

Knowledge and skills for occupational social work: challenges for education and professional practice

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Abstract. Occupation Social Work - OSW - is settled as a professional action field that can be recognized since the early beginning of social work. And at the same time, as a current space to exercise the social work profession, even though there is not a clear definition and it has a imitated academic development (Cheeran et al., 2015). This study proposed to inquire about essential knowledge and abilities to the OSW professional exercise, from social workers, managers and union representatives perspectives. Through qualitative methodology, it has been possible to identify abilities and knowledge demands that are specific to this researched area at Chilean case recognizing their similarities and differences with other contexts. Based on these results, challenges and future lines of research are presented.

Keywords: occupational social work; Chile; social work education; skills and knowledge.

Summary: Introduction. 1. Literature review. 2. Methodology. 2.1. Research design. 2.2. Participants. 2.3. Data collection and information analysis. 3. Results. 3.1. Outstanding skills and knowledge in the OSW exercise. 3.2. Skills and knowledge required and demanded at OSW. 3.3. Knowledge and skills: in relation to training needs. 4. Conclusions. 5. References.

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Introduction⁵

During the 21st century, little has been said regarding the skills and knowledge demanded by OSW, that is defined as the field in which social workers attend to the human and social needs of working, unemployed, and retired people (Straussner, 1990). Indeed, the publication average of articles related to OSW, published between 2000 and 2018 by magazines

indexed in databases such as WOS or Scopus, was one per year.

The limited academic production in the area does not coincide with the historical and practical relevance of the OSW. Certainly, the occupational dimension of social work, where the needs and demands of the actors in the work community –employees, employers, government– are linked (Mor-Barak, 2000), can be traced back to the profession origin through the welfare secretaries' figure and the devel-

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opment of industrial social work (Kaufman, 2014; Kurzman, 2009).

Regarding professional practice, it is possible to recognize OSW as a consolidated space in professional practice⁶. Actually, in the United States, about 35% of social workers indicate that their main work is carried out in business and industry contexts (Arrington & Whitaker, 2008).

Although in Latin America there are no aggregated data, it is possible to observe the Chilean context in order to recognize OSW as a prevalent space for action. Indeed, according to a 2004 study, 67% of people in charge of welfare and benefit units in organizations, were social workers (Monckeberg, 2004). This figure can be complemented with the example of graduates from the Catholic University of Chile, where 35% of them work in the private world (ETSUC, 2014).

Thus, the limited academic development of the area can be linked to poor conceptual precision (Frauenholtz, 2014). Certainly, it is possible to verify that the practice of social work in labor contexts has been described interchangeably as social work and labor welfare, industrial social work, social work in companies, and social work and support for employees. Therefore, this diversity of nomenclatures, which supports different approaches to professional practice, has impacted the development of a global view of the OSW and the construction of a theoretical framework to understand the professional role in the area.

However, even when there is no clear definition (Cheeran et al., 2015), the claim that OSW is the practice carried out in a certain physical space such as the “industry” or the “company” has been overcome. In fact, during the last 20 years, in the USA, England, Canada, South Africa, Australia, Chile, Colombia, and Mexico, OSW has been redefined based on its mission. So, OSW is social work practice in labor contexts, where the demands of the workforce and the reality of workplaces are articulated

(Mor-Barak, 2000, Maiden, 2001, Treviño, 2014).

Thus, OSW refers to the practice in human resources offices not only in a company but also is an intervention of social service to unemployed people. This perspective of OSW is also observed in different papers. For example, Barck-Holst et. al. (2017) studied the reduction of stress and working hours of Swedish social workers, that based on Mor-Barak perspective, it would be a OSW research. On the other hand, Roa’s research (2010), “Stress and burnout as risks in work scenarios after the emergency: conceptualizations and analysis axes for preventive management in organizations” is an example of OSW investigation too.

In conclusion, if OSW is the practice of social work in labor contexts, so it would refer to a practice that pursued the autonomy and dignity of the subjects in their labor dimension building, defending, and ensuring decent work⁷.

Summarizing, based on OSW historical roots, its definition, and practice it is possible to say that OSW is focused on a specific problem and field. Therefore, particular knowledge and skills are required despite the techniques of social work may be the same, the sense of its application depends on the context (Sagi-Vela Large 2004).

In this way, knowledge has been defined as a set of information that is applied to a particular professional field, to ensure their achievement. On the other hand, skills refer to the “know-how” that is necessary to achieve the expected results (Sagi-Vela Grande, 2004). Thus, in the OSW case, there would be specific knowledge and particular know-how to intervene in the work community.

In order to the understanding framework of the skills and knowledge required for the OSW, the Anglo - Saxon approach that has prevailed in the literature, needs to be complemented. Therefore, the present work was focused on the Chilean reality, understanding that the OSW has historical and practical relevance in

⁶ Specialization in OSW is not seen as a partition of Social Work, but rather going in depth a social praxis that maintains a global vision of the practice. In this framework, the OSW in Chile is a consequence of the historical formation of the areas of Chilean social work.

However, critics that are made have been recognized, highlighting designated by Healy (2012). She suggests specialization could lead to developing limited skills. However, the same author states that a certain level of specialization in the fields of professional practice would be necessary to respond to the complexity of the context.

⁷ According to the ILO, decent work, “involves opportunities for work that is productive and delivers a fair income, security in the workplace and social protection for families, better prospects for personal development and social integration, freedom for people to express their concerns, organize and participate in the decisions that affect their lives and equality of opportunity and treatment for all women and men”

the country. Achieve this aim is justified because when the economic context and welfare policies change, the challenges of OSW also change (Iversen, 1998).

Studying the Chilean case is relevant because it involves analyzing OSW in a neoliberal economic model characterized by a productive development based on copper extraction. This model was implemented by Pinochet dictatorship in the 1980s that expanding wage labor offered greater job opportunities along with growing precariousness. In this way, although it had an impact on poverty reduction since 1990, it also had an impact on inequality (Ruíz & Boccardo, 2016).

Therefore, this article aims to investigate the knowledge and skills that OSW requires in Chile. At the same time, the article looks to update information that allows strengthening training in the area, and feedback to professionals, contributing to the conceptual framework, where practices, skills, and contexts are connected.

1. Literature review

Industrial Social Work -OSW predecessor- was founded with the arises of welfare secretaries

figure that arises at the end of the nineteenth century in the United States and England (Hughes, 2013a; Mor-Barak, 1999) and also in Chile at the beginning of the twentieth century (Illanes, 2001). At this early stage, knowledge and skills were part of social visitors' general education (Elvira Matte School of Social Service in Cruchaga, nd). This trend continued as the profession developed. However, as changes were experienced in the economic, political, and social context, also changes in the exercise and formation of the OSW (Miranda et al., 2018) were observed. Indeed, Googins (1987) points out that different periods of OSW development mark OSW education. These stages go from the stage of welfare capitalism (late 19th century) to the stage of organizational change that is installed in late the 1980s.

In order to understand the current state of development of OSW, the analysis will focus on the stage of organizational change, as it is the one that would prevail today, as Googins has mentioned.

First, we find Straussner's work (1990), who noted the OSW covers certain models that require skills and specific knowledge, as is detailed in Table 1.

Table 1: *Occupational Social Work Models*

Occupational social work model	Roles	Knowledge and skills
The employee service model	Counselor	Intervention with individuals Biopsychosocial support Social diagnoses Interviewing skills Crisis intervention skills Knowledge of family and group dynamics Counseling and communication skills Socioeconomic realities knowledge
	Constructive confronter	Facing substance abuse, family systems and authority issues
	Broker	Referral skills Understanding of individual and organizational resistance, Knowledge of organizational and community resources Skills in advocacy of resource development, and networking skills.
	Advocate	Skills to support the worker to obtain services and resources
	Mediator	Conflict management skills
	Teacher/Trainer	Training skills

The employer/work organization service model	Consultant	Knowledge in organizational change
	Analyst	Assessment skills
	Trainer	Training skills
	Program developer	Education skills
The Consumer Service Model	Counselor, program planner and developer, consultant, and advocate	Counseling skills
The Corporate social responsibility model	Community analyst, budget allocator, program developer, broker, advocate, negotiator	Management skills
The Public policies model	Formulation, identification, analysis, and advocacy for public policies	Program and policy planning and management skills

Source: Straussner (1990). *Note:* Own elaboration.

Likewise, professors of the University of Southern California developed an OSW specific curriculum (Mor-Barak et al., 1993), which integrated the following contents: a) social policy and employment; b) human behavior; c) social work and microsystems; d) social

work and mesosystems; e) social work and macrosystems; f) research applied at work..

Besides, Iversen (1998) developed a skills and knowledge model based on intervention with employed and unemployed community, in order to redefine the OSW for the twenty-first century, as is detailed in Table 2.

Table 2: *Occupational Social Work: Roles and Functions*

Work-Related Practice Role	Work-Program Functions
Assessment, brief counseling, and referral	Assessment Brief counseling and referral Collect individual- and organizational-level data
Advocacy	Advocacy of poor and excluded workers
Program development	Form business–community collaborative
Social activist	Development of relevant labor and employment policies for poor and excluded workers

Source: Iversen (1999). *Note:* Own elaboration.

In the 1990s’, Bargal (1999) projects the future of the OSW. She concludes that professionals in the area need to combine clinical and organizational skills, especially those related to counseling, network management, assessment, training in interpersonal skills, and employment policies.

On the other hand, Bates (2007) remarks the OSW’s impact on well-being at work because it is a non-medicalized, pathologies, or individualized practice. He highlights the difference between OSW and other approaches. Therefore, empowerment, intervention levels

and methods, defense and support of workers, mediation, resources management, and education, are noted by the author.

Regarding recent studies, the work of Hughes, Olsen & Newhouse (2018), it could be mentioned. They concluded that OSW is in transition. Also said, ecological theory and its effects must be integrated to the training programs, as well as the development of “organizational social work” that is defined as the practice that exceeds the focus on the individual.

Now, in order to build a broader perspective on the OSW, it is possible to review the

Chilean context. Burgos (2012) carried out a research focused on social work professionals who work in companies and concluded that three models of OWS are been developed in the field. First, the emerging model which relies on management practice and knowledge requirements are: public policy, corporate social management, labor law, research skills, basic computer programs, and organizational development. Secondly, the dominant model, demands knowledge as public policy, social management business, labor laws, human resources, and finance. Finally, the decadent model, proposed by Burgos as a style that is withdrawing in organizations, focuses on intervention with families, social welfare and projects, the knowledge requirements are social programs, and labor laws.

In conclusion, after reviewing different perspectives, it is possible to establish that OSW is recognized as a specific field of action. In the same way, different authors agree on the need for expertise in labor and employment policies, social benefits, and human resource systems. Regarding skills, social intervention at microsocial, mesosocial and macrosocial levels and skills related to counseling and management are noted.

Concerning the differences, it is possible to verify that only the perspectives of professors from USC and Burgos refer to research skills. On the other hand, the Chilean perspective differs from the Anglo-Saxon, in connection with counseling and intervention value at the individual level, widely developed by the Anglo-Saxon authors.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research design

The study aim was to identify the knowledge and skills that are required for the OSW. Due to the characteristic of this study and available literature an exploratory-qualitative approach was adopted a focus on the Chilean context. This method is used particularly to address complex objects of research (Arroyo, 2009), understood as transformation processes, with random elements, interactions, and/or retractions. Organizational and social change processes are quoted as examples.

Also, symbolic, ideological, or imaginary overdetermination is another attribute considered (Arroyo, 2009). That is explained by the qualitative approach, because it is used to describe relations, symbolic valuations, social conceptions of hierarchy, power, influence, among others.

In relation to research techniques, focus groups and semi-structured interviews were carried out, depending on the participants. The conversation was modeled by a semi-structured guideline, whose main aim was to facilitate the conversation. The patterns were built based on, historical performance repertoires indicate on literature. Also, open questions about the current performances associated with specific knowledge and skills were integrated.

2.2. Participants

Three groups of participants were considered: social workers, managers from public or private organizations, and union representatives. The detail is presented in Table 3 summarizes the participants and the applied techniques.

Table 3: Summary of research participants

Participants	Quantity	Example	Information gathering technique
Social Workers with experience in the area	21	Compensation Manager in a private company. Head of Welfare Office in a Public Service Head of Compensation Office in a NGO.	Focus groups
Human Resources, Quality of life, and sustainability managers,	12	Head of the sustainability area Manager in a public service Bank Human Resources Manager	Interviews
Union representatives	8	Union leader of public employees	Interviews

Note: Own elaboration.

The social workers selection included people who graduated from the School of Social Work of Universidad Católica de Chile were experienced in the area. Update training was required for those with more than 15 years of professional practice.

The selection of participants was intentional, based on different criteria, balancing the principle of homogeneity and heterogeneity (Flores, 2009). Also considering the access to information resources only were included organizations with a presence in Santiago de Chile.

In the case of union representatives, they were selected based on proximity, and its relation to projects of the School of Social Work of Universidad Católica de Chile.

2.3. Data collection and information analysis

The information was obtained through 5-month fieldwork. Those who participated were informed about a consent process before the interview or focus groups.

The interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed with a word processor to be analyzed through a specific software (content analysis). Finally, the analysis of the results was focused on describing the knowledge and skills for the OSW based on the contributions and limitations of social work in the field. The results were structured in relation to these criteria, and are presented in the corresponding section

The identity of those who were involved was protected, referring to them as participants.

Finally, regarding the validity and reliability, the recommended procedures were used, such as the parallel coding of interviews.

3. Results

3.1 Outstanding skills and knowledge in the OSW exercise

Regarding the contributions of professionals OSW, those who participated in the research mentioned the social workers' ability to focus on social relations, which is understood as the ability to relate directly with the individual and know the social case's intervention techniques. In general, the ability of OSW professionals to establish high –quality interpersonal relationships is remarked–.

Then, social workers from the focus groups agreed that in practice “they are very focused on the social” and that social case work is a key strategy to achieve that focus. In this way, the relationship they make between “the social” and the intervention is interesting, so that, the first concept is reduced to social case work, revealing the idea that the social is expressed in direct social intervention.

Furthermore, managers of public and private organizations, recognize the same value regarding intervention and the link that professionals establish with their employees, as it is mentioned by a company manager:

They (Social Workers) are like an arm on the field of human resources, finally they are those with direct contact with the employees, they are the ones that know them better, they know what they need... The truth is that they are fundamental. I have had worked with super hard-working social workers who work on Saturdays, Sundays, at different times to make home visits depending on the emergencies, obviously... they are calm, giving very *important support*.

In this way, the managers mention the value of direct contact, through techniques, such as home visits, recognizing a dimension that they prominently handle, as pointed out by another manager who claims that “The direct linking management is *fully dominated*”

The social view is also mentioned by the group of union representatives, but they are more focused on the power held by the social worker knowledge of the members of the organization, as was noted by a representative of an association of entrepreneurs: “The social workers have a close link, they know each worker by name, its personal world, its family, the children they have, if they study in college, etc. Because that is what social workers do, to know “that” world”.

The same idea is reinforced by a representative of workers, who points out that “Regarding the impact (of social workers), the first thing they contribute is the knowledge of the people and the approach to people...”

Therefore, the actors identify the social gaze that social workers have. That skill, which involves practical orientation to the social dimension of people and the problems they face, it implies at the same time, the application of their own techniques of social work.

On the other hand, it is interesting that managers and union representatives highlight the skills that social workers did not identify, such as the ability to build bonds with the community, as expressed by a representative of managers: “The *social* worker links what he has to do with networks, their own family networks. He/She links the organizational work and the work within the community”.

The mention of network management it's also recognized by a union representative, who mentions the value and power possessed by professionals OSW: “Who manages to make the link in the field? Who manages to build trust in people and have all professionals available when needed? There is where social workers play a very difficult role to replace”

In conclusion, in relation to skills, the social orientation of social work professionals is recognized, whereas, in relation to knowledge, methodologies and techniques of social intervention are remarkable. Besides, network management and community development should be considered to be performed in this area.

3.2. Skills and knowledge required and demanded at OSW.

The second part of the analysis of the results show the challenges and demands for knowledge and skills that must be developed or strengthened in OSW.

First of all, as a challenge appears what professionals OSW described as the ability to validate their role in the organization, as was present in the focus groups:

I was hired as a social worker... and you start doing things and they tell you, do you know how to do that?... hey, I studied, I didn't earn my degree in the lottery... then you have to start showing what you do, unfortunately ... you have to start to publicity what you do.

A lot of people were hired to do a very basic job and you have to go positioning within your organization, many colleagues (socials workers) told us that they asked them... Are you a social worker? Do social workers know how to do that? Yes, was the answer.

On the other side, it is also interesting to note that the OSW professionals pointed out as a challenge the idea of overcoming what they called “social focus”. This means that the pro-

fessionals who participated, believe that they should complement the social orientation because it would not be enough to perform in the occupational field. This is interesting because the social workers see as a challenge something that is considered as a contribution by the other participants.

There is again a similarity between managers and union representatives. Both groups believe that the main challenge is the development of strategic management skills and managerial skills, as affirms a manager of quality of life: “(Social workers) need to have competence, training, that allows them a broad, general, and strategic vision”.

The same is endorsed by a representative of the union world: “Greater emphasis on management is required, to be able to aspire to these management positions, and also to validate themselves as professionals to perform in administrative tasks”

The same challenge in relation to developing administrative and strategic management skills, in this case, human resource's management, is named by another union representative who states:

The social worker should, due to his training, have a slightly broader perspective, not to look at human resources' only in terms of training, just the intention of obtaining benefits collectively, but also from the point of view of the administration of happiness. So there I think they have a little bit to take on, in those roles.

In conclusion, there would be a distance from what social workers think and what other actors believe, regarding the skills and knowledge required to practice OSW. Social workers believe that their main challenge is to validate and communicate what they do, while managers and representatives say they need greater management skills that strategically impact the organization.

Finally, it is interesting, how people get close to each other from different positions in the power structure, considering the ethical-political dimension in this area. As noted in the introduction, the OSW has historically been analyzed from different positions regarding its role in the social control-transformation tension. However, as indicated by Kurzman (1999), the ethical dilemmas linked to the OSW, such as the impossibility of remaining neutral -in front of the interests of the employ-

er and employees, and the idea that personal benefit will be over the collective, are risks that social workers face in any workspace. Therefore, the professionals of the OSW, like any other social worker, must recognize the dilemmas they face and analyze them from the values of the profession.

3.3. Knowledge and skills: in relation to the training needs.

The research also investigated the opinions that actors had regarding the training needs of social workers in the occupational field.

Social workers identify multidisciplinary training as relevant, as it is confirmed in the focus groups:

Today we have to know about the economy, projects, technology, etc... nowadays as you no longer continued with a piece of paper giving benefits, you have to innovate, in relation to how you communicate, how to communicate or not (...).

The need for multidisciplinary knowledge, is consistent with the challenges that the social workers mentioned, in relation to the idea of complementing the socially focused gaze.

Moreover, the union representatives expressed a similar opinion that the social workers regarding training needs, since according to them, it is decisive to acquire knowledge and skills in various subjects, such as information analysis, law, direction and management, economics, administrative management, communication skills, negotiation, unionism and intervention techniques.

The training needs expressed by managers are related to administration benefits, control of indicators, change management, public management, and methodologies of Social Work, such as strategic management, organization and administration, social protection, and critical vision.

The needs that managers identify, are consistent with the management dimension that they had previously mentioned and also with what the companies expect of social workers: management and social perspective.

From the point of view of managers, the value of monitoring, the evaluation of processes and results, and management reporting is important. In this case, it is very important

the training in, control, monitoring, and evaluation, since that, it would generate a different language.

The manager of a multinational company points out that the required training refers to:

The world of administration, in this case, is a numerical subject to handle and probably a language topic as well. The language of the social worker is very special and suddenly a business manager can get lost with what we are saying.

As we can see, it aims at multidisciplinary training that should include knowledge regarding monitoring and the evaluation, management indicators, and the idea of using a language linked to management. In this way, a key question arises to identify knowledge and skills for OSW: how to communicate the social with a language that relieves the dimension of management? One answer could be in the performance indicator and its evaluative purposes to improve intervention, as suggested by Cabrera (1992).

Regarding training, the managers interviewed not only refer to strategic management but also specify that it is necessary to train in public management. Thus, a manager of a social service points out that: "It seems to me that, on the general education level, the theory of public organization could be a good tool. Some chapters or seminars on political science, and specifically on, management control... public administration... uh... reengineering processes..."

Concluding this section, the various actors highlight the importance of multidisciplinary training, deepening in the field of management, direction, control management, and communication abilities. There are no important references to demands for training in the social atmosphere, which could be explained by the perception that it is sufficiently developed.

5. Conclusions

This research was intended to investigate the knowledge and skills that are demanded to perform in the OSW in a Chilean context, according to the perspectives of different actors. Based on the results presented, it was possible to answer the question that guided the study, as indicated in Table 4.

Table 4: *Knowledge and Skill Results*

Knowledge required at OSW: What must be known to intervene at occupational social work?	Social work techniques and methodologies	Case intervention Home visit Social interview Broker
	Control Management	Monitoring systems Indicators
	Statistics	Quantitative data analysis
	Multidisciplinary training	Law, economy, unionism, social protection systems.
OSW skills: What should you know how to do to intervene in the occupational field?	Recognize and enhance the social dimension of subjects and organizations	Management and administration of interpersonal relationships Social analysis
	Strategic management skills	Leadership Influence decision making Communicate effectively Negotiate

Note: Own elaboration.

The results presented, partially confirm the validity of previous studies carried out in the US reality at the end of the 20th century. At the same time, the demand made by the participants in the study for typical methodologies of social work coincides with OSW Employee Service Model (Straussner, 1990). This approach focuses on requirement to know and manage methodologies and techniques typical of social work.

This finding is not only relevant, because it confirms previous studies, but because despite the difference in the political, legal, and economic context, the focus on the social continues. This could respond to the weight of historical tradition in the exercise of social work, (Hughes, 2013b) and to the internationalization process of US companies that have impacted in smaller economies (Mor-Barak, 2016).

In the same way, it is relevant that in the Chilean context the knowledge and skills that are demanded in the United States are maintained, it is interesting the difference that exists in relation to the ranking and weighing of the skills and knowledge in management matters that are required in the OSW. Thus, there is a requirement for managerial skills, strategic management knowledge, human resources, among others, that the OSW should implement.

This complement between intervention skills and management, identified by the participants of the research agrees with what was indicated by Bargal (1999), who claims that the OSW is based on the combination of knowledge and skills of social work and management. On this concern, an association can be seen between the demands of efficiency and

effectiveness of the organization, regarding production and demands in relation to the decisions and the administration of the workers and collaborators, generating expectations of greater incidence in that dimension.

Now, continuing with the analysis of results in light on what Straussner (1990) raised, it is important to highlight that those who participate in the research do not make references to skills and competences in relation to other models of OSW. This could be because of OSW professional practice in Chile, which was historically characterized by the development of employee services to improve quality of life and well-being (Monckeberg, 2010). Indeed, the innovative interventions in Chile appear during the 1990s with the recovery of democracy and the expansion of public policies and social services, especially those related to employment. This description of the practice of social work in Chile could explain why different actors did not recognize as relevant skills and knowledge regarding outplacement that was referred by Iversen (1998).

On the other hand, the emphasis that the participants made regarding the OSW professionals' knowledge and skills in management control, indicators, and data analysis is relevant. This is connected to the statement by social workers, in relation to the requirement to "show what they do", since, show their work and validate it and show results from tools of management control, which It can be explained because social work has not managed to design qualitative and quantitative metrics that allow linking its actions with the auspicious future of the organization (Rodríguez, 2010; López & Chaparro, 2006).

Then, the managers agree that social workers require multi-disciplinary training, which in this case seems to refer specifically to the management and financial disciplines.

In conclusion, the knowledge and skills demanded the OSW, are generic of social work, adding others from management dimension, having no differences with the skills and knowledge that have been identified in the US and Anglo-Saxon context in general.

However, a question arises, if the skills in the management dimension is a requirement itself for OSW or, it is a transversal demand to the profession. From the perspective of the authors, those are transversal skills, but its form of articulation to the context, level of development, and depth varies, as developed Castañeda & Salomé (2003).

To the study's findings and limitations, it is possible to establish future lines of research. In the first instance, in order to make further progress in characterizing the needs of knowledge and skills, it seems important to develop a quantitative look of the phenomenon in order to complement this first exploratory phase and have more information for integrating inputs on training social work programs and the practice of professionals in the area. Also, it is necessary to identify the perspective' differences between the different actors, pointing out the blind spots between them: how they occur? Which are professional representations? How do imaginary impact professional practice?

Finally, another interesting point is linked to study the OSW knowledge and skills required for other contexts of professional practice, such as social work with families or community development

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