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Crisis of the Welfare State: An Analysis of the Responses from Social Work

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Abstract

Below we present part of a larger study on the responses that social work professionals are giving in the current times of socio-economic crisis. The study has been developed in the province of Seville (Andalusia, Spain), through interviews with professionals who carry out social work both in the public administration and third sector organizations. The information has been analysed by the program for qualitative data analysis ATLAS.TI which helped to categorise information and the declarations of said professionals. The investigation shows us that the main responses that professionals are giving in the context of social cutbacks and lack of investment in social contexts are linked to the development of social work which looks more to society and the community to develop greater awareness and reporting of incidents, more networking with other social agents and group social work. Throughout the article we compare these results to research the origins of social work as a profession, its mission and objectives, we question the extent to which these sources are now recovering following the crisis, and how from this point of view, the crisis may be an opportunity for the correct recovery of social work (diverging from the idea of social work as a professional activity related to management and bureaucracy).

Keywords: crisis, social work, social innovation, community, professional practice.

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How the crisis affects social work: social changes and the loss of social rights

By analyzing the transformation of social policy in recent years, both the fragility of the public system of social services as we have known them until now as well as the convergence of European social policies towards the common ground of containment and reduced social spending, are evident, along with a movement towards the privatization of services and benefits: the current health-care systems, immersed in the task of finding ways to ensure their efficiency (Moreno Fuentes, 2012); pensions, with a track record of reforms since the 1990s which have resulted in a holistic mixed system of public and private provision of pensions (Rubio Lara, 2012); systems of unemployment protection, that after a series of reforms and transformations, affected by globalization and the transition to post-industrial economies, have been facing up to the containment of social costs associated with the benefits received by the unemployed as well as more difficult access conditions for said benefits, a set of general trends of change in protection for unemployment common to all countries of the European Union (Pine & Ramos, 2012); educational policies, characterized by a key issue of the current educational state, namely unequal educational opportunities for ethno-cultural and class reasons or the privatization and commercialisation of education (Alegre & Subirats Humet Canos, 2012); the deterioration and reduction of the programs for those receiving a minimum wage as a last safety net since the 1990s (Marí-Klose & Marí-Klose, 2012). In short, it can be argued that the issue of the decline of social rights serves as a basis for alleging the impasse and / or change in the current paradigm characterized by the surrender of a Europe (a Europe which is relatively proud of its welfare systems) which is collectively overcoming the differences established by the typologies of the welfare state, a socio-politically and weathered state of permanent crisis in Europe. It imposes what is deemed 'austerity' and a new dynamic in the states alone does not seem to be able to cope with the tensions that arise between the objectives (historical-ideological) for the provision and maintenance of (minimum) levels of welfare for the people, and the demands of a global economic and political system full of uncertainty and inequality. We could argue that both the welfare state and welfare itself are in danger, which eventually and in the worst case scenario, will result in the dismantling of the welfare state and the loss of social rights, also known as Second Generation Rights, historically acquired and implemented through the development of a range of social policies traditionally focused on the acquisition of equality and social justice. Nowadays, "Those who can afford to buy them, have rights" (Franco and Fernández, 2013: 192).

Beyond the quite worrying decline in employment figures and increased job insecurity, the consequences and impacts of the Great Recession are multifaceted. On one hand, as Esteve Pérez *et al.* said (2013: 3), a perverse logic has been

established that “some of the people who were considered poor, now cease to be while still having the same income”, since in this context of insecurity, “the average income of Spanish families is low and this makes the poverty line also descend while, in general terms, as read in the Poverty and Deprivation in Andalusia and Spain report, the incidence and intensity of poverty in Spain in general and Andalusia in particular has grown (Esteve Pérez *et al.*, 2013), hence the importance of the context chosen for this research. On the other hand, Atkinson (2012) shows that not all the social spectrum has been hit in the same way or with the same intensity by the growing distance between the objective possibilities of the people and subjective desires that the crisis has generated, but they are precisely those same classes that were already in the lower positions, closer to situations of need / deprivation / poverty, which have had to adjust to their new living conditions, which mainly means working longer hours without receiving a higher income and reducing their spending on material goods and non-material goods such as education, culture and recreation services.

This briefly described scenario has strong implications for the public system of social services and also for the entire network of Third Sector Entities engaged in the fight against poverty and social exclusion. The consequences are related to the lack of budget for implementation of activities, increased demand (in many cases tripled) and having to deal with new profiles of people in need of social assistance who, so far, have not been traditional benefactors of intervention. We understand that this new scenario affects the development of professionals in these two institutional fields (mainly social workers) and hence the interest in and development of the research presented.

The Methodological Strategy

In our research we have employed a qualitative methodology considering that the object of study was to determine the way in social workers perform social intervention in times of crisis (caused by reduced investment in the social context and the established policy of permanent austerity) and the strategies being developed in response to the lack of resources. The research design was inductive, conceptualizing the information produced in the field. The findings, therefore, although not intended to be generalised, aim to describe and interpret declarations on current practices by social workers who are active in a given context.

This context was that of Sevilla in 2013. There were two reasons for choosing this province when considering our investigation. 1) It is an important province in that it is an autonomous region particularly affected by the crisis as mentioned above. 2) Access to active social workers was particularly easy for us due to the fact that we have lived and worked for years in the province and have created a network of contacts.

The methodological strategy consisted of designing a semi-structured interview with different active professionals from various institutions.

The selection of institutions for the development of the research was done using the following criteria: (1) Institutions with a wide range of general intervention, in which said intervention can be broadly understood as they are the first contact point for those affected; (2) Regional Implementation: we have focused on public and private entities which carry out interventions in said territory; (3) Based on these two criteria we work with the Social Community Services of the Public Administration and organizations in the Third Sector comparable with the Community Social Services both by their nature and way of addressing issues as well as their geographical scope for intervention (Caritas, Red Cross etc).

When establishing the sampling of social workers to interview we followed what Miles and Huberman (1994) call conceptually driven sequential sampling, i.e. a qualitative (provisional) sampling, under continuous review, which is not fully screened when planning the investigation. This is in line with the concept of flexible (Marshall & Rossman, 1989), interactive, continuous (Rubin, 1995), emerging (Valles, 1997) design that characterizes the most genuinely qualitative studies. It is a circular research design where decisions are taken throughout the study and where access is developed starting with the initial contacts themselves through the “snowball” technique.

The instruments for producing the information were the interviews carried out. We chose this technique because the objective of our investigation required us to design a tool flexible enough to allow for the collection of the broader contributions of professionals contacted whilst focusing on information on a number of items of interest to the study. Specifying the type of interview, we used a non-scheduled standardized interview (Denzin, 1970), where standardization would be achieved by targeting the same set of information in all interviews and the lack of structure is due to a style of interview that requires changes in the formulation and order of questions to each respondent, a catered interview. This type of interview, also called semi-structured (Russell, 1988), tends to be a very useful tool in interviewing managers, technocrats or people who do not have much time at their disposal, such was the case of the professionals to whom we had access.

When designing the interview questions, we decided to continue the Kvale scheme (1996), which distinguishes between thematic research questions (TRQ) which form the major themes around which we wanted to investigate, and dynamic interview questions (DIQ), consisting of the translation of these major axis to a particular language that can be used and understood by the respondent in the course of the interview. A thematic research question may contain several possible dynamic questions as can be seen in Table 1.

Data from the interviews was subjected to a coding process by the team through a qualitative analysis software called Atlas.ti 6.2 . Two members acted as judges

reviewing all the encoded information in order to eliminate a possible biased process. Using the grounded theory approach (Glasser and Strauss, 1967) we coded the data using first a system of open and axial coding (Charmaz, 2005) in relation to the 5 core themes that form the thematic research questions. As shown in Table 1, these subjects have been coded in Atlas-ti from the data obtained through the dynamic interview questions. Each code, in turn, contains a number of sub-codes derived from the information produced in the accounts of the various professionals interviewed.

The interest of our research is mainly in comparing responses before and after the “crisis” in order to analyse the changes brought about in relation to the Thematic Research Questions issues, profiles, activities and budgetary sources. Hence, our objective is based on identifying and interpreting the codes obtained from the questionnaires. Most of the codes generated in each of these blocks have been produced from the declarations of the professionals contacted, except in the following instances when they have been based on subcodes: YES or NO: 1.1. Type of institution (divided into closed categories, Third Sector and Public Administration); 1.2. Recruitment time (divided into temporal sequences); 2.2. Increasing problems; 3.2. Increase of people treated; 3.4. New profiles of people in need of care; 4.5. Starting of new activities and; 5.2. Budget Reduction.

In this article we will focus specifically on Thematic Research Question 4. Activities and Services. To do this, the results offer some of the significant percentage differences in frequency of appointments that give us some indication of the major changes in the current practices of professionals in relation to the referential element of “the crisis”. This, in turn, will be interpreted in the analysis and discussion of results from the existing writings on the subject, the current socio-economic context and the history of social work.

Results

After processing the information obtained through interviews and focusing on the last of the thematic sections of the questionnaire, i.e. strategies that social workers use to combat the new social situation, there are two possible responses:

1. To continue with the current trend, that is, continue carrying out the same activities but with fewer resources. More than half of the interviewed professionals (60.8%) assume that, after the arrival of the crisis, they still do the same activities they did before albeit, on the whole, with fewer resources, both financial and human. Said activities were standardised by the respondents as is shown in Table 2, where the activities mostly referred to by professionals were preparing reports, supervision, monitoring and management of resources and the coordination with and referral to other services. The majority of respondents, as mentioned before,

state that they continue to do the same tasks in their work but that a greater demand exists for both problems and those requesting help, creating the necessity to optimise resources and promote volunteer work. When we analysed the data from the interviews, we found that 47.8% of respondents state that there has been a reduction in the budgetary resources of the entity, the percentage of said reduction being about 25% -50% of the budget received in previous years.

2. In light of this information, we also found declarations which are useful when referring to different strategies used to address this situation of economic cutbacks. When we asked professionals about the tasks performed today and those which have been recently launched since the ‘crisis’, we found that many are being ‘innovative’, with the following examples: (a) An increase in pre-employment work. 30.4% of respondents indicated that, given the lack of job opportunities and training resources, they tend to work on the social and personal skills aimed towards the workplace and orientation towards self-employment. Such actions have been categorized as the search for *training/ employment resources, pre-training workshops and Self-employment*; (b) On the other hand, we detected that Group Social Work (understanding this to be that interviewees are working with a group of people who have the same problems and working in a group can help in overcoming the problem) is being promoted. 17.4% of interviewees indicated that they are currently conducting new activities with three main objectives: first, to make the increased demand more manageable; second, to encourage the active participation of those requesting help and; finally, to encourage self-help among groups that present the same problems. These tasks have been categorized from the declarations of the professionals as therapeutic groups and the conducting of assemblies; (c) 13% of those interviewed indicated a strengthening of networking and teamwork through various strategies ranging from greater coordination between the different services and resources (public and private) to increased derivations and running collaborative actions between different institutions. These collaborations have been classified into *Collaboration with and Referrals to colleagues*; (d) An increase in activities related to vindication and social denouncement. 17.4% of professionals interviewed told us that, although still performing the same activities as before the crisis, it was true that there had been an increase in denouncements and social action plans focused on working with individuals and families, assessments, home visits, etc.. This is also linked to results in the transformation not only of the circumstances of those being treated but also of the local environment and community in which they live, an increasingly difficult environment as a direct consequence of the cutbacks in local social investment. The following graph shows the activities currently being collected after the crisis according to the declarations of the respondents and the percentage ratio of said activities according to the frequency detected in the analysis of declarations.

Table 1. *Thematic Research Questions, Interview Questions and dynamic coding information in ATLAS.TI*

THEMATIC RESEARCH QUESTIONS (TRQ)	DYNAMIC INTERVIEW QUESTIONS (DIQ)	CODING IN ATLAS TI
TRQ1. TYPE OF INSTITUTION	DIQ1. What kind of institution do you work for: public administration or Third Sector?	1.1. Type of institution: Public / Third Sector Management
	DIQ2. How long have you worked at your institution?	1.2. Time spent as professional staff: Less than 1 year; 1 to 5 years; 6 to 10 years; more than 10 years.
TRQ 2. CARE ISSUES	DIQ3. What issues do you address and which have increased?	2.1. Issues addressed 2.2. Rising issues: YES / NO 2.3. Increased Issues
	DIQ4. What new issues have emerged from the crisis?	2.4. New problems
TRQ3. PROFILES OF THOSE IN NEED OF CARE	DIQ5. What is the profile of those you have treated? Have you experienced an increase in the number of people needing care?	3.1 Profile of people cared for 3.2. Increase in people cared for: YES / NO
	DIQ6: What were the reasons for the number of people cared for in recent years?	3.3. Reasons for the increase in people cared for
	DIQ7: Have any new profiles of people in need of care emerged?	3.4.New profiles of care: YES / NO 3.5. Type of new profiles
TRQ4. ACTIVITIES AND SERVICES	DIQ8: What activities and services were offered before the crisis and today?	4.1. Activities before the crisis 4.2. Activities today
	DIQ9: Have you stopped performing any activities? For what reason?	4.3. activities suppressed 4.4. Reasons for suppressing said activities
	DIQ10: Have you started any new activities? For what reason?	4.5. Started new activities: YES / NO 4.6. Type of new activities started 4.7. Reasons for starting new activities
	DIQ11: How is the new activity maintained?	4.8. New ways of maintaining said activities
TRQ5. BUDGET SOURCES	DIQ12: What budgetary sources does your institution depend on?	5.1. Budgetary sources
	DIQ13: Have you had your budget decreased? How much?	5.2. Budget Reduction: YES / NO 5.3. Percentage reduction budget
	DIQ14: How has this reduction affected the activities you carry out?	5.4 Consequences of budget reduction

Source: *Prepared by the authors.*

Table 2. *Activities performed by social workers before the crisis and percentages by frequency in declarations.*

ACTIVITIES BEFORE THE CRISIS	DATA PERCENTAGE
Writing Reports	39.1%
Supervision / monitoring	30.4%
Resource Management	26.1%
Collaboration with / referral to colleagues	26.1%
Internal coordination	21.7%
Planning	17.4%
Social/family study	17.4%
Family Interviews	13%
Prevention	8.7%

Source: *Prepared by the authors*

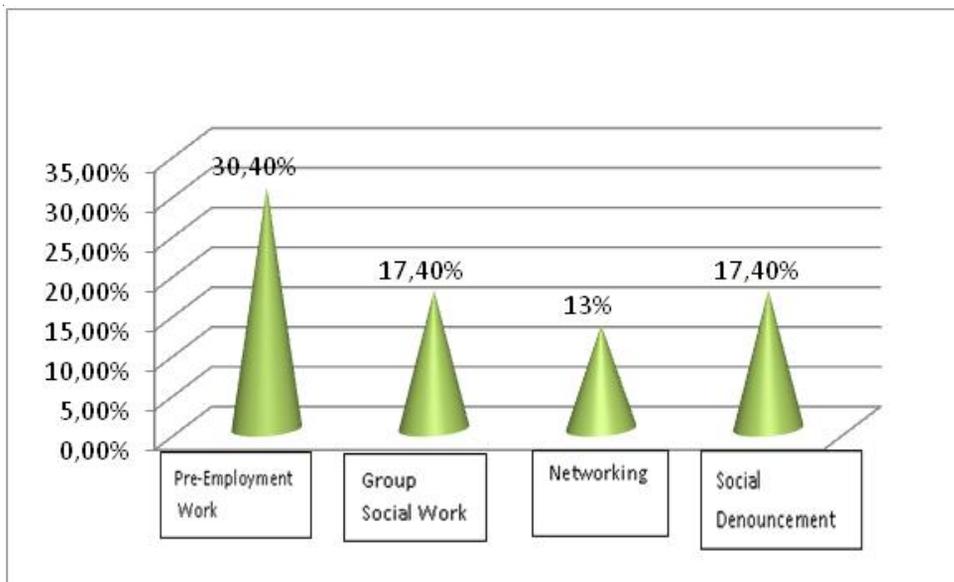


Figure 1. *Activities after the crisis*

Source: *Prepared by the authors*

Overall, we could say that we have noticed, in the analysis of the declarations of the social professionals on which our research is based, a shift in professional practice from highly individualized social work typical of the previous era in which the professional felt responsible for solving the problems of each and every one of the people who came to his office, to group and community social work, in which social workers attempt to exploit and stimulate the social capacity of

individuals and organizations and seek the active participation of those being treated in the group.

Discussion

After analysing the results obtained in this investigation, three axis of reflection arise which we will use to discuss the current state of the social work profession.

Innovation in Social Work is actually a return to the origins (the foundations, the rationale) of the profession.

Analyzing the declarations of social work professionals who have been interviewed, we observed that many of the issues they raise are issues like innovation that already appeared in the declarations of social reformers and the founders of social work. In Table 3, we propose a comparison between two accounts, that of the current professional and that of founders of the profession. In this respect we believe that it is worth looking back and rescuing (professional) social work given the nature of society and why the discipline was created. Ultimately, as Barrera *et al.* (2013: 126) declares, “*We have the impression that Social Work is fulfilling the myth of the eternal return (...) and that the current situation is promoting a return to its origins. Obviously history does not repeat itself, but sometimes social phenomena are very similar, although the contexts are others*”.

Social Work is more than just running errands and managing resources

Without forgetting everything positive that has resulted from the institutionalization of social work, such as self-criticism, we argue that precisely this institutionalization has been, by and large, the cause of a certain relaxation by professionals as well as a drift toward the individualized and systematic social work focused on managing resources and services predesigned by institutions. There are a lot of studies and research that point to this. In research conducted by Ballesteros *et al.* (2013) on the functions performed by social workers in Spain, the prevalence of bureaucratic functions over all others is found. “81.8 percent of professionals recognize that their work is connected in some way or other to the conduct of bureaucratic-administrative tasks that are not directly related to Social Work” (Ballesteros *et al.*, 2013: 130). This fact had already been shown by other research and previous studies such as Mendía (1992), Hernández (1991), Rossell and Pellegrero (1995) or Cintora Sanz (2001). Along the same lines, Lima (2009) notes the need to break with the trend of excessive bureaucracy and to encourage the prevention of social problems, global intervention, mediation and the recovery of the community dimension of social work, to break the chain of “immediate product = satisfied customer” (Lima, 2009:30). In fact, the daily lives of many

social workers have become a methodological cookbook that gives security and confidence to the social professionals. But the cause and effect models based on what Borgman (1984) called the “device paradigm”, even though there is evidence of their success, are not sufficient (Mora, 2012).

The obligation to verify the needs of those receiving care has led to social workers focusing much of their efforts on bureaucratic tasks and constant processes of social control, distancing their work from educational processes and more appropriate changes to the profession. However, this reality is seen not only in Spain, but in many other countries. Specifically, Stataham (2009) refers to the Social Work Task Force 2009 report to indicate that social workers do not have enough time “to devote directly to the people they want to help, and feel tied up in bureaucracy”. Social intervention must have its essence in reflection in order to create real policies (Mora, 2012) and so we believe that social work, by its nature, can, and perhaps should, be separated from the institutional (and legalistic) approach to a more independent, creative and transformative development of the profession; focusing on values and empowerment and self-determination of individuals; enhancing the social and solidarity dimension; sensitive positions which care, comfort and pity; treating those needing assistance as equals, without prejudice and with an open mind; censoring and denouncing abusive behaviour to themselves and others.

Recovery of Group and Community Social Work

Many of the “new strategies” being carried out by professionals due to the lack of resources (by this we mean an activity previously catalogued and used by management or the institution before the crisis) point to the recovery of group and community social work, two dimensions and branches of social work which are just as important and as powerful as normal social work but which have been dormant in recent times. It seems that the inability of many social workers to provide economic benefits for those in their care is leading them to go down the line of providing social and personal support networks. This is confounded by the importance networking has taken on today (especially for professionals working in the public administration), offering a glimpse of the resources that many people offer today and that others offer, who, in many cases, were completely ignored or invisible before. It seems logical that in the current state in which we find ourselves, as Franco and Fernández (2013) said, ‘broad-based social work “ is necessary, social work which is incorporated into the social fabric of society, which seeks cooperative and collaborative formulas with small and medium enterprises as well as informal and community sectors, which are also direct victims of the crisis and the changing model of the welfare state. We understand that these three axes which we have proposed for discussion, far from being a threat to social work, offer us an opportunity to boost and reinforce the profession, in spite of the ‘crisis’.

Table 3. Comparison between the speeches of the founders of the profession and current

PROFESSIONAL INNOVATION IN SOCIAL WORK IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY	REFORMERS CONTRIBUTIONS AND FOUNDERS OF SOCIAL WORK (Munuera (2003), De la Red, N. (1993), and Miranda, M. (2004))
1. More pre-employment work. Due to the lack of job opportunities and training resources, there is a tendency to work and strengthen social and personal skills aimed toward the workplace.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • J. L. Vives (XVI century), "From Helping the Poor" (1525) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - He discovers and upholds the principle of individual learning. - Training and retraining of all the poor who were in need of it - Integration into employment • Miguel de Giginta (XVI century), "A Remedy Treaty for the Poor" (1,576) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mercy Homes: where they tried to reinstate the poor into economic activity by giving them work in textile mills. • St. Vincent de Paul (XVII century): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - In his action plan against begging, he argues that boys will be employed in any given profession or a workshop will be built to teach them some easy work, like knitting. • Count Rumford (s S.XVII-XVIII.): "Political, Economic and Philosophical Essays" (1799): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> He established factories, like the "Military Working House" dedicated to the manufacture of clothing for the army, where poor people with the required physical strength worked.
2. Promoting Group Social Work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Samuel Barnett (XIX): Settlements Houses: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - He put forward the importance of working with the poor in groups. - He created working groups between the poor of the local neighbourhood and university students.
3. Empowerment of networking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Charity Organization Societies (COS) (1,840) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - various institutions which are involved with treatment will cooperate and collaborate. The charities will keep a list of subjects under their protection, which will mean having a central record of those being assisted and will be a guarantee against the exploiters of philanthropy. Duplication will also be avoided.
4. Increased activities related to vindication and social denouncement.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cristobal Perez de Herrera (XVI century), "Protection of the poor" (1598): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - those marginalised were not responsible for their situation. They were victims of the socioeconomic structure of that time. • Charity Organization Societies (COS) (1,840) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The origin of poverty is not the moral weakness of individuals. The structures of that time must be analysed. • Samuel Barnett (XIX): Settlements Houses: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - He puts forward the general awakening of popular interest in the social and health problems and social legislation. • Jane Adams (twentieth century): Settlements Houses (USA): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - For some it was the first war in that country against poverty led by the young middle-class, who settled in the slums trying to fight for the dignity of such people (the first activists for the equality of blacks or the feminist movement).

Source: Prepared by the authors

Conclusions

The practice of Social Work After having is going through a crucial moment. The current crisis period should re-activate a profession which during the past years has been neutralized as well as too comfortable in comparison with its origins and essence. Therefore, it is necessary that, in the face of the current socioeconomic scenario, where the Welfare State is showing its most fragile moments and the state social protection is more and more weakened, the profession must strengthen and make its way in various ways: (1) Recovering its critical and proactive role regarding social policy development; (2) Recovering the intervention spaces above the bureaucratic ones; (3) Progressing in new ways of social innovation, being creative when facing social situations in as much as many of them are completely new regarding both its contents and actors.

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