EDITORIAL

The object of social work, many years later

Teresa Zamanillo Peral
Emeritus Professor of Social Work, UCM

Reconsidering the object of social work is no trivial matter. Social work must adjust as the times change; it is not fixed and immovable as if it were a "thing". What is more, this process of adjustment to the dizzying social and cultural change we are experiencing renders ever more profound the inherent complexity of social work. Thinking openly about the object of social work requires a brief summary of how it has been seen in the past. This editorial revisits past debates to examine the possibility of convergence of the previously identified objects of the discipline: need/resource, and psychosocial distress. It is also important to add that I have never referred to social services in my work: not when I defined the object of social work in 1992, and not now. I only consider myself knowledgeable in the discipline of social work.

But before starting, I would like to provide a necessary caveat. The reader will observe that I make no reference to the profession at any time. This is not to exclude professionals, who I greatly appreciate and respect. It is because a discussion of the discipline of social work must concern the discipline and that alone. There is no alternative but to distinguish between discipline and profession. The field is what is studied to practise a profession. It covers the entire area in which professional activities are carried out across the various types of fieldwork. It would appear that we cannot look past the indissoluble relationship between theory and practice.

With that said, on the verge of concluding my attachment to our discipline, I am preparing to complete a journey I began several decades ago in the work I co-authored with Lourdes Gaitán entitled "Understanding Social Work" ("*Para comprender el trabajo social*"), which was soon endorsed at the 7th State Conference of Social Work Graduates and Social Workers held in 1992 in Barcelona. And so I bring to a close an epistemological work that has taken a long time to formalise, because I believe that now I can offer the new reflections that have come about from my collaborations and/or conferences over the years.

More recently, following an interview with me that was published in December 2024 in the Barcelona Journal of Social Work (RTS), I considered the formulation set out in what we fondly refer to as "*el libro de las casitas*" by Patrocinio de las Heras and Elvira Cortajarena (1979): in terms of the relationship between social needs and the social resources applicable to them, to what extent are both formulations incompatible? This concerns Patro de las Heras: I know, because she has told me. In fact, the last time we saw each other we agreed to discuss the issue, but Madrid life has yet to give us the chance to do so.

And so I am using this invitation to write the next *Cuadernos de Trabajo Social* editorial, to create a space for reflection on a recurring question: why is it increasingly critical for social work to define the object of study? First, because the continuing calls for a definition of this important issue are not only coming from academic circles. This is of general interest to the scientific community, since we are seeking the recognition our discipline deserves. It is incumbent on us, it concerns us, it commits us and it affects us.

Insofar as the prominence of social work is growing in the social sciences, we must strive to consider an issue that impacts social research from the perspective of our discipline. The scientific community deserves this highly important contribution, and so do we. We have travelled a long road to secure degrees and be able to produce doctoral theses. It is now, having achieved the level of an academic discipline, that the moment has come for us to examine this issue; previously, social work was only a profession. We have been faced with the inevitable path that leads to intellectual maturity; there were no shortcuts.

Let us turn, then, to the meaning of the concept of an object. The object of study of research is that part of the social reality that one is seeking to understand. Put differently, the object of study of a discipline concerns the type of matter that it covers or which is in its interest to research. "Therefore, the object of study cannot be understood separately from the problem that motivates the research; rather, it ultimately forms part of the same thing: an aspect of reality that it is sought to interpret, question or examine in order to gather certain relevant knowledge. It does not matter if this is natural, human or social science research; all research necessarily arises from a particular problem, based on which a specific object of study is defined"[1].

Interpreting, questioning or examining are terms that characterise the need for knowledge and, therefore, the need to define the object so it can be included within academic disciplines. Once again, however:

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[1]   https://concepto.de/objeto-de-estudio/#ixzz8tNYQ5kns

the object, conceived in this manner, requires abstraction from the social reality. It is articulated through philosophy.

Social work broadly recognised the object, formulated above, at the 1979 Pamplona workshops. But an increasing number of people are interrogating the object formalised as psychological distress, ordered according to its structural genesis and the experience of the "subject subjected" to structural conditions from which they cannot escape. However, object as need/resource remains an apparently real concept in the imaginary of professionals, thereby simplifying their social image. We can consider it as the material object, hence its real representation as something visible: a representation that corresponds more to the professional dimension. We must nonetheless bear in mind that today we are dealing with a discipline.

For this reason, as the author of the formalisation of psychosocial distress, it is worth noting now that as part of this 1991 formulation, I referred to the object of knowledge in the Kantian sense, and not to the material object, defined as "need/resource". I must cite Ferrater Mora in this regard, who offers the following advice for developing the object of a discipline: "every time such a term is used in a technical manner, its meaning should be specified". Or to avoid confusion, one could "always use 'object' to mean object of knowledge" (Ferrater Mora, 1991, p. 2407). I would like to clarify further here: while not having emphasised it at that time, I believe it worth noting that I always used the concept of object in the sense of the object of knowledge, as the philosopher proposed.

And so, once again, the time is ripe to undertake this review in response to the gradual evolution and maturity of our discipline. A question arises: to what extent do these two points of analysis (need/resource or psychosocial distress) provide the discipline with two distinct fields of research?

My latest reflections form an indivisible dimension. The aspiration for unity that guides my life ends, or begins, with an imposition on the dualized reality of mutually irreducible categories. These are not dilemmas (Ferrater Mora, 1991, p.819)[2], as has sometimes been suggested with an unintentional glance that trails behind it the objectification that is so commonplace in everyday and even scientific thinking. Nor is this a sporting match with winning and losing positions. These are epistemologically profound issues that must be studied, as they support the research we wish to incorporate into our discipline. And now is the time that research has started to concern us.

A further question: are these objects of knowledge mutually exclusive or could they complement each other? I leave these questions open because I am currently only sure that the object of knowledge needs to be rescued from the paralysis inherent in the tendency to objectify every concept. But I have taken this task on; it has been lurking in my thoughts for some time. This is the purpose of this brief work. However, I cannot commit myself beyond offering these broad observations, by way of reflection, to open up an ongoing debate. And so I cannot answer the question raised in this paragraph by myself. The outstanding research issue that we cannot evade is precisely this. No progress can be made in the discipline without research, and it cannot be considered scientific either.

It is important, I was saying, to investigate what is being discussed in the field of social intervention. And what is that? What is the thematic core to which we are referring in the discipline of social work? Issues have been examined such as the social problem, people's needs, resources, psychosocial distress. Is it necessary to hit the mark and choose one over another? Not in my view. But it is essential to know which we are referring to, since if we do not respond to this question we are left with doing, with pure practice. The consequence is the great problem of social work: the attempt to address all needs, all distress and all suffering that we encounter in those we serve. This is an exceptionally common symptom of the attempt to provide omnipotent professional response, commonly linked to the development of burnout.

A lack of resources indisputably creates situations of social distress that can often expand to cause irreparable harm. This creates the need for social or psychosocial intervention in most circumstances. Because attending to psychosocial distress is of little use without access to structural social resources that can alleviate poverty, social inequality, the problems caused by educational failures in families or the lack of decent housing, among many other social or psychosocial problems. Nor is it of use to merely use "pre-fab" resources to fit what people are asking for, as done in the past. It is hence absolutely essential to take into account the exponential growth of needs in today's world and their disproportionate relationship to the shortage of resources and services owing to increasingly brutal cuts and neoliberal policies.

This is what leads me to consider if the observations outlined above recommend an investigation of whether the objects defined as need/resource and psychosocial distress might converge. To put it differently: is it possible to achieve a minimal level of wellbeing in a society in which a large majority of the population is forced to live with permanent shortfalls in terms of their fundamental needs – an absence of the resources that are essential for their development? Are these not the situations, among others such as the inability to participate as citizens and in political life, that create an unthinkable level of social distress?

And this is the case because needs arise over the course of history, meaning they cannot be defined in fixed categories and cannot be equal for all people, beyond the basic needs that should be mandatory in accordance with the Constitution. But as needs have been defined "in relation" with resources, both elements (need and resource) have become subject to a framework that neither professional nor user can avoid. In this simplified context, the landscape is marked with well-known cases of professional burnout, on many occasions leaving no alternative but to flee to other fields.

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[2]   According to José Ferrater Mora, dilemma "refers to the conflict of two theses, such that if one of them is true, the other must be considered false, and vice versa".

And so I think: would it be suitable, for example, to examine the needs of those who turn to social services, beyond the resources that are available on an ad hoc basis? I also think that leaving the field open to new resources yet to be discovered, not in existence due to being immaterial, may give rise to an openness that would refresh our plaintive minds. This would cause the emergence of problems related to psychosocial distress that are experienced everywhere, but which cause populations with material needs to bear greater harm in addition to the suffering that occurs as a part of any life. Seen in this way, social intervention would be enriched with new paradigms. All of this is conditional, and so I add a single question: are we prepared in our profession to think differently, beyond the established paradigm of need and resource?

Perhaps we should learn to hear what they cannot say, as "subjects subjected" to their conditions of alienation, just like everyone who is subject to the imperceptible power of a contradictory, irrational and inconsistent society. Perhaps there is also an urgent need to implement a basic income. Perhaps, perhaps... Let us leave space for inquiring minds.

In light of all this, I turn once again to Mary Richmond, who we should never forget if we do not wish to risk losing the origins of the discipline. What we must do, then, is to expand on her thinking with new, contemporary contributions. Her definition of social work, so often recalled in previous writing, sees our discipline as having two dimensions: understanding the individual and their circumstances, in addition to direct action in that respect and indirect action through environmental resources. It is through a combination of these four "actions", with "people participating in the plans that are outlined to secure their wellbeing (...) at all stages of the process and in decision-making, that the personality can be developed" (Richmond, 1996, p.107).

It is indirect action that distinguishes us from other professions dedicated to psychology, pedagogy, psychiatry and so on. And indirect action is responsible for using social relations and community resources to help "the development of the personality", in the author's words. Today, we understand the development of the personality more as collaborating with people in their life projects, to counter the psychosocial distress that confines and paralyses them.

How to conclude these brief observations? Given the brevity required by this journal and the great complexity of this issue, it is not easy to do so. And so I will merely offer a suggestion. First, we need social work faculties to be available to direct this research. Without their guidance, workers from different fields of intervention cannot develop the necessary questions to be researched, and they certainly will not have the time required to carry out those investigations. Based on my training, I propose action-participant research that can be carried out within the framework of an intervention, after informing users of the questions to be asked. This would be on-site research at the workplace, during the interview. Well-planned questions should not take too much time. It is the analysis that will require skilled and qualitative supervision, requiring the creation of ad hoc teams.

In conclusion, perhaps we should start by clarifying our ideas without attempting to impose only one of them. This involves incorporating the plurality of views that are present in our discipline. But we must recognise that there is no debate in social work, and without it we cannot embark on the journey toward knowledge. Ideas are segmented, disordered, random, unknown. We follow the path from action to reaction without stopping, save for conferences or other meetings; and when they come to an end, we start again. Sometimes we are doing the same as we did before, and on other occasions, if we have stopped at points ripe for reflection, such as supervisory courses, lectures or conferences, we may change our step to serve people differently.

But what we need most of all is to meet up and investigate "what is being talked about". Conversation today is revolutionary in itself, insofar as we construct new scenarios. It is transformative. But it is not sufficient to discuss what has already been discussed, because of the ease of falling into the kind of entrenched positions that take everything for granted.

The proposal I wish to make here and now is to create schools of thought that open up to theoretical pluralism. In fact, this has existed for years in social work, given the currents of thought that have squeezed into the discipline, particularly in terms of systemic theory. But more paradigms should be accorded the stamp of recognition. Glancing for a moment at the contents of a social psychology book, such as "Entre el individuo y la sociedad" ("Between the Individual and Society") by Frederic Munné, offers a sense of this plurality to which I am referring. Social psychoanalysis, social behaviourism, symbolic interactionism and Marxist social psychology are all key paradigms chosen by Munné for this fascinating book.

The fabric of the critical perspective that I have always defended is frayed and loose. Let us reinforce it with content: there is plenty of material for a strong theory-practice construction. This is merely an invitation; I will take my leave now, in the knowledge that others will come along and improve what we have developed. That is my wish.

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