Social Worker — Paths and Identity Construction

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ABSTRACT:

The main purpose of this text is to understand the paths and the processes of identity construction of Social Workers, based on a phenomenological perspective. The research behind its arguments attempts to produce knowledge about the training (especially self--training) of Social Workers, attempting to ascertain their professional paths, the meanings that are attributed to them and the processes of their identity constructions. Within the scope of this research, still ongoing, exploratory empirical work was carried out, through interviews of a biographical nature with three senior professionals.

Simultaneously, an attempt is made to analyse the institutionalisation of the Social Services as a profession, in the historical background whereby humanitarian thinking takes on full professional legitimisation with the establishment of a new relation between the State and Civil Society.

Today, as a consequence of the fragmentation caused by the transfer of multiple services from the public sector to the private sector, growing specialisation of the functions of Social Workers and the advances made towards working in closer contact with other professionals, the following question is increasingly pertinent: what exactly does it entail to be a Social Worker?

KEY WORDS:

Self-training, Professional Identity, Professionalisation, Theoretical and Practical Knowledge, Social Service.

INTRODUCTION

This article derives from the work carried out as part of a PhD in Educational Sciences, in the specialist area of Adult Training. The research's starting point is the question of how the identities of a profession are constructed and how Social Workers are trained throughout their professional careers.

An attempt is made to identify and understand the meaning attributed to the training processes of, and by, Social Workers who are at an experienced stage of their life and professional career. This question centres the object of the research on the reflection about people and their contexts, accepting the "perspective of repositioning the subjects on the pedestal they deserve when wanting to become actors that earn independence and accept their responsibilities as regards learning and the horizons it opens to them" (Josso, 1989, p. 49).

As a Social Worker myself and seeing myself as a "practitioner-researcher" I cannot forget that the undertaking of research is a phenomenon that, having practical, methodological and epistemological implications, has essentially a social meaning.

The problem with taking part in research is linked to a rebellion of "a kind of middle class in the domain of social practices" (Berger, 1992, p. 25) who refuse to see knowledge elaborated without their involvement which treats them as the object, and which as a consequence of this rebellion, attempts to turn into a researcher of the self.

Conceiving social workers as subjects now means placing them at the heart of their own permanent training, on the understanding that all space/time has training potential. And attempting to understand the perspectives on the very processes of training and identity construction can perhaps contribute to getting to know the reference frameworks used when they intervene and how they justify their work (to themselves, to others and to society in general).

Hence, the questions that guide the ongoing research are not foreign to my own process of self-knowledge and self-training, feeding into the dynamic between stability, uneasiness and change.

What connections do Social Workers establish between theoretical knowledge and practical knowledge? In other words, what is their relation with the academic knowledge? What are their views regarding the interaction between the initial training, the ongoing formal training and the experiential and organisational learning?

How is a "critical reflexivity" constructed in the professional and in the profession? In other words, how is the "conquest of personal time" and the "transformation of perspectives" brought about?

How is the professionalism and the professional identity of these professionals formed? In other words, what skills are constructed — when, through what processes and backgrounds? What

is the relationship between the professional domain and the family domain? And at the end of the professional life cycle — what balance, crises and projects are drawn?

The research carried out up until now deepened the issue of the professional field where the Social Service is situated, namely its evolutions and paradoxes and the way it relates with Adult Training along the lines of Ongoing Education. From the methodological point of view, the starting point was the research into references that enabled a basis, upon which it would be possible to define a methodological strategy. The empirical work, still of an exploratory nature, allowed the analysis of interviews of a biographical nature as an instrument for the reconstruction of narrative identities.

The conception of identity that guides this reflection views human action as something that is constructed in face-to-face communication with others, and not strictly commanded by imposed regulations and social values, acknowledging the active participation of the subjects in the construction of their identity.

The characteristics of social work explain, in part, the structural difficulty that social workers have in describing what they do, a difficulty that is linked to the construction of the practices, in which the construction of the object is profoundly connected to the strategies of action.

Social Service activities are carried out in the register of the relationship (Dubet, 2002) and language. As a symbolic practice, the action involves the articulation of four domains, identified by Autés (1999, p. 246), "subjectivity, identity, word, social facet: social work is on the limit".

Given that the professional field of Social Services is replete with paradoxes, controversies and a degree of steadfastness between Christian humanism and a "romantic anti-capitalist criticism", it is increasingly important to nurture reflection on its historical narratives, the ends and resources used, and their implications, both for society and for the professional body.

SELF-TRAINING IN THE RELATIONSHIP WITH KNOWLEDGE

One of the principles defined in this new training epistemology is what is learned in all circumstances of life, intentionally or not, whereby formally acquired knowledge at school (which continues to validate knowledge) is just one small part of the global knowledge (being, thinking, doing, feeling) that each adult possesses, develops and constructs.

In this background, this perspective is above all a criticism and conception of "accumulation of knowledge" and the defence of closer interrelations between initial training and continuous training. Hence, the training is constructed "by critically reflecting on the practices and constant (re) construction of a personal identity. Therefore it is extremely important to endow the person with and lend status to the knowledge derived through experience" (Nóvoa, 1991, p. 23).

Hence, the starting point is the concept that production in life, through the appropriation of the training processes, accompanies the changes and the production of the Social Worker profession.

This perspective opens up huge potential, namely with regard to a recent field of research that seeks to understand the knowledge acquired by adults at work or in non-formal or informal contexts, with special focus on the role of reflected experience and the role of the subjects in "controlling" their own training process.

In the field of Educational Sciences, which is a gateway to the ongoing research, I am particularly interested in the articulation between the social and the psychological, through the grasping of individual and collective paths, simultaneously viewed as puzzles, focused on the issue of finding out how individuals learn and how time is related to change and learning.

The choice within the possible adults of Social Workers was linked to endogenous reasons (being peers perhaps I can understand them and they can understand me better, in a process that also intends to be self-training) and exogenous reasons, because, at a time of the weakening of the Welfare State and the respective social policies, with consequences namely at the level of practices and employment of these professionals, an effort is made to understand

what "profession" we are dealing with which, despite everything, has constructed a history that is diversified and today discusses the future possibilities beyond the impossible utopia of humanising a capitalism that is increasingly less able to be humanised.

In the opinion of Lesne and Minvielle (1988), training, understood as an organised and intentional process, corresponds to a particular and partial aspect of a continuous and multi-faceted process of socialisation that coincides with the professional trajectory of each one. Hence, the production (and the change) of the professional practices takes us to the process of professional socialisation, lived in the working contexts in which a training dynamic and an identity construction process go hand in hand in time and space.

Historically, the profession of Social Worker "was not recognised and identified as contributing to the production of specific knowledge, but by the way Social Workers acted in social situations, how they carried out their institutional powers and the policy of the service they were part of, intimately linked to social policies" (Martins, 1999a, p. 48). The same author adds that "social workers were not expected to master the social phenomena and processes or take part in the production of knowledge, but they were expected to take action and put the knowledge produced by the social sciences to use. The social service professional is therefore designed to act on and not produce knowledge, positioned in the social division of work that separates producers of knowledge and actors on the social reality" (Martins, 1999a, p. 48).

In line with the technical Social Service model of the 1960 and 70s, Social Workers were asked to come up with ways to intervene that provide new answers to worsening social situations. The work concerning the development of new skills and the planning and study/research of communities should be highlighted.

The initial training of social workers, although coming under the influence of different epochs, models and contexts, was based in general, until the mid 80s, above all on concepts, presentation of products and results of the research process into different areas of the social sciences. However, the next step — transmitting the results of the production and the disclosure of these sciences — never came

about given that the social worker was not trained to investigate, and even less so to master the process of construction of knowledge itself.

According to the perspective of the Ongoing Education Movement, it is possible to overcome the restrictions of the conceptions based on a rational approach of science, which deems that knowledge is based on certainties and on established and universal references, seeking the "objective" knowledge and the "domination of the world at the service of the development of man".

In the light of the hermeneutic and interpretative paradigm, all human action carries meaning and can only be understood and interpreted based on historical and cultural contexts, valuing knowledge as the local and particular.

On this theme one should recall the words of Rui Canário in tackling what changes took place in training between the 1970s and 90s: "With regard to training, the fundamental change lies in the shift from the qualification model to the skill model. We are, according to Carré and Gaspar (1999, p. 7), in the midst of an authentic 'cultural mutation' which, in less than thirty years, led to the transition from a 'social and humanist vision of ongoing education' to an 'economic and realist vision of production of skills'. If the qualification model matches a precise level of training, the skills model takes us, in the 1990s, to the requirement for employability" (2000, p. 37). He adds "It is at the level of the relationship with knowledge and the relations of power that essential educational choices are made and one justifies the talk of innovation and analysing and discussing the 'how' and the 'why'? Production, on the one hand, of added pertinence, and on the other, of added democracy, today emerge as the final and structural goals of the production of innovations in education and in training" (Canário, 2000, p. 45).

What is left to find out is whether the qualification of the Social Service professionals (at the academic and professional level) is leading to better practices and organisational change so that the professionals themselves can learn more.

Thanks to the influence of the views and production of the Chicago School, with the changes that occurred post 1974 in the academic degree and its wide-ranging implications, and thanks to the increase, in the 90s, of organisations researching into

Social Services, conditions were created to enable research, in several different forms, to contribute to the affirmation and identity of the Portuguese Social Services.

To illustrate these positions I reflect on the synopses of interviews carried out with three Social Workers between March and August 2006, which led to narratives centred on their respective professional paths.

All the narratives clearly outlined the importance of learning throughout one's professional life, from the formal point of view (seeking post-graduate training, or a second degree), and from the non-formal and informal point of view, whereby the interviewees mention learning with peers, in contexts and with other agents in the environment.

These paths of ongoing training are not always perceived by the interviewees as sources of knowledge, as one of the interviewees mentioned when talking about becoming aware of this factor during a Master's Degree: "it was a case of gradually learning and realising that a person has learned a lot more during one's professional career that one thinks. (...) And in the midst of all those people I was astounded. I always knew more than I thought".

On the other hand, the theoretical fragility of Social Service is viewed by the three interviewees as a handicap.

Rita[1], another interviewee, says: "(…) and then they've got a complicated aspect which is they think they know it all. We don't know everything. Things are brushed over. And maybe it's because of this that we know so little."

Fernando[2], meanwhile, criticised the empirical nature of the profession: "It's practical insofar as a set of tasks are carried out, and we get people moving, but we don't know why or where".

The assumption here is that the training processes are not independent of the life story of the subjects, and "training oneself" occurs in strict connection with this life story and with the knowledge and global experience that people have and manage to mobilise in their training. According to Claude Dubar (1997), the importance of the professional performance is obvious as the decisive factor in the process of production of the professionalism, with the process of identity construction, in this perspective, the result of the confrontation between the biographical path and an empirical action context.

If we argue that the problem of change (individual and collective) in the professional practices is, above all, a problem of professional socialisation, then this change supposes the development, in the work context of a training and identity construction dynamic that corresponds to reinventing new ways of professional socialisation, whereby this reinvention is only possible in the action. As a result these training processes will be instituted as intervention processes in the work organisations (Canário, 1998, p. 19).

In this perspective the social workers must not, as the saying goes "throw out the baby with the bathwater". In other words, despite the recent legitimisation of a knowledge conquered through the academic route, one cannot forget the domain of experiential learning that is viewed in the sense "of the ability to solve problems, but accompanied by theoretical training and/or symbolisation" (Josso, 1989, p. 163).

As such, the status attributed to experience in the learning and training process is not merely a place for application of theoretically acquired knowledge or material to facilitate the coding of disciplinary knowledge, but rather it is considered, when reflected upon, as a source and producer of learning, insofar as in recognising and valuing what experience teaches us, value is assigned to this knowledge and the production of knowledge becomes possible (Couceiro, 1994).

THE CONSTRUCTION OF CULTURAL IDENTITY

My reference point as a definition of Identity is the result which is simultaneously stable and provisional, individual and collective, subjective and objective, biographical and structural, of the various processes of socialisation which together construct individuals and define institutions (Dubar, 1991). In this conception Identity encompasses representations of the subjects about themselves and about others, thus building a permanently interacting dynamic in which the representations of oneself and an observation of the other take place (Dubar, 1997).

The concept of identity therefore points towards a dynamic interaction between the individual and the group he belongs to, and in parallel the representation that both have of the group and its social position.

Professional identity, in turn, simultaneously means the image that the individual possesses of the self and the way he defines himself through reference to the institutions that surround him, namely the group he belongs to (Dubar, 1998). The working space translates into a permanent recursion between the individual and social dimensions of Identity. In Sainsaulieu's opinion (1997), Identity consists of a field of investment (practices, work, knowledge, relations), in the course of which transactions are made between the individual and society.

Given that the social worker profession is extremely permeable (almost Chameleon), the professional performances have undergone profound change in an attempt to generate value (and reproduce values) for each historical circumstance and time.

Knowledge and its values are taken from different fields, constituting a profoundly eclectic reference point, but, more often than not, compromised with maintaining of the social order.

In the empirical work carried out, albeit of an exploratory nature, and specifically with regard to the identity (or identities) of the profession, the range of positions is wide-ranging, although not antagonistic.

One of the interviewees, Fernando, says: "Social Service is something so open, so humanist, that it ends up collapsing. You don't have any support, where can the staff get a foothold?" adding "Social Service didn't give me great models. Perhaps if I had models to work on, we could have gone far!"

Rita says "(…) if one thing defines our field it's the mixture, it is being inside it. If you can't get inside, close up, you have nothing to grasp".

Maria[3] states, in a more individual approach, that "(…) along the same lines that made me choose Social Service, in other words enabling people to be masters of their own destiny. Enabling people to have the right to their life project. Enabling people to feel that setbacks are temporary and not definitive".

In the two women interviewed professional identity seems to have heavily contributed to their processes of personal construction; the same cannot be said for the male interviewee, Fernando.

Indeed, Rita explicitly states: "Even if we are not working, even if we are on holiday… we have this in our bones. Wherever we go we can't see with other eyes".

The construction of identity is, as such, a process of objective and subjective transactions. The objective transactions (where attribution predominates) seek to blend the identity of oneself to the identity of the other. The subjective transactions (or internal to the individual) vary between the need to maintain earlier identifications and the desire to construct for oneself new identities in the future.

In this perspective, the identity constructed by the individual in the course of the process of socialisation can be analysed alternately as an interiorised product of the objective earlier social conditions and as an expression of the more subjective particular desires, but is necessarily marked by the duality between the biographical and the relational process.

All the interviewees pointed out situations of "empowerment" in their professional careers, often translated into professional mobility in search of more satisfying contexts and performances and a certain feeling of autonomy, as professionals. On the other hand, the positive images outweigh the negative ones in all the interviews.

However, when their narratives are generalised and they talk of others, the three interviewees point out situations/feeling of lack of power and independence.

Maria says: "But I'm very sorry about way the State appropriated the profession. Because I think this has weakened it. (…) It had made Social Workers employees."

Rita uses passive metaphors such as "blotting paper" and "virus", as if the profession severely reduced options:

> I think our traits are a little like "blotting paper". Social Service is therefore a virus that we catch and are never cured of. Afterwards the symptoms appear, sometimes coughing, other times a sore throat, but it's here — it's an accumulated virulence.

Fernando says:

> We have been manipulated, it's the weakest link, we have let ourselves be manipulated in political terms, and we haven't put our foot down...
>
> It also has to do with a culture... of consensus... at all cost. Divisions must not be created...

Following on from this I cannot resist associating the concept of "non-places"[4] to the possibility that the profession of Social Worker has become a "non-profession", having only itself for a reference, without catering for the commitment towards an ethical, historic and political facet and a model of society compromised with the principles of human rights and social justice.

> What is new is not that the world does not have, or has little, or less, meaning; it's rather that we feel explicitly and intensely the need to attribute it a meaning every day: give a meaning to the world, and not the certain village or certain lineage. This need to lend meaning to the present, if not the past, is the counterpoint to the vast abundance of events that correspond to a situation that we can call "over-modernity", in order to deal with its essential modality: excess (Augé, 2005, pp. 28-29).

This "excess" that Augé speaks of, with theories, events, things, perspectives, sources of information, etc, in its different modalities, accentuates paradoxes and institutes the complexity. According to this author, the symbolic deficit and the excess of images lead to the disappearance of the "thinking of the other", and especially the hiding of the conflict replaced by the consensus and by its opposite, "exclusion".

As Sousa Santos (2005) states, the excess of conflicting theories about what still is, constitutes simultaneously a theoretical deficit and a huge challenge. In the entire process I felt the intertwining of this deficit and this challenge, but in an initial approach I sought to question myself through the theoretical contributions of the various authors and through the narratives of the interviewees.

PROFESSIONALISATION

The permanence of the notion of help as the overriding principle of the Identity of the social worker has been ever-present, even after the Social Service practice was inserted into the scope of social policies, which have as their basis the democratic model anchored on Human Rights — a citizen man, now viewed as the bearer of rights and duties.

In the internal movement of construction of new professional identities, the Social Service again nears the Social Sciences and assesses its capacities to reposition itself in the inevitability of sharing the process of social intervention, without "territories of protected intervention".

In the background of the successive crises of its trajectory, inasmuch as an identity stigmatised as mediator of a conformist thinking, this idea is pushed aside and Social Service today recovers the internal diversity and opportunities of construction of new forms of participation in the process of social change.

For an occupation to earn the status of profession several facets have to be taken into account, namely: "its history, its theoretical and practical knowledge transmitted longitudinally, basic and specialised training throughout life, its legitimacy in terms of regulation of the activity and acceptance by society" (Carvalho, 2003, p. 39).

The Social Service has a history and specific training, but the question of specific knowledge and its legitimacy continues to be problematic and far from consensual, inside and outside the professional body. Hence its status as a profession is not yet pacifically accepted, and even less so its status as a discipline. Assuming that concepts are never neutral, they are dependent on being theoretically anchored, which will also defend the argument of whether or not Social Service is a profession.

A sociological approach of "profession" takes us back to the times of the Industrial Revolution, where the term was used to counterbalance the "craftsman" label. Up until then a given product was designed and produced by somebody who oversaw the whole process from start to finish. The growing social division of work led to increasing specialisation that sprouted multiple professions and organisations.

The functionalist theories, distinguishing profession from occupation, advocate the concept of

profession when there is a recognised organisation of a community, occupying a high social and/or organisational position and a long training period.

Despite the fact there are specific types of characterisation of the profession, one can identify, according to Dubar (1997), common aspects at play: ethical and deontological principles to regulate the professional activity; scientific knowledge, as a guarantee of competence and specialisation of a professional group. These principles and this knowledge serve, simultaneously, to protect the field, constituting a barrier towards indiscriminate entrance of individuals into the profession.

The advocates of interactionist theory, in turn, put socialisation at the core of the analysis of the realities of work and are distinguished by characterising the professions through valuing the dynamic interactions, deeming the biography and interaction important elements and also considering the work activities as processes, at the same time, of dynamic relations with others and subjectively significant.

These processes include aspects linked to *knowledge*, by institutionalising the formal knowledge, and *power*, through control of and in work.

According to Dubar (1997), so as to construct and enable recognition of a profession, two historical roads of the relation between *power* and *knowledge* can be identified:

- Through the initiative of the State that creates the "school certificates" and regulates access to social statuses and professional groups in a monopoly;
- Through the collective action of the social elites, which enable recognition of a discipline endowing it with cognitive devices and practices and obtaining from the political powers the monopoly of the market for the profession.

Clearly in the history of the Social Service profession one understands that these roads are not mutually exclusive, let alone unconnected in time.

In this case, and given the particularity of the Portuguese situation, it is difficult to say where the action of the elites ends and where the action of the State begins.

If, from the historical point of view one can mention that the construction and recognition of the profession was carried out in an initial phase through the pressure from the elites and only much later did the State regulate the certification, it is also the case (indeed, which is not particular to the Social Service) that the State played a crucially important role in the process underpinning the birth and development of the profession, namely in the aspects linked to its emergence, acknowledgement, legality, job market, power, prestige and the political guidelines that favour or undermine it (Negreiros, 1993).

As in other professions, the Social Worker profession can essentially be characterised through three interrelated and constantly changing dimensions: I) the professionalisation, as a socio-historical process of transformation of an occupation into a socially recognised profession; II) the professionalism, as an articulated set of knowledge, know-how and attitudes required to exercise the profession; III) the professionalism that is tied in with ethical principles and values that guide the professional work (Estrela, 2002).

The mobilisation of the concepts of profession and professional field is important to historically situate the social service profession and understand the dynamics of redefining the group currently called "social workers", which include several professional activities, different training and different qualifications (Ion & Tricart, 1985).

Costa e Silva (2007) views social work as a twofold space, through the relationship with its object and through the regulations it adheres to. On the one hand, because it has the mission of saying what society cannot or does not want to hear, show what it does not want to see, and on the other hand because it is ruled by the institutions and the representative of the populations. To sum up, it should combine the response to requests made to the services and the pure inter-subjective relation, positions that are often incompatible.

THE THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL KNOWLEDGE IN EXERCISING THE PROFESSION

I attempt to distance myself from the dualisms present in categorising the profession and I believe that the objects of knowledge are constructed through

the mutually fertile to and fro between thinking and acting and that the theoretical possibilities are enlarged whenever the reality on the ground is critically pondered.

In reflecting on the relations (often tense and undermined by contradictions and attempts at domination) between knowledge deriving from the theories and the knowledge situated in the professional practice I was confronted with need to distinguish "practice" and "action".

Viewing the action as a set of behaviours able to be observed that emerge from the practice (Jarvis, 1987), one understands, in turn, the practice as a complex system of interactions, occurring in a given environment, which in turn fit into the action and is contextualised as a set of symbols, through which the action is conferred meaning. Practice implies the occurrence of an experience and appeals for the production of new knowledge, insofar as it is a field of interactions, conflicts, judgements, power games and personal and collective transformations. As Schon (1996) points out, there is hidden knowledge in the professional act that only practice allows to be formalised.

In the wake of Barbier (1996), it is argued that the practical knowledge cannot be understood as a simple means of adapting the knowledge to the realities and the contexts, but rather as a means of re-learning in another way and assimilating the previous knowledge in its mobilisation in action. The author distinguishes the coexistence of the two theoretical parts of knowledge: one, a regulated knowledge and another, an epistemological knowledge.

In the case of social workers, if the relations between the knowledge of action, which the intervening parties give rise to in their daily work, and the pedagogical and regulatory knowledge, are relatively strong, in contrast the relations with the scientific knowledge are much more tenuous or non-existent.

Pedagogical knowledge, in aiming for transmission and abstracting to numerous aspects of practice, in particular what it contains tacitly, constitutes an illustration of practical knowledge and from this point of view it is theoretical knowledge. The regulatory knowledge, in its most elaborated forms, is proposed as a theoretical framework (in the doctrinal sense) for the practice, and as such attempts to channel and anticipate the future development,

but is integrated into the numerous elements of practical knowledge with which, to be effective, it has to be compatible.

At the extreme one can consider that the practical knowledge, pedagogical knowledge and regulatory knowledge form a single and same body of knowledge, fed by the experiences of the intervening parties. But this compound, highly contingent and in part tacit, has operational purposes and is similar to scientific knowledge, above all insofar as it intends to be explanatory knowledge about the "accountable" world.

One of the current visions of Social Service considers it necessary to redefine the profession, combining aspects of more up-to-date models, along the lines of anthropological understanding of man. This vision does not boil down to the integration of knowledge, but defends the need for a new positioning, an ethic entailing empathy, i.e. through the comprehension and respect for the conceptual logic of the subjects of intervention.

Other authors, among which Desrumaux-Zagrodnicki, describe Social Service as a "profession that has the purpose of producing changes" (1998, p. 137), through the development of social capacities.

The difficulty in recognising the "social" professions derives, according to this author, from their history (it was not a science that was born, but rather ideologies) and in being essentially a practice (training favoured learning on the ground, and the profession also evolved based on pragmatism).

This same author proposes that, for the Social Service to define itself as a profession, it should endow itself with assessment methods recognised in the scientific field. But not even this scientific qualification can solve the lack of integrated knowledge, and in itself the exposure to experience does not seem to be enough for the production of knowledge.

Today much credence is given to systematic movements that consider that social intervention implies complex decisions and action and that more generic theoretical knowledge has to be articulated with the knowledge constructed in practice. This stance has contributed to keeping a relation of externality between the theory and the reality, illustrated by the current thinking among many professionals that "the training received is very theoretical",

which may mean that the theories are not valid to solve the everyday problems. This position shows above all the ambiguity (and at time the divergence) between "understanding" and "controlling", assuming that the social workers have a deep need to control the reality and some difficulty in dealing with disorder, chaos and emptiness.

Understanding, in contrast, allows one to connect theory to practice, relating common knowledge to the theoretical knowledge and experience. In this perspective, perhaps it is not necessary to pursue the specific theory and methodology, but instead order the knowledge into theories that already exist and produce new knowledge based on research in the field, which develops concepts and makes people aware of a transdisciplinary dynamic.

CONCLUSION

I began this reflection with a question that remains open but which, along the way, allows the addition of other queries: What is the object of Social Service? Through what processes are its knowledge and practice constructed?

In attempting to find the answer to these questions one often confuses the "what" (social problem, social need), the "who" (out-of-place individual, oppressed and exploited men) the "where" (area of interaction between the individual and the environment), assigning all these terms the category of object, depending on the historical moment, the geographical area and/or ideology.

Despite these terms being elements that make up the construction of the object, they are partial aspects of a reality that involves the contemporary subject, and which one can summarise in the concept of "discomfort".

The state of want, today's social problems, failure to meet needs in many groups of the population constitute only the tip of the iceberg. It is the visible part of a social project grounded on the asymmetry of power and access to the material, cultural and social goods of most of the world's citizens. The production and reproduction of these conditions is what generates this "discomfort" which individuals cannot escape, in their condition of interdependent subjects.

Therefore, the proposal of a new object is formalised in the following manner: "all the phenomena related to the psychosocial 'discomfort' of individuals, ordered according to their socio-spatial genesis and their personal experiences" (Zamanillo, 2001, p. 141).

Certainly, as Dubar states, "the social question has not yet been solved and before all else it has to be solved. It is entirely true and it is crucial to place it at the centre of public policies. (...) Hence, the only thing left is this slow, tortuous and often disappointing process, which consists of carrying out effective social policies that make it easy to construct learning subjects, but which also act collectively so that they transform into social emancipation" (2006, p. 184).

The professional practice, in order to no longer be viewed as "repetitive, pragmatic or empirical", needs the professionals to know how to articulate the practical, regulatory and pedagogical knowledge and tie the day-to-day action in with a process of ongoing construction and deconstruction of categories that allow criticism and self-criticism of knowledge and intervention.

But, in the process of construction of Social Service (discipline and practice), the problem remains of segmentation between theory and practice, notwithstanding recognition of the need for an integrated epistemology that provides a significant theoretical framework for action.

Donald Schon (1996) tackled the issue from the point of view of a "dilemma between rigour and pertinence" and uses a very interesting metaphor to express the distinction between "the professionals from the highlands" (those who opt for a strictly technical professional practice and can make effective use of the theories and techniques coming from research) and the "professionals from low-lying land" (those who deliberately dwell on the most crucial complex problems and who, if you ask them to describe their research methods, talk of experimentation, trial and error, intuition and improvisation). Along these lines Schon identifies as two sources of the aforementioned dilemma "between rigour and pertinence": precisely the power of technical reasoning, understood as an "epistemology of practice" which is dominant; and the emergence, increasingly strongly, of certain indeterminate areas of practice that derive from the categories of technical reasoning.

The technical reasoning model, in this aspect of professional knowledge, has greatly influenced our opinion both about the professions and about the institutional relations among the research, education, and professional practice. According to this model, professional activity is a way to solve practical problems, through the application of scientific theories and techniques.

From this perspective, what defines the professions is the search to adapt its means to the ends, using the problem-solving technique based on specialised scientific knowledge. As such, it is difficult to argue that social service is a profession.

But, for the time being, the concept of "tacit knowledge" of Michael Polanyi (1967) is useful to recognise that when one learns to use a "tool" (e.g. knowing how to "read" the feelings in the somebody's face, or managing to mobilise a group without being able to explain how), this lends greater density to our initially acquired knowledge as a result of the effect produced on others present in the action.

The traditional dichotomy between "those who know" and "those who do", illustrated over years in the professional field through the divorce between academics (mainly coming from the Sociology and Economics fields) and practitioners (mainly Social Workers), is today much diminished both because of the diversification of people working on the ground and because the roles of the two classes are less stereotyped and conscientious practising reflexive professionals are now commonplace, whether they be more empirical or more theoretical.

Schon advocated that when somebody reflects on their action, they become a researcher in a practical context and can build a new theory in that particular case. In this case they do not depend on categories taken from pre-established theories and techniques, or from the separation between the means and the ends instituted in the dichotomies of technical reasoning. The theory does not have to be separated from the practice, to construct new categories of analysis and new approaches towards the phenomena in question.

The road of professional reflection is potentially one of the solutions to articulate conceptual knowledge and practice in the Social Service profession. But as Dubar pointed out (2006, p. 192). "Personal identity cannot be reduced to reflexivity", because the "I narrative" is a story that each individual relates about himself, to himself and to others, simultaneously in the search to "give meaning" to his life and in an attempt to obtain an understandable meaning for the other. In this perspective, I recall the three trends that Dubar (2006) defines as important identity incidences: "work as problem solving", "work as the carrying out of skills" and "work as a relation of service".

It is as such, through a typological analysis, that I intend to deepen the ongoing research in seeking to understand the ways of reinterpreting the references and the processes of identity construction of a profession.

Endnotes

1. Fictitious name.
2. Fictitious name.
3. Fictitious name.
4. The concept of Marc Augé (2005, p. 74) who states on the topic "The journey constructs a fictitious relation between observation and the landscape. And, if we call 'space' the practice of places that specifically define the journey, we should also add that there are spaces which the individual delves into as a spectator without the nature of the show being of any real significance for him. As if the position of spectator constituted the core of the show, as if, in the ultimate analysis, the spectator (…) was for him the show itself. (…) The space of the traveller will therefore be the archetype of the non-place. (…) we are able to rediscover the prophetic evocation of spaces where neither identity, nor relations, nor history make any real sense, in which solitude is experienced as the overcoming or emptying of the individuality, in which only the movement of images lets one predict for moments something fleeting, and which looks at the hypothesis of a past and the possibility of a future".

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