

The professional reality of frontline social workers in the municipal social services of Castilla y León

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ENG Abstract: Professional practice is constructed through the lived experiences of practitioners themselves. This study aims to understand how social workers describe their frontline practice within municipal social services in Castilla y León. A qualitative, theory-driven methodology was employed. Drawing on doctoral theses addressing this topic in Spain, a codebook was developed comprising four key dimensions: professional identity, disciplinary projection, object of intervention, and claims and suggestions for change. Twenty-five social workers participated in self-administered online interviews. Their accounts highlighted professional ethics as the foundation of their interventions. Regarding contextual factors, participants articulated demands and suggestions for change, pointing to professionalization arising from the organization of social services. Recurrent references were made to caring practices, relational social work, and emotional strain. In conclusion, participants identified with a deontology-based approach to social work practice, drawing on theories of change and motivation. They described their primary role as providing emotional support, while expressing concern about the deterioration in intervention quality due to excessive bureaucracy and heavy workloads.

Keywords: social work, professional practice, social services, professionalization, ethics, emotional support, occupational stress.

ES La realidad profesional de los y las trabajadoras sociales de atención directa en los Servicios Sociales Municipales de Castilla y León

Resumen: La realidad profesional se construye en relación con las experiencias de los/as propios/as profesionales. El objetivo de esta investigación es conocer cómo describen los/as trabajadores/as su actividad de atención directa en el contexto de los servicios sociales municipales en Castilla y León. Se utiliza una metodología cualitativa desde el enfoque Theory Driven. A partir de la búsqueda de Tesis Doctorales sobre el tema en el ámbito español, se crea un libro de códigos con cuatro elementos clave: identidad profesional, proyección disciplinar, objeto y reclamaciones y sugerencias de cambio. En la entrevista individual autoadministrada online participaron 25 trabajadores/as sociales. En los discursos se refieren a la deontología profesional como elemento de sostén de las intervenciones. Sobre el contexto, se manifiestan reclamaciones y sugerencias de cambio, se hace referencia a la desprofesionalización procedente del ámbito de la organización de los servicios sociales. Repetidas veces se alude al cuidado, al trabajo social relacional y al estrés emocional. En conclusión, los/as participantes se identifican con un Trabajo Social de base deontológica y utilizan teorías del cambio y la motivación. Describen su rol principal de acompañamiento desde una perspectiva emocional. Se muestran preocupados por el detrimento de la calidad en las intervenciones a causa de la alta burocratización y la elevada carga de trabajo.

Palabras clave: trabajo social; ejercicio profesional; servicios sociales; desprofesionalización; deontología; acompañamiento; estrés.

Summary: 1. Introduction. 2. Methodology. 3. Results. 4. Discussion. 5. Conclusions. 6. References.

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1. Introduction

Professional practice in social services is a recurrent theme for social workers engaged in direct practice, for academics, and for the General Council of Social Work and the Social Work Professional Associations. Defining professional practice in this field is complex, as it encompasses multiple interconnected elements.

Zamanillo (1987) argued that the welfare state was already in crisis at the time when it was beginning to be established in Spain. In this regard, the declarations of the 1979 Pamplona Congress are particularly noteworthy, as they pointed out that the social services system provided a professional identity and framework that had previously been absent.

In the same vein, Ituarte (1990) discusses the difficulties arising from the identification of social work with social services. The author proposes a way of addressing “the identity crisis” (p. 58): defining the object of social work and strengthening its identity through knowledge.

Continuing this line of thought, Ariño Altuna (2009) describes professional identity as multiple, continuously under construction and open to debate, since social work is characterized as “a dialogical profession” (p. 16), in constant dialogue with changing and highly diverse social realities. Martín-Estalayo (2013) also argues that uncertainty in professional identity is a feature of postmodernity. Hernández-Echegaray (2017) refers to the “dual nature” of the profession, which is rooted in a complex and changing social reality and, therefore, is constantly evolving. In the *Libro Blanco* (Vázquez Aguado et al., 2005), the professional profile is defined as non-static, being redefined according to the historical period and culture, in a dialectical relationship between the profession and the social environment that addresses the question of identity through the practical contribution it makes to social development.

Barbero (2011) presents research conducted with social workers to understand and interpret their perceptions of the profession. This study offers a framework with three factors that shape professional realities: the social and institutional context, self-projection, and disciplinary projection.

In Castilla y León, according to social workers' own definition of their situation, summarized in the research by Gómez-García and Torices (2012), the following aspects of their professional reality stand out: social workers feel insufficiently valued by their organizations (69.9%) and by society (57.1%), which leads to dissatisfaction with their social status (41.5%). Other factors contributing to professional dissatisfaction include insufficient pay, a lack of incentives, and the contrast between their professional expectations and the reality of their daily work. However, the aspect that provides them with the greatest satisfaction (83.91%) is contributing to improving people's quality of life through their work.

There are other elements that must be considered to gain a comprehensive understanding of professional practice. Hernández-Echegaray (2017) offers an analysis that identifies the most relevant factors in processes of professionalization, including the existence of a service delivery system parallel to the public system, characterized by precarious working conditions; the excessive bureaucracy of social service systems, which undermines creativity and knowledge production; and the codification of interventions into simple subtasks that distort the work carried out. To curb this trend towards professionalization, it is necessary to improve professional care, integrate practice, reflection and ethics, foster autonomy and creativity, strengthen the social dimension of practice, improve training in basic tools, and understand the history of the profession as a foundation for professional identity.

Psychosocial health is another issue affecting professionals. Puig-Cruells (2017) develops strategies for reflection and professional care in “caring interventions” (p. 126), based on people's right to care, to care for themselves, and to be cared for. Cuartero-Castañer (2018) studies compassion fatigue, or empathy-related burnout, in social workers and reports that one in three workers is at high risk. The tasks carried out by social service professionals are emotionally demanding; despite the bureaucratic perception of the profession, 50.38% of the cases they deal with are characterized by a high emotional burden. Morilla-Luchena (2022) analyses, among other factors, the influence of organizational commitment in correlation with other variables that affect occupational health. For professionals, the emotional bonds they establish at work with colleagues, service users and the institution itself, as well as their perception of their positive and valuable role in society, are highly relevant for occupational health. As in Gómez-García and Torices (2012), the influence of commitment and recognition in their relationship with the institution is highlighted.

Another key element is professional ethics. The journal *Cuadernos de Trabajo Social* dedicated its 30th issue (2017) to ethics and social work. Idareta Goldaracena, Úriz Pemán, and Viscarret Garro (2017) explain that ethics has been a central element of the profession since its inception and continues to be so today. Cordero Ramos and Palacios Esteban (2017) stress the need to adapt professional practice to ethical advances, always oriented towards the pursuit of human dignity in all contexts. They point out that the Ethics of Care (Gilligan, 2013) is a key point of reference for understanding the role of social work today.

The thematic analysis of the texts shows that the conceptual field related to professional practice encompasses diverse topics, including the relationship with the legal and organizational context of social services; the definition of the object and subject of intervention; processes of individual identification; the definition of roles; professional deontology; professionalization; bureaucratization; creativity; professional autonomy; ethics; professional care; and the processes associated with empathy-related burnout.

This study focuses on professional identity as a central element of analysis, from the perspective of front-line professionals in municipal social services in Castilla y León.

2. Methodology

This qualitative study aims to connect, for a comprehensive analysis, the discursive realities of professionals providing direct care in municipal social services in Castilla y León with the realities reflected in academic research conducted in Spain. It adopts a theory-driven approach (Sandín-Esteban, 2022, p. 47). Deductive reasoning from the theoretical framework was primarily used to formulate the questions and to analyze the data.

Specifically, this article focuses on answering the question: how do social workers describe professional reality?

Creation of the theoretical framework

Several authors have reviewed research conducted in Spain on social work. For example, Berasaluze Correa y Berrio-Otxoa (2006) present, under the heading “results of the analysis” (pp. 11-13), a list of twenty-two studies. Similarly, Hernández-Echegaray (2017) provides a review entitled “Social Work Research Conducted in Spain (1963-2015)” (pp. 394-401), selecting fifty-eight titles.

To create the theoretical framework for this study, a search was conducted in the TESEO database. The search terms used were four: “social work” (119 results), “social workers” (2 results), “social worker” (5 results), and “social workers/as” (3 results). A preliminary selection was made based on the content of the abstracts, including only those theses related to social work as a discipline or to social work in municipal social services (40 results). Theses not developed within the Spanish context were excluded (7 excluded). Of the remaining 33 theses, those whose empirical material included direct research with professionals were selected. A total of 26 doctoral theses were finally selected and are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Search and selection process in TESEO

Year	Title	Author	Online Access
2001	Discursos del Trabajo Social, interpretaciones profesionales y las formas de hacer	Barbero García, José Manuel	No
2004	El Trabajo Social en Aragón. El proceso de profesionalización de una actividad feminizada	Báñez Tello, Tomasa	Yes
2006	La Construcción Social del Trabajo Social: España en el último cuarto del siglo XX	Brezmes Nieto, Milagros	No
2006	Cenizas de un ideal: estudio sobre el proceso de "burnout" en trabajadores sociales	Lázaro Fernández, Santa	No
2006	El desempeño profesional de los/as trabajadores/as sociales y sus relaciones con el contexto laboral	Giménez Bertomeu, Víctor Manuel	No
2008	La intervención profesional de los trabajadores sociales	Pomar Fernández, Francisco Javier	No
2008	La profesionalidad de los trabajadores sociales en Castilla y León	Gómez García, Rogelio	No
2010	La resiliencia en el trabajo social	Palma García, María De Las Olas	No
2010	Alteridad y Trabajo Social. Perspectivas y alcances de la experiencia de alteridad en el trabajo social en contextos de exclusión.	Rubilar Donoso, María Gabriela	Yes
2011	Las familias de los trabajadores sociales. Un estudio de casos desde las aportaciones de Ivan Boszormenyi-Nag	Fombuena Valero, Josefa	Yes
2012	Definición del contexto de intervención en el trabajo social de casos	Cardona Cardona, Josefa	Yes
2014	Redes Sociales: un nuevo cuadro metodológico de intervención en trabajo social comunitario	Rodríguez Álvarez, María Dolores	Yes
2015	Percepción del bienestar profesional de las trabajadoras sociales de los servicios sociales de Mallorca	Mestre Miquel, Joana María	Yes
2015	Apoyo social y empowerment en la satisfacción laboral y vital de los trabajadores sociales	Cosano Rivas, Francisc.	Yes
2015	La vocación y el imaginario en la elección de los estudios de trabajo social en la comunidad autónoma del País Vasco	Segú Odriozola, María Isabel	Yes
2016	Incidencia del humor en el burnout y engagement en profesionales del trabajo social desde la perspectiva de género y la crisis socioeconómica actual (2007-2014)	Baeza Roca, Nuria	Yes

Year	Title	Author	Online Access
2017	La práctica narrativa desde el trabajo social: su abordaje en contextos profesionales de acción social. Estudio en el marco de la estrategia metodológica multimétodo	Martí Trotonda, María Amparo	Yes
2017	El proceso de (des)profesionalización del trabajo social En España (1980-2015): déficits, riesgos y potencialidades	Hernández Echegaray, Luisa Aránzazu	Yes
2018	Estudio sobre la prevalencia del desgaste por empatía (compassion fatigue) en los/as trabajadores/as sociales de los centros de servicios sociales de Mallorca	Cuartero Castañer, María Elena	Yes
2019	La satisfacción laboral en profesiones asistenciales: de la investigación comparativa en trabajo social a una propuesta de intervención	Vallellano Pérez, María Dolores	Yes
2019	Factores descriptores de la intervención con familias especialmente vulnerables y sus sistemas amplios desde el trabajo social: la perspectiva del profesional	Casado De Staritzky, Tatiana	Yes
2020	El diagnóstico social: una propuesta metodológica desde el trabajo social	Fustier García, Núria	Yes
2021	Un marco ético para el trabajo social comunitario	Cuenca Silvestre, Mercedes	No
2021	Compasión y sufrimiento en la atención a la población vulnerable: estudio cualitativo de la perspectiva de los/as trabajadores/as sociales de servicios sociosanitarios	Ortiz Amo, Rocío	Yes
2022	Salud laboral en profesionales del trabajo social	Morilla Luchena, Aleix	Yes
2022	Hacia un trabajo social contrahegemónico. Autoetnografiando resistencias en atención social primaria del Ayuntamiento de Madrid	Maroto Sáez, Ángel Luis	Yes

Note. Data elaborated by author from TESEO database search.

These theses, together with studies published in relevant journals and books by social work researchers and theorists, constitute the theoretical framework.

1.1. Participants

Fieldwork was conducted between December 2023 and May 2024. Participants were selected from among social workers in direct practice positions in Social Action Centers (hereinafter CEAS) in Castilla y León. All participants were registered with an official professional association. Direct practice positions in CEAS are regulated by Law 16/2010 of 20 December on social services in Castilla y León (BOE, 2011), as well as by other strategic and sectoral regulations that define their functions and standardize their professional profile. The accounts of these professionals constitute the specific and distinct object of study of this research.

On 1 December 2023, a request for collaboration was sent to the Official Colleges of Social Work of Castilla y León. A collaboration agreement was negotiated, and an initial link to a Google Forms questionnaire was distributed to delimit the target population. On 1 April 2024, those who had agreed to participate were contacted individually. The form was closed on 19 May 2024.

Table 2. Universe and participant data

Sociodemographic data	Universe - 97 units	Participants - 25 units
Gender	96.9% female 3.1% male	96% female 4% male
Age	22.7% (30-40) 36.1% (41-50) 35.1% (51-60) Other 6.1%	28% (30-40) 32% (41-50) 32% (51-60) Other 8%
Years of professional experience at CEAS	20.6% (0-5) 19.6% (6-10) 7.9% (11-15) 19.6% (16-20) 7.9% (21-25) 24.4% (26 or older)	12% (0-5) 28% (6-10) 8% (11-15) 32% (16-20) 12% (21-25) 8% (26 or older)

Sociodemographic data	Universe - 97 units	Participants - 25 units
Years of training	6.1% (0-3) 36.1% (4-5) 36.1% (6-7) 9.3% (8-9) 12.4% (10 or more)	0% (0-3) 36% (4-5) 32% (6-7) 12% (8-9) 20% (10 or more)

Note. Data collected by author from Google Forms responses

1.2. Instruments and process

A self-administered individual interview was designed (Penalva Verdú, Alaminos, Francés García y Santacreu, 2015, p. 34) and distributed online via *Google Forms*. The basic theoretical framework and the questions were validated by experts.

The interview, which is the focus of this article, includes four open-ended questions:

- In your opinion, what are the current challenges driving the advancement of the profession?
- Does being a social worker involve seeing reality in a particular way? If so, how?
- What does it mean to be a good social worker? What would you change about being a social worker? What do you think should change to make it easier for professionals to be good social workers?
- Which aspects of this identity do you agree with or feel comfortable with? Which aspects of being a “good professional” make you uncomfortable or do not fit your personality?

A methodology was used that facilitated rapid distribution and flexible follow-up for each unit. Minimizing the influence of social desirability bias, given that the researcher was not present. The importance of recording personal opinions and experiences in the questionnaires was emphasized.

A codebook was created for this research. The codebook was systematized through thematic analysis of the theoretical framework. After validation and the creation and refinement of categories, a classification consisting of four main codes and eighteen subcodes was obtained. Table 3 shows the definitions of the codes most frequently represented in this article.

Table 3. Most relevant codes and subcodes

Code	Subcodes
1. Topics on professional identity. Set of characteristics of an individual or a group that distinguish them from others (RAE)	1.14. Context (Berasaluze Correa et al., 2020): includes the legal and political context, the organizational context (also 1.14.15. organizational commitment), the cultural context and the socio-relational context. 1.18. Deprofessionalization: “reduction of discretion and professional autonomy in controlling of objectives, the work process and its use” (Harris and White, 2013, p. 143, cited in Hernández-Echegaray, 2018, p. 140). It includes factors of deprofessionalization and solutions.
2. Disciplinary Projection. Fundamental theoretical elements of Social Work	2.10. Models, Theories and Perspectives: this includes Payne’s (2014) classification and theoretical foundations.- 2.17. Foundations for Methodology, in Duque (2013): “is the foundation of the method” (Duque, 2013, p. 20). This foundation can be: “ontological, pedagogical, philosophical, epistemological, axiological, teleological, ethical” (Duque, 2013, p. 20). It includes the union between the global and the ethical, principles (human dignity, the ethics of care and the autonomy of persons), relationships of solidarity, human development, social identity, Rogers’s (1961/2019) “being able to be oneself” and the relationships of individuals with their context. 2.2.15. Caring interventions, in Puig- Cruells (2017, p. 126) are defined as interactions within social interventions and include three parts: the caregiving skills of professionals and support for natural care networks; professional care and the development of professional skills and qualities such as self-awareness; and, finally, the institution’s obligation to care and supervision.
3. The Object. Psychosocial distress (Zamanillo, 2018) as a demand and social problem.	3.19.1. Analysis of psychosocial distress in its structural genesis. Includes macrosocial changes, social and structural violence, social and community movements, poverty and social fracture. 3.19.2. Analysis of psychosocial distress as a subjective experience. This includes the absence of identity as an extreme form of social exclusion, difficulties in developing a social identity, stigmatization and stereotyping, anomie and social alienation, social underdevelopment with high conflict, power imbalances and negative individualism, traumatic experiences, and damage to personality rights. 3.19.3. Social Problems. This includes poverty, violence, housing, trafficking of women for social exploitation and discrimination in access to employment, among others.

Code	Subcodes
16. Claims and suggestions for change A claim is an objection made to something considered unfair or unacceptable, and a suggestion is an idea that is proposed or advised (RAE).	16.1. Claims and suggestions on topics of professional identity 16.2. Claims and suggestions regarding disciplinary projection 16.3. Claims and suggestions regarding the object

Note. Codebook created by author through thematic analysis of theoretical framework.

Qualitative analysis was carried out using *Atlas.ti*, employing tree maps and the code-document analysis and text search tools.

2. Results

The overall results of the study suggest that participants primarily identify factors related to the projection of the discipline, described in terms of basic theoretical elements, methodological aspects and relational components (50.22%). Within this category are the subcodes 2.17 Foundations for methodology (17.78%), 2.10 Models, Theories and Perspectives (11%), and 2.2.15 Caring interventions (9.78%).

Participants also identify topics related to identity that connect to both contemporary and classic themes, such as technology, ethics and context, among others (46.67%). The most frequently cited subcode is 1.14 Context (16%), followed by 1.18 Professionalization (13.78%).

Aspects related to Code 3, The Object (3.11%), have less weight in participants' accounts. Greater importance is given to structural interpretations (subcode 3.19.1; 1.33%) than to the subjective experiences of psychosocial discomfort (subcode 3.19.2; 0.89%).

Finally, Code 16, Claims and suggestions for change (20.44%), captures the voices of professionals regarding what should be changed and how such changes could be implemented.

One aspect discussed in the theoretical framework—the high emotional burden associated with direct interventions (Cuartero-Castañer, 2018)—is encompassed within subcode 2.2.15 Caring interventions. Subcode 1.14 Context includes information related to affective organizational commitment (Morilla-Luchena, 2022).

Table 4. Number of quotations and percentages

Code	Subcodes	n	% of code total	% of global total
1. Topics on professional identity	1.14. Context	36	34.29	16.0
	1.18. Deprofessionalization	31	29.52	13.78
	1.2. Functions and social utility	9	8.57	4.0
	1.13. Discoveries	29	27.62	12.89
	Total	105	100	46.67
2. Disciplinary projection	2.10. Models, Theories and Perspectives	26	23.01	11.56
	2.17.11. Reflective practitioner	2	1.77	0.89
	2.17. Foundations for Methodology	40	35.40	17.78
	2.15. Relational component	4	3.54	1.78
	2.2.15. Caring interventions	22	19.47	9.78
	2.13. Discoveries	19	16.81	8.44
	Total	113	100	1.22
3. The Object	3.19.1. Analysis of psychosocial distress in its structural genesis	3	42.86	1.33
	3.19.2. Analysis of psychosocial distress as a subjective experience	2	28.57	0.89
	3.19.3. Social Problems	0	0.0	0.0
	3.19.13. Discoveries	2	28.57	0.89
	Total	7	100	3.11
Total		225		100

Note. Data from Atlas.ti qualitative analysis conducted by author.

Table 5. Quotations and percentages regarding claims and suggestions for change

Code	Subcodes	n	% of global total
16. Claims and suggestions from professionals	16.1. On topics of professional identity	35	
	16.2. On disciplinary projection	9	
	16.3. About the object	0	
	16.13. Discoveries	2	
	Total	46	20.44

Note. Data from Atlas.ti qualitative analysis conducted by author.

To provide a better understanding of the participants' speeches, the following section presents a detailed analysis of the quotes

Within Code 1, Topics on professional identity, the most frequently cited subcode is 1.14 Context (16% and 36 quotations). Several topics are discussed, the most common being the organization of social services. On the positive side, four quotations highlight adequate working conditions (hours and salary) (p. 15), satisfaction with the configuration of services as "public" (p. 16) and "local" (p. 6), and the fact that they are universal services that "everyone may need" (p. 6). Regarding negative aspects, the content related to high workloads and inadequate staff-to-resident ratios stands out, with nine quotations, such as: "When the workload is so high, social work cannot be done" (p. 17). Negative comments outweigh positive ones; four quotations call for the establishment of a "common criterion" (p. 17), two demand "greater security" (p. 10), and other issues are mentioned individually, such as the lack of "learning periods" (p. 14), "complex protocols" (p. 11), and the need for "more support networks and networking" (p. 12).

In subcode 1.18 Professionalization (13.78% and 31 quotations), participants discuss various factors that act as barriers or facilitators in relation to professionalization. Excessive bureaucratization is mentioned 14 times and is linked to a decline in the quality of interventions.

"Providing space to intervene, not just putting data into systems and managing benefits by treating people as numbers" (p. 11).

"We spend more time on "paperwork" and "reports" than on being with people" (p. 12).

The interviewees emphasize the importance of contact with people and social realities in seven quotes:

"I like direct interventions with users" (p. 15).

"To be better social workers we need more time and group and community projects" (p. 11).

Five quotes express the dual nature of the profession (Hernández-Echegaray, 2018): "The profession is dynamic just like reality" (p. 5). Other protective factors are less represented, such as creativity with two quotes, giving more value to the decisions made by professionals with two quotes, or there is only one quote related to improving training on basic tools of the profession such as the interview and the social report.

Regarding Code 2. Disciplinary Projection (50.22% and 113 quotations), the most cited subcode is 2.17. Bases for methodology (35.40% and 40 quotations). Participants primarily discuss ethics (36 quotations):

"Respect for the code of ethics, in terms of being a good professional" (p. 10).

"Letting them act and decide in their own realities" (p. 9).

"Understanding reality from the inequalities generated by human vulnerabilities" (p. 8).

"The professional must work for dignity and social and human rights" (p. 13).

Continuing with the analysis, subcode 2.10, Models, Theories and Perspectives (11.56% and 26 quotations), includes descriptions of the theoretical patterns used in practice to structure interventions (Payne, 2014). Theories of change and motivation are mentioned in 8 citations: "establishing the intervention based on the possibility of change" (p. 10). In second place, with 6 quotations, are theoretical orientations framed within the humanistic, strengths-based, and ethical perspectives: "a good social worker believes in human beings and their potential for growth" (p. 10). Five quotations contain expressions situated within the theoretical field of critical practice: "we see society as a stage for possible changes" (p. 8). Four quotations refer to a "holistic vision" (p. 9) and a "comprehensive and global view of each situation" (p. 9). In three quotations, reference is made to the person-centered care model.

In subcode 2.2.15 Caring interventions (9.78%), 22 quotations refer to caring for oneself and being cared for; no expressions were found about caring for solidarity networks (Puig-Cruells, 2017):

"To be in constant self-knowledge" (p. 12),

"We are overwhelmed" (p. 12)

"It would be cool to talk seriously about the elephant in the room, which is burnout" (p. 5).

"At work, having spaces to share that emotional aspect" (p. 13)

"I love feeling people" (p. 19)

"Having access to professional supervision services" (p. 12)

In Code 3, The object (3.11% and 7 quotations), three quotations refer to the role of social structures in generating psychosocial distress: “the neo-capitalist system... generates situations of need and social exclusion” (p. 9). Two quotations refer to personal experiences alluding to negative individualism (Castel, 1997) and difficulties in developing a social identity (Bauman, 2005). Regarding social problems, “loneliness” is mentioned in two quotations (p. 5).

Finally, Code 16, Claims and suggestions for change (20.44% and 46 quotations), is explored. The greatest number of quotations relates to subcode 16.1 Claims and suggestions on topics of professional identity (35 quotations). Twenty-one of these refer to professionalization arising from the way social services are organized:

“Excessive bureaucracy” (p. 10),

“The pressure on healthcare and the dismantling of the public sector” (p. 11),

“More intervention time” (p. 12).

With 8 citations, there are claims related to the work within social services, which focuses mainly on “the lack of common criteria” (p. 17); with 5 citations, there are those that refer to the lack of recognition by the institution: “presence and social and professional recognition” (p. 5).

Eight quotations refer to claims related to work within social services, mainly focusing on “the lack of common criteria” (p. 17), and five quotations refer to a lack of institutional recognition: “social and professional presence and recognition” (p. 5).

In subcode 16.2 Claims and suggestions on disciplinary projection, nine quotations concern the relational component; participants talk about supervision: “the lack of supervision is uncomfortable” (p. 16) and about the emotional burden they bear: “it is increasingly difficult for me to be passionate about the small things” (p. 13) and “we are people” (p. 13).

There are no quotations for subcode 16.3, regarding the object

3. Discussion

The results are then compared with other relevant research and theoretical reflections in the field of direct social work practice in social services. The most prominent theme in participants’ accounts is the influence of context. As in Barbero (2011), participants refer to context as a condition that shapes interventions, most frequently in relation to professionalization.

With respect to professionalization, the main concern is the inability to provide high-quality interventions; excessive bureaucratization and the need for better organization of tasks and functions are recurrently described. According to Hernández-Echegaray (2017), other protective factors against professionalization—such as recognizing the dual nature of social work, training in basic tools, and creativity—are less frequently mentioned in participants’ accounts. Creativity is a fundamental pillar of social work intervention and has been approached from different perspectives: “social work as an art” (Moix Martínez, 2005), “art as a tool” (González Abad, 2016), and “creativity and innovation co-laboratories” (Navarro Pedreño, 2015). Martín-Estalayo (2013) also proposes alternatives to professional burnout through the synchronization of theory and practice, which she defines as the “reflective practitioner... a researcher in the practical context” (p. 270).

Participants place particular emphasis on professional identity and disciplinary projection in their work, referring broadly to methodological and relational aspects. The most frequently mentioned dimension is professional ethics, which social workers use to orient their approach and develop criteria for intervention and for understanding social reality. The General Council of Social Work (CGTS, 2012) and the professional associations have played a significant role in this area, which is also a key focus of university education.

In relation to institutional models, the brief mention of the person-centered care model is noteworthy, given that several implementation manuals for this model have been developed in CEAS (Salgado, 2021). The text mainly refers to theories of change and motivation, as well as to ideas that fall within humanistic, strength-based and ethical perspectives. These accounts rarely mention specific authors, schools of thought or models; instead, they draw on more general expressions.

Another part of the accounts, now from the relational sphere (Morilla-Luchena, 2022; Puig-Cruells, 2017), refers to demands for professional care in the context of social services. The quotations focus on requests for support to address situations of emotional distress among professionals, the demand for supervision spaces and, to a lesser extent, for greater recognition of professional work.

Participants also highlight the satisfaction they derive from building relationships and understanding people’s relational contexts; however, they express dissatisfaction because their work organization does not allow them to devote sufficient time to these tasks. Numerous authors underline the importance of relational social work: as “collaborative praxis” (Cardona-Cardona et al., 2017), as “the factor that determines the success of interventions” (Coday, 2016), as “the art of relating” (Navarro Pedreño, 2017), or as “involvement in the process” (Escudero, 2012).

Constructivist discourse is less prominent; instead, discourse that refers to the emotional experiences of both professionals and service users is more prevalent. The focus on relationships from a power perspective (Foucault, 1994) is not predominant; rather, participants speak of shared vulnerability and the need for universal care, in line with the Ethics of Care (Gilligan, 2013).

Overall, the analysis of social realities is underused as a means of describing professional practice. This contrasts with Ariño Altuna (2009) argument for an identity that is transformed through contact with others and with changing social realities. Consistent with Maroto-Sáez (2022) description, the focus of community social services appears to be moving away from the community itself.

4. Conclusions

This study aimed to understand how social workers providing direct care in CEAS in Castilla y León describe their professional practice. Participants identify with a deontological approach to social work practice, based on the defense of justice and social rights, as well as on respect for individuals' autonomy. Their professional identity is strongly influenced by the context of social services, where the quality of interventions is threatened by excessive bureaucracy and overwhelming workloads, with a notable risk of professionalization. Drawing on theories of change and motivation, and on humanistic, strengths-based and ethical perspectives, professionals carry out respectful interventions in which caring practices are fundamental. Professionals acknowledge their emotional exhaustion, although only a minority explicitly request supervision sessions within their institutions.

The frequent references to factors associated with professionalization raise the need for a broader debate on this situation. It would be appropriate to develop initiatives within social services aimed at identifying which protective factors could be strengthened more effectively and at lower cost, and how intensively they should be promoted.

This study provides a systematic exploration of multiple aspects that shape professional practice. However, it has limitations in terms of generalizability, given the medium sample size. Nevertheless, it offers relevant insights into how the interviewees experience their professional practice in the specific context of frontline intervention in municipal social services in Castilla y León.

5. References

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