inability to work, in cases such as illness or involuntary unemployment, or other forms of assistance for elderly and motherhood. Fields of intervention are many and range from social security to work policies, from health to social assistance, with different models of planning and intervention which can include a partial or total coverage of people's needs, balancing economic assistance and services on the territory (Ranci and Pavolini 2015).

28.2   Sociological Methods and Empirical Analysis

Sociology produces knowledge through the empirical analysis of facts and phenomena, through verified hypotheses and systematic observations of social behaviour. The aim of this discipline is to increase knowledge useful also for the intervention, like the planning, the implementation and the evaluation of social policies. The ambits where sociology is involved are different and diversified, they are in a functional relation with both specific sociologies and general sociological theories, concerning both micro and macro social. The sociological study of society is founded on sociological theories, conceptual categories, models of explanation, research methods for the collection and the analysis of data. The identification of the methods for the empirical sociological research and their correct use in each phase of the analysis produces scientific knowledge reliable and methodologically controlled (Bailey 1982; Corbetta 1999; Guala 2000; Ricolfi 1995). The theory

leads the researcher to choose the object of the study, to identify methodological principles which are at the foundation of the research plan, to interpret results.

In the planning of scientific research it is necessary to understand the hypothesis, the goals to reach, the characteristics of the studied object, the methods for the collection and the analysis of data. All these preliminary conditions allow other researchers to repeat the study entirely or partially, even for a critical revision. It is important to explain clearly the plan of the research, addressing the object of the study, the hypothesis, the aims, the theory or the theories of reference, the methods employed and whichever other aspect of the study able to give useful information in favour of the scientific reliability of the results.

The method has a very important role because implies a link between sociological theory and the empirical research. Sociological tradition allows to differentiate and classify the methods of research in formal and informal. Each group incorporate a different research plan and different techniques to collect an analyse data. Each method has its own value in order to study specific aspects of the realty in relation with the different scientific aims.

In sociological research we find qualitative methods, defined also as descriptive methods: the ethnographic method and the participative observation belongs to this category. The ethnographic method uses a limited number of informers within a specific community, whilst the participative observation requires that the social researcher becomes a member of the community or of a specific social group in order to obtain direct information. Quantitative methods, on the other hand, are founded on research techniques which require mainly the use of statistics. In some circumstances, the combination of these two approaches can be considered as a consequence of the necessity of an in-depth study that requires both methodologies.

The difference between informal and formal methods in social research is to be referred mainly to the different aspects of the qualitative and quantitative sociology (Guba and Lincoln 1994). Qualitative sociology usually uses informal methods of research, whilst quantitative sociology uses mainly formal methods (Schwartz and Jacobs 1979). Qualitative methods are more useful than quantitative methods to understand the reasons behind individual behaviours and people's social actions. These methods are mainly employed to understand people's point of view in relation to the social situation in which they are involved. Conversely, quantitative methods are used to verify hypothesis of cause and effect. Sociological research led by qualitative methods aims to identify the point of view of the actors, the single motivations and the aspects of individual and collective life (Memoli 2004, 40).

There are situations in which qualitative methods are used together with quantitative methods. In these cases the researchers tend to obtain general empirical results applicable to similar situations. Generally, in social research quantitative methods may be combined with qualitative methods. The sociological research develops in relation to more sociological theories, as methodological approaches and methods for the detection and data analysis. The choice of methods in social research is defined in relation to the object of social research, the empirical situation in which the object is placed, the cognitive objectives which the research aims, the degree of generalizability expected, the hypothesis that the research aims to verify.

The combination of these variables determines the different methodological approach and the use of different methods, quantitative and qualitative, which are considered more suitable for the purpose. We must naturally consider the importance of quantitative and qualitative methods of social research for the analysis of social care needs of the population. We must not forget the importance of the stakeholder in the planning process of welfare services.

Planning, management and evaluation of social policies are aspects of science applied to the solution of problems; they are a practical use of sociological knowledge in the context of social intervention.

28.3   The Analysis of Social Care Needs

The study of people's social needs or of the needs of a local community is very complex. The problems are related primarily to the epistemological aspects and to the methods of data collection. Giving an objective definition of the social needs of the people is difficult, but necessary.

In social planning the study of needs is both a social research on the areas of intervention and a pre-evaluation of the life-conditions of the people who are the targets of the social policies (Bruni 2009). The study of social needs and health needs is complex because of the epistemological, political, methodological issues that are involved, together with the issues related with the choice of the research techniques to be employed (Palumbo 2001, 118–119). The aspect of the politically driven choice of the needs on which an intervention is planned implies that, sometimes, intervention projects are not oriented to address a real need of the person. For this reason, it is important, in social planning, to have a precursory study and a pre-evaluation of the needs of the population targeted by a project of local welfare. The social determinants of health like the socioeconomic status, the social structure and cultural factors are important to consider (Rebeleanu and Soitu 2017, 159).

The main methods of study, functional to the social planning, are the context analysis and the SWOT analysis. Context analysis is the study of the needs of a population, to be carried out in the moment when it is decided to enact interventions of planning of the local welfare services; it concerns the socio-economical and territorial background of reference. The SWOT analysis is an instrument for the strategic planning that allows to evaluate strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and threats for a project of social intervention. The above methodologies must be integrated with the participation of the stakeholders in the process of planning; the participative method is introduced in Italy by the law n. 328/2000 which establish the 'area plan' (*piano di zona*) as a strategic instrument for an integrated and collaborative approach to the planning of the local welfare (Battistella 2004).

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welfare system. We must naturally consider the importance of quantitative and qualitative methods of social research for the analysis of social care needs of the population. We must not forget the importance of stakeholder in the planning process of welfare services (Corsi 2017, 68).

The participation of the stakeholders in the construction of the local welfare is very important, particularly in the constitution of the 'area plan', which is the planning instrument of the local welfare established by the law 328/2000. The 'area plan' operates in a planned and propelling way aiming to create a system of protection and promotion of the rights of the citizen; it guarantees a gradual development of social policies and services of the territory; for this reason the 'area plan' is a social planning instrument to be continuously redefined according to the analysis of people's social needs, considering the negotiations with the different stakeholders (Venditti 2004, 144).

The 'area plan' is the fist element of the construction of the local welfare in Italy; it includes a separate section called 'Local Social Profile' (*Profilo Sociale Locale*) which shows the analysis of territorial needs. In the 'Local Social Profile' social, demographic, economical and cultural aspects of the territory are analysed through the collection and interpretation of socio-demographic data; the secondary analysis the data; interviews with representatives of public and private agencies; interviews and informal conversations, or thematic meetings with representatives of certain categories of people. The aim of this document is to gain an understanding of social resources and social needs of the area in order to build a local welfare system.

The study of social needs can be divided in the following phases: the elaboration of need indices, the study of social epidemiology. In the first case, the needs and the social resources of the territory are highlighted, in the second case the distribution of social needs through the different stage of life, from childhood to the elderly, is identified. These needs can concern issues related to childhood, families, youth, people with special needs, mental health, poverty, unemployment etc. For the analysis of the social need is important to collect information from sources of a different nature, including the attendance data of the services already present on the territory and specific sociological studies.

The detection of social needs, necessary to the planning of the local welfare and of the social services, is based on an approach founded on macro and micro-data. The latter is related to participative methods with the aim to plan social interventions involving the people directly concerned (Venditti 2004, 101).

The methods to collect data can be surveys over opinion, focus groups, interviews; the methods can be quantitative, i.e. aimed to collect numerical information, or qualitative, aimed to collect information that can be expressed by words. Therefore, the methods to collect data are many and complex. Quantitative methods are useful to collect much information on feelings, opinions and behaviours; they allowed to generalize the results. Surveys, checklists, monitoring forms, forms to reveal the needs, forms to analyse already available data, are normally included into the quantitative methods. On the other hand, qualitative methods are limited to few examples, they don't allow to generalize but consent an in-depth analysis. Interviews and focus groups are considered qualitative methods. The latter uses, to

analyze deeply an issue in short time, a group discussion involving the representatives of single categories of people.

The action of planning social services and interventions cannot be detached from an effective recognition of the needs on the territory, and, as a consequence, from the involvement of the different actors. Through the years, the role played by the participation in both the collection and analysis of the data and in the subsequent planning of the local welfare has increased. In Italy, participation is today the most common method to build the local welfare, through quantitative and qualitative research techniques, aimed to achieve a correct analysis of the social needs of the population.

The analysis of the social care needs of the people is carried out through qualitative and quantitative methods of social research, and through the participation of stakeholders. Participation is a method of social planning; we must take into account the demands of social services of the people and to incorporate these services into the local welfare system. The planning of welfare services cannot be separated from the effective recognition of the social care needs of the citizen people. The quantitative methods of social research are important but not sufficient, people must be involved, by qualitative methods, in the analysis and planning of local welfare system.

28.4   From the Synoptic Model to the Incremental Model

Participation is important from the early stage of the analysis of social needs and it remains important during the construction of local welfare and the enactment of social interventions. Every time that a project is enacted, it changes in relation with the social context where it is involved. The concerns expressed by the different stakeholders, who play a role in the construction of the local welfare (Bifulco 2015), are different, therefore it is important that the analysis of the needs is realised through a tangible contact with the reality, using a variety of methods where all the welfare actors are involved. These methods are: case studies, in-depth interviews, the instruments of quantitative analysis capable of identify the aspects which a considered key-points by the actors. The role of the beneficiaries of the social services has changed in time, from simple 'consumers' of the given services to being 'co-planners'.

In Italy, during the 70s, the synoptic model was employed by the social planning (Siza 2002, 45). It is a centralised model of planning, defined by a series of phases and procedures with a single decision maker who identifies the problems the priorities of the intervention and the goals to pursue. The logic behind this system priorities the efficiency in the employment of the economic and human resources, following a model of decision making centred on the rationality of the choices and the rational equilibrium between aims and means (Gherardi 1985, 74–75). It is founded on the predominance of some technical aspects like the analysis of needs, the definition of the aims, the selection of the aims according to the chosen

priorities, the analysis of all the alternative of intervention and their comparison, the choice of the alternative which allows to maximise the results (Merlo 2014, 100).

The models allows to identify, from the beginning, the priority of the problems and the goals to reach, that must direct the choice of the solutions and of the interventions to be planned and enacted. This happens through the comparative analysis of the alternatives of intervention and of the means to reach the goals; afterwards the consequences of the enactment of each mean are analysed, and the mean which allows to reach the defined goals in the most efficient way is chosen (Leone and Prezza 2003, 240).

This model is driven by a rational decision-making process where the problem on which to intervene is clearly identified; the possible strategies of intervention are identified and it is possible to establish a list of priorities and foresee the consequences of the decisions taken. Behind the application of this model there is the belief in a decision-making process capable of a complete rationality in the analysis of the possible alternatives and in the choice of the most efficient one. The model implies a common poll of unchallenged values and a perfect faculty of analysis of the decision maker as well as the existence of a technically correct solution of the problems on which it is decided to intervene.

The criticism against the decisional model started with Simon (1947) who, in 1947, underlined the structural difficulties encountered by a decision-maker who uses a model of rational decision. The reason behind this position lay in the evidence of the impossibility of the decision maker to evaluate all the alternatives and the consequences of any of them. It is more realistic to think that the decision-making process aims to identify not the best solution but the most satisfying in a defined social context of problems. The reason of these behaviour is to be found in the limits of human rationality and in the complexity of the environmental context where decisions are taken (Siza 2002, 46).

The criticism against the model starts from the observation that a perfect knowledge of the situation, where the intervention is planned, is impossible, given the complexity of the problems and the quantity of the variables involved; as a consequence, it is impossible that a single decision maker can consider all the possible alternatives for the solution of a problem, therefore the best solution cannot be identified (Lindblom 1979). From this point of view, the construction of a local welfare made through a synoptic planning model, which involve a complete rationality, becomes pointless. The model of 'absolute' rationality shows different limits because the amount of information necessary for the complete understanding of a phenomenon is infinite, the availability of information is normally limited and the cognitive rationality is conditioned by the context where the policy makers are acting. The decision is not the result of a decisional process of complete rationality, but the result of an interaction between different actors of the social planning, involving many stakeholders (Siza 2002, 47).

In this model decision-making processes are de-centralised, there is no longer a single decision maker, but many subjects involved; through their interaction and negotiation the local welfare system is built, using the instrument of the participative planning where public and private institution take part. Participation is

involved in all the phases of the planning of the local welfare, which demonstrates itself as a project of continuous construction and negotiation of services and social interventions, in response to the needs of the people who live in a defined territory.

The model of local welfare planning in Italy is participative. The planning uses a 'limited rationality' system and is based on the recognition of many goals and many actors. With the law 328, enacted in 2000, the planning assumes in Italy a systematic quality, allowing autonomy in the decision-making process to the intermediate and peripheral levels of the local government, with a strong recognition of the role played by the third section even in the decisions related to social planning. The law n. 328/2000 contains many important dispositions concerning the social planning for the construction of the local welfare and method indications.

The law identifies four levels of administration:

- The central government has the duty to identify the principles and the aims of the social policy through the National Plan of intervention and social services (*Piano nazionale degli interventi e dei servizi sociali*).
- The provinces help in the planning of the integrated system of intervention and social services.
- The regions have functions of planning, coordination and lead of the social interventions and of verification of their effective enactment on the territory; moreover they control the interactions between the different interventions.
- The municipalities provide the administration concerning the local social interventions and take part to the regional planning. To the municipalities is given the task of planning and enacting the local system of social services.

The constitutional law n. 3/2001, the reformation of the Title V of the Italian Constitution has redefined the responsibilities of the different levels of administration in the construction of the local welfare. The change in the law implies a new relationship between the different levels of administration: between the central government, the regions, the provinces and the municipalities. The central government is now responsible for the definition of the essential levels of assistance, the regions have the faculty of legislate on their own on the local social policies, the municipalities are responsible for the planning and the management of the local system of welfare though the 'Area Plan'.

This multiplicity in the levels of administration of the local welfare in addition to the duties given to the local health agencies (*Aziende Sanitarie Locali*) and to the third sector imply that social planning is by necessity participative, with the involvement of all the subjected interested in the different phases of the project. 'Area plans' are the most innovative element of the reform, they are at the base of the construction of the local welfare, they are the instrument to answer to the social needs of the population on a defined territory; they require an attitude towards negotiation and participation during the planning in order to be an useful instrument to build the local welfare system (Bifulco and Facchini 2015, 3).

Social planning in Italy today tends to involve many institutional actors and of the third sector. The municipality is at the centre of the system but the decision about the social services to be implemented are taken by many institution, public and private, with the participative method. The directing role of the local governments remains central in the system; it collaborates with the competences and decisions belonging to public and private organisations with the intention to combine social and health policies.

28.5   Conclusion

The social planning in Italy in the first half of the 70s plays a marginal role in the context of the public intervention and it is mainly linked to the socio-economic development. Only on the second half of the 70s planning starts to have a role in the reorganisation of the social services on a regional level; it is a prescriptive and centralised planning, applied in a limited way. Between the 80s and the 90s it assumes a local connotation, based on the municipalities, for specific sectors of interventions (i.e. elderly, childhood and adolescence etc.). Only with the law 328 in 2000 the social planning has a systematic order which gives autonomy of decision to the medium and peripheral levels of local government; moreover the important role of the third sector is recognised.

Social planning is an activity with a high level of rationality, uses different approaches and it is situated between model of 'total' rationality and model of 'limited' rationality. In the models of 'total' rationality the main idea is that social planning must be centralised; it is assumed that there is a possibility to have, from the beginning, a complete understanding of the phenomena and of the social problems (Burgalassi 2013, 37–38). On the other hands, the of 'limited' rationality are based on the idea that it is impossible to analyse social phenomena in their complexity; in the social planning the analysis of the information and of the decision taken by the different levels of administration are partial and limited; social planning must have a disposition orientated to evolution and enhancement. Decisions are taken by a multiplicity of actors and different levels of administration which are involved in a collaborative way in the definition of the plan and in the construction of the local welfare.

Social planning is a political project which allows to identify the solutions to the social problems of a territory. Participation allows to take into account, in the construction of the local welfare, different values and suggestions from different social actors and from many levels of the welfare management, it allows to take into account different interests and aims of the public institution, of the third sector and of the people to whom the social services are addressed.

Participation is the main model of social intervention through which, today, the local welfare system is built in Italy. To participate, in the construction of the local welfare, means to involve public institution, in the different levels of administration, and the different actors on the territory whenever it is necessary to choose

intervention and strategies of action. The Italian model of local welfare planning shows a strong connection between the services and the territory and potentially a better efficiency in responding to people's social needs, because many actors are involved in the decision making process, including the citizens and the local communities.

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