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Pragmatism and interest: Immobilism of social work in the welfare state

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Abstract
This article argues that due to the fact that working in public bodies has become the preferred field of professional development for social workers, a certain level of stagnation in theory and professional practice has been produced. The conclusions emphasize the responsibility of professionals and academics in configuring different feedback between theory, practice and ethics, which increases the possibilities of social intervention.

Keywords
epistemology, ethics, professional practice, welfare state

Some threats to the development of social work

The development of social work, both on the theoretical front and in the professional field, is a concern that has been around for some time. In the context of Western societies, the recent debate has been linked, in particular, to two phenomena:[1] on the one hand, to the direct or indirect effects that growing neoliberalism and the diminishing welfare state have on social work; on the other hand, to the challenge set by the switchover from modernity to postmodernity.[2]

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As regards the effects of the expansion of neoliberalism and the weakening of the welfare state, various potentially negative effects for social work have been highlighted: negation of welfare rights at the same level as legal and political rights (Pratt, 2006); privatization of social services (Powell, 2001); assimilation of professional roles which place social workers in the position of 'servants of an entrepreneurial ethos' (Webb, 2006: 55); new organizational structures for the provision of services which create coordination problems, generate problems of identity among social workers and favour narrow definitions of concepts like necessity (Clarke, 1996); increase of a managerialist style that leaves aside the relationship with the service user (Postle, 2001). All of these effects threaten to restrict social work's field of action and its space for reflection.

Likewise, the change in paradigm from modernity to postmodernity brings with it new challenges for social work theorists and professionals. The scepticism regarding metanarratives, that is, any supposedly omnicomprehensive explanatory framework, is one of the characteristics of this change (Lyotard, 1991). Among these metanarratives is the idea of lineal progress. In the field of social work, this was reflected in the belief that through the positivist technical knowledge of social work it would be capable of providing increasing levels of welfare to its customers. However, the positivist–modernist paradigm is being questioned (Sewpaul and Hölscher, 2004; Walker, 2001). Social work needs to respond with new practices and conceptual frameworks to a society which can no longer be grasped with the theoretical and professional tools used until now. Postmodern society demands a re-examination of concepts such as otherness, power, identity, ethnicity or gender (Chambon and Irving, 1994). Even a reaffirmation of the commitment to clearly modern values such as emancipation, justice or empowerment requires in our time to be pursued via the 'deconstructive' techniques of postmodernity (Pease and Fook, 1999). However, as in all dynamic processes, there is always resistance to change. From the postmodern perspective, it is these resistances that endanger the advance of the discipline and the profession. Nevertheless, this does not imply that postmodern postulates must be welcomed with open arms (Parton, 1994). The positive contributions that postmodernity can bring must be interpreted from a critical standpoint.

With the general lines of this debate as the background, this article focuses on the social work performed from the public institutions. The objective is to present the arguments via which social work faces a danger of stagnation as a result of a risk which complements those which the abovementioned literature has identified (negation of welfare rights, privatization of social services, assimilation of professional roles, new organizational

structures, increase of a managerialist style). On the one hand, this risk constitutes a potential risk which goes against the increasing neoliberalism-diminishing welfare state binomial. That is, it is a risk which becomes more evident as the welfare state is consolidated. On the other hand, it is a risk which is rooted in the hyper-individuality that underlies postmodern societies. Social workers are as exposed as any other person to the seduction of this hyper-individuality; therefore, it is in the attitudes and behaviours of social work professionals and academics where we must first look for those responsible for the state of development of the discipline and the profession.

In short: the hypothesis that we will discuss is that the development of social work runs the risk of becoming stagnated due to a) the pragmatic behaviour of social work professionals aimed at ensuring that by performing their professional duties they are not coming into conflict with the institutions for which they work, and b) academic training aimed at reinforcing this type of professional behaviour.

Hyper-individuality as the context

The most significant representatives of literature on postmodernity have identified aggravated individuality as a central characteristic of Western societies of our time (see Bauman, 2000; Lyotard, 1991, for example). This context of hyper-individuality (Lipovetsky and Charles, 2005) becomes a cultural trait which shapes everyone's attitudes and behaviour.

The studies carried out by Triandis (1988, 1995) on different societies reveal four characteristics associated with individualist attitudes. The people who have this type of attitudes are: a) people who define themselves more in terms of their individual attributes rather than in interdependent terms (e.g. member of x tribe or y religion); b) their relationship with others is based more on rational calculations (cost–benefit) than on socio-emotional aspects; c) the objectives that these people pursue are independent from those pursued by the group they ascribe to; d) their behaviour is mainly based on their personal attitudes and on the perception of their needs.

The following example illuminates this idea. At present, in various European countries a very peculiar television programme format is proving to be a great success: a relevant politician in a live television studio faces questions from a group of people chosen using representative sociological criteria. The politician in question comes face to face with the examination of a 'microsociety' constituted ad hoc. This way citizens have the opportunity to present before politicians the problem that the former feel are important

from their individual perspectives. By observing the use the citizens make of this opportunity, we can suggest that in most citizens there is a transposition between problems experienced and general problems. For instance, from the socio-demographic characteristics of the questioner, the theme of the question is relatively predictable: young people asking about housing, foreigners about immigration or widowers about pensions.

The fact that each individual questions as a matter of public priority certain issues and not others, and that the criteria used for this is how it affects them personally, has important significance in the view of a society understood as a shared project. Our awareness of individuality has reached such an extent that we are incapable of seeing beyond a self-referential view of our problems. This means that one person's vindications are formulated totally independently from the vindications of others. The individual does not exercise any kind of civil responsibility which assumes (critically, of course) that in a context of a lack of resources not all the particular interests can be fulfilled at the same time.

This is the framework of individuality in which we find ourselves, a context in which each individual wants the common good – as long as it does not harm their personal well-being in the slightest. That said, we can now ask ourselves how this framework of hyper-individuality affects social workers seen as individuals of the present. Because, let's not lose sight of this: if we accept this apocalyptic present, we must also consider the social workers as individuals with interests.

Pragmatism and interest under the welfare state

In all Western democracies the fundamental substrate of a certain social responsibility of the state with its citizen persists, even at a very basic level. The states' need to articulate a public network of social protection (larger or smaller depending on the case) has granted social work its own privileged space in professional development.

The temptation to link the future of social work *exclusively* to the future of the welfare state is understandable. As highlighted by Ife (1997), the fact that a large number of social workers work in public agencies links their future to the future of these agencies in some way. However, in our opinion, this does not mean that the survival of social work is linked exclusively to the consolidation of the welfare state: first, because social work existed before the configuration of the welfare state and, second, because social work currently exists in socio-political contexts in which the welfare state is only a remote reference. The relationship between social work and the welfare state is much more complex than the idea that under a consolidated

welfare state, social work can aspire to being fully developed. Surviving is not the same as being capable of being fully developed. The welfare state provides social workers with a privileged environment for their professional performance, the institutional environment. However, at the same time, this is precisely what makes it difficult for the social worker to question the structure.

From our perspective, social work capable of being fully developed is social work which observes its professional practice and its referential theoretical frameworks from a critical attitude. This stance places the emphasis, in the words of Gray and Webb (2009: 77), 'on being critical as a crucial disposition and in relation to existing practices, organizations and ideas. It draws attention to the value of using criticism as a capacity to contrast, reformulate or challenge existing practices'. This stance has been consciously taken to an epistemological level by different critical approaches which have highlighted the 'excessive' emphasis that social work practice has placed on the social integration of individuals, without questioning the influence of the structures in which they are inserted. For instance, currents such as critical practice or anti-oppressive social work (Adams et al., 2002; Dominelli, 2002) have made a strong appearance, and, beyond the discovery of 'new' social groups (women, old people, homosexuals, ethnic minorities, the disabled) which are the object of social protection, they give importance to the effects of the structures on these groups and focus their criticism on the same professional practice of social work.

Not all social workers have taken this type of criticism personally. In our understanding, this is due to a certain positioning of the profession as a result of an equal mixture of professional pragmatism and corporate interest:

1) As regards pragmatism, this stance of social workers would not be based mainly on philosophical pragmatism (see Shook and Margolis, 2006), but rather on a pragmatic attitude (in the ordinary sense of the word) in the light of problems in daily professional practice: doing what they can within the framework of the existing limitations. Epistemologically speaking, the type of critical proposals, such as those highlighted above, are still identified excessively with radical or revolutionary semantics in which professional practice in general has never been at ease. With the exception of Jane Addams (see Hamington, 2004), the pioneers of social work based their practice on a type of relationship with the socio-political structures of that period with a relative degree of collaboration.

At this time, nobody can deny the importance that Josephine Shaw Lowel, Beatrice Webb, the Barnetts, Octavia Hill or the omnipresent Mary

Richmond had on improving the quality of life of the lower classes of the time. However, set out in a highly ideologized historical context (socialism, workers' struggle), we cannot deny the mainly palliative character of their actions. Once again, the aim is not to underestimate the contribution of these figures; our aim here is to highlight that in the close origins of social work the stance of its main figures was rarely based on markedly controversial views in the individual–structures relationship. Therefore, it is not surprising that in the 21st century social workers end up pragmatically leaning more towards the possible than towards the desirable: aspiring to improve a daily practice which, however, surrounded by its own bureaucratic inertia, barely enables a time for self-reflection and much less for critical questioning.

This is the context in which criticism appears on the role of social workers in social reproduction and their small involvement in a more profound change in society (Healy, 2001). These contributions enrich social work as an academic discipline but find it hard to permeate daily practice (Stephney, 2006). Professional practice requires pragmatic theories, that is, theories that can be applied by taking into account the institutional context in which they are to be carried out. For this reason, social work from the public bodies can be coherently based on theories which exclusively place on the individual the responsibility of their problems; however, it tends to avoid other approaches which emphasize the influence of social structures when explaining the causes of social deprivation. Without limiting ourselves to the field of work in institutions, what is clear is that some theories have adapted better than others to the practice of social work. In this sense, from the analysis of predominant daily professional practice, Payne (1995) suggested the existence of a basic paradigm of social work. This basic paradigm would be largely based on derivations from the psychodynamic paradigm. This is consistent with the preference for clinical practice identified, at least in the Anglo-Saxon environment (Midgley and Jones, 1994).

Therefore, the professional development of social workers in institutions would be guided towards a pragmatism articulated through theories that do not call into question the social workers' status or their role within the institution. The danger of an alternative scenario is obvious: the questioning of structures implies the questioning of the same professional identity of the social worker. Authors who have attempted to assess the application potential of theories with a controversial core in institutional contexts have noticed the dangers that this can imply for the professionals themselves. For instance, for the effective introduction of anti-oppressive practices in the context of the provision of social services from welfare state institutions, it has been highlighted that 'the foreseeable result of this is that a fracture is produced between an increasingly more critical theory and a practice which,

as it cannot carry out this theory, will lead to ethical dilemmas, stress, anxiety and nihilism for the professionals' (Salcedo, 2001a: 22).

2) In our discussion thread, the professional pragmatism presented here has a clear origin which is personal and corporate interest. Once a professional status has been reached which was unthinkable at the origins of the profession, the profession now focuses on defending that space acquired. This is where the struggle appears between social workers and social educators, nurses, psychologists, sociocultural coordinators and other professions which may carry out similar tasks.

With this we return to our starting point: an individualized society according to personal and group interests, but not necessarily general interests. Social work as a profession which has been mainly carried out in public bodies becomes an amalgam of individuals who combine their own interests. Among these interests, preference would be given to their consolidation within the institutions and not to questioning them.

The profession has travelled a great distance to reach a relatively comfortable place, which finds it inserted in public welfare bodies. To now ask social workers to throw themselves into the void of questioning which type of practice those institutions promote is to ask more than they are likely to be willing to do, particularly if by doing so it would place their job in jeopardy.

On the other hand, we must not forget that the public bodies in which the social workers work, respond to the functions of social protection provided by the state with the democratic legitimacy of the citizens. That is to say, the citizens provide a social mandate in these institutions to ensure they promote general welfare. Even so, on numerous occasions this social protection work creates ethical dilemmas among the different players in the process (user, social worker and institution). In this sense, Banks (1997) identifies three ethical models of professional practice, which focus the ethical dilemmas in a different way: the professional model gives more importance to the users' right; the bureaucratic model gives more importance to the duty to perform the tasks pre-set by the institution to which the social worker belongs; and finally, the committed/radical model gives more importance to the social workers' commitment to social change. Obviously, on many occasions the differentiation between these three models is vague. However, a global analysis of the predominant action of the social worker in public welfare bodies makes it possible to identify what Salcedo (2001b: 145) calls a 'public conception of professional responsibility'. According to this conception, as the social institutions are in charge of promoting general welfare, the primary responsibility of the social workers would lie in meeting the duties that their public bodies

establish. With this, the social worker has the perfect ethical 'excuse' to always act in line with their institution's orders.

The theoretical and practical immobilism of social work

From what we have stated until now, very important consequences emerge. One, which we have already mentioned, is the unlikely implementation of certain practices that criticize, to a greater or lesser extent, professional practice or the employing institutions. The second consequence, connected to the previous one, is related to the training process of social workers, fully focused on a 'successful' integration within a public institution for social protection. In some countries with a relatively well-established Welfare State these two consequences articulate an immobilist self-reproduction of the social work which has developed strong roots in both the academic field and in the institutionalized professional field. The Spanish case provides a good example of this process, which in one way or another is also produced in other countries where the social protection network is high.

After the end of the dictatorship in Spain, from the 1980s successive democratic governments gradually introduced a system of public social protection which covers all sectors of the population. Social workers have become an important part of this system, introducing themselves into the administrative structure through which the state provides services and guarantees social rights characteristic of the welfare state. In order for this integration to be as unproblematic as possible, both the professionals and the academics have not hesitated in making a very specific interpretation of the Deontological Code, an interpretation which is both legitimate and strategic.

The profession's Deontological Code was approved in Spain in 1999. Article 2 of the Code, regarding the social workers' functions, states that 'social workers are responsible for planning, designing, calculating, applying, assessing and modifying the social services and policies for individuals, groups and communities' (Consejo General de Colegios Oficiales de Trabajo Social y Asistentes Sociales, 1999).

The strategic and self-interested interpretation is produced when, in the light of this allusion that the Deontological Code makes with regard to the functions of social workers (planning, designing, calculating, applying), the discipline and the profession want to understand that the mere fact of passing through those different phases of social intervention is the basis of its epistemological consistency. A direct consequence of this is that both

in the social workers' training period and in their later professional practice the classic intervention process (gathering information, diagnosis, planning, execution and assessment) is presented as a merely technical process, as if there were only one way of diagnosing, implementing or independently assessing the theoretical paradigm in which we set out the intervention.

This final situation, which is reached in the same way from different countries with a minimum welfare state, favours immobilism at all levels. In each country different nuances can be found; however, the range of social intervention methodologies made from the public welfare bodies is not generally vast. The academic discipline is partly responsible for this by marginalizing to a large extent those contents which do not encourage bureaucratic professional practice. The contents of social work study plans are focused on coherently responding to the functions that the social worker is later required to carry out in the framework of the welfare institutions. In Jones's (2009) words on the social workers' training process, the higher education sector is under pressure to produce graduates whose educational outcomes are gauged in terms of job readiness and task competency rather than their capacity for critical and independent thought.

The training objective appears to be to teach skills and abilities which can be applicable in 'real' professional practice. This is the premise which enables the differentiation to be made between what is considered 'useful' to be taught and what it is not 'so necessary' to cover: between technical management and critical reflection. With this the academic world responds favourably to the pressure of the context in which professional practice is generally developed. As Midgley (1997: 167) points out, based on international reviews of social work education, 'in many European countries, where social workers are employed in the public social services, social work programs must ensure that students have a sound knowledge of statutory and administrative procedures'. Therefore, it is not surprising that the criteria of efficiency, predictability, calculability and control characteristic of a so-called McDonaldization of social work (Dustin, 2007) emerge more strongly in daily practice.

In this situation that we have set out, a homogeneous corpus (theory–practice–ethics) is configured which is totally functional to the work that the social worker is expected to carry out within their institution. A homogeneous corpus based on other theories, other methodologies and another ethical approach would be just as legitimate as the previous one. However, with this alternative 'non-officialist' corpus, ethical dilemmas could eventually arise for the social worker which will cause confrontation with the institution in which they work. The social worker avoids these dilemmas

by opting for the less controversial methodologies, or they directly resolve them by taking an ethical stance in favour of their institution.

Conclusions

Neoliberalism and postmodernity can affect the development of social work. Social work's relationship with these two factors is complex. On the one hand, the only obstacle for the development of social work does not lie in the weakening of the welfare state which brings neoliberalism with it, as the welfare state can have perverse effects which also prevent this development. On the other hand, postmodernity can act as an incentive to revitalize practice and theory through critical epistemological frameworks, but at the same time it can promote individualist attitudes among social workers.

Historically, professional practice has based itself on institutional power to carry out its functions. At the present time, the fact that social workers carry out their work in public bodies which are legitimized by society to promote general welfare, means that they have sufficient ethical reasons to not question their everyday professional practice. For that reason, their work will tend to be characterized by: a) a type of bureaucratized practice; b) a traditional epistemological framework; and c) in a normative sense, a primary commitment to the institution in which they work. In the framework of the public welfare bodies, these characteristics are interrelated and eventually lead to stagnation of the discipline and the profession. An alternative theoretical and practical proposal is hampered by this homogeneous corpus which is only receptive to functional proposals with the status quo.

As we have highlighted, this stagnation is a perverse effect of the institutionalization of social work in the state's social protection network. However, by pointing this out we are obviously not suggesting that social work should mainly be developed outside of the state field. In the light of this situation, the imposing factor is for the profession and the discipline to stop hiding behind the pragmatism of theories and intervention modes that are as legitimate as others that are avoided simply due to a matter of interest.

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Notes

1. The consideration of other potential risks which are not covered here, such as some specific ones arising from globalization (see Dominelli, 2010), go beyond the scope of this article.
2. Although both phenomena have their own logic which, separately, could possibly imply a risk to the development of social work, some authors (e.g. Ife, 1997, 1999; Midgley, 1999) have highlighted the interactive effects that these two phenomena have jointly.

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