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## Social work education and family in Latin America: a case study

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The chapter develops a comparative analysis of three social work programs applied in three Latin-American countries, to answer the question whether these programs do or do not include teaching about families in a way that students are prepared for, enabling clients to challenge and transcend oppressions that disempower them (Dominelli 2002). To attain that goal, we identified three key dimensions that help students in achieving a comprehensive sociopolitical and integrated analysis about familial contexts, and constitute basic content in social work programs that should provide 1) acknowledgement of social and demographic changes, 2) a critical approach to social policies our states are adopting, and 3) a dialogue with vulnerable and marginalised families about their needs and the challenges they experience. Through analysis of each case and cross-case analysis, we answer the question guiding the study and propose some future challenges.

The purpose of this chapter is to develop a comparative analysis across three Latin-American countries on how social work education about families reflects expression of two main features for practice: families in their own private domains (referring to conformation of domestic spaces of social reproduction) and family policy carried out in each country (Argentina, Chile and Mexico). The approach social work education may have towards these two factors becomes crucial in order to understand the achievement of social work's professional mission of transcending oppressions and accomplishing empowerment of people (Dominelli 2002), and is particularly relevant for the Latin-American region, given the centrality of the family in Latin-American people's everyday life; social work and families are intrinsically merged in most of the public and private actions oriented towards social welfare.

In Latin America, social work schools began including families as a particular subject of study in their programs during the period of post-reconceptualisation and after the breakdown produced by the social movement of reconceptualisation through the 1960s and 70s, as a result of academic and professional debates on epistemological theory perspectives and methodological options for social work. From these discussions the institution of family became relevant for the academic field because it is one of the main subjects

that social work interacts with. Family was acknowledged then as an organisation where the key social reproduction of its members occurs.

In regard to the post-reconceptualisation, the process is a reaction to the prior Latin-American movement of reconceptualisation of social work. Social work in the 1960s questioned its professional practice as one profoundly influenced by society's economic and political forces, and marked by apathy in response to inequities caused by structural sources of oppression over excluded groups in society. Assuming a critical perspective of capitalist societies (Faleiros 2011; Netto 1976), this movement was based on a Marxist analysis of capitalism, searching for transformations of social structures, critically analysing social work's daily practices, and questioning its servile disposition towards dominant social structures.

The process following this movement, post-reconceptualisation, brought a new search for the foundations of the profession, based on a critical appraisal of the reconceptualisation outcomes. Basically, the previous process was accused of being too ideological, and there was a new focus on working with families, which replaced the traditional work with the individual case, and made broader the intervention towards groups and communities, based on renovated conceptual and epistemological frameworks as well as intervention methodologies.

For those who support the idea of social work as a profession that interacts with social actors (families, groups, communities and institutions) searching for solutions to daily life complexities, the study of life conditions and family organisation in each socio-historical context becomes significant, as well as the distribution of social reproductive responsibilities of the state, the market and families. The members of families request different resources to satisfy their needs; those resources are their labour activities (paid or domestic labour), as well as formal and informal cross-over points indicating exchange relations and mutual help relations (Jelin 2000). The relationship between families and social work professionals occurs in institutional contexts related to social policy, conforming fields of power relations affected by time and space.

Therefore, how students of social work are taught about family conformations will tell us about how social work thinks about the relationship between the family relationship and the state and wider society; how social work envisages and carries out research with families; how it answers questions in relation to what aids or obstructs the development of the capacity to care; and how social work deliberates about the fields of power where social work intervenes. The approach to these key topics will elucidate how social work education in the Latin-American region tackles a vital subject for students and practitioners alike: the role of social workers in enabling their clients to challenge and transcend oppressions that disempower them (Dominelli 2002).

This chapter is devoted, then, to compare social work education about families in the Latin-American region, taking three case studies as theoretical samples. Three schools of social work were studied in their teaching of social work and families; specifically, the modules dedicated to family are reviewed. The structure of the chapter justifies first the relevance of teaching about families for social work. Secondly, it discusses how social contexts have changed in Latin-American societies, producing a tension between development, globalisation and public action, presenting a number of issues between the political/economical approaches in each country in serving the poor/excluded. These discussions identify the emergence of key dimensions that need to be acknowledged in the curricula

of social work education in order to ensure its fidelity to social work principles of social justice.

### **Latin America: a changing society**

Nowadays it is undeniably the case that the whole world is immersed in transformations: post-modernity and globalisation have wrought effects on many structures, including one of the most core institutions: the family. It is understood as 'a social institution, the most representative of the human systems, based on socio-ecological relations with the environment and the cultural context to which it belongs and represents' (Quintero 2001, 7). The importance of family lies in its centrality for society to function. Therefore, if sociocultural contexts change family will change too, and vice versa.

'Concepts, definitions, measurements and perceptions of family life, family policies and policies that impact on families are not constant over time or space' (Hantrais 2004, p.1), because they need to respond to an increasingly complex family structure; social work education is challenged too to respond to the new plurality of family life. This is expressed in decreasing fertility rates, increases in rates of divorce and separation of families, and changes in gender roles. All of the three countries under study in this chapter are affected by these tendencies.

To face these challenges, social work education needs to acknowledge and give legitimacy to new family conformations as well as study family policies from a critical stance, because these become the instruments to support families in coping with complex needs. The critical perspective in social work education becomes a core approach, to prepare students to support families in challenging structures that disrupt egalitarian relations among individuals, families and communities (Dominelli 2002). An approach of this nature should lead to family policies ensuring gender equality, reconciliation of work and family life without making undue demands on women, intergenerational solidarity, life-long learning, and the expansion of day-care systems for children, among others.

New family configurations are emerging rapidly in the Latin-American region but are still considered as atypical families; previously the family could only possibly be conceived as a two-parent structure, as an unbreakable morally, legally and religiously sanctioned structure, whilst today it becomes more evident that a hegemonic model of the family does not seem to belong to the era of globalisation (Quintero 2001, 9). According to Arriagada (2007), the traditional family is no longer the main household structure in Latin America, due to modifications of the basic conditions of life affected by globalisation and modernisation. These conditions are related to urbanisation, and then linked to industrialisation (demographic shifts and modifications in the production process), an expansion of female employment and new consumption patterns, as well as new ways of employment and consumption and greater access to, but more segmented, social services (education, health, among others).

Key demographic shifts are expressed in the decrease of birth rates: in Chile the current birth rate is 0.99%, one of the lowest in Latin America. The decrease has been drastic; in the last 40 years this rate has decreased 54% (INE 2012). In México fertility rates have also decreased from 5.7 children per woman in 1976 to 2.2 in 2006 (INEGI 2009). As for Argentina, the birth rate has decreased from 1970 (23 per thousand) to 2012 (17 per thou-

sand), as well as the average number of children per woman of 1.4 or more per year: in 1979, 3.73; 1990, 2.99; 2000, 2.48; and in 2010, 2.21.

Naturally, this has affected family size. In Chile, between 1992 and 2002, the average number in a family was reduced from 4 to 3.6 people; by 2012 this average was 3.28 family members per group. In Mexico, family size was reduced from 6 children per woman in 1975 to 5 in 1979, 4 in 1985, 3 in 1994 and 2.2 in 2000. Even though these trends are observed in different continents, the speed of change in such a short period may provoke particular difficulties in the society to adjust to such a radically different scenario, especially if family has been a core institution, as we will see later.

The basic idea of a 'nuclear family' as the model for the design of family policies is currently challenged by demographic trends in the region. The three countries show new types of family conformations as well as transformations in the family life cycle, based on the postponement of the arrival of the first child, and the decrease of the average size of households. Although the most common familial organisation is still the nuclear two-parent household with children, increasingly it is observable in the three countries that this configuration is changing towards new ones, such as single-parent households with children, unmarried cohabitation and an incremental increase in the number of divorced couples. New patterns in marriages, divorces, re-marriages etc. contribute to a different family landscape.

The former transformations in the three countries have affected gender roles. Increasingly there are more households headed by women, with a weakening of the male breadwinner and female career model. Sources of transformation are anchored also in improvements of social indicators like longer life expectancy, a rise in general schooling and education, especially for women, and increase of female access to the workforce. However, it is observable that there is an unequal access to these improvements through the different socioeconomic groups, negatively affecting lower socioeconomic groups. Certain changes in family conformations and practices are affecting mainly higher income groups, such as schooling and female access to the labour market. Other changes negatively affect poor families; in the three countries there has been a rise in the number of female-headed households in the poorest families. These groups are characterised by women holding mostly non-qualified jobs and family responsibilities, which means that they have young children, school age children and teenagers to care for as well as work responsibilities. This information concords with empirical evidence establishing that young households with small children or of school age have more probabilities of being in disadvantage and poverty than those households with parents at a more advanced stage in life (Kaztman & Filgueira 2001).

These families are also characterised by their low school attainment. In Argentina, Mexico and Chile, the relationship between education and income is relatively stable until 12 years of education, after which additional years of education increases income. According to Raczynski (2000), most of the adults from families living under the basic subsistence line and in poverty have not completed twelve years of education, limiting their access to better paid jobs. Their low attainment influences also their children's school achievement. According to the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (2007), in Latin America the educational level of parents plays a more important part than income in explaining children's educational performance, negatively affecting results, school dropout, and predicting low educational attainment. Low educational level of poor families impacts also their precarious economic status, expressed in a

range of activities with common employment patterns: non-standard employment, being underpaid and under-protected by labour laws, and often insecure employment, affecting particularly women, who not only have precarious access to the labour market, but see themselves as restricted by cultural patterns.

Modernity in the family would be expressed as the exercise of democratic rights, autonomy of their members and more equity, but it becomes fractured when families have to struggle against market competitiveness and the unequal distribution of wealth, a feature of Latin-American societies. Inequality is the reality for many Latin-American families; Jelin (1998) claims that Latin-American families carry out the functions of social support and protection when it comes to responding to social and economic crises (unemployment, death, low incomes); the family then appears as a strategic resource of great value, which is an outcome related to governments' social, political and economic options.

Therefore, demographic shifts, new types of family structure, changes in the family life cycle and transformation in gender practices are general trends in Chile, Argentina and Mexico, but certainly with different features. Chile and Argentina are located in the southern part of South America, while Mexico is in North America. Chile has been considered an archetype of privatisation and the neoliberal economy with social policies as strategies for economic growth. However, this is a country where a neoliberal model of development has increased the already present forms of socioeconomic stratification, affecting Chileans' perception of economic and social insecurities, inequity and lack of trust in others and institutions (UNDP 2009; Marcus 2004). In Chile political power is concentrated in the executive branch, which initiates most legislation, and is highly centralised, with presidential appointment of the regional executives and the provincial governors. Argentina and Mexico are different; both have federal states leading to a decentralisation of power, favouring regional variation according to local needs.

Even though in these countries there is decentralisation, it does not necessarily bring more equity. In Mexico economic policy had produced an important negative effect in income distribution. According to Székely (1995), some measures such as privatisation and financial liberalisation have led to a concentration of resources' ownership in few people. This, in a country historically unequal, unavoidably means that differences tend to expand. A similar situation is found in Argentina, where the federal system isn't always favourable to equality; there are large inequalities between provinces. As a neoliberalist model was installed, inequalities and poverty growing with it transformed the role of the market which has become a regulator of social risks, and the state only attends to extreme situations. Consequently, people's needs were conceptualised as residual rights of specific groups, and assistance policies assumed the character of compensatory policies. Resources to families in poverty were given only from targeted programs.

Political and economic approaches frame the type of welfare regime implemented in each country, and the kind of family involvement in it. The next section reviews theories of welfare regimes and how they can be applied to the countries under study.

### **Welfare regimes and social policy in Latin America**

The acknowledgement and critical review of types of welfare regimes affecting families gives to the family a clearer perspective. To compare social policy from a social work viewpoint, there are several frameworks to guide the discussion; one of these is the typology

introduced by Esping-Andersen in *The three worlds of welfare capitalism* (1990). Later debate about this typology has led to criticisms of it and this critique in Europe has led to the development of more sophisticated models of comparison (Hantrais 2004). Currently, the review of the social investment approach becomes a crucial means of appraisal for social work to analyse the relation between social policies and families (Jenson 2009; Morris & Featherstone 2010).

Esping-Andersen (2000, 53) claimed that in welfare regimes the family must not be considered as only a shelter of privacy and a place of consumption, but also as one of the most important actors, whose decisions and behaviour influence directly the welfare state and labour market. This view is shared in Latin America; Jelin (2005) proposes considering the family as an organic part of broader social processes that include productive and reproductive dimensions; cultural patterns, political systems, labour markets and social network organisations, in a way that demographic processes such as fecundity, divorce, ageing, among others, are as much part of family processes as social, economic and cultural processes, with all interrelated to public policy.

Hantrais (2004) suggested a categorisation with four 'regimes' of family: defamilialised, partly defamilialised, familialised, and refamilialised types of welfare states.

These regimes reflect different ways to mix social service providers with family responsibilities, leading to highly variable consequences in terms of the role of the family, but also in terms of resource distribution between richer and poorer, men and women, generations, immigrants and natives, etc. (Nygren, in press)

Under these classifications, in the three countries under study, a liberal and conservative welfare mix is recognisable, combining familialised and defamilialised policies. In the case of Mexico – and following here the classification of Esping-Andersen (2000) – Mexico's social welfare regime is closer to the Mediterranean model. Social policy appears strongly familialised, influenced by patronage and the Catholic Church. In Mexico, families have been made responsible for solving family problems in cases where protection systems are weak; in practice, the family, particularly the poor ones, is the only institution that ameliorates the effects of economic crisis, unemployment and disease (González de la Rocha 2006, 3). Family has been regarded as a central body to improve the level of success of social policy (Székely 2003). These features are also seen in the Chilean case.

These approaches are not free from economic options taken by these countries. We have identified in different stages for México, Chile and Argentina an economic liberalisation approach (Sheahan 1997, 7). The model has brought negative effects for these countries' poorer socioeconomic groups, even though direct social aid has been promoted to lessen the impact on the poor through the implementation of methods that do not interfere with markets. These policies led to a divided society, because they caused marginalisation and the risk of social exclusion.

Following Hantrais (2004), we will understand partially defamilialised policies as those that in their discourse appear supportive of families, but stay far from intervening in private life, reducing coordination between policy actors (Hantrais 2004, 202). These policies are seen frequently under liberal approaches, based more in risks than rights. Familialised policies often appear to be influenced by Catholic social doctrine and the principle of social support, i.e. social policies are aimed at addressing situations where primary social networks (especially the family) fail. Thus, a familialised system does not mean

'pro-family' but rather proposes policies in which family members are primarily responsible for the welfare of the rest of the family.

A deeper critical scrutiny of Latin American welfare mix and family policies is found in Jenson (2009). The author has claimed that, currently in Latin America, neoliberalism is being replaced by the social investment perspective.

In the social investment perspective the state may have a legitimate role if it acts to increase the probability of future profits and positive outcomes. This objective-setting in future terms is exemplified by the overriding concentration, now shared by policy communities in Europe and Latin America, on breaking the intergenerational cycle of poverty and disadvantage rather than on ending poverty (ECLAC 2007, Chapter V, for example) (Jenson 2009, 450)

The focus of this approach is represented by the value of present investment for future returns and the value of policy based on its outcomes. Spending strategies as well as policy instruments are shaped by the social investment perspective's underpinning ideas, preferring life-course perspectives instead of cross-sectional measures of the here-and-now, or the increase of the value of asset building. All of these shifts in ideas about time and about appropriate policy instruments buttress new ideas and practices about social citizenship (Jenson 2009). The new perspective privileges structural adjustments that 'make markets the distributors of wellbeing, families responsible for their own opportunities, and the community sector the final safety net' (Jenson 2009, 454).

The effect of this perspective on family policies is the reconfiguration of a 'rights dimension' by giving a 'child focus' to social rights (Jenson 2001; Jenson & Saint-Martin 2003 in Jenson 2009, 458). Examples of this are found in programs like 'Oportunidades' in Mexico, 'Plan Nacional de Familias por la inclusión social' in Argentina, and 'Chile crece contigo' in Chile. It also has been expressed in the extensive use of conditional cash support programs as preferred policy instruments, which demand from citizens some pre-specified actions (Jenson 2009).

Underlying this approach is a dilemma for social workers when working in child welfare. In a context where there is a rise of formal early intervention to invest in children, legislation supports family involvement:

yet the prevailing political and social environment seeks to position vulnerable families outside of mainstream discourses and services, and resists their ongoing involvement in the welfare of their children. (Morris & Featherstone 2010, 563)

According to Morris and Featherstone (2010, 563):

a number of problematic binaries have operated, such as children versus parents, and hardworking families who can access modernised support services versus the small number of failing 'high-risk high-cost' families . . . Furthermore, as we have suggested above, families within this group, alongside others, have also been called upon by government policies to provide care often with inadequate resources or rights available to them.

The new perspective then, with its child-centred and human capital emphases of the social investment strategy, ends up strengthening the idea of children who should be invested in,

to achieve future success and social cohesion, with the help of parents controlled by the state, while the social work focus is on families who were defined as failures (Jenson 2009).

Therefore, the challenges for social work education and family issues are complex, and require a comprehensive sociopolitical and more integrated analysis. It is not only about acknowledging social and demographic changes our societies are going through, nor only about studying critically the social policies our states are adopting; it is also about what Morris and Featherstone (2010) claim as an urgent need 'dialogue with vulnerable and marginalised families about their needs and the challenges they experience . . . what risks they consider they pose'. Social work education on family issues must ensure social workers are able of understanding 'how we know what we know and how that knowledge is grounded in connectivity within everything that we do' (Bellefeuille & Ricks 2010, 1241).

In the current context, with a strong preeminence of liberal and social investment approaches, social projects are predefined, and only poor and inadequate primary research with such families has been carried out (Nixon & Parr 2008) to inform those projects. For instance, in Chile the focus has been on professionals' implementation capacities, but weak attention has been given to how difficulties are experienced by families. Are all these challenges acknowledged and addressed in social work education on families? This is the analysis we carry out to finish this chapter.

### **Neoliberalism and critical perspectives as factors affecting anti-oppressive social work**

The analysis of our case studies is led by the question of whether the social work programs in the three selected Latin-American social work schools include teaching about families in a way that is conducive to discarding top-down and hierarchical relations with people, and promoting more dialogical and collaborative relationships (Dominelli 2002). To attain that goal, we have identified three key dimensions that help students in achieving a comprehensive sociopolitical and integrated analysis about familial contexts, constituting how basic content in social work programs should provide 1) acknowledgement of social and demographic changes, 2) a critical approach to social policies our states are adopting, and 3) a dialogue with vulnerable and marginalised families about their needs and the challenges they experience.

To study the social work programs from three different Latin-American countries, the analysis was carried out within each case and across countries. Therefore each case is now analysed as a unit, in order to develop later a comparative analysis across the three countries.

In the case of Mexico, the social work program from Universidad de Nuevo León currently is in transition from a program that analysed family issues from Urie Bronfenbrenner's systems theory perspective and gave special attention to sociodemographic change and its repercussions on how families reconfigure their composition. However, the fact that the specific module teaching familial transformations is optional does not ensure that all social work students get these fundamental contents. The second characteristic of this first program is its descriptive approach to the neoliberal model applied in Mexican society, which is seen clearer in the module Social Theories II; in it there is not a critical discussion about the impact of the model on social production and reproduction of families.



Lastly, in the module Social Policies and Social Work, even though it is focused on discussing sectorial social policies implemented in the country, families' interpretations and appraisal of these policies are absent in the contents of the program. In addition, there is no special validation of families' contribution and responsibility in the success of the policies' outcomes.

The second highlighted program in the Mexican case shows the general tendency of national educational policies aiming for the development of competences, with an emphasis on a practical approach. In this program there is an emphasis on two main theoretical constructs – general system theories and human development – which are based on motivational schools of thought coming from existentialism and the psychology of Carl Rogers; this program replaced the module Social Work with Families, which included the understanding of sociodemographic variables affecting policies and family intervention. Although other programs such as Approaches to Social Work, Socio-communitarian Human Development, and Law, include the family unit as one of the objects of study, the focus of the teaching is placed on the attainment of specific skill-based educational outcomes. Therefore, there is not a clear fidelity in these two programs to the three core dimensions identified earlier for our analysis.

In the Argentinean case, based on the Universidad Nacional de Cordoba, contents related to demographic transformations and new familial conformations are covered by the module Scenarios, Processes and Subjects; this includes topics that contribute to the understanding of social actors: socioanthropological, cultural, psychosocial and human development contents. These contents are studied again in the module Theories, Spaces and Strategies of Intervention, which deepens the interpretative efforts to understand the meaning families give to their daily lives. The dimension related to political-economic contexts and their impact on family life is covered in this case in several sub-modules (Social Policy, Health and Public Policy, Education and Public Policy) which are articulated within a larger area of intervention strategies that studies concepts of and state interventions on families. Both modules also incorporate families' daily practices as strategies to live and cope that should be part of considerations about professional intervention.

In the Chilean case, based on the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, there are only two modules whose contents give special attention to the family as a whole connected with the rest of the spheres of social life; these are Social Work and Families and Social Policy and Family. Because of the short time invested in these subjects, the challenge of teaching about sociodemographic change and family reconfigurations is achieved to an extent, but the capacity to review policy approaches is restricted to the descriptive level, rather than a critical appraisal of them and their impact on family life. Achieved to a lesser degree has been the response to the challenge of listening to the voice of the families to integrate this in reflexive practices to improve interventions.

Additionally, the particular approaches used to understand family issues, such as Urie Bronffrenbrenner's systems theory, ecological perspectives, and strengths perspective bring the risk of giving responsibility only to clients in solving their crises, instead of developing more holistic understandings about the disempowerment these families experience.

The general review of the three programs shows limitations in Mexico and Chile to fully embrace the unique role social work has advocated: 'educate students to be change agents and to enable clients to alter their social environments' (Reisch 2013). However, it seems to be that Argentina has kept its loyalty to social work's mission, and we have tried to find some answers to why this might be the case.

One reason for the strong differences between different countries is the degree of autonomy universities have from higher education policies. In Argentina, state universities have sustained an important defence of civic education and responsibility towards society in their curriculum. Even though this autonomy was interrupted during many periods by both democratic and military governments, some measure of university reform was established in the years following the end of the dictatorship in 1983. During these critical periods there was a strong reflexive action among the body of social work professionals and faculties allowing some filters against the neoliberal logic that was preeminent at that time in the country. In 1995 there emerged a point of inflection from the faculty body convening a Specificity of Social Work and Professional Training.

This meeting allowed the rethinking of the academic training in terms of the ethical-political dimension, theoretical-epistemological dimension and methodological-instrumental dimension, as it recognises the need to rethink Social Work and reinforce our explanatory theories, and produce new knowledge to confront the profound contextual transformations. (Acevedo et al. 2007, 5)

Consequently and consistently over time there have been academic meetings arranged dedicated to discuss the training and curriculum reform processes in social work careers. There is clearly an important heterogeneity and diversity in social work training in Argentina. However, there is also an agreement about how social work programs should seek to strengthen critical perspectives and transfer them into teaching and practice.

Mexico and Chile have been affected by a strong regulation of the higher educational system, leaving few spaces for autonomy that protects the particular emphases and commitments social work has. Specific aspects jeopardising social work's mission have been recognised by Reisch (2013, 715) in regard to US social work education:

the growing stratification of social work faculty; the increased reliance on untested online methods of education; and the emphasis on quantitative 'outcomes' as indicators of educational success. At the same time, social work education in the US has been unable to respond effectively to the implications of demographic and cultural diversity.

The constant effort in Mexico and Chile to attain American's standards have put social work schools under pressure to achieve outcomes that are not always compatible with professional values, and the lack of a strong corporative defence has reduced the capacity to subvert this, especially when funds are dependent upon achieving state goals.

This last point raises a second difference between Argentina's case and the other two cases. Unlike Argentina, although in Mexico and Chile there are professional organisations and councils, these are still weak in their contribution to building professional cohesion and a strong corporative defence (Ribeiro et al. 2007). Currently, in Mexico there is the Mexican Association of Educational Institutions of Social Work, which states that one of its objectives is to improve the academic level of social work, but has not issued any statement about the intrusion of the neoliberal logic in the training of social workers. In Chile, practitioners' associations and the discipline of social work appear fragmented, limiting its already limited influence.

A third difference is in the critical approach of the programs to the neoliberal effects on social policies, strategies and instruments. It seems that the Argentinean programs bet-

ter acknowledge the negative effects of social investment perspectives, and this is achieved by emphasising an approach to reality from hermeneutical perspectives that gives centrality to relational ties with clients. In contrast, the use of perspectives coming from ecological theory and systems theory in Mexico and Chile relates more to a vision centred on the satisfaction of individual needs (Jani & Reisch 2011). The impact can be seen then in 'an emphasis on individual change, rather than social action' (Reisch 2013, 723).

Lastly, if we look at the general distributions of modules in each program, there are policy modules dedicated to teach macroeconomics, legal regulations, and social analysis among other relevant subjects. However, if the implications of the labour market, legal frameworks and changing social action are not problematised, then few steps can be achieved to help students in raising resistance and change from their practices. On the contrary, the risk of adapting to the 'disciplinary regime' of neoliberalism becomes higher (Reisch 2013, 71).

### Conclusions

From within and a cross case analysis it clearly appears that the three programs achieve the first dimension identified as key to promote social work's mission: the programs under study acknowledged demographic and sociocultural changes in family life. However, this first accomplishment is minimised in two cases, Mexico and Chile, because these are not so strong in applying a critical approach in the modules reviewing policy approaches, and do not provide the means for students to listen to the voice of the families, to integrate it in reflexive practices to improve interventions. The risk these deficiencies bring to social work education is the lack of a comprehensive analytical capacity in social work professionals, which becomes a barrier to re-think policies and programs implemented in each country. The outcome, then, is professionals with few skills to offer in cooperative interaction with families, helping them to recover intimacy and trust.

Our analysis led us to articulate the trends of higher education in Mexico and Chile that had a rigid conceptualisation of quality, produced by weak critical appraisal of social policies. The consequence is a threat for the role of the family in regard to resource distribution between different groups and genders and a tendency to an unquestioning acceptance of market-oriented solutions.

In Argentina these trends have been resisted by a strong corporative defence of social workers, demonstrated in collaborative actions that are sufficiently empowered to prevail upon social work ethics, developing the capacity to fight successfully for professional autonomy. This last aspect has been aided by the higher education autonomy from market forces. We would now question if neoliberalism has been working against social work education, and is it not time to do something?

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