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## Learning from service users' involvement: a research about changing stigmatizing attitudes in social work students

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### ABSTRACT

Stigmatizing attitudes can create barriers to forming partnership with service users and to developing people's empowerment. So, social work education must help students overcome their stigmatizing attitudes. A useful strategy for bringing about changes is service users' and carers' involvement in social work education, providing students with direct exposure to stigmatized people in roles that emphasize their humanity and strengths, rather than their deficits. The present study assessed the impact of a one-day meeting with service users and carers members of self-help and mutual-aid groups on freshman social work students. Students completed an adapted version of Attitudes to Mental Illness Questionnaire before and after the meeting, and answered several qualitative questions. Data comparisons suggest that after face-to-face contact with service users and carers, social work students showed reduced stigmatizing attitudes. Implications for further research and social work education are discussed.

### KEYWORDS

Service users' and carers' involvement; stigmatizing attitudes; relational social work; AIMQ

### Social work and stigmatizing attitudes

Stigma is particularly important in social work because most if not all people social workers work with will be subject to some form of stigmatization. 'Simply being a client of a social worker is often enough to attract stigma' (Thompson & Thompson, 2008, p. 216). Furthermore, social work has an important tradition and role in supporting vulnerable populations and in fighting discrimination and stigma (Banks, 2008; Barnes, 2006; Burke & Parker, 2007; Cree, 2013; Dominelli, 2002, 2008; Fook, 2012; Thompson, 2006). Nevertheless, social workers often share the negative view of social problems that is so widespread among general population. Stigmatizing attitudes are not only present in society at large but also in helping professions, including psychiatry, psychology and social work (Nordt, Rössler, & Lauber, 2006; Scheyett & Kim, 2004; Trevithick, 2005). Promoting users' empowerment and partnership is pivotal to social work practice, but stigmatizing attitudes can create barriers to forming partnership and to empowering people. Therefore, it is vital that social work education helps students to overcome their stigmatizing attitudes (Zellmann, Madden, &

Aguiniga, 2014) as means to develop a ‘critical understanding of how socio-structural inadequacies, discrimination, oppression, and social, political and economic injustices impact human functioning and development at all levels, including the global’ (Sewpaul & Jones, 2005, p. 220).

Various ways to decrease stigmatizing attitudes in general population (e.g. Corrigan & Penn, 2015; Galletly & Burton, 2011; Heijnders & Van Der Meij, 2006; Lebel, 2008; Weiss, Ramakrishna, & Somma, 2006) and among professionals (e.g. Galletly & Burton, 2011) are described in literature. As direct contacts and personal relationships with those stigmatized seem particularly useful to reduce stigma (Corrigan & Penn, 2015; Covarrubias & Han, 2011) an important strategy for bringing about changes in professionals’ perceptions of stigmatized people has been to involve the latter in education and training, providing students and practitioners with direct exposure to stigmatized people in roles that emphasize their humanity and strengths, rather than their deficits (Scheyett & Kim, 2004; Shor & Sykes, 2002).

## Service users’ and caregivers’ involvement in social work education

### *Diffusion*

In the last three decades, in the UK, service users’ and carers’ involvement in social work has become firmly embedded in important aspects of social work education (Branfield, 2009; Edwards, 2003; Taylor, Braye, & Cheng, 2009). In recent years, service users’ involvement in university programmes has been started in other European countries—as Denmark, Germany, Norway, Sweden, in Northern Ireland (Agnew & Duffy, 2010), Croatia (Skokandić & Urbanc, 2009) and in Eastern European countries (Zavirsek & Videmsek, 2009). As far as we know, in the Italian social work education system, only two experiences can be found that were carried out by the Catholic University of Milan and by the University of Eastern Piedmont (Allegri, 2015), respectively.

### *Rationale*

The involvement of service users and carers in social work education is thought of as promoting the more collaborative ways of working that contemporary social work theory and practice emphasize (Waterson & Morris, 2005), and as providing a balanced education capable of building a good professional practice in students, especially when service users are involved right from the beginning (Baldwin & Sadd, 2006; Tyler, 2006; Waterson & Morris, 2005). The central idea is that social workers must regard service users and carers as partners in dealing with their life difficulties. So, social workers should not regard them merely as recipients of interventions, but as people from whom to learn, both in professional practice and education.

Service users’ everyday experiences are fundamental to equipping would-be social workers with key elements of knowledge and expertise and to improving services (Anghel & Ramon, 2009; Beresford, 2000). The exposition to service user perspectives also aims to help social work students, and freshmen especially, relate theory and practice (Cooper & Spencer-Dawe, 2006; Irvine, Molyneux, & Gillman, 2015).

### **Power sharing**

In order to achieve an effective participation and to avoid the risks of a tokenistic approach, general issues about how users' role could be presented and how programmes could be adjusted to promote effective changes in social work practice should be addressed (Askheim, 2012).

There is the risk that users could be seen as 'case studies' instead of partners, increasing the emphasis on the distance between 'us' (professionals) and 'them' (the users) (Beresford & Croft, 2008; Wilson & Beresford, 2000). Conversely, only if service users and carers feel respected for what they can offer, they are more able to share their perspectives (Anghel & Ramon, 2009, p. 187). When groups or organizations of users are involved, they are in a better position to effectively challenging conventional images of service users (Beresford & Boxall, 2012).

### **Involvement domains and methods**

Service users and carers have collaborated with social work courses in different ways: as personal testimonies, educators, co-teachers, recruiters of students (Askheim, 2012). They have contributed by telling their stories and real-life experiences, as well as by producing written materials (Reynolds & Read, 1999) and videos (Smith, 2013). Gee, Ager, and Haddow (2009) analysed what learning students had gained after spending 24 h with service users and family carers. Quinney and Fowler (2013) described a participatory initiative carried out through online discussion groups run by users and carers.

Judkins and Lahurd (1999) underlined the importance of involving service users and carers in curriculum development and design, and not only as personal testimonies—they should be regarded as partners in developing educational programmes (Molyneux & Irvine, 2004). To this purpose, they may take part to a wide range of tasks, as students' selection, development of teaching approaches and materials, programme planning, teaching and learning activities, feedback and assessment, quality monitoring and evaluation (Health & Care Professions Council, 2014).

Though, service users and carers have been actively involved in assessing the readiness of freshmen students in social work for their first period of practice learning (Duffy, Das, & Davidson, 2013) and in assessing students' achievement both in practice learning and in institution-based learning (Gee et al., 2009), more compelling evidence about the effectiveness of service users in such roles is needed (Skoura-Kirk et al., 2013). According to Gregor and Smith (2009), prior to involving 'service users as educators', their potential role and contribution, as well as their training needs, should be considered.

### **Recruitment and training**

Involving service users and carers can mean working with individuals or working with groups and networks of service users and carers, with voluntary organizations (Health & Care Professions Council, 2014), with community organizations (Gupta & Blewett, 2008), with local activity centres (Askheim, 2012). This outreach work always takes time and requires careful preparation. It is essential to explain the initiative to the different individuals

or organizations targeted, and to learn what they may offer, whom else they are involved with and what their engagement conditions are (Levin, 2004).

Service users and carers may need support and training, particularly when they take part in student selection processes or assessment tasks (Brown & Young, 2008). Help with reading, understanding and/or producing written may be necessary too (Gupta & Blewett, 2008).

Preliminary meetings among service users and carers enable them 'to present the views of the group, rather than just their own experiences, which can be emotionally difficult for them and dismissed as unrepresentative by those receiving the training' (Baldwin & Sadd, 2006; Gupta & Blewett, 2008, p. 468; Irvine et al., 2015).

## Outcome

Most authors argue that service users' and carers' involvement in social work education is extremely valuable to all parties (Brown & Young, 2008; Morgan & Jones, 2009; Irvine et al., 2015).

Irvine et al. (2015) show that many students come to realize how keeping the service users' perspectives at the core of practice is paramount in order to actualize social work values. Thanks to service users' and carers' testimonies, awareness of the importance of human experience within the social and health service system has grown (McCusker, MacIntyre, Stewart, & Jackson, 2012). A student quoted by Smith (2013) said that he had learnt by service users the importance of being aware of how social workers' behaviour and attitude impact upon them.

Students acknowledged the importance of interacting with service users and carers away from their usual environments and roles (Benbow, Taylor, Mustafa, & Morgan, 2011). The 'us-and-them' distinction between the parties dwindled (Askheim, 2012). Significantly for the purposes of the present article, it has been shown that the stigma associated with certain service user groups, particularly in relation to mental health, decreases. This occurs to varying degrees, depending on students' previous experience (Smith, 2013). One of the most important results of the project carried out in Northern Ireland by Coulter, Campbell, Duffy, and Reilly (2013) was showing how this kind of initiatives appeared to increase students' awareness and capacity in a divided society. After talking with victims of violence and discrimination, students appeared more equipped to meet the requirements of such a society (Judkins & Lahurd, 1999).

Furthermore, learning by and with service users and carers develops communication skills (Skilton, 2011) and emphasizes the value of listening (Branfield, 2009).

There are indications that service users involved in social work education improve their confidence and self-esteem, arising from a sense of making meaningful contribution (Benbow et al., 2011; McCusker et al., 2012). The significant literature review by Robinson and Webber (2013) underlined that little effort has been made to ascertain if the participation of service users in social work education actually improves outcomes for students. After analysing 29 international studies, they showed that none of them addressed the effects on social work practices and only two measured change in social students' attitudes or in their perception of service users and carers.

The study presented in this article attempts to fill a small part of this gap by investigating the effects of a meeting between freshman students in social work and service users and carers in terms of reduction of stigma.



## A full-day meeting: students and EBE together

### Setting

In Italy there aren't specific policies to promote service users' involvement in social work education programmes, and not even in social services planning and delivery.

Nevertheless, service users' and carers' participation is closely linked to the social work approach taught at the Catholic University in Milan, i.e. Relational Social Work. Relational Social Work (Folgheraiter, 2004, 2007, 2015; Folgheraiter & Raineri, 2012) stems from relational sociology (Donati, 2010) and focuses on relationships as the basis for change. The central idea in Relational Social Work is that change emerges from a reciprocal aid, both among people in difficult circumstances, family members, friends, neighbours and between that network and the social worker. The practitioner helps the network to develop reflexivity and improve it in enhancing welfare, and—in turn—the network helps the practitioner to better understand how s/he can help it (Folgheraiter & Raineri, 2012).

In Relational Social Work, service users are considered as 'experts by experience' (McLaughlin, 2009; Preston-Shoot, 2007; Saleebey, 1996), because they have experience of using care services, and especially because they are experts about their lives, and about their difficulties.

Coherently with the Relational paradigm, the involvement of service users or ex-service users and carers as teachers is an important part of social work education programme at the Catholic University. During the 3 years of bachelor's degree and even in the 2 years of master's degree, the students take part in various activities realized with the contribution of carers and services users. First-year students work together with service users and carers in the activity described below. During the following training years there are two workshops each of 30 h, where service users and carers with different life problems are invited to share their experience with the students, and to discuss with them how social work interventions could be improved. In the third year of bachelor's degree and in the second year of master's degree, groups of service users and carers, students and other stakeholders work in partnership to develop small community social work projects. Service users and carers take part in the annual social work students' congress in which conventional practice placements and off the beaten track placements (Doel, 2009) are presented. Finally, service users and carers are involved in almost all lessons, workshops and other events opened to external professionals too (students supervisors, social and health practitioners, etc.).

### The meetings

The present study looked at a learning experience that is part of a Social Work Orientation Workshop (Cabiati, 2016) addressed to freshman students and aimed at providing them with an opportunity to know a life story and change their views of social problems and service users. For 8 years, this annual 'Social Work Orientation Workshop' has been a component of professionalizing modules about Social Work Skills, Values, Approaches and Contexts.

Every academic year, the University organizes a full-day meeting between students and 'Experts by experience' (EBE), who are service user members of self-help and mutual aid groups). The programme of the day is divided in two parts: in the morning, each student talks individually with a service user for two hours. It is not a professional interview but a simple conversation aimed at knowing each other and exchanging life experiences. After

the lunch time, shared together in the university canteen, all the participants (students and service users) meet together in 5 groups with about 15 EBEs and 15 students, to express thoughts and feelings about the experience. Every group was facilitated by one of EBEs.

The EBEs who participate in the meetings can be experts in various different problems that can change every academic year depending on the self-help/mutual-aid groups in which EBEs took part. In the year when the present research was carried out (2014), the students met EBEs with experience in the following problems: mental health; drugs addiction; alcohol addiction; unemployment; disability; difficult partner divorce; parents of children in child protection; gambling addiction.

### **EBE recruitment**

EBEs were recruited through self-help and mutual-aid groups organizations, the so-called ‘umbrella’ organizations that gather a number of self-help and mutual-aid groups for the same type of problem, or many groups with different targets.

Firstly, the initiative was presented to some key persons who were group facilitators and who had already contacts with the teachers of social work course. Then, the University sent a letter to each self-help and mutual-aid group, inviting all those who were interested in participating and suggesting to extend the invitation to other potentially interested groups. The only necessary condition to participate was to be member of a self-help and mutual-aid group for a year at least.

In 2014, a total of 80 self-selected members of mutual-aid groups took part in the full-day meeting. This number can be seen as a significant success, since—according Levin (2004)—the number of individuals actively involved in social work education initiatives usually ranges from 4 to 20, with an average of 8–10.

According to Relational Social Work, service users and carers are ‘experts by experience’ because they are experts in their lives, in coping one or more life problems, in taking care of a relative or a friend, in managing the relationship with services and practitioners. The recruitment through self-help and mutual-aid groups’ organizations was chosen taking into account both the range of benefits arising from working in groups (highlighted above) and particularly what happens in this kind of groups. Self-help and mutual-aid groups produce strengths-driven processes promoting psychological insight and social skills (Steinberg, 2010). Self-help and mutual-aid groups imply an ongoing reflection on personal experiences, starting from the others’, in a peer-to-peer logic. In this way, individuals can develop narrations and points of view enhanced by the other members’ perspectives. When someone participates in a self-help and mutual-aid group for a period of time, s/he will not only elaborate his/her experience individually but s/he will also enrich it with the coping experiences of the other members. When motivated people who have lived similar experiences talk and listen to each other, they can develop a higher standing life knowledge that expresses the shared experience and is less contingent on individual circumstances. In a self-help and mutual-aid group, the knowledge of individual members upgrades, just because it becomes shared knowledge (Raineri, 2011). Thus, the student who meets an EBE listens to his/her life story, but in the dialogue between them the experiences of other people expert in coping with a particular difficulty also emerge. In this way, the student does not listen only to the individual voice of an expert but listens to his/her experience revisited in the light of experiences of others.

Due to all these reasons, the experience in self-help and mutual-aid groups was considered as an excellent basis of competence for the EBEs involved in social work education. In fact, thanks to their participation in those groups, the EBEs are experts in sharing and communicating their life experience. This expertise needs an adequate amount of time—at least one year—to be elaborated. So, the EBEs were required to participate to a self-help and mutual-aid group for at least a year before taking part in the meeting.

Other minor issues about the EBEs participation were discussed with the key persons who were group facilitators and with the course's teachers.

## Research method

The research hypothesis was that face-to-face contact with people coping with life difficulties would produce educational effects in the students, particularly by reducing the level of prejudice towards service users who are experiencing life problems. The research aimed at exploring how this educational experience affected participants and at finding out, by means of a survey, if students' attitudes showed any change.

Students were administered an adapted version of the 'Attitudes to Mental Illness Questionnaire' (AMIQ—Cunningham, Sobell, & Chow, 1993; Luty, Fakuda, Umoh, & Gallagher, 2006), previously translated into Italian, both in the two weeks preceding the meeting (pre-test) and in the two weeks following it (post-test). The second administration included some additional qualitative questions.

The 5-item AMIQ has good psychometric properties and can be used in most situations (Luty et al., 2006). Respondents read short vignettes describing an imaginary service user and answer five questions for each vignette. Respondents are asked to rate how likely some consequent events are to occur on a 5-point Likert scale (from  $-2$  = most likely, to  $+2$  = most unlikely). The scores for the five questions are then added up, giving a total score that can range between  $-10$  and  $+10$ . Low scores indicate negative attitudes.

The data collected by means of the questionnaire were analysed through a statistical programme to look for differences between pre- and post- results. Differences were calculated by subtracting each student's pre-test score from his/her post-test score.

The full-day meeting was part of the common academic activity, so all freshman students were expected to attend it. Prior to the meeting, students were told that they would take part to an initiative aimed at gaining a better understanding of the life and difficulties of people who turn to social services.

Through an email the survey was sent to the students by an external researcher. The online questionnaire came with a note giving assurance about anonymity and explaining that the research intended to gather information about some opinions and attitudes of the students. Students have never known the survey and its aims before. Responding to the questionnaire was discretionary and the teachers didn't participate in the research project. Students responded online anonymously. Each student was asked to insert an alphanumeric code that would allow us to make the pre-/post-comparison. Non-obligatory participation, anonymity and lack of awareness of the specific AMIQ aims were a way to limit the influence by role expectations.

The study was conducted with the freshman students of the Catholic University (Milan, Italy) in 2014. A total of 100 students participated. Most of them (90%) were female and



Italian. The mean age was 20 years. 45% of them came from technical college and 55% from high schools.

## Findings

The hypothesis of the present research, i.e. that after face-to-face contact with EBEs students' attitudes towards service users would improve, was supported by the findings of pre-test/post-test analyses. The data obtained through the first and second administration of the AMIQ are shown in Table 1.

Post-test mean scores differ from pre-test mean scores for all the vignettes, with the only exception of the disability vignette. The mean AMIQ scores improved from  $-0.45$  prior to the meeting with EBEs to  $+0.25$  after that meeting, with a mean difference of  $+0.70$ .

Through a second analysis, participants were divided into percentiles on the basis of their total score at the pre-test. Three groups were identified: with a high, medium and low level of prejudice. It is apparent that the increase in mean scores is due to improvement by students with lower scores (i.e. students in the sample who initially had a high level of prejudice).

As Table 2 shows, change scores for this group of students are up to 2.71 for the vignette about schizophrenia, and up to 1.37 in total.

Qualitative data collected by asking some questions during the second administration of the AMIQ revealed that participants appreciated the experience of meeting the EBEs, following which they were able to identify some key concepts for social work practice.

Students' answers confirmed that they had improved their personal attitudes towards service users:

**Table 1.** Pre-test and post-test scores.

Vignette	Pre-test mean (SD)	Post-test mean (SD)	Change score
John (cocaine)	-1.51 (2.84)	-0.68 (3.15)	+0.83
Tom (depression)	+0.52 (2.74)	+0.84 (2.69)	+0.32
Stefano (alcohol)	+0.05 (3.63)	+0.96 (3.42)	+0.91
Robert (law problems)	-5.43 (2.53)	-4.39 (2.82)	+1.04
Michael (schizophrenia)	-1.39 (3.29)	-0.17 (3.35)	+1.22
Claude (disability)	+5.22 (2.75)	+5.17 (2.61)	-0.05
Paul (birth parent of a child in foster care)	+0.4 (3.93)	+1.07 (4.09)	+0.67
Luke (gambling addiction)	-1.42 (2.75)	-0.81 (3.53)	+0.61
Total	-0.45	+0.25	+0.70

**Table 2.** Pre-test and post-test scores for students who initially had a high level of prejudice.

Vignette	Pre-test mean (SD)	Post-test mean (SD)	Change score
John (cocaine)	-3.14 (2.39)	-2.32 (2.52)	+0.82
Tom (depression)	-0.82 (2.77)	+0.36 (2.51)	+1.18
Stefano (alcohol)	-2.46 (3.40)	-0.61 (3.63)	+1.85
Robert (law problems)	-6.96 (1.68)	-5.39 (2.48)	+1.57
Michael (schizophrenia)	-3.89 (2.85)	-1.18 (3.18)	+2.71
Claude (disability)	+3.96 (3.34)	+4.46 (2.60)	-0.50
Paul (birth parent of a child in foster care)	-1.68 (3.67)	-0.68 (3.36)	+1.00
Luke (gambling addiction)	-3.43 (2.50)	-2.11 (3.24)	+1.32
Total	-2.30	-0.93	+1.37

I have learnt more about drug addictions, revising my wrong ideas

I found out that these people have a problem, but are not a problem.

The answers to the qualitative questions suggested that students' stigmatizing views of service users as bad or lacking people were questioned after meeting them:

Prior to the meeting I was worried, but now I have to say that service users are strong and brave people.

When I will become a social worker it will be important for me to treat each service user as a unique person, giving him/her the chance to change and avoiding to focus on past events.

Service users are people who take on the challenge of starting a new life. They are people from whom we can and we have to learn.

This change in the image of service users requires to be further elaborated in a critical perspective, following the idea that each user, just as each person, could have both strengths and vulnerabilities. However, for a young student at the first step of the education way this change of perspective could represent a promising starting point. For future practitioners engaged in human relationships, these statements are meaningful, because being able to suspend one's own conjectures and judgements, and to set aside one's own feelings and free associations in order to recognize the otherness will be essential for them (Seventhuisen, 1998).

Furthermore, students underlined that they needed to improve their personal reflexive abilities:

I learned that prior to expecting other people to change I have to question myself.

To become a good social worker I need to work deeply on myself, coping with my worries, understanding my limits and my resources.

Analysing these answers appeared from the same students the danger to run into a stigmatizing attitude and at the same time the wish to avoid it. This idea represents an important issue for the young would-be social workers. The experience opens the way to get to the core of the matter during the educational pathway.

Finally, to the question 'Was the meeting a positive, negative or neutral experience for you?', none of the students answered 'negative', two students answered 'neutral' and most of them expressed enthusiasm and satisfaction.

## Discussion

Overall, the findings of the present study are encouraging. Data suggest that meeting face-to-face with people who are expert in coping with their own life difficulties had positive effects on social work students. Change scores show a reduction of stigma for almost all the vignettes presented in the AMIQ.

The only exception showing no improvement was the situation of a man with disability (Claude). It is possible that the students who talked with people with disability or their relatives during the meeting had already a good understanding of the everyday difficulties of living with a disability, so their attitudes did not change significantly.

Interestingly, stigmatizing attitudes seem to have decreased not only with reference to the problems of which the EBEs had a personal experience (and about which, then, they talked with the students during the meeting) but also with reference to the situation of

Robert (offender), that had no correspondence to any of the self-help and mutual-aid groups involved.

Despite the pre-/post-improvement, Robert was by far the most stigmatized character in the opinions expressed by our sample of students. Therefore, particular attention will have to be paid in addressing prejudice towards offending people and, if possible, it may be useful to involve in future meetings also EBEs who have experienced this kind of difficulty.

For the students of our sample, the full-day meeting with the EBEs was one of the first opportunities to interact with service users. Qualitative findings of the present study suggest that this encounter has some characteristics of a relational and dialogical practice culture. It is a brief intervention that may have a significant impact on students. The students of our sample pointed out how this kind of experience could help them recognize users' value, respect their identities and facilitate empowerment and participatory approaches.

## Limits

The most obvious limitation of the present study is the lack of a comparison group. Therefore, it cannot be claimed that the decrease in students' stigma was entirely or mainly due to the meeting with the EBEs, though it may be reasonably assumed.

Moreover, it was not assessed if and how long the changes in students' attitudes last. In their framework for evaluation of educational programmes, Robinson and Webber (2013) have highlighted eight levels of evaluation, based on: learners' perceptions (1a), service users' or carers' perceptions (1b), staff perceptions (1c), modification in learners' attitudes and perceptions (2a), acquisition of knowledge and skills by learners (2b), changes in learners behaviour (3a), changes in organizational practices (3b), benefits to users and carers (4). The research presented placed at the level 2a (modification in students attitudes and perceptions). With reference to level 3a, at the present it's not possible to prove if the effects of this experience persist in the students. In the same way, from this study there are no elements to prove that this experience could influence their behaviour in future social work practices. Future studies would be needed to scrutinize if an experience like this could produce long-term effects.

It would be both interesting and important, for future research, to gather EBEs' opinions and perceptions about their engagement. The vast and enthusiastic participation by service users and carers that has been observed over the years suggests that this activity benefits EBEs too.

AIMQ was used earlier in social and clinical studies (Galletly & Burton, 2011; Luty, Kumar, & Stagias, 2010; Luty, Maducolil, & Mendes, 2011; Luty et al., 2006; Onesirosan, Ohiole, & Osemudiamen, 2012) from which the problem of role expectation has never mentioned. However, it's not possible to exclude that this could be occurred. Furthermore, it's important to note that the positive effects generated thanks to the experience with EBEs are general, not only related to the single problem encountered. The design of the study had not allowed to identify the factors associated with positive changes in students' attitudes. In this sense, the change may have occurred due to the nature of shared experience, rather than the core views held regarding the subject matter. The change could be strongly connected to the nature and the structure of the experience that aimed to create a social climate in which experiences and expertise were reciprocally exchanged. For all these limits, this has been an exploratory study without statistical claims.

## Conclusions

Participants to the meeting expressed satisfaction and appreciation about this initiative. Besides, data suggest that the full-day meeting was effective in reducing stigmatizing attitudes and mistrust towards people who have personal and social problems.

Stigmatizing attitudes towards people with mental illness, drug addiction or offenders is commonly reported among professionals. It is widely recognized that in order to become effective and morally upright social workers, it is essential to develop some abilities related to human, relational and personal skills (Banks, 2008; Barnes, 2006; Braye & Preston-Shoot, 1995; Schön, 1983; Thompson, 2002; Trevithick, 2005; Wilkes, 1985). Promoting face-to-face contact with experts by experience may be an effective strategy to reduce dangerous feelings of anger, mistrust and discrimination.

To think of people who are living life problems as 'experts by experience' it is necessary to recognize their power, their abilities and their feelings, irrespective of the resolution of problems. Furthermore, for social work professionals, the obligatory way to 'create' power is to take a step back and relinquish some of their own power (Folgheraiter & Raineri, 2012). Social work education has the responsibility of encouraging students' awareness about the need to establish fully collaborative relationships with service users, co-creating help interventions. The reciprocity of help—letting the user be an equal and help the social worker—is not an empty slogan or a luxury. It is a radical turning point (Folgheraiter, 2012) because, if this reciprocity is absent, the help withers and dies (Beresford & Croft, 2008).

This study confirms that social work education can be enhanced through the participation of service users as 'experts by experience'. Given that in a true helping relationship both human agents aid each other (Pettersen & Hem, 2011) and that both experts and interested parties should work together in a synergic search for a common good (Folgheraiter & Raineri, 2012), learning from service users is for would-be social workers a valuable educational opportunity at the first steps on their path.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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