

# *“WHAT TRAINING IS NEEDED FOR WHICH SKILLS?”*

## *REFLECTIONS ON THE TRAINING OF SOCIAL WORKERS AS PART OF SOCIAL POLICIES*

Written by Núria Fustier Garcia, adjunct lecturer. Department of Social Work and Social Services. Faculty of Education. UB

### **ABSTRACT**

The training of social work professionals is a process which should be addressed from a global standpoint taking into consideration the professional career as a whole: from basic training to postgraduate qualifications and continuing training.

This paper reflects on training and the design of it based on the definition of social work and its purpose, proposing to strengthen training in theoretical contributions specific to the field of social work: paradigms, models, methods and techniques. Contributions from the remaining social sciences are established as instruments in order to develop the profession and the academic discipline.

Lastly, the paper champions the need to tailor research as part of the training process and to ensure all stakeholders associated with social work become involved in research.

**Key words:** Purpose of social services, social work, training, professionals, skills

Training of social workers in the context of the social services system calls for the training process to be conceived from a global standpoint. Among other aspects, this entails taking into consideration the various stages a social worker will embark on during her professional life. Training does not end with the design of degree programmes; rather, it should incorporate a global framework that encompasses postgraduate education and continuing education and, moreover, also includes research as a source for refreshing theoretical and practical knowledge on social work.

In this article I aim to offer a reflection focussed on four themes:

- Training of social workers from the standpoint of the definition of social work and its purpose.
- Fields of work: the social services system as the primary sphere, although not exclusively; incorporating the other sectoral social policies (healthcare, education, justice, housing, employment, etc.).
- Suitability of training for the development of a professional career: the various training needs depending on the stage of practice and its link with theory.
- Innovation and renovation from a theoretical and practical standpoint: research and the involvement of the various stakeholders.

## **TRAINING FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE CONCEPT AND PURPOSE OF SOCIAL WORK**

In my view, the starting point for the training of social workers consists of defining social work and its purpose. On the basis of these definitions, it is essential to identify the common foundations for developing professional activity, going beyond a specific field of work because, in spite of the fact that various fields of work have differing legal and technical contexts, each profession lends added value: their theoretical and logical frameworks, and their strategies, methodologies and techniques.

Training of social workers should be focussed on developing these theoretical and logical contexts, the methodologies and the techniques specific to the field based on the definition of social work, whilst supplementing them with contributions from other social sciences. On this basis, the aim is to incorporate the various fields of work with their specific characteristics.

Accordingly, I consider that conceiving of the type of training social workers need to receive leads us directly to two essential questions: how we define social work and what the purpose of social work is.

It may appear easy to define social work; however, in actual fact, throughout history its definition has been changing, as indeed Natividad de la Red (1993) accounts in *Aproximaciones al Trabajo Social* reviewing contributions from several authors. In the international sphere, the first definition was put forward by Bartlett in 1958 (BARTLETT, 1958, cited by RODE, 2017) for the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) which incorporates values, purposes and knowledge (method, techniques and skills). This proposal was developed by the NASW over the following decades, expanding on the perspective of social work. The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) put forward the first definition proposal in 1982 (RODE, 2017: 66), which was expanded on and amended to the point where it transformed into the definition adopted by the IFSW and by the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) in 2014:

Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance well-being (FITS, 2014).

Nevertheless, the reality shows us that it is not so easy when the IFSW itself then goes on to add that “The above definition may be amplified at national and/or regional levels” (IFSW, 2014). Despite this, the above definition offers us an initial perspective because it tells us the following:

- What it is: “a practice-based *profession* and an *academic discipline*”.
- Its *goals*: to promote “social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people”.
- Its *principles*: “social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities”.
- The concept or theory by which *it is underpinned*: “theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge”.
- And, lastly, *how it is implemented*: it “engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance well-being”.

However, due to its global scope, this definition needs to be broad and it is scantily rational when it comes to defining the purpose of social work, even though this is the key that should serve as a guide when it comes to training futures professionals.

Given that the common definition to all social work is so broad, we may be led to think that in order to conceive of training for social workers it may be more interesting to focus on the **purpose** of social work. According to Irujo Tellaeché (1990: 53), the purpose is “that which constitutes *its very knowledge and calls for a systematic exercise of mental faculties in order to reach a specific purpose*”;<sup>1</sup> and Zamanillo (1999) highlights the fact that the definition of the purpose in terms of the events or phenomena that may be researched forms one of the basic requirements for research and we cannot refer to academic discipline unless we can engage in research that enables the development of the discipline. Without scientific and academic knowledge, social work would be reduced to a practical profession. However, as Teresa Zamanillo states, the “issue of the purpose of social work is far more complex than what it at first appears to be. Elaborations on the purpose have been conflated with *practical aspects and so they were thus shown*, more often than not, identified with the objectives, the subjects of intervention or the professional field or sphere of study” (ZAMANILLO, 1999: 14).

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<sup>1</sup> Italics from the original text.

The debate surrounding the purpose is complex and, to a certain extent, this complexity has had a bearing on the design and implementation of training, inasmuch as the purpose defines the very core of what training of social workers should entail. Again, as with the definition of social work, various eras have applied differing proposals in order to define the purposes as indeed Teresa Zamanillo (1999) remarks or, more recently, María José Aguilar (2013). Taking into consideration the open debate with regard to this highly significant and basic issue when it comes to defining the profession should constitute part of the most basic training. Acknowledging the range of approaches and paradigms should help us to enhance social work as a scientific discipline.

Below I have selected three definitions of the purpose to provide a sample of the range that exists:

Red (1993: 166)	“Man determined by a need who embarks on a quest to satisfy it, compromising his human dynamic and his experience of social mobilisation.”
Zamanillo (1999)	“All phenomena linked to the psycho-social malaise of individuals arranged according to their socio-structural genesis and their personal experience.”
Aguilar (2013: 53)	“Interaction between the subject in a situation of need and/or in a problem-situation and his social environment. This subject (which may be individual or collective and seeking to develop their human and social potential) should always be studied, understood and treated within their situation of need and/or in their problem-situation or situation of change. Both the subject-in-their-situation and the environment must be understood as inter-retro-acting relational systems that strive to address needs and problems.”

Although there is common ground, we can observe that there are differences of approach that answer to these paradigms and theoretical frameworks and they have all helped to develop social work over the years, precisely because knowledge is built on an analysis of the realities and theories that explain such knowledge with a view to expanding on or rebutting said realities and theories. This is why I consider it absolutely

essential to strengthen knowledge of these paradigmatic frameworks and, on that basis, the various theories that have been created within the realm of social work throughout history.

The recent study conducted by GRITS (FERNÁNDEZ et al., 2016) shows limited knowledge of the models and theories of social work and it reveals that whether the models or the theories are monitored depends on various factors (the time when the study programme is taken, continuing education, etc.) rather than being the result of an in-depth, reflective study based on the analysis of various theories and paradigms surrounding the aforesaid models or theories. The contribution made by the discussion groups (FERNÁNDEZ et al., 2016: 99) is highly significant—and I imagine it is for that reason it is pointed out—where certain participants show ignorance of the existence of theories specific to social work while others refer to the influence of theories from other disciplines and the blend of models as being one of the inherent characteristics of social work.

A brief review of the syllabus for Social Work at the University of Barcelona shows that the theoretical models of social work are specifically addressed in a single 6-credit subject, compared to the large total number of credits for the study programme as a whole: 240. The same subject also deals with the issue of individual and family intervention. It may be that other subjects also cover these theoretical frameworks; however, it appears unusual that the time devoted to the theories specific to social work pales in terms of representation within the study programme and are only associated with individual and family social work, as it is called, which could be seen as a degree of recognition of the limits of theoretical development.

Furthermore, the practice of social work entails using methodologies and techniques and, in my view, we devote scant time to basic training in some of these aspects, in addition to following the traditional model of dividing “individual or case-based, group and community” social work. This, as indeed Teresa Matus indicates, “entails classification according to the assumed ‘subjects’ which, ironically, ends up dividing the discipline depending on whether work is conducted with a few, some or many” (MATUS, 2017: 66), and she points out that this division is not even carried out in accordance with historical points of reference. At this juncture, it should be pointed out that social case work has often been translated in other languages as individual social work. In her book *What is*

*social case work?* Mary Richmond clarifies that “The social worker's ‘case’ is the particular social situation or problem—not the person or persons concerned” (RICHMOND: 1922: 27). Along the same lines, Matus continues to point out that there is a certain degree of attention on areas (community, family, health, etc.) and that could lead to the notion that “‘being’ a social worker would be much more closely linked to the field in which the profession is conducted than to the selection of positions within a body of approaches to social work” (MATUS, 2017: 67).

In short, in order to conclude this first section, the development of the definition of social work and the variety of concepts that were—and indeed still are—formed in relation to its purposes is an upshot of the existence and influence of various paradigms. It is essential to strengthen social workers’ knowledge of this during their training, particularly during basic training (albeit not solely then) because social work as a discipline progresses and social work professionals cannot allow themselves to remain at the stage where they undertook their university study programmes.

Strengthening this dimension entails focussing on social work as a priority; however, it also involves addressing the paradigms that lend meaning to the various theories which are linked to other disciplines (epistemology, sociology, political science, law, psychology, anthropology, pedagogy, etc.) but always associated with social work, rather than offering a general introduction to these disciplines which may constitute highly superficial knowledge scantily related to its practical and, perchance, theoretical application. Likewise, it would be necessary to strengthen training on this “body of approaches” Teresa Matus talks about to ensure the professionals are the ones that choose the most suitable framework and methodology at any time in order to effect their interventions.

## THE FIELDS OF SOCIAL WORK

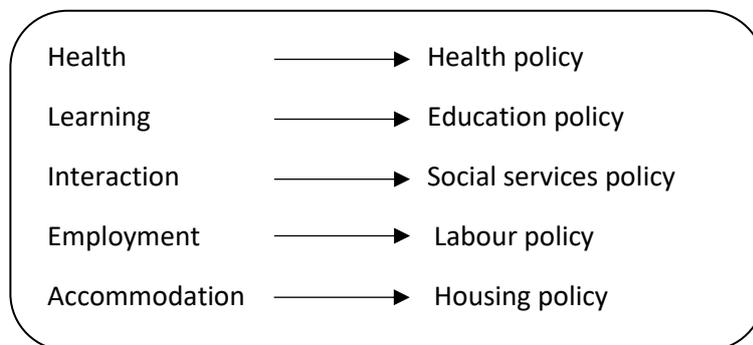
The second point of reflection concerning training of social workers I wish to address is the field in which social work is exercised and what that field (or fields) requires from social work.

The sphere of development of social work is in social policies, but the former is not present in all policies to the same extent and, in certain cases, its presence is scanty relevant or is simply not taken into consideration. I shall begin this section by offering a brief review of sectoral social policies and I will then focus on the social services system inasmuch as it is the system where social work has the most widespread and substantial presence.

Social policies may be defined as those that “meet or offer answers to a host of social needs (including genuine aspirations for human development) through (public, to a certain degree) provision of a host of services and provisions, the perception and enjoyment of which may ultimately give rise to a social right” (FANTOVA, 2014).

In order to arrange these answers, social policies are structured in a sector-based manner, meeting a primary need. Indeed, in our context it is highly common to hear speak of six sectoral policies that meet six needs or, as Fantova points out (2014: 119), “promote and protect goods with meaning or universal value”. Following his specific scheme, we shall represent this as follows:

**Figure 1: sector-based policies**



Source: compiled by the authors based on Fantova (2014: 121).

As we indicated, we shall now focus on the social services system which has also been at the core of heightened debates in terms of how it is conceived. Several authors have reflected on the definition of social services and their purpose. Figure 1 shows that I have adopted the proposal by Fantova concerning the purpose of the social services system: “human interaction, understood as dynamic adjustment between personal autonomy (capacity for development) and relational integration (informal support available for family and community networks)” (FANTOVA, 2008). However, this specific debate is also not a peaceful one.<sup>2</sup>

Based on an analysis of the theoretical and regulatory texts we can see that there are two major interpretations about what social services are: one is highly broad and includes ambitious goals virtually linked to the entire welfare system; the other is hugely restrictive and places social services within a residual setting, covering needs that other systems are unable to take on (FANTOVA et al., 2005: 11-12).

The first definition, for instance, is found in the Act on Social Services of Catalonia (Act 12/2007, of 11 October, on Social Services, 2007), article 3 of which states: “The purpose of social services is to **ensure** the right of people to live a dignified existence during all stages of life through coverage for their basic personal needs and their social needs on a context of social justice and well-being for people”. It then goes on to define what these social needs are: those having a bearing on personal autonomy and support for dependency, on enhanced quality of personal, family and group life, interpersonal and social relationships and well-being of the community. Lastly, it defines basic needs, such as survival and quality of life.

On the other hand, the second definition conceives social services as a residual system, with no specific content, which is entrusted to cover all areas that other protection systems are unable to take on (FANTOVA et al., 2005: 12). This definition is found in regulations intended to address certain aspects such as housing or survival (minimum income) which would pertain to other sectoral policies but end up landing on the desks of social service professionals: one example of this residual vision serving as a substitution for other systems is the regulation set out in Act 24/2015, of 29 July, on urgent measures to address the emergency in the field of housing and energy poverty

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<sup>2</sup> For a summary of the most recent contributions to the debate on the purpose of social services, see “Identidad y estrategia de los servicios sociales” (FANTOVA, 2015).

(2015), stipulating that the criteria for determining risk of homelessness are exclusively income-based (article 5.10) and only if the income stipulated are exceeded can social services ascertain that homelessness applied; however, it also specifies that in the case of energy poverty, utility companies shall require a report from social services in order to assess whether the requirements set out in article 5.10 are met (regulated in articles 6.4 and 9) and a deadline is specified for issuing these reports. In other words, there is no requirement for the housing or guaranteed income system to issue the mandatory reports on peoples' level of income (even though the law makes repeated, exclusive references to income limits for setting access to the coverage proposed); rather, it is referred to social services.

As Amaya Ituarte pointed out a number of years ago, at the time of creating the social services system, a certain identification took place distinguishing social services and social work, confusingly in the author's view, inasmuch as social services were championed as "*the field of action of social assistants and no one else*"<sup>3</sup> (ITUARTE TELLAECHÉ, 1990: 51). Subsequently, Xavier Pelegrí Viaña (2014) revived Amaya Ituarte's idea and supplemented it with the criticisms made by Teresa Zamanillo in conceiving the purpose of such work in the "needs-resources pairing". Indeed, he understood that it remained a simplification linked to the operation of an administrative, bureaucratic system.

The two conceptions of the social services system are worlds apart and the skills and knowledge needed for one or the other are also entirely different.

Nevertheless, it is my view that as part of basic training (we will later address postgraduate and continuing education) it is a priority, as I mentioned in the previous section, to focus on social work and establish sectoral social policies (as a whole) as fields within which social work may be developed. Indeed, the social services system employs more professionals and, perchance, could be viewed by other disciplines as a "natural habitat" for social work, whilst also being a natural habitat for other social intervention professionals. Accordingly, the social services system must particularly be incorporated into the syllabus, even though it is necessary to highlight certain aspects:

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<sup>3</sup> Italics from the original text.

- Conceptualising the social services system as one of the sectoral social policies of the welfare state (one of the pillars): social services in context.
- Emphasising the *inter-connected* nature of sectoral social policies in order to achieve the well-being of society: no single system can attain overall well-being of citizens.
- Incorporating the *debate on the purpose and limits* of the social services system, beyond the parameters established in regulations and arising from historical development: critical analysis of the purpose that has been assigned to social services.
- Highlighting the *multi-disciplinary nature* of the social services system linking it to the specific role of social work.

Despite the importance of the social services system for the exercise of social work, during the basic training stage it is essential to expand on the remaining sectoral policies: their structure, their development rationales, the way they are legitimised and, lastly, their service portfolios, in addition to further examining the role to be unfolded by social work professionals. It is my understanding that more emphasis should be placed on configuring social work within the various sectoral policies, particularly within those that are scantily represented (education, housing, employment, etc.), rather than pursuing the route of bringing under the umbrella of the social services system the care of those individuals who are excluded from other systems in light of the fact that it is the system that employs social workers. Incorporating this analysis as early as during basic training could constitute a breakthrough in consolidating the social services system and the profession, distinguishing goals and purposes.

In short, the fields of social work form the various sectoral social policies and, accordingly, these policies must be part of basic training and, to a different extent, all other training. The role played by social work within the social services system must be recognised as part of the training of future professionals, without overlooking the fact that this constitutes one of the fields of work but not the only one. What in actual fact does shape social work as an academic discipline and as a profession is not the field of work, but rather its development, picking up on Teresa Matus' words.

## TRAINING THROUGHOUT THE PROFESSIONAL CAREER

As I mentioned at the start of this article, training of social work professionals must be envisaged from a global perspective in order to encompass the three areas that shape training of professionals: basic training, postgraduate education and continuing education. For the purposes of this reflection we shall define these terms as follows:

–*Basic training* is that which enables access to exercise the profession, in other words, undergraduate study programmes.

–*Postgraduate education* is that which elaborates on the academic aspect and aims to specialise in a specific field. The length, conditions and requirements of this education are regulated.

–*Continuing education* is that which makes it possible to refresh training, particularly in relation to aspects of professional practice. The length of such courses is not regulated, nor indeed are the conditions and requirements of such education.

At present, the definition of training or education—at least from a strategic standpoint—is restricted in practice to basic training and, in part, postgraduate education, while continuing education is still offered at the initiative of the various organising institutions and bodies.

Even so, postgraduate education in the field of social work does not benefit from particular strength. A simple Internet search<sup>4</sup> reveals that there is only one recognised postgraduate study programme (master's degree) relating specifically to social work; namely, the master's degree in Medical Social Work, along with one professionally-oriented postgraduate programme in Social Expert Analysis.<sup>5</sup> All other postgraduate education programmes are not specifically addressed to social workers; instead, they focus on social action, social intervention or social well-being. Also, such education forms part of programmes that are not officially recognised.<sup>6</sup> A search in English allows us to

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<sup>4</sup> Search items: “treball social” + postgrau (Catalan), “trabajo social” + postgrado (Spanish), “social work” + “postgraduate degree”.

<sup>5</sup> The master's degree in Medical Social Work, the only recognised programme found in searches in Spain is run by the Open University of Catalonia online; the postgraduate programme in Social Expert Analysis of a specific degree programme offered by the University of Vic – Central University of Catalonia.

<sup>6</sup> We should recall that recognised postgraduate programmes (master's degrees) are those that are endorsed by the National Agency for Quality Assessment and Accreditation (ANECA) and are needed in

see that there are courses offered when it comes to a “master’s degree in social work” in certain countries.<sup>7</sup> The lack of specific social work postgraduate study programmes may also be having a bearing on research.

In terms of continuing education, there are no general lines or strategic planning from any organisation. Each body or entity may organise its own range of courses and they are often focussed on highly practical aspects because the organisers and promoters of this education are typically the entities hiring the professionals. Moreover, this education is intended to allow followers to better adapt to work positions or undertake their duties. In terms of the range of continuing education offered, I cannot personally recall any course being offered which centred on the theories of social work for example, although major steps have been taken in this field since I completed my basic training. It is possible to find courses addressing working methods, but when it comes to the theoretical foundations of social work, this seems to be a mission reserved for basic training.

As a consequence, how can professionals (how can we) refresh knowledge (our knowledge) in theoretical and conceptual frameworks if there are no postgraduate or continuing education programmes offered in social work specifically dealing with these areas? What resource remains for (us as) professionals in order to refresh their (our) knowledge in theoretical aspects upon completing basic training?

In summary, it would be suitable to encourage extensive reflection involving various stakeholders to promote several lines of postgraduate and continuing education enabling social workers to refresh their knowledge of practical aspects while introducing them to new conceptual frameworks.

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order to undertake a PhD programme. University postgraduate programmes or those run independently by HEIs are reliant on the university and the recognition of them is similar to that of continuing education.

<sup>7</sup> Of the universities identified, some are from both the UK and the USA.

## RESEARCH: AN OPPORTUNITY FOR RENEWAL AND INNOVATION

The last point I wish to address in this reflection on training and education is research. It is my opinion that education cannot be conceived without research: the two are interconnected and hard to separate. Without research, education and the profession would not have evolved. It is worth considering that Mary Richmond (1917) wrote her key book *Social Diagnosis* based on an analysis of thousands of social reports and cases (she documents 10,871 consultations using different sources, taking into consideration solely the first consultation in each case (RICHMOND, 1917: 469)).

In my view, research is a fundamental element in conceiving training. Social work cannot be unfolded either as an academic discipline or as a professional practice unless research contributes to the development of both dimensions. Indeed, on the basis of this perspective, it is necessary to promote all kinds of research ranging from the most theoretical research (conceptualisations, frameworks, paradigms, etc.) to the more practical elements. Above all, research should be generated that brings together both aspects because unless theoretical research is applied in practice, its usefulness will be limited.

Accordingly, I understand research as a thread that links training and education on all the aforementioned levels to professional practice. For this reason, I consider it necessary to ensure we benefit from organisations that incorporate it into their academic sphere (which already boasts research groups) and in the professional sphere. Again, we are faced with a huge shortfall in organisations such as scientific associations in the field of social work<sup>8</sup> which would make it possible to shape research within the juncture between the practical dimension and academia.

The commitment to research must involve all stakeholders concerned with social work: universities, professional associations, public authorities and the organisations where social workers are employed. I would like particularly to call upon the latter group to ensure that the recruiting organisations incorporate research, setting aside space and time to enable professionals to take part in the institution's activities, so that the outcomes can benefit society as a whole. We should take heed of how other disciplines

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<sup>8</sup> We are aware of two scientific societies in the field of medical social work.

have acknowledged research and encourage participation in professional settings in order to share experiences. We should assure the thoroughness of the task performed, but we should also set aside space for research in work places.

## FINAL REFLECTIONS

Training of social workers is a process that goes far beyond initial university study programmes, i.e., degree programmes, particularly if we believe and accept that we are more than just a “practice-based profession” and instead are an “academic discipline”. As a result, training should be conceived from a standpoint that understands the overall lifelong process, including postgraduate education and continuing education.

In terms of content, we champion all dimensions of training having a focus on social work because, although it may appear obvious, we realise that all too often the various social sciences—which are supplementary and necessary—end up taking up more time than social work itself in training and study plans. We understand it to be essential to shift the focus of study programmes by expanding on the theories, methods and techniques of social work.

At the same time, we cannot overlook the fields of work in which the practice of social work unfolds and, in particular, the social services system. Nevertheless, despite acknowledging the vital role of this system for the practice of social work and, in turn, the importance of the contributions that may be made within the profession in order to create the system, it is necessary to not forget that social work plays or can play a role in all sectoral social policies. Also, all policies should form part of basic training; meanwhile, specialisation in the various fields could form part of postgraduate education, even adapted to the various functions that may be unfolded.

Lastly, research needs to be incorporated into training and education by all agents involved in carrying out social work: professionals, employing organisations, universities and professional associations. To do so, it would be appropriate to arrange flexible structures allowing all parties to become involved in lending research suitable impetus.

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