Mentoring in the Design and Facilitation of Workshops to Promote Professional Well-being in Child Care and Protection Workers

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Abstract
The study examines a training program designed to equip coordinators and managers of childcare and protection services in central-northern Italy with the skills needed to design and deliver workshops aimed at improving the quality of working life (Stamm, 1999; Figley, 1993). Conducted from January to September 2022, this program was part of a broader training and research initiative rooted in a critical-emancipatory paradigm (CEP) (Denzin & Lincoln, 2023). The initiative aimed to empower service coordinators to independently design and facilitate workshops—adaptable in terms of group size, methodology, and scheduling—while receiving support from university researchers through a mentoring pathway. The data collected show: 1) a preference for more emotionally neutral topics (self-evaluation and self-care strategies); 2) some difficulties expressed by the coordinators in taking on this task and their request for an external facilitator; 3) both desires and difficulties expressed by the operators in dealing with their own emotions. The purpose of this paper is not to explain these perspectives but to explore and reflect upon them. In addition to theoretical insights from the literature on optimal training design, it is crucial for educators and trainers to understand what constitutes an effective training path for professionals working with vulnerable families. By giving participants a voice, the program enabled them to recognize their role as co-designers of the training process itself—a critical step in fostering their agency and ownership of the initiative (Giroux, 2020).

Keywords: Social Work, Wellbeing, Mentoring Path

Introduction

According to the literature, emotional labour, vicarious disorders, bias in communication processes and resilience are common issues which are central to the wellbeing of those operators who face challenging events and situations on a daily basis in relation to their work commitments. First of all, it is known that social workers have to deal with emotional labour, since any professional who carries out a helping activity more or less consciously or intentionally expresses emotional labour, which can be defined as the set of gestures, actions, choices, reflections and words that are useful to manage or express one's own emotions and those of others in a way that is appropriate to the expectations inherent in one's role (Hochschild, 2012). Depending on their role, workers knows that there is a set of more or less explicit rules that oblige them to express or control certain emotions, both towards the people they are trying to help and towards their colleagues or superiors. They also are required to learn, over time, to control or manage the emotions arising from observing and meeting particularly traumatic or painful situations and that, as such, are capable of jeopardizing their well-being as persons, even before their well-being as professionals (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002).

In addition, some studies have highlighted that knowing and observing existential situations and vicissitudes of discomfort, material, cultural or symbolic poverty (McLaren, 2015), listening to stories of abuse, mistreatment or parental neglect of vulnerable children, can expose many of the actors who work daily in child and family protection services to the development of one or more emotional, psychological, behavioral and identity disorders: first compassion fatigue, followed by vicarious trauma, both of which are prerequisites for burnout (Figley, 1989; Stamm, 1999; Maslach & Leither, 2016). In addition to this triggering factor, many social workers are confronted daily with an overload of work and often unacknowledged responsibilities, to which are added the annoyance of bureaucratic procedures and a public opinion ready to attack and penalize any of their gestures or actions (Anderson, 2000). All these elements put a strain on the professional and identity balance of these workers, sometimes leading them to exhaust all the energy (cognitive, emotional and physical) they can devote to a job from which they may wish to withdraw, even though they have chosen and loved it from the beginning of their professional career (Figley, 1989).

Sometimes the fatigue perceived and experienced by social workers also stems from some difficulties they face in the communication processes, both with colleagues and with the people they are trying to help. Our mind has, indeed, evolved over the millennia by developing a series of strategies that enable each of us to deal with the complexity of reality by means of quick and efficient interpretative schemata. These mental schemata enable us to make decisions and act even under conditions of partial or great uncertainty. This usually occurs when there is not enough time to weigh up all the information, when there is not enough information to make an objective assessment of the facts, or even when one is in a position of responsibility for others and in a moment of great physical and mental exhaustion. In such situations, which are so common in helping work, these strategies are used spontaneously and unconsciously, so that they sometimes are likely to risk to become real pitfalls, impairing communication and leading us to make errors of judgement: for example, when we are guided by our prejudices or stereotypes, or when we rely too much on our own strengths without actually having sufficient resources (Haselton et al., 2009; Hertel & Mathews, 2011).

Another significant theme in social work revolves around the construct of resilience. While resilience is narrowly understood as the ability of people in situations of vulnerability to adopt a path of positive adaptation and overcome the adverse situation in which they find themselves, we underline that often the structural and environmental causes of inequality are not adequately addressed (Hart et al., 2016; Ius, 2020). This perspective often casts social workers as "guardians of resilience," positioning them as facilitators of others resilience rather than professionals who approach challenges from a systemic perspective while demonstrating their own resilient responses to the difficulties they encounter daily (Ungar, 2021).

The Research-Training Path

The aim of this paper is to present the results of a mentoring pathway carried out to support a group of 27 service coordinators and managers employed in child care and protection services working with families living in a vulnerable situation, within 3 local authorities / services in Region Emilia-Romagna, a region of central-northern Italy. These coordinators were involved in a training and research programme, designed and coordinated at the University of Padua (Bobbo et al., 2024). The training aimed at disseminating knowledge about vicarious disorders and skills related to self-care strategies, and was designed in order to enable them to take responsibility for promoting the professional wellbeing of the teams they coordinate, by activating and strengthening some self-care strategies and promoting mutual supportive working communities (Stamm, 1999; Figley, 1995). The training program, which lasted from January to May 2022, included three types of actions: thematic webinars to provide theoretical and practical knowledge on specific topics; the resource Book to have a guide containing theories, self-assessment tools, and activities to support the creation of tailored workshops; reflective mentoring to offer ongoing support and feedback.

The first action proposed thematic webinars on aspects related to professional well-being shown above. Each webinar, beyond the theoretical part, included the presentation and use of some workshop strategies useful to support practitioners in dealing with the results of emotional labor, preventing vicarious disorders, becoming aware of their own cognitive biases and how they play out in communication processes, and becoming resilient professionals. The strategies were proposed and experienced with the coordinators to enable them to use those strategies in the implementation of wellbeing promotion workshops to be carried out with their operators within their respective services. These strategies are conceived in four levels of insight into personal perceptions and experiences regarding one's own professional well-being and discomfort. The four levels are:

1. Self-assessment: it included tools useful to assess personal wellbeing, assess personal and team fatigue signs, encourage self-reflection on the daily time sheet (balance between lifetime and work time).
2. Emotional labor and professional identity: it included tools useful to increase intra- and interpersonal emotional awareness.
3. Cognitive bias: it included tools useful to identify personal cognitive biases and overcome them by becoming more aware of this kind of pitfall.
4. Self-care strategies and reciprocal supporting community: it included tools useful to identify personal self-care strategies and make operators build mutual support communities in their services.

Lastly, since the training path took place at a time when the pandemic was still ongoing in Italy, so that most of the meetings and the training course had to be conducted online, it

seemed necessary to support the coordinators in the use of this type of tools as a prerequisite for the implementation of the wellbeing activities with their operators. So, the path included some webinars focused on the use of videoconferencing platforms in training, facilitation of online meetings, use of online tools to support training and make it more interactive.

The second consists in the support provided by a published book containing the main theories to present the ideas underpinning the programme, and different activities that are described and explained as a "set of bricks" each coordinator could consider and use to creatively build up their own paths addressed to their teams (Bobbo & Ius, 2021). In fact, at the end of the training process, the coordinators were invited by design and facilitate workshops tailored to their team's needs. Flexibility in group size, methodology, and scheduling were key aspects to consider in the implementing phase.

The third action regards the reflective mentoring. During the implementation of the local workshops, which lasted from June to November 2022, the researchers proposed to the coordinators a continuous mentorship to provide them with guidance and support through a series of reflective mentoring sessions. This action aimed to accompany their work, both in the planning and in the realization of the workshops they had chosen to facilitate. Some of these online meetings were scheduled on a monthly basis, while others were organized at the request of participants who needed support to define and implement their projects. These meetings were thus held with different working groups and allowed each coordinator to gain mutual discussion on ongoing projects and difficulties. A final meeting was held to collect some feedback from the groups that had completed their local projects and to discuss the different experiences.

A Research Project on the Mentoring Path

The Critical Framework

The research paradigm chosen for the training-research path was critical-emancipatory (Denzin & Lincoln, 2023). This paradigm conceives of research as a tool for the emancipation of oppressed people, so the research-training path was developed viewing participants as co-researchers and co-designers in their learning journey to address professional oppression and stress.

The word oppression evokes any situation in which people feel powerless and overwhelmed by life or professional events. Based on the evidence that social workers working with vulnerable families and children are often overwhelmed by stress, compassion fatigue and burnout caused by the complexity and drama of the situation they are dealing with (Bobbo et al., 2024), we considered social workers and their coordinators as "oppressed" people. The conduction of the mentoring path was considered under the same logic of emancipation. Beside this, the pedagogical framework underpinning this path underlines firstly the intention to promote processes of self-reflective and meaningful learning among professionals about their capacity for self-protection and resilience (Calaprice, 2020; Cyrulnik, 2001); secondly, the need to choose a training/research approach that would meet the following conditions: the immediate usefulness of the knowledge that these activities could promote; a fully active role of the actors involved; the consensual production and legitimation of knowledge; lastly, the goal to make the pathway a real opportunity for learning and empowerment for all the actors involved, both operators and researchers (Formenti, 1998).

A Glance on the Perspective of Coordinators

The mentoring pathway was designed to support the coordinators to independently design, implement and manage workshops (adaptable in terms of group size, methodology and scheduling). During the tutoring path, researchers collected their words and thoughts, firstly with the aim to give them voice and acknowledging their professional experience, and secondly to achieve a better comprehension of their perspective on the path.

Understanding their perspective was useful to assess how they comprehend the theoretical and methodological proposals presented during the webinars. During each meeting, the coordinators had the opportunity to express their difficulties, the obstacles they encountered and, by sharing them with the researchers, they were able to find some solutions or simply conceive a different way to face the project or the realisation of the activities. This happened because they shared their difficulties and doubts not only with the researchers but also with their colleagues, on a community level. Often, in these sessions, the discussion flew with only a few actions of the researchers, who acted as facilitators of a group of the participants who were able to co-construct the methodological knowledge they needed to move forward. Moreover, they had the opportunity to share about their work, their fatigue, the difficult conditions of their services, and this allowed them to shaping to their thoughts, making them clearer even to themselves (Giroux, 2005, p. 205).

In this logic, this paper aims at presenting the participants' perspectives rather than to explain them, because we think the coordinators' perspective is useful to understand the strengths and weaknesses of both the training project we carried out and the different workshop the coordinators realised, in a kind of formative assessment for both agents of the project (Gasmalla et al., 2023).

Results and Discussion

Despite the structured framework, coordinators largely opted for simpler tools and less demanding workshop designs, prioritizing short-term gains over in-depth exploration of professional well-being. Briefly, the data collected show: 1) coordinators' preference for more emotionally neutral topics (self-evaluation and self-care strategies); 2) some difficulties expressed by the coordinators in taking on this task and their requests for an external facilitator; 3) both desires and difficulties expressed by the operators in dealing with their own emotions.

Regarding the first point, coordinators were offered a choice between different models of lab paths and tools. However, they predominantly opted for simpler tools to design short workshops, which encouraged only superficial reflection on their well-being. The proposed journey included four different, progressively complex types of labs: self-assessment, emotional labour, cognitive bias, and self-care strategies. Although the ultimate aim was to build mutually supportive working communities, most coordinators chose to stop at the first step. The most popular workshop was the self-assessment lab, selected by 22 coordinators. The emotional labour lab and resilience lab were chosen by 4 coordinators each, while the cognitive bias lab was selected by only 1 coordinator.

Midway through the path, the mentoring activity invited coordinators to describe and reflect on their experiences, consider what could have been improved, and identify what they felt was missing. The positive aspects coordinators underlined were a good level of participation

in an initiative that was perceived as legitimate. They appreciated the strong team spirit and sense of cooperation that emerged. They also struggled in finding time and space for other work commitments and in sharing emotional memories and feelings with colleagues.

In response, they requested for more support from the mentors, more opportunities to share lab content online with other services, more chances to meet and chat with other coordinators, and lastly, but more significantly, they asked for the possibility of involving an external facilitator to manage the private and emotional dimensions of the dialogue.

At the conclusion of the path, we presented the coordinators with four evocative keywords to guide their reflections on the journey: Positive Feelings, Team Atmosphere, Criticism, and Facilitator Tasks.

Regarding the positive feelings lived during and at the end of the path, coordinators reported discovering new protective factors within their group, expressing a desire to connect with one another and discuss emotions. Some also expressed pride in their team.

The team atmospheres they described were characterized by openness, honesty, availability and spontaneity.

The criticism they pointed out as areas for improvement regards initial challenges in understanding and using some tools; inadequate spaces for conducting workshops; discontinuity and instability during the process; fatigue and the emergence of destabilizing emotions within the group.

Regarding the facilitator role, most of them state that it was particular demanding. Many noted the challenge of navigating the dual role of being both a service coordinator (responsible for organizational tasks) and a group facilitator (focused on promoting team well-being). They emphasized the difficulty of overcoming resistance within the group and often felt lonely in balancing the desire to solve problems with the need to facilitate effectively. By the end of the path, it became evident that coordinators faced significant obstacles in finding time and space for these activities and in openly sharing personal difficulties or vulnerabilities. This was often tied to the need to uphold the image of the "strong social worker." The ambiguity of the dual role—being both a service coordinator responsible for HR and a group facilitator promoting well-being—was a recurring theme. This ambiguity likely contributed to their frequent requests for help, whether from researchers or independent supervisors.

This initiative uncovered significant barriers to implementing professional well-being strategies, such as organizational constraints and cultural resistance to vulnerability. While participants valued the mentorship and support provided, they often sought additional guidance, creating challenges for researchers in balancing the need to foster autonomy with the necessity of offering adequate support.

These findings emphasize the need for researchers and service managers to:

- Reframe the role of coordinators as facilitators of team well-being rather than mere HR managers, by implementing programs for the prevention and monitoring of well-being within the organization (Figley 1989; Slatten et al., 2020).

- Strengthen reflective practices as a means to achieve autonomy in addressing professional challenging experiences (Harrington & Loffredo, 2010) by creating more accessible tools for professional development and wellbeing.

Nevertheless, these improvements cannot be fully realized without a systemic change in the policies of social work services, prioritizing the emotional well-being of operators over the need to optimize service costs.

Conclusions

This path highlights the challenges faced by researchers and trainers in understanding the needs of coordinators, amplifying their voices, and enabling them to become autonomous in creating and maintaining the conditions necessary for the well-being of the professionals they coordinate. The mentoring path and the voices we collected confirmed the need to continue using a critical participatory approach in research and training in order to model coordinators as co-designers: the difficulties they have encountered along the way make them ask for help, but at many of them would receive that help passively, whereas others asked for help only to go forward. Some coordinators felt that they had too many work commitments to take on other responsibilities and were threatened by the emotions that workshops let emerge, but at the same time other coordinators, facing these same difficulties, wanted to go on in improving the wellbeing of their operators and perhaps also in order to gain an agency that they often don't have in the public services. One of the key objectives of the mentoring pathway was to support coordinators in managing the dual role we asked to play. It aimed to help them move beyond a reliance on external assistance and instead become active agents of change. This outcome could not have been achieved without providing coordinators with a platform to voice their experiences, as we did. By giving them a voice, we helped them recognize their opportunities and resources, fostering a deeper awareness of their potential as co-designers of transformation (Giroux, 2004).

The training path highlighted the complexities of promoting professional well-being in childcare and protection services. While the critical-emancipatory approach proved effective in engaging participants and fostering meaningful learning, it also revealed significant limitations in current organizational practices. Future efforts should prioritize participatory and reflective methodologies, ensuring that coordinators are adequately supported and empowered to lead sustainable well-being initiatives within their teams.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

During the preparation of this work the authors used Chat GPT in order to check linguistic translation. After using this tool/service, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and takes full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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