



## WHAT CONTRIBUTIONS CAN SOCIAL WORK MAKE IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY? PERSPECTIVES FROM THE USA AND SPAIN

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## ¿QUÉ PUEDE APORTAR EL TRABAJO SOCIAL EN EL SIGLO XXI? PERSPECTIVAS DESDE USA Y ESPAÑA

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**ABSTRACT:** In this article, we discuss the major challenges facing our societies, and the role social work can play as a scientific discipline and a helping profession, with particular attention to the situation in Spain and the United States.

**RESUMEN:** En este artículo, analizamos los principales retos que afrontan nuestras sociedades, y el papel que puede jugar el Trabajo Social como disciplina científica y como profesión de ayuda, prestando especial atención a la situación de España y de los Estados Unidos de América.

**KEYWORDS:** Social Work; Social Services; Social Policies.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Trabajo Social; servicios sociales; políticas sociales.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In a context of crisis and the redefinition of social policies and institutional welfare state structures in Europe and the United States (Gilbert, 2014), it is essential to explore changing trends in social work, an area that is key to the sustainability of social welfare (Reardon, 2011). Technological, economic and social changes have altered the context of social work practice as citizens face new risks, which create additional social demands (Segado Sánchez-Cabezudo and López Peláez, 2014) and institutions are being redefined (Della Porta, 2013). To grasp the implications of these developments it helps to examine them from the perspective of both users and the professionals who work in the field (Dulmus and Sower, 2012).

From the specific perspective of social policy, and more particularly social work, both perennial and new problems impact professional practice in a variety of ways:

- Sociodemographic changes modify our priorities (Scharlach and Hoshimo, 2013), immigration flows redefine our societies, and new technologies create new opportunities and risks, including new spaces of inclusion and new forms of exclusion.
- How we deal with problems institutionally is being redefined in two ways. First, the institutionalization of social work as a profession in Western countries has resulted in the bureaucratization of the profession, and the progressive specialization of social workers as techno-bureaucrats that act as intermediaries between users and the available service or resource (Dominelli and Hackett, 2012, 450); a concern which has been voiced reiteratively in conferences held at social work schools in Spain. Secondly, the processes of outsourcing and subcontracting and the redefinition of the role of public institutions in a context of economic crisis are changing social work practice, while public expenditure on social intervention programs is on the decline.
- Finally, these problems are being redefined in the context of technology: both social networks and new technological advances (from robot caregivers [López Peláez, 2014] to alert and control systems via mobile phones) require redefining traditional strategies of social intervention, while social work with groups and communities are being impacted by the Internet.

In this context, this monograph has a twofold purpose. First, to explore the changing trends in the field of social work, which requires analyzing the problems of exclusion of groups such as the elderly, youth, immigrants or families; and secondly, to focus on two specific environments: Spain and the United States. This is an ambitious project as it is the first monograph published by the leading journal *ARBOR* in the field of social work.

As part of the activities of the Koinonia research group ([www.koinonia.org.es](http://www.koinonia.org.es)), faculty members from the School of Social Welfare of the University of California at Berkeley, one of the most prestigious academic institutions in the world, and a group of Spanish professors working in the fields of social work and social services from the universities of Jaén, Murcia, Huelva and the National Distance Education University of Spain (UNED) designed this monograph in four phases. The contributors were selected in a first phase in November 2012 and given a deadline of 10 months to submit their articles. In a second phase, in September 2013, the authors sent their articles to the coordinators of the monograph for anonymous peer review. In a third phase, an international research seminar titled "International Workshop on Social Work: Future Trends in Social Work" was held at the UNED of Segovia on 11-12 December 2013<sup>1</sup>, where the articles that had been previously reviewed were presented and discussed. And finally, in January 2014, all the revised articles were submitted to *ARBOR* for a second anonymous peer review process.

We believe that social work and social services are a key element in reshaping our welfare system, and as such should be a central part of social inclusion strategies in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Featherstone, 2011). The articles contained in this monograph will provide insight into the challenges and opportunities for the development of our social protection systems in the coming years.

## 2. PARADOXES OF SOCIAL WORK IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

Historically, social work as a scientific discipline and as a profession arose in the midst of the conflicts and fragmentation that individuals, families, groups and communities suffered in industrial societies of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. At the same time initial efforts were being launched to apply scientific methods to the investigation of social reality: "the birth of social work is closely associated with the birth of the social sciences in general and arose within them with a clear mission: to be an applied discipline to bring about

change, to intervene in the social reality” (Miranda Martín, 2012, p. 40). The so-called “social question” brought to the fore new forms of poverty characterizing industrial societies. To use Jaspers’ terms, we could say that social work is a *logos*, which attempts to respond to the dissatisfaction with a world that produces anguish, and seeks to become a *technê*, a transformative technique or practice. In this sense, and as can be seen in the work of Mary Richmond (Richmond, 1917/2005), the assessment of the living conditions and circumstances of each person’s life begs the question of the processes that have led to the situation, and also the question of which life model, social model and welfare model should social work strive to achieve, and of course of the citizens themselves who use social services. Our discipline addresses processes of social degradation and exclusion with a very specific goal: to make a decent standard of life possible by combining a micro-level approach centered on citizens and their circumstances with an approach that emphasizes the need to design institutional strategies that ensure the rights of citizens, thus becoming rights and capabilities in the logic of Sen (Sen, 2010), and which obviously has a meso and macro approach in the sphere of social policies and the welfare state. The new challenges we face have led to the development of the so-called Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development, whose key objective is to link the personal to the global, the theory to the practice and the regional to the local, thus contributing to the redefinition of social policies globally (Jones and Truell, 2012).

As a social science, social work takes as its starting point the social nature of human beings: individuals who relate to one another, suffer conflict and discord, but also share experiences of solidarity and engage in collective projects. We are immersed in a society, a tradition, a history, a language, a way of being in the world towards which we act and react, thus becoming agents of change and of resistance to change at the same time. Processes of social exclusion permit us to observe each person’s relational model, their ties or their lack of ties. But we can also analyze these relational models and ties (or their absence) that develop in our institutions, in our companies, in our environment, and how we adapt to such dynamics of interaction. If, in Ortega’s words (Ortega y Gasset, 1930/1984), “I am I and my circumstance” (and as the author of *The Revolt of the Masses* noted, “If I do not save it, I do not save myself”), each of us serves as a means for the other, and our institutions are a means for developing our life project.

It is important to mention three paradoxical aspects of our societies, which directly affect our discipline and the broader field of social welfare:

- First, the progressive loss of the value of assuming responsibility for others (which implies not recognizing communal obligations), and for the institutions in which we organize ourselves with others. The exaltation of individualism and the deification of management, coupled with globalization and the technological capitalism in which we are embedded, have tarnished the image of public institutions and eroded our participation in the public realm and our sense of duty and responsibility shared with others, which has ultimately diminished our trust in institutions. In some groups, such as young Spaniards, this distrust of and detachment from public institutions and political parties has already reached very high levels (Moreno, López Peláez and Segado Sánchez-Cabezudo, 2012). The view that public investment is a cost rather than a benefit and the lack of trust in public authorities as a result of corruption and scandals have undermined the legitimacy of the welfare state and introduced an individualistic logic in which cooperation and responsibility play a secondary role. Paradoxically, this process of apparent criticism weakens our capacity for cooperation, and strengthening it becomes a goal of mediation: conflict cannot end only by destroying our opponents, it is necessary to establish mechanisms of coexistence, properly manage complex relationships, and promote the capacity for teamwork. As Etzioni states, the core tenet of the good society is that people must assume responsibility for others (Etzioni, 2004, p. XIV). And in societies where others are seen as obstacles, enemies or simply opportunities, interaction becomes increasingly difficult. This paradox can be formulated as follows: in a context in which individualism is exalted, we depend on our capacity for interaction, negotiation and agreement. Learning to cooperate involves educating ourselves to recognize the other as a citizen and in the techniques to resolve interactions with others within this epistemological framework.
- Second, and closely linked to the previous point, is economic change and its impact on the welfare state. Processes of exclusion, the demands of citizens, and the institutional structure of

the welfare state are closely intertwined. Social and economic changes affect the very model of capitalism in a market-driven society where consumption has become a norm of identity. Not only have the rules of the game and the scope of action changed (such as international financial transactions and globalization), but life expectancy has increased, new services are in demand, and the diversity of individuals and cultures is putting pressure on traditional forms of life (perhaps because these traditional patterns are no longer an undisputed norm in our societies as evidenced in the diversity of family structures [Del Fresno, 2011]). The need for a sustainable welfare state brings us to the debate on democracy and a decent standard of life, and how to organize ourselves collectively. We cannot continue to defend social measures that have proven to be ineffective over time, or protect groups with different interests, be they professional or not, who have benefited from each of the possible configurations of the welfare state. But neither can we leave public responsibility up to each individual and society; we need an effective welfare state to smooth and protect our life paths. Currently which social policies are being reformed against the backdrop of the most severe financial crisis since the 1929 crash. In this situation we must rethink ways to cope with these socioeconomic changes and ensure that the negative effects of such changes are mitigated by strengthening citizens' individual and collective capacities. Indeed, over the last decade, social work researchers have highlighted the need to restore solidarity and promote more efficient and inclusive social policies, in which the relationship between public and private responsibility is redefined and seeks a balance grounded in our capacity for cooperative action and involves both the public and the private (Gilbert, 2004). In this environment, the existence (or lack) of relational skills and cooperation become a clear predictor of inclusion (or exclusion). This paradox can be summarized as follows: socioeconomic changes threaten the welfare state and the society that has made them possible. To address these changes, we need to strengthen our relational skills, which clearly entails a culture of dialogue and mediation (Gorjón and López Peláez, 2013), in which problems and issues are not dealt with solely in individual

terms. We need to structure our society in such a way as to make this possible, and transform, not dismantle, the welfare state.

- The third paradox of societies of mass consumption involves the problem of recognizing our shared identity. The logic of identity defined by opposition to the other (the corrosive "us-against-them" thinking) so brilliantly analyzed by Sennett highlights the importance of developing cooperative skills and a model of identity that integrates others and allows us to engage freely in social interaction. But we can only cooperate, regardless of our feelings of sympathy or empathy, if we recognize the dignity of others and establish formulas and rites; a specific model of interaction that facilitates cooperation. For this reason, it is necessary to analyze processes of recognition and the specific techniques or skills which can be used in social work to enhance personal, group and community development. One of the issues that often arises in divorce processes, for example, is the importance of not seeking to destroy a spouse or children because in that process of negation we also *negate* ourselves. We must reach agreement as we have children in common and share a common past, but we must also protect our legitimate interests, without negating the other, which does not mean being submissive. One aspect that characterizes social work practice is the use of relational models in which domination and power (which are always present) are tempered by the recognition of others and respect for their identity. It is about strengthening the so-called "dialogic exchange", in which spaces of interaction and cooperation are created to facilitate exchange and the attainment of particular goals, while respecting the personal identity of others (Sennett, 2012, pp. 127-128). Although our social lives are immersed in personal consumption and the logic of "keeping up with the Joneses", paradoxically we must relate with others to be both competitive and competent. Indeed, what has become evident through social work practice is the importance of recognizing, in objective terms, the needs, projects and desires of people who interact and analyzing the rites or forms of behavior that facilitate such interactions, both to compete and to collaborate. In short, in a mass society that deifies individuals and exalts the pursuit of individual goals, we

need to design better models of interaction to manage our relationships more effectively, which is the first step towards becoming autonomous subjects.

### 3. WELL-BEING AND SOCIAL WORK FROM A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE: THE UNITED STATES AND SPAIN

As we have seen in the analysis of these three paradoxical situations, social work as a discipline is closely linked to social welfare. Our discipline begins when research on social problems and the dynamics of social exclusion involving individuals, groups and communities goes beyond assessment to engaging in social intervention. Indeed, solving problems of various kinds involves putting social interaction first. Our discipline stresses the importance of intersubjectivity, recognizing the other and the power of each person, group and community to pave their own life paths; a power that has to do with individuals' personal situations, relational status and group dynamics, their ties to the social environment and community dynamics. At the same time, our discipline also recognizes the importance of social policies and public and private institutions that allow us to develop what we call social welfare as a key dimension of citizens' lives.

In our view, a democratic society is only viable if it ensures that the life paths of its citizens are also viable. In this sense, social work carries out a key role as a "global player that deserves recognition and being listened to by all those who are committed to advancing the well-being of people and the environment in contemporary societies within a human rights and social justice framework" (Dominelli and Hackett, 2012, p. 450). In line with this view, the articles in this monograph address three key issues:

Firstly, the changing trends of our welfare systems, including both general changes in our societies (article by Neil Gilbert), specific changes occurring in the field of social work focusing on a key aspect of any discipline: the institutionalization of Social Work in public education (article by Susan Stone), and the extent to which social justice forms part of doctoral programs (article by Spahiro, Hudson, Moylan and Derr):

- In his opening article of the monograph, "Social Welfare Trends in Western Societies: Toward the Enabling State", Neil Gilbert analyzes the changing institutional framework for social welfare. Demographic trends, the globalization of the economy, the unintended consequences of our actions, and the evolution of capital-

ism have placed us in a context of change. It is a change that is conceptualized in terms of a new institutional model of social welfare that is moving away from the traditional welfare state: the Enabling State, which is expanding in both the United States and Europe. In this context, Gilbert analyzes changing trends in the workplace, the responsibility of citizens, and paradoxical aspects that have arisen in this new model, such as how to achieve privatization while assuring public accountability.

- Social problems and changes in our environment directly affect social work education, which as a helping profession responds to the demands of users in a particular historical context. In her article, "School Social Work in the United States: Current Evidence and Future Directions", Susan Stone examines the historical and school institutional factors that shape the current workforce, programmatic, and practice trends related to school social work in America. A key strand developed throughout is that the profession appears to be at a crossroads. It is suggested that this field of practice may be enhanced by placing a central focus on schools as organizations and school-community relations as key targets of intervention.
- In their article "Changing organizational routines in doctoral education: An intervention to infuse social justice into a social welfare curriculum", Shapiro, Hudson, Derr and Moylan describe a process used to infuse a social justice framework into doctoral education at one school of social work in the United States. Although this organizational self-study and incremental change effort at one institution was not designed for the purpose of creating generalizable knowledge, what was learned may serve as a model for how an infusion approach to curriculum reform may be completed at the doctoral level through the shifting of programmatic routines. This paper illustrates ways in which doctoral program forms can be revised, doctoral students' routines can evolve, and doctoral student perceptions of opportunities for social justice learning in doctoral education can shift between sequential doctoral student cohorts. It also calls attention to the perceptions of surveyed doctoral students that there are many ways in which they envision promoting justice as social welfare scholars, teachers,

and public servants that are not actively facilitated through their doctoral education, but that these perceptions are dynamic and appear modifiable.

Secondly, we analyze specific vulnerable groups, including children (article by Jill Berrick), teenage immigrants (article by Vázquez-Aguado, Álvarez-Pérez and Fernández Borrero), youth (article by López and Segado), dependents (article by De la Fuente and Sotomayor), the elderly (article by Scharlach), and social work with communities (article by Pastor).

- In the article “Protecting Children from Maltreatment in the U.S.”, Jill Berrick analyzes child protection models in America, focusing on their primary characteristics. The U.S. child welfare system is in the midst of change, reducing its reliance on foster care and increasing its use of voluntary, in-home services. The fundamental architecture of the house of child welfare is the following: the house of child welfare still only serves the children and families who are allowed entry based on an allegation of maltreatment. In that regard, the U.S. child welfare system represents a model quite distinctive from many of its European counterparts; one that is selective instead of universal; reactive instead of proactive; residual instead of institutional; and characterized by low levels of defamilialization.
- The article “Unrecognized rights, nonexistent laws. The invisibility of foreign teenage mothers: A challenge for Social Work in Spain” by Álvarez-Pérez, Vázquez-Aguado and Fernández-Borrero analyzes a group at high risk of social exclusion: teenage immigrant mothers. Following a discussion of the specific characteristics of this group of mothers, the authors focus on the risks faced by this group because social services are not designed to deal adequately with their situation. The authors present a set of strategies for social services to deal with this problem at four different levels: the individual, the family, the cultural sphere and the political sphere.
- In the article “Are Social Services the same for all the citizens in Spain? Youth and the Spanish Welfare State”, López Peláez and Segado Sánchez-Cabezudo examine one of the paradoxes of the Spanish welfare state: although youth are considered a cornerstone of the welfare model under current legislation, young people are largely overlooked by the social services in

Spain. The detailed analysis of social service interventions with youth in Spain has led to four findings. First, Spanish youth are clearly in a situation of vulnerability due to the country’s high youth unemployment rates. Second, youth are not a target group within the social services, despite the theoretical importance of youth policies. Third, because social services are designed for other age groups and other demands, young people are clearly dissatisfied with social policy and social services. Fourth, Spanish youth interact intensively with new technologies and social networks. The results of the study give rise to a clear recommendation: in order to foster participation by young people in the design of youth policies – an express objective of the European Union – the social services model must be redefined to incorporate modern technology.

- In their article “The Spanish Dependency Care System in the European Context”, De la Fuente and Sotomayor examine the primary aspects of services available to dependents in Spain. In a European context characterized by an aging population and an increasing number of people demanding measures to ensure their personal autonomy, the Spanish Law 39/2006 of 14 December on *Personal Autonomy and Dependent Care* marked a milestone in social policies in Spain and became a reference in the European Union. Eight years after the law first came into force, and in the midst of a deep economic crisis, the authors discuss some of the problems involved in implementing the system, such as the lack of coordination between levels of administration. They also highlight key aspects to improve the application of this integral system to provide care to dependents.
- In his article “Social Work with Older Adults in the United States”, Andrew E. Scharlach analyzes different initiatives and programs in the sphere of social work with older adults. In the United States, services for older adults involve a mixed economy of care that includes government, the voluntary sector, and the private market, but with primary responsibility for care provision and financing resting on individuals and their families. Through the analysis of various initiatives, Scharlach shows how social work services have the potential to ameliorate many of the physical, psychosocial, familial, or-

ganizational, and societal factors which serve as barriers to optimal functioning and emotional well-being in later life. However, the ability of social work to meet the needs of a growing aging population is hampered by inadequate numbers of social workers with adequate training and competence in aging. In this regard, preparing sufficient aging-competent social work professionals requires advances in social work education, including aging-related curriculum development, training, organizational development, and scholarship.

- In the article “Social work and local community development: Learning from practice and its practitioners”, Enrique Pastor examines the theoretical and conceptual foundations that enable and promote sustainable and autonomous change in the complex relational universe of 21<sup>st</sup>-century Spain. To do so, Pastor analyzes methodological and participatory processes associated with social work with communities, focusing on a model of strategic and comprehensive local development centered on community empowerment. The author also discusses various areas of community social work, particularly social protection systems and the systematization of community practices of coexistence and local development.

The third topic is new strategies based on new technologies (Del Fresno and López Peláez, 2014). Social networks are expanding our sphere of sociability, while new information and communication technologies allow us to develop new intervention strategies. At the same time, Internet has become an environment in which new forms of social exclusion emerge and in which both cooperation and criminal or addictive behavior have found a space. As a result, new technologies cannot be disconnected from social work, and must become a fundamental tool in social intervention programs in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in both healthcare social work and programs to assist the elderly (article by Adrian Aguilera), as well as in research on the Internet (article by Miguel del Fresno).

- In the article “Connecting the Disconnected: Social Work and Social Network Analysis. A Methodological Approach for Identifying Within Network Peer Leaders”, Miguel del Fresno examines the potential of social network theory and analysis (SNA) in the field of social work. Despite the fact that both SNA and social work focus on relationships and behavior,

and that each discipline could substantively inform the other, there remains a significant lack of intersection between the two disciplines. In response to this gap, SNA as applied to social work can provide additional ways to both diagnose and behaviorally intervene through the following approaches: a) by identifying key players in promoting the dissemination of behavioral changes in networks; b) by segmenting and identifying groups, cliques and communities; c) by supporting behavioral change through social ties surrounding the individual; and d) by aligning and applying specific interventions that draw on mutually interactive processes in terms of individual influences on networks, as well as network influences on individuals. Del Fresno shows how SNA provides social work with an additional lens and set of tools based on the constellation of interactions surrounding individuals, families, groups or communities that supports understanding, diagnosis, and intervention.

- In his article “Digital Technology and Mental Health Interventions: Opportunities and Challenges”, Adrian Aguilera explores the effects of incorporating technology into the field of mental healthcare. The growth of the Internet, mobile phones, social media and other digital technologies has changed our world in many ways. The availability of data in real time has presented hopes of intervening more efficiently and managing health problems by leveraging limited human resources. It also has an impact in changing the roles of providers and patients and in legal and ethical issues including privacy in digital health interactions. In the article, Aguilera presents some current applications of technology and mental health, explores the challenges to full implementation in clinical settings, and presents future opportunities for digital technologies.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

As readers will see, the articles in this special issue share two common threads; topics which were also discussed at the International Workshop on Social Work: Future Trends in Social Work. First, the parallels between American and Spanish society (an aging population, child protection and the intensive use of new technologies, among others). Secondly, the mutual interest shared by specialists in learning about and

discussing training programs, intervention strategies, and the effects of privatization and outsourcing that are firmly established in the United States, and which are also in expansion in the Spanish welfare state. Indeed, all the articles attempt to respond to the same question: How can we improve our welfare model in a sustainable manner in a changing environment? Undoubtedly, this is the major challenge facing social

work and social services in the 21st century. We hope that the results presented in this monograph will provide relevant information for redefining and improving our social protection systems and contribute to the development of social work and social services in Spain and the United States by promoting academic exchange and strengthening the academic research community of both countries.

## NOTES

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