Knowledge base, identity and alienation in social work: reflections on a classic topic that is re-emerging

Claudia Sandra Krmpotic[1]
ORCID: 0000-0001-8969-9345

Abstract

This theoretical paper reflects on the relationship between knowledge base, identity and professional alienation. Although it refers to a classic topic in social work, it is no less relevant in the current context. If the knowledge base is necessary to define the field and professional autonomy, it is concerning when a lack of clarity is still perceived in defining the substantive theoretical matter of professional interest. Considered a problem of domain, its weaknesses may explain the developing tensions when facing the various contingencies in practice. Therefore, it is justified by the recurring proposition from professionals and advanced students in relation to the weakness of the knowledge base and the manifestations of identity-based discontent it entails.

From a hermeneutic standpoint, the findings of the author's research, bibliographic sources and professional training experiences are retrieved and analysed, both at undergraduate level within the sphere of systematisation of pre-professional practices, and at postgraduate level within the specialty of forensic social work in Argentina.

It is expected to prompt new questions and to give rise to systematic research.

Keywords: Knowledge base, social work theories, professional identity, alienation, Argentina.

1   Doctor in Social Service and Master in Political Science. Researcher at the National Scientific and Technical Research Council. Director of the Argentinian Centre of American Ethnology (Buenos Aires). Lecturer at the University of Buenos Aires. claudia.k@conicet.gov.ar

1. Introduction

This theoretical paper revisits the fundamental topic of the role of knowledge in a discipline that has practical aims. From an interpretation based on Argentinean reality, and driven by the questions posed by social workers today, a reflection is presented on their relationship with alienation and professional identity. It is argued that the knowledge base continues to be a problematic aspect of the discipline that re-emerges in each new historical investigation regarding the definition of the field and autonomy and its relationship with the substantive theoretical subject matter of professional interest. Considered as a problem of domain, its weaknesses may explain the developing tensions when facing the different contingencies – the vicissitudes of practice –[2] whether deriving from management, processes or policies.

The disciplinary theoretical base reflects the specific and characteristic way in which social work (hereinafter referred to as SW) is able to understand and act on problems it is concerned with (Vázquez, 2013). Grounded in the tension between knowledge and experience as a criterion of professional distinction, the theoretical base of SW remains in a weak position if one considers the indicators accepted by the scientific community (publications in impact journals, competitive research projects, innovation in its theoretical developments and practical implications, etc.). It operates in a state of indeterminacy which manifests itself in the absence of a specific code for SW, for example, in the scientific fields recognised in UNESCO's nomenclature for the sciences and technology, in such a way that it is subordinated to different descriptors, the majority included in the field of sociology (Raya Diez and Caparrós Civera, 2014).

There is relative consensus that theoretical knowledge of the social sciences used by SW remains in such a degree of indeterminacy that it must be permanently negotiated between the various professional and non-professional actors involved in the field of social action (Abbott and Wallace, 1990).

From a hermeneutic standpoint, based on the interpretation of the author's research results, bibliographic sources and vocational training experiences both at undergraduate level in the area of systematisation of pre-professional practices and at postgraduate level, in the specialisation of forensic SW, it is proposed to link the theoretical disciplinary base as a dimension of professional identity, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, as an interpretative factor in order to understand behaviours and beliefs that we associate with alienation. The hard core of knowledge such as that found in the margins and disciplinary intersections available to the professional allows the professional to identify him or herself as such and thus sustain the professional conscience around the structuring axis of

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2   With reference to the characteristics of the practice: emergencies, phone calls, interruptions, threats, detours and delays, contradictions, etc. (Luckmann, 1996; Bourdieu, 1991).

professional practice, namely: purpose, work process and products. On the other side, alienation can be understood as a problem of a lack of perceived meaning or autonomy, a lack of self-realisation, as well as externality and dehumanisation in everyday work.

2. Conditions of professional practice

SW presents as a collective and complex practice, whose results do not only depend on the professional, but also on the bureaucratic organisation, other specialists, as well as, fundamentally, service users themselves. The end result stems from the professional work transforming individual and intersubjective material and symbolic conditions, which is also associated with the objective of the institution in which the work is undertaken. Therefore, while enjoying autonomy, the social worker is not fully in control of the conditions for change. The effects cannot be attributed to the former alone, as they derive from co-management, i.e., from changes and adjustments in the behaviours and attitudes of the service user, the environment and the institutions. Moreover, the results are not limited to objective indicators; intervention adheres to an integral and multidimensional viewpoint which can be measured as a scale of wellbeing that varies over time. Typically, the acting professional does not manage to visualise the entirety of the changes that have taken place, whether they are beneficial or damaging. The professional also does not know in advance, and with proven validity, whether or not the objectives and resources correspond to the perception of the service user and his or her satisfaction threshold. This focus on the individual gains relevance when it comes to public services requiring the involvement of those who are the subject of the services' work (people processing). Here we face clear boundaries: where adjustments cannot be controlled causally or technically, their results cannot be assured by the management and its officials (Luhmann, 1993).

This being the case, no single work process can be identified. Different practice contexts require the application of knowledge to specific work situations. Specifically, professional competency and autonomy are manifested in a selection founded on concepts and instruments. Insofar as we seek to unify and homogenise in a characteristic process, we will be modelling and reifying professional intervention. While it is pedagogically necessary for textbooks intended for basic training, it should be noted that SW is essentially a coordinated and collective product and is, in that sense, open and uncertain.

Professional competences are first and foremost of a social nature. SW must demonstrate its competency in order to provide responses. Social recognition of the relevance and validity of professional intervention is necessary in order to sustain an institutional space and assume the theoretical and technical definition of the problem and its responses, demonstrating that there is no more thorough intervention than SW compared to other possible alternatives. Today, this requirement emerges as highly

necessary at a time when the social field is highly contested, with the increase in shorter and more focused academic offerings, featuring diplomas and technical degrees, as well as the range of new social agents. These reflect the creation of hybrid knowledge in people with leadership qualities called upon to assume mediating roles between the occupants of disadvantaged urban areas (from which many of these people come from) and the institutions of social integration (schools, justice, police, social housing programmes). Some come from the social movements, others are promoted by the institutions and their social programmes; in any case, they develop a practice learned in the context of the multiple negotiations in which they participate (Krmpotic and Ponce de León, 2017).

The above elements contribute to the formation of professional identity. While we identify as determining factors those factors included in: a) the origins of the profession in the context of a professionalisation of social care; b) the mechanisms of professional regulation; c) the gender dimension affecting the modelling of interventions; and d) the criteria and dominant values that are internalised during training, other aspects converge that are linked to the life stories of the professionals themselves. This will give rise to an individualised resolution that is projected collectively and is expressed in the memory/utopia tension.

3. Does theory matter?

Some professions have developed knowledge, skills and scientific support for practical purposes. SW is one of these professions: it forms part of the so-called care professions. SW entails working with others based on the manifestation of their needs, collaborating in the task of socialisation in order to form a regulated and autonomous person via procedures that generate both conformist and liberating practices (Dubet, 2006). And, as a community of meaning, it presents itself as a polycentric and atomised universe, dispersed among multiple employers, universities and specialised practices according to the problems it is addressing.

In the local setting, professional training is currently oriented towards graduates with the capacity to produce knowledge as a constitutive aspect of the intervention, i.e., as a basis for the professional decisions for taking action. The discourse on public policies and, particularly, on social policies has become a privileged locus of the professional system. Moreover, a delicate transposition of the objectives of the profession with the objectives of the social policy is observed. The curricular profiles indicate a pre-eminence of management capacity – primarily at a state level – in its various jurisdictional and sectoral scopes. This has further strengthened the presence of contents from other disciplines, in an unequal exchange, while the call for consolidation of the hard core of SW remains in force. An interdisciplinary horizon is observed in the literature which contributes to the methodological and ethical/political aspects.

Although we are aware that there is no practice that does not involve a theoretical proposition, it is commonplace to find ourselves in training spaces where it is difficult to distinguish the theoretical frameworks that colleagues use, often forming part of the verbal and informal networks of knowledge transmission between a few colleagues. It is reiterated – often to the point of exhaustion – that theories do not belong to the domain of academics alone: practice is always based on conceptual assumptions that guide decisions, define the focus of the intervention, the method of designation, the type of information we collect, etc. Indeed, the discipline is not reduced to action alone; it is the consequence of a conception and diagnosis of the reality in which intervention is sought. Although qualitative and quantitative growth of the Argentinean literature has been remarkable in the last decade of the 20th century, this does not have the same impact on local contexts of professional practice, which remains a critical issue.

SW theories constitute: a) our knowledge base; they define our objectives, the subject of the intervention and the practical approaches in order to achieve the objectives; and b) tools for a contextualised SW, conceiving practices as fluid and diverse entities, which combine theoretical frameworks, framings and institutional references (Healy, 2014). In other words, the development of knowledge also involves the capacity to identify, use and consolidate SW theories in our practice. In this way, it becomes transferable, provides the foundations for everyday decisions, increases options, enables the evaluation of the quality of services, and enables accountability and the establishment of agreements with service users, professional teams and institutions. In short, it strengthens well founded professional work. From all of the resources offered by the professional community, every social worker will undertake a selection process based on his or her experiences concerning gender, status, class or ethnic origin, which will impact on both the context in which the subject develops (actors) and his or her life opportunities.

It is particularly when situations require us to provide non-standard responses that it is possible to observe how professionals gather together fragments from different discourses and theoretical-practical constructions and articulate them on the basis of specific needs, often in an instrumental way. The selected fragments can respond to one's conceptual schemes or that of other fields of the social and human sciences. In this sense, the knowledge base is updated in relation to the personal values of the professionals and the subjects of their practices, which requires careful reflexivity in each professional decision (Salcedo Megales, 2013).

The configuration of the theoretical-methodological matrix has been characterised by the borrowing of concepts and methods from disciplinary intersections, often via a mechanical adoption of conceptual references, which are even abandoned and make way for new ones, without a debate surrounding the reasons for discarding the old references. Theoretical impasses and paradigmatic crises lead to a reconsideration of the lines of teaching, sometimes from a passive position, other times from an anarchistic position, from a review that is generally carried out by others

and is imprecisely incorporated into the professional body of knowledge. Therefore, the problem is not the absence of concepts, but rather their entrenchment in the task.

In referring to a base or hard core, we refer to what the scientific community considers to be the texts and authors that possess the greatest consensus and that a future professional must learn in order to become a professional. However, it should be noted that this base is not structured and stable. One way of approaching the issue is the proposal by Payne (2001), who proposes to understand the generation of knowledge in SW as an ongoing interactive process between professionals and other stakeholders, instead of as an established base of concepts and theories. Likewise, a distinction needs to be made between the process of developing professional opinions (which includes methodological aspects) and its specific content (Wallander, 2012). Regarding specific content, Howe (1996) finds that the knowledge of social workers is demonstrated to be "analytically shallow and increasingly performance-oriented" (p. 77,), finding that social workers are in demand more for what they do than what they know, which reinforces the instrumental dimension of professional practice. In turn, the legacy based on a humanist and reformist narrative in the first half of the 20th century may explain the predominance of ideological and experiential, rather than conceptual, foundations of professional decisions. In terms of balance and predominance, it is appropriate to recognise the extent to which the three theoretical traditions present in the Anglo-Saxon origin of the profession are updated and have an impact today: pragmatic, socialist and therapeutic (Payne, 1995).[3] On this subject, in a relatively recent piece of research carried out by colleagues from Chile, Farías Olavarría et al. (2013, p. 9) conclude that "the absence of clear and precise theoretical references recognised as classic references is evident among social workers who practice the profession".

Finally, and beyond the strength of the theoretical base, it is necessary to mention the ability to provide convincing arguments and therefore claim the authority to establish definitions and lines of action. The professional discourse also seeks to persuade via reasoning supported by scientific, but also literary, use of language in this encounter between rhetoric and science (Gusfield, 2014). This is where the greater or lesser success of professional autonomy lies, deemed as the expression of a particular form of expertise whose limits and responsibilities will be negotiated both with the target subjects and with other professional groups with whom the community of practice is shared.

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3   For the author, pragmatics originates from the actions required by administrations in the distribution of social aid since the English Poor Laws. Today, it is updated in social management and planning. The socialist approach was focused on reform, social criticism and intervention in socially disadvantaged communities. Currently, it is being updated towards approaches that are radical, feminist, based on human rights, anti-oppressive, etc. The treatment originates from provision of care to individuals or groups presenting personal or social interaction difficulties. Today, it is being updated with psychosocial intervention, clinical SW and group intervention, with their different approaches.

3.1. What do they have in common? What is different about them?

In the theoretical domain, developing and utilising categories of analysis involves the exercise of abstracting and generalising, i.e., understanding that, for example, the generic symbol "family" or "neighbourhood" encompasses disparate units of various sizes and forms. However, forgetting the differences can become a problem. In daily life, the social worker moves along the winding path that goes from the abstract to the concrete, and vice versa, searching for a word that sums it all up. As such, income, occupation, education and housing constitute the four key indicators to describe the social position of a person or group (at least, from the second half of the 20th century). The concept of class has undoubtedly been a potent descriptor of existing social hierarchies in a capitalist society. The problem arises when an attempt is made to interpret the occurrence of specific problematic situations based on these indicators (Korn, 2016). For example, it is highly likely that a problem such as Juan's addiction is associated with discernible social factors that can be organised on a scale, but it is difficult to assume that this gradient is unequivocally linked to the scale of income, occupation, educational level or type of housing. Furthermore, discovering an association between his addiction and certain occupations, or his housing status, is of little help either to those understanding the case or to those who are trying to define an intervention strategy that requires other drivers and factors. Although they are conditions that form part of the problem, a distinction should be made when they are used to explain an occurrence.

It is typical of scientific practice to apply categories of analysis with reflexivity, thus avoiding the reduction of reality to indicators that obscure particularity, subjective awareness and the humanity of the individual in each case: Juan is poor and presents with addictive behaviours, but he is also Juan (trying not to reduce him by the effect of the signifier). What does he have in common and what differs from all of those who present similar class conditions? There is only one step separating generalisation from prejudices and stereotypes. Conversely, it is only when we break the category down into its classificatory criteria and its units of analysis and we try to imagine Juan in the real world that the effort of conceptual ordering used can be rendered absurd, taking into account the perverse effects of generalisation in a social or expert report (Krmpotic, 2020a); and, most relevant of all, the weak understanding we arrive at regarding Juan's problem.

We can also review the weak use of basic information related, for example, to income and employment. On average, Ana receives the same variable income as Juan (below the officially established poverty line) and both obtain this income from informal street selling. These two pieces of data can be enriched beyond the economic classification which places Juan and Ana in a cluster of poverty, and without denying its materiality. We often observe that culture is a somewhat elusive dimension in professional interpretations, without realising that such information opens doors for

us into the material culture and to a plexus of meaning and resources for intervention (Doel, 2021): the money that circulates, the objects that are purchased, sold and gifted, the price, the space that these sellers occupy, etc., reveal both tangible and intangible aspects linked to feelings, to their identity over time and to the social relations that such objects block or promote.

3.2. Family experience

There are numerous reasons why the family is a core concept for SW, which I am not going to list here. I am only focusing on it here to illustrate the use of social theory and its effects.

All societies – whatever their kinship system – are organised on the basis of smaller units which revolve around the home and the bed. Beyond the discussion around the quasi-universality of the conjugal unit, as well as the forms and functions of cohabitation between related and unrelated persons, here I shall put forward the imprint of Schutz's phenomenology (1974) to emphasise a vision of the family as a group in which exchanges, feelings and significance among its members are reproduced, which then project towards classes, status groups and other forms of collective organisation (Krmpotic, 2020b).

The first thing to consider is the family experience (instead of referring to an entity) that takes place in daily life shared with fellow human beings. These fellow humans can be – and this is important – contemporaries, predecessors or successors, although my contemporaries will only be accessible to me through direct experience. Events beyond this direct relationship can become part of my reality, as legitimised by the direct and original experience of other fellow humans (that is to say, even though it was experienced by them, I can include it in my body of experiences).

For its part, temporal and spatial proximity is presented as a characteristic aspect of family relations, known to us as a face-to-face situation. However, for Schutz, the direct character of social relations, of us, is relative. It varies depending on the intensity and intimacy, with varying levels of depth in the consciousness of the fellow participants. Likewise, said consciousness transitions from a direct experience to an indirect experience of social reality. That is to say, I can feel intimacy with those who are not face-to-face, but who coexist with me in time. In other words, intimacy is not reliant on a manifest presence, although it does require contemporaries (an example of this could be telephone conversations, the exchange of letters or messages communicated by a third party). Likewise, direct relationships also vary considerably.

In other words, the family experience is accessed in two ways: directly and indirectly experienced. The first includes immediate joint participants. In this case, I find myself in face-to-face situations, reciprocity, an "us" relationship and simultaneity. For example, being present while a brother speaks to me is very different from reading an email from him, as it allows me to capture the meaning of his words, hear the tone of his

voice, and observe his gestures and other body movements. In addition to these specific manifestations, I have an additional advantage: I can look him in the eyes and ask him what he wants to say to me, in such a way that I transform direct social observation into a direct social relationship. However, even if I lose that intimacy, this does not mean that the intensity fades, as my brother is a very important person for me, as was my grandmother, who, although she has passed away, appears to me as a real person every day. Thus, indirect relationships – with contemporaries or predecessors – can be equally valuable.

This brings us to another noteworthy aspect of the approach: the family (as well as work and peer groups, etc.) forms spheres of significance. Schutz identifies some intrinsic and some imposed significances. The former are the result of our choices, of the decisions that we can control and change to a certain point; the latter come from and are subject to events that affect us but are out of our control. There is a merging of the individual and the social: the biographical situation defines the way we place ourselves in the setting of the action, interpret its possibilities and face its challenges: "the" world transforms into "my" world, where sometimes one suffers what is imposed and other times one decides to do what is possible. The greater the social distance or the more anonymous the other is in a relationship, the smaller the zone of intrinsic shared significances will be and the greater the zone of imposed significances; in which "we are increasingly less in control of determining for ourselves what is and what is not meaningful for us" (Schutz,1974, p.128).

In short, if we adopt – for the case in point – this theoretical perspective, the description and interpretation presented in a social report will be different: the temporal and spatial immediacy will vary according to the intensity and intimacy, and the inferences will be relative to each family experience. For example, the distinction between co-habiting and non co-habiting family groups that we often find in social reports loses validity, and the notion of significance, not in entities or roles, but rather in direct and indirect relationships, of contemporaries and predecessors, assumes a central role.

4. Knowledge base, identity-based discontent and alienation in postmodern terms

The knowledge base refers to the most general and abstract knowledge that helps to construct a general discourse on what exists in common and what is valued and preserved by social workers in order to provide unity, homogeneity and coherence to public and social recognition of the profession; and, at the same time, to define and defend the professional field. Today, social workers continue to express concern, although at times in a controversial manner, about the weakness of the knowledge base in light of increasingly stretched multidisciplinary organisational contexts. Beddoe (2011) contends that the alleged "hegemony achieved through

the acquisition of specialised knowledge was never achieved and that its aims were almost always mediated by third parties" (p. 29). However, in recent research relating to the relationship between knowledge regarding the ends and means of intervention and professional identity, Sousa et al. (2020) find consensus, coherence and transversality in the consciousness that social workers have about the content of the knowledge they use with regard to the means and ends of social intervention. In place of fragmentation and fragility in the knowledge base, they predominately find heterogeneity in the configurations that the means and ends can assume in social intervention, and introduce the generational variable in the profile of the responses obtained. They highlight that the consensus should not be interpreted as synonymous with the uniformity of identity, as strong consciousness can coexist with the debate and the internal arguments about knowledge that better legitimise and sustain the professional identity in general.

To these conditions affecting the professional self-image must be added the debates surrounding a) the feminine character and its subalternity; b) the essential link with the State today defined by care management; and c) the sometimes contentious ways of resolving conflicts of legitimacy and control of the divergences within the collective, and generational renewal.

Moreover, among the requirements of the work environment, the criterion of specialisation stands out, as well as a selectivity and competitiveness that previously did not form part of the eventual monopoly of SW over the social sphere. Knowledge is double faceted, for even in a society in which knowledge is the primary source of power, this constitutes a significant factor in the transition towards deprofessionalisation for some and proletarianisation, as demonstrated by others (Krmpotic, 2011). Those who support the theory of deprofessionalisation (Haug, 1975) understand that the combined effects of users' actions and technology would generate a counter-process involving, in the first instance, an erosion of the monopoly of professional knowledge. Those who, for their part, argue in favour of the theory of proletarianisation interpret that capitalism would reduce virtually all workers to the status of proletariat, and alienated labour would also reach the management system itself. Salaried employment of professionals would imply the loss of certain privileges and its approximation – in terms of values and behaviours – to the world of manual labourers (Braverman, 1987). An increase in the relationship of dependence (and a reduction in liberal activity) would result in technical proletarianisation, with the loss of control over the work process, and also in ideological terms through the expropriation of value over the product of labour (Rodrigues, 2002).

If we add to this the wide range of both local and global demands, we find that the claims of homogeneity, normality and standardisation of wellbeing are under threat, along with the validity of certain concepts that until recently provided solid foundations for guidance for those entering the profession, such as – among others – that of dependency (Fraser, 1997) and

the penal-welfare complex in the rehabilitative, correctionalist and labour inclusion expectations as a response to social problems (Garland, 2005).

5. Knowledge base and alienation

If identity is a process through which knowledge, skills and values embodied in professional experiences are internalised, the weakness and disarticulation of such elements can manifest itself as identity-based discontent and alienation. Thinking about alienation in SW allows us to account for those situations which we usually describe as work dissatisfaction and insecurity with regard to the task undertaken by the professional, both in terms of the results and the evolution of the process itself.

Alienation is closely linked to identity and the knowledge base. If identity is constructed through work, then an awareness and connection with the work is essential. The professional participates in his or her function by contributing to the general objective of the process in which he or she is involved. However, if the professional does not identify with that particular intervention, the professional will find it difficult to make sense of the action. Likewise, not all work results in the creation of value and transformation. As long as this is a recurring feature of the task, a sense of alienation will be maintained for the professional carrying out the task. Conversely, identity issues can result in a source of alienation. The theory set forth by Martinelli (1997) reinforces the explanatory value of this relationship, described as a pathway that, from an identity ascribed to bourgeois social practices and the mechanisms produced by the dominant class to guarantee the consolidation of the capitalist system, is virtually guaranteed to produce alienated and alienating practices. The lack of acknowledgement of the outcomes of the intervention, i.e., the value of the use created from the professional work, implies the impossibility of objectifying the relationship between the objective and outcomes, which results in strangeness and the action losing its meaning.

In any event, the consistency and revitalisation of the knowledge base work together to reduce discontent and alienation as regards the work process. Perhaps we shall find some keys in the following conceptualisation to explain our experiences and to enable them to be studied in greater depth.

1st manifestation: a gradient of discontent can be distinguished, ranging from powerlessness to the loss of meaning, isolation and alienation
An approach is represented by – among others – the studies of Blauner (1966), for whom the inclusion of the worker in his or her work environment contributes to explaining the feelings of alienation or freedom, understanding the latter as a sense of control rather than domination, of meaningfulness rather than futility, of connection rather than isolation. For its part, alienation is presented as a gradient, ranging from a sensation of increasing powerlessness which then transforms into a loss of the ability

to understand the meaning of the intervention in a given situation, leading to a confusion of meanings. The subsequent isolation characterises a withdrawal into highly individualistic behaviour. The author hypothesises that the level of alienation or freedom is linked to the level of technological development and argues that there is a tendency towards anomie and alienation in the case of repetitive tasks (to the rhythm of factory conveyor belts). He analyses ongoing concerns linked to processes of automation, of repetitive performance, of standardisation and specialisation. Consideration of these aspects gains relevance in current service professions and activities, given that technological modernisation has signified the transition towards the 21st century. For SW, it entails a debate around specialisations, the development and use of protocols and standardised tools, and of course anything that pertains to the digitalisation of information and virtual interventions, through a transformation of the sense of space and interactions between humans and non-humans.

2nd manifestation: alienation as a lack of perceived meaning

It does not imply a perceived lack of meaning per se, as only meaning can provide the motivation for action. The recognition of structures of meaning leads us to the role of consciousness (Nozick, 1995; Luckmann, 1996; Schutz, 1974). As consciousness is nothing in itself, but is rather always consciousness of something, this *something* is comprised of life experiences. These are responsible for the attribution of meaning which then helps us to explain the limit of what is possible for each person and individual circumstance. In this way, each person gives meaning to his or her action (experiences), thus constructing meaningful experiences (subjective order) which are then likely to be integrated into the wider universe of the experiences of others (intersubjective order). On the plane of intersubjectivity, the exchange of experiences materialises and spaces of professional socialisation are sustained. As a result of these experiences, there is an emergence of certain beliefs surrounding the situations experienced. Despite appearing to be static (to allow them to be drawn upon wherever necessary), beliefs present a dynamic characteristic, enabling an adaptation to the erratic changes that take place in the world.

In other words, to the extent that we perceive a meaning to our action (experiences), we construct meaningful experiences that are shared in an intersubjective way. These are grouped into beliefs, which are arranged under general headings. This generalisation serves three functions: a) an intellectual function that orders the justification before others in a convincing way, and allows its validity to be tested and strengthened; b) an interpersonal function, as it facilitates interactions, allowing aspects of the conduct of others to be anticipated; and c) a personal function, by bestowing feelings of integrity and internal coherence with ontological security, which offers some prevision of our future self.

In this interpretation, alienation implies the loss of general meaning of the act of work, namely, the linkage between purpose, process and re-

sults, as well as the possibility of finding a source of pride and belonging in this.

3rd manifestation. Alienation can also be conceived as a lack of self-actualisation

Self-actualisation can be defined as the full and free realisation and externalisation of a person's abilities and skills. Even if it cannot be full (since the potential is infinite), it must necessarily be free, and is therefore incompatible with coercion.

The concept connotes two dimensions: one becomes self-actualised first of all because one is the creator and, at the same time, the raw material itself. We are gifted with certain talents and natural abilities and, moreover, with a desire to develop them. The important thing is to develop the motivations, interests or desires, as a result of one's own choice and not the choice of others. Furthermore, we can extract two derivative notions. These are self-actualisation in the sense of Aristotle, which involves the transformation process from a potentiality into an actuality; and self-exteriorisation in the Hegelian sense, as the process by which the ability of the individual is made observable by other people. The subject places his or her abilities in the public domain, with all the risks and benefits that this entails.

Thinking about alienation in this perspective can therefore signify a lack of self-actualisation, but also a lack of opportunities for self-actualisation or, in other words, the lack of desire for self-actualisation. We can then ask ourselves: what do professional spaces offer us? In some cases, we can obtain the maximum integration or efficiency with the minimum of self-actualisation; or the inverse relationship could also occur. In this situation, there is no moral measure to tell us what is best, because if there were, for who would it be best?

4th manifestation: alienation as a lack of autonomy

This perspective seeks to respond to the nature of our decisions. Free and rational seem to be the expected traits in our society. Nevertheless, we stress that, as a profession, we are a defined by the user. This means that autonomy cannot be assessed on the basis of our decisions alone, but rather in relation to those assumed by our beneficiaries. We also interact in an institutional framework that also imposes requirements and makes decisions accordingly. Therefore, how should the space of professional autonomy be described?

Firstly, and as we have already indicated, autonomy implies a range of particular competences; if a profession intends to gain the confidence of a society, it has to demonstrate a certain type of competence in order to effectively resolve a certain type of problem. A professional is someone who reliably provides his or her service users (both employers and clients) with a certain expertise. A professional's commitment is, therefore, doing the best that he or she can for his or her service users and employers in order to maintain his or her social utility. However, it is also an activity aimed

at providing assistance that is valued to the extent that it is not imposed, essentially aimed at resolving problems that clients present to the professional and in the way they pose them. The duty to respect the clients is the guarantee that the profession provides: few people would be prepared to seek professional services without this guarantee. This emerging conflict can be aggravated by the institutional environment. As we have previously said, this is because the profession is framed within a larger work process, from which it draws resources for its development. Thinking about professional autonomy and its shortfall as a source of alienation entails delving into the very nature of the process of professional help, which is influenced via a personal relationship with the client. Deprofessionalisation and paternalism are two of the most recurrent aspects when observing the forms of professional alienation in relation to the problem of autonomy.

5th manifestation: alienation as a consequence of the capitalist mode of production

In this case, professional alienation is seen as analogous to the notion of alienated work. Thus, alienation is the social process through which humanity in its reproduction produces its own dehumanisation, and its own denial of humanity. This is not only a result of the development of productive forces, of private property and the intensive division of labour, as an additional form of domination is introduced, in which the wage earner, having already lost part of what he or she had produced by virtue of his or her appropriation by capital, now also loses all autonomy and personal job satisfaction. In this sense, alienation can be understood as frustration and subjugation. Thus, Martinelli (1997) highlighted the way in which alienating practice strengthened the illusion for service users that the State was nurturing a paternal interest for its citizens. Likewise, she established a relationship between the urgent nature of professional responses with the imprint left behind by immediate action in terms of spontaneous and alienated action. In a circular and cumulative movement, the absence of professional identity weakens the social conscience of the professional community, establishing an alienated and alienating trajectory. In these terms, identity and social conscience are the factors that can overcome alienation.

6th manifestation: alienation conceived as externality

Underlining the salaried nature of the professional, a range of prescriptions are assumed that the professional transforms into actions during his or her working day. This means that the professional activity finds itself conditioned by the institutional dynamic, by social policies and by specific expressions of the social issue. These become part of the work of the professional, although they are generally perceived as externalities. As such, there is a responsibility that is assumed or, on the contrary, is externalised, in the same way as the resources of the work process. The risk is noted: if the limitations belong to or are external to the social ser-

vice, then so are the possibilities for work and transformation. Following this logic, the role of SW fades away.

6. Conclusions

A review has been undertaken of a range of concepts, approximations and illustrative proposals around the current characteristics of professional work and professional identity as a result of collective actions as well as personal trajectories. The role played by the knowledge base was analysed, particularly in terms of its theoretical platform, finding that its fragmentation, fragility and heterogeneity make the theories of both proletarianisation and deprofessionalisation plausible.

However, by extending the study on identity-based discontent, shortfalls in the hard core of knowledge are a necessary but insufficient requirement in respect of manifestations of identity alienation. In their different forms, from powerlessness, the lack of perception of the meaning of the action, self-actualisation or autonomy in the profession, or those derived from the condition of the wage earner with the predominance of externalities in the work process, or alienated work in a capitalist mode of production, other factors are added that traverse personal life stories. In a given here and now, the difference and inequality that converge in processes of professional identification and identity-based discontent are experienced.

Therefore, although the knowledge base is questioned by students and professionals and it is necessary to recognise the impact of the processes of creation, accumulation and transmission in academic and professional settings, as well as to distinguish the knowledge that is actually in use, it is equally important to uncover the roots of these factors in student, professional and work experiences. To be able to answer with some certainty the question "what is SW?" does not only refer to the hard core of knowledge. It involves connecting with our feelings around the professional task. Every concept also evokes values and emotions around wellbeing, social and cultural justice, the State, subordination, origin, etc., which are aspects that help social workers keep their identity and commitment to SW relatively stable and consistent.

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