

# Social Transformation Through Supervision in Participatory Action Research



Ainhoa Berasaluze , Maddalen Epelde-Juaristi , Miren Ariño-Altuna , and Charo Ovejas-Lara 

**Abstract** In this chapter we present a new research model, which we call the *PARS* model. It represents a synergy between participatory action research (PAR) and supervision: Participatory Action Research Supervision (PARS).

Social work professionals confront a reality characterized by inequalities and social injustices that stymie any form of democracy. In this context, the action-research methodology presented in this paper aims to generate commitments to participatory and democratic processes, community development, and social cohesion.

The research process itself has led to transformations, notably in terms of the dialogue and effective collaboration between academics and professionals. It has been demonstrated that alternative, constructionist, and critical-reflexive forms of knowledge are possible. These alternative models are far removed from the positivist paradigm which is part of the heritage of the social sciences in their most instrumental and pragmatic expression.

The first part of the chapter outlines the theoretical basis of the *PARS* model, including its epistemological foundation, methodology, and application. In the second part of the chapter, the application of this model in a specific investigation is described. This investigation was a collaboration between the School of Social Work at the University of the Basque Country UPV/EHU and the Department of Social Services of the Vitoria-Gasteiz City Council. The research aims to promote strategies that contribute to the improvement and transformation of the professional practice of social work, as well as the living conditions and coexistence of citizens in our local context.

**Keywords** Social work · Methodology · Social services · Dialogue

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A. Berasaluze (✉) · M. Epelde-Juaristi · M. Ariño-Altuna · C. Ovejas-Lara  
Department of Sociology and Social Work, University of the Basque Country (UPV/EHU),  
Vitoria-Gasteiz, Spain  
e-mail: [ainhoa.berasaluze@ehu.es](mailto:ainhoa.berasaluze@ehu.es); [maddalen.epelde@ehu.es](mailto:maddalen.epelde@ehu.es); [mirenedurne.arino@ehu.es](mailto:mirenedurne.arino@ehu.es);  
[charo.ovejas@ehu.es](mailto:charo.ovejas@ehu.es)

# 1 Introduction: The *PARS* Model, or How to Investigate Through Supervision

The paucity of collaboratively produced knowledge encouraged us to delve into a model that challenges the hegemonic logic of scientific production. We propose an alternative that is collaborative and inclusive and that overcomes the knowing-doing dichotomy. It is a further strategy for deepening democracy and social transformation.

This preamble serves to contextualize the *Participatory Action Research Supervision* model (hereinafter, the *PARS* model) that we propose and its epistemic and methodological framework (Fig. 1).

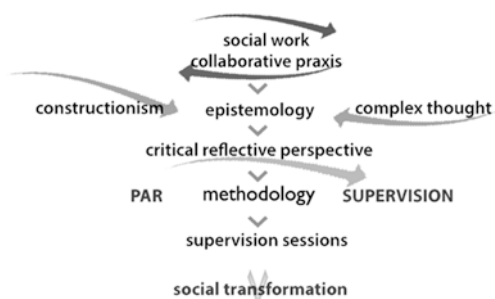
By bringing together research and supervision, we aim to contribute to the generation of more effective responses to the challenges present in our increasingly complex and uncertain contemporary reality. Sociologist Helmut Willke signals a need for new forms of state governance. He draws attention to supervision in the context of knowledge societies (2012) and the important role of professional associations of supervisors, as well as social workers, in public policy contexts.

In this sense, the *PARS* model aims to promote strategies that contribute to social and political reflection and to a transformation of professional practices as well, improving the living conditions and coexistence of citizens in our social context.

The body of work which has had most influence on the methodological and epistemological development of the *PARS* model is based on a constructionist paradigm. This is linked to complex thinking and general systems theory, prioritizing critical and reflexive perspectives. As to the methodology, *Participatory Action Research* (hereinafter, *PAR*) is proposed as a form of research action and, in turn, as a methodology for intervention and social transformation. We find analogies between *PAR* and supervision in social work, as both represent ways of investigating and building knowledge from action embedded in a reflexive and participatory process.

This chapter describes the *PARS* model in terms of theory, together with its practical application in a specific research project. The aim of this project was to advance toward a resignification of difficulties and strategies with respect social work carried out by the social services department of the local city council. The chapter

**Fig. 1** Epistemic and methodological framework of *PARS* model. (Source: authors, based on material adapted from Alonso, 1998; López & Bach, 2016; Mayring, 2000; Conde, 2010)



concludes by recounting the principal findings. This has been a collaborative work that has fostered a space for reflection and the construction of knowledge. It has aimed to widen narrow perspectives, enhance the professional effectiveness of social work, guide social policymaking, and evaluate existing premises and processes. Ultimately, it seeks to transform social reality not just for but also with socially disadvantaged people.

This model updates participatory social work and reflects on participatory forms of knowledge generation, thus legitimizing a collaborative praxis whose ultimate purpose is the search for knowledge and transformative action built collectively by social action workers together with research personnel.

## **2 The *PARS* Model**

### ***2.1 Epistemological Guidelines: Re-constructing Knowledge and Action in Critical-Reflexive Complexity***

In this chapter we present the theoretical bases, methodology, and techniques that make up the *PARS* model. The theoretical bases are informed by the schools of complex thought, social constructionism, and the critical-reflective perspective. With respect to methodology, participatory action research and supervision are key. Finally, the applied qualitative techniques used were supervision sessions, content analysis, and discourse analysis.

#### **2.1.1 Social Constructionism**

The construction of knowledge is the result of sociocultural processes and exchanges and is determined by the cultures and stories shared by a community. According to Gergen, the words with which we understand the world that surrounds us are “social artifacts, the product of exchanges between historically situated people. Therefore, one form of understanding prevails over another as the result of agreements within a community that, sustaining and supporting one form, excludes others” (1985, 271).

A constructionist epistemology favors a perspective and a being-doing with others in spaces of exchange in which the meanings that we attribute to different situations are understood as dialogic constructions and reconstructions. These emerge from social interactions, mediated by language and the consensus and dissent present in a given culture. The diverse realities that we inhabit are constructions that in turn construct us. In our case, the particular culture and reality that interest us are that of social work.

In the *PARS* model, one particular point of focus is how difficulties, responses, and proposals are constructed socially and culturally in such a way as that they emerge as alternatives for understanding, action, and participation in a collaborative

praxis of social work. As Kisnerman points out, “to deconstruct is to determine the factors involved in creating a problematic situation, and which preconceptions, representations, prejudices, and assumptions are operating as barriers or obstacles when trying to move, from this constructed situation, to a less problematic reconstruction through new practices” (1998, 148).

From a constructionist paradigm, we are committed to research understood as a dynamic, critical, reflective, and collaborative process of creation in complex contexts. We support participatory research whose ethics, philosophy, characteristics, and procedures are more coherent with the subjects, objectives, strategies, values, and principles of social work.

### 2.1.2 Complex Thinking

As Xavier Montagud details, complex thinking aims “to find or construct results that are useful in the context in which they are produced and with the purpose they pursue, while keeping in mind that the complexity of reality allows for many possible alternatives” (2015, 10). We approach complex thinking along the same lines as Edgard Morin (2005), for whom it brings together a series of principles shared with social constructionism. These include the following:

- The principle of participatory democracy: This brings together the experiences and capacities of all people, defending a model of life that understands freedom as a responsibility and is responsive to social issues.
- The principle of complexity: This recognizes interrelationships between different systems and situations. The whole is more than the sum of its parts.
- Principle of circular feedback: This states that a cause acts on an effect and this in turn on the cause (multiple causality).
- The principle of self-organization: This recognizes that situations are shaped by complex dialogues between internal and external systemic logics. Systems in a constant state of flux are forced to reorganize, to move from order to disorder, and vice versa. It is a capacity for self-organization that makes it possible to maintain a certain internal balance in changing contexts.
- The principle of local-historical context: This places knowledge within a social and collective framework. It warns us against a belief in the existence of an asymmetry between the supposed authority and rationality of the university and the supposed dependency or even ignorance of citizens and even practicing professionals.
- The principle of meaning: This centers attention on language as the means par excellence for the construction of social life.
- The principle of non-objectivity: This recognizes the observer is present in all observations, and therefore neither objectivity nor neutrality are possible.

### 2.1.3 Critical-Reflective Perspective

A critical and reflective perspective goes beyond instrumental rationality. This is because to know is to recognize and progress in the sense of doing more than seeing the perspective of the other as an object and instead recognizing it as a subject (Santos, 2003). From this perspective, it is understood that the action of objectification is a reflexive action, a process of construction that recognizes the complexity of the object of the social sciences: complexly dialogical, self-referential, and geohistorically and politically contextualized. Nothing is an exact or correct representation of a given reality. Objectivity can only be a result of the action of objectifying a set of conventions, beliefs, assumptions, and options that operate in a particular setting.

Social work seeks to reconstruct collaborative professional development, termed “dialogic conversations” and “reflecting teams” by Anderson (1987, 1997) respectively. These spaces can generate “alternative stories that permit the emergence and incorporation of new meanings, building with them more desirable possibilities, new meanings that people will experience and recognize as more useful and satisfying” (White & Epston, 1993, 31).

Knowledge guided by a reflexive practice (Schön, 1983) is always unfinished, since it is constantly reconstructed. In our case, we understand this as collaborative praxis oriented to discovery and change through dialogue.

## 2.2 *Methodological and Technical Frameworks: Toward a Dialogical and Collaborative Construction*

We opted for a qualitative methodology consistent with participatory action research, including supervision as a variant of this methodology. Based on this approach, various qualitative techniques were deployed. These included supervision sessions, content analysis, and discourse analysis.

### 2.2.1 Participatory Action Research

We understand that *PAR* is the research methodology most appropriate for an engagement with social work, its objects, objectives, social function, and ethical principles sanctioned in 2018 by the International Federation of Social Workers (*IFSW*).

Bradbury et al. (2008) note that *PAR* researchers join together “with leading-edge professionals to apply scientifically derived knowledge to practical problems and promote a democratic and egalitarian social order, underpinned by ethical values” (2008, 78). From our perspective, we would also draw attention to the possibility of overcoming the theory-practice binomial and the separation of the research

system and the system researched. This facilitates a construction of collective knowledge based on professional practice itself. Action research investigates by reconstructing the situations it observes, composing and sharing meanings and actions for change (Kisnerman, 1998).

*PAR* in social work is also a means to step away from a positivist linear conception based on professional *help*, to make space for a praxis based on a cooperative relationship between professionals and citizens: a participatory commitment to face current problems that does not take existing social conditions for granted.

### 2.2.2 Supervision

The *PARS* model incorporates supervision as a variant of participatory action research. As defended by Professor Teresa Zamanillo, it is a “particular way of investigating, a complementary method for action-research, a way of reflecting and experimenting on the conceptual framework, a method for the application of praxis-based theory” (Zamanillo, 2008, 322–323).

Supervision in social work as a methodology for reflection on professional practice “offers professionals from social services teams an opportunity to improve their professional skills through reflection, thought and self-care” (Puig, 2011, 48). In addition, it provides a space for training, analysis, shared reflection, and construction of knowledge based on an approach to complexity that professional practice demands (Aragones, 2010).

Therefore, we understand supervision as a space for critical and constructive reflection on professional practice. It is a space to rebuild situated knowledge, an encounter based on collaborative dialogues (Anderson & Swim, 1995) and a shared territory to investigate. According to Casement (1985; as cited in Ferguson, 2018), supervised people develop “the capacity to reflect, self-analyze and contain themselves when interacting with service users, (...). The supervisee learns in supervision to see how they are as a practitioner and watch themselves as well as the client” (418) (Fig. 2).

**Fig. 2** Supervision in social work. (Source: authors)



Berasaluze and Ariño (2014) define supervision as a “process of reflection on professional practice, a meta-position holding a mirror to professional practice that allows us to contemplate situations with enhanced perspective and clarity. This means revisiting what has already been said and constructing new perspectives with the purpose of learning and generating action strategies” (2014, 106). Our research fits within this definition, understanding supervision as a space for collaborative dialogues, mutual learning, and shared construction, based on mutual and horizontal relationships.

### 2.2.3 Qualitative Techniques

We sought to deploy the technical instruments most appropriate for dialogue, understanding, reconstruction, and a transformation of the praxis of social work. We opted for a triangulation of qualitative techniques including supervision sessions, content analysis, and discourse analysis.

- *Supervision sessions*

Supervised group sessions are analogous to focus groups in some respects. They try to elicit conversations that approach everyday contexts. Although the groups involved are artificial, they reorganize a given social situation by producing a text in context. This text is later analyzed through content and discourse analysis. This methodology aims to uncover meanings that can be collectively identified. It also considers each participant to be active in the process and in a horizontal relationship with other participants and researchers (Reason & Bradbury, 2008).

Perhaps the most relevant difference is that in supervision sessions the group dialogues spontaneously and freely. The objective is to generate communication and information, rather than obtain it. By contrast, focus groups partake in planned conversations, designed to obtain information. Importantly, supervision sessions involve the same group of people (between 6 and 12 people) during several sessions (six to nine sessions) over a period of time (between 6 months and 1 year).

In our methodology, the group participating in supervisory sessions becomes a group engaged in collaborative dialogue. The intention is to engage in analysis from a critical and reflexive consciousness, with the intention of reconstructing discourses and improving and transforming practices. Meta-supervision sessions complemented and supported these supervision sessions. The objective of these was to cast an analytical gaze over the work carried out in supervision sessions. It constituted supervision of the supervision itself.

- *Content analysis*

Although this technique was originally designated for the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the material content of communication, today it refers to a set of methods and procedures for document analysis that place an emphasis on the meaning of a text. Qualitative content analysis is defined within this framework as an approach to the analysis of texts in communication spaces,

controlled methodologically (Mayring, 2000). It is about interpreting the material under investigation with the help of analytical categories, which identify areas of interest.

The primary contribution of this technique to the *PARS* model is its usefulness in generating analytical categories for the systematization of information from information registers. In this case, both the semantic and the pragmatic utilities of the technique are fundamental.

- *Discourse analysis*

Discourse analysis focuses on processes and is confined to the social practice of verbalization (Van Dijk, 1977). It understands language not as a reflection or representation of the world but as action and social construction. Discourse analysis, understood as the construction of knowledge and also as part of processes of change, connects discursive practices with social structures (Ibáñez, 2000). Discourse analysis as social praxis and as a complex and relational construct seeks to reconstruct other possible meanings (Bateson, 1972).

In the analysis of professional discourses, intra-professional discourse is prioritized, that is, discourse within specific professions. Belonging to a discursive community is made evident in the use of shared conventions that mark and follow the norms of that community, its epistemology, ideology, and social ontology. Some categories have to do with a particular discursive genre, such as professional activity, cognitive world, discursive community, pragmatic objective, or specific interlocutor (López & Bach, 2016).

Discourse analysis involves critical analysis by category. Texts are analyzed in context, based on analytical categories or codes that organize the approach to the reality observed. The purpose of these categories is to conceptualize the text and facilitate the resulting theoretical construction-explication. This process is drawn from grounded theory, and more specifically, what Charmaz (2005) describes as a new interpretation of “social constructionist grounded theory.” This variant understands that those categories and theories are not absolute but constructed by researchers.

Setting out from the epistemological framework and methodology described above, we have attempted to achieve a kind of integration between content and discourse analysis. This comprises the structure of the methodological process of the *PARS* model, as shown in Table 1.



**Table 1** Structure of methodological processes in the *PARS* model

Content analysis (CA)	<i>PARS</i> methodological structure (CA+DA)	Discourse analysis (DA)
1. Notes taken after fieldwork	1. Selection of the object of analysis	1. Selection of the object of analysis
2. Literal transcription of the discursive material	2. Notes taken at each supervision session	2. Pre-analysis
3. Ascertaining the order of reading the corpus of texts	3. Literal transcription of each supervision session	3. Definition of the units of analysis
4. Open and literal reading of the text	4. Reading of the transcription of each session according to codes	4. Setting up rules of analysis and codes of classification
5. Fragmentation of the text or integrated approach	5. Pre-analysis at each session	5. Creation of categories
6. Pre-analytical conjectures	6. Elaboration of pre-analytical conjectures and categories	6. Final integration of findings
7. Guided reading(s)	7. Guided reading	7. Reconstruction of new meanings favourable to change
8. Codification	8. Final integration and reconstruction of findings	
9. Annotations of the text		
10. Validation of conjectures		

Source: authors, based on material adapted from Alonso (1998), López and Bach (2016), Mayring (2000), and Conde (2010)

### 3 Application of the *PARS* Model in Research on Social Work in a Local Government Social Services Unit

In this section we present a research process carried out using the *PARS* model. This covers the structure, development, and contents of each stage of research and the most relevant findings with respect to core difficulties and possible strategies for change.

The project involved reflection and collective participatory research through a group made up of four academics and nine professionals. It aimed to improve the professional practice of social work in the context of a local social services unit, through the constructive resignification of difficulties and the development of strategic lines of action aimed at social change.

The initiative was carried out over 15 months, from September 2018 to March 2020. It deployed the methodological process outlined above. Nine supervision sessions were held, in which each of the participating professionals presented a situation derived from their professional practice. All the sessions were recorded and transcribed, with the aim of identifying the main difficulties felt and expressed by the participating professionals in their daily practice, as well as their proposals for improvement.

In this way, the supervision sessions facilitated a reflection on difficulties and opportunities for improvement. The content generated was systematized through

the application of both content analysis and discourse analysis techniques, which promoted the construction and reconstruction of professional praxis.

On the basis of the summary of the process shown in Table 1, we now go into more detail with respect to each stage of the research cycle. Finally, we describe some of the most relevant conclusions reached over the course of the investigation.

### 3.1 *Structure of the Methodological Process in PARS Research*

- *Selecting the object of analysis*

The professional practice of social work in a local social services unit was the object of analysis in this research. Reflection on the praxis of social work was carried out in order to resignify everyday difficulties and reflect on possible alternatives of action to overcome these and improve professional practice.

In order to carry out the analysis and reflect on professional praxis, nine collective supervision sessions were held. In each session, professionals presented a specific difficult situation drawn from their personal professional experience to the group, which was then discussed.

The *difficult professional situations* presented in the supervision sessions were also written up in a live document that was reviewed and updated after each of the sessions. This facilitated learning, the emergence of new concepts, reflections, and/or action strategies. The documents were re-constructed through the use of a series of codes. These codes were structured along the six axes of analysis-reflection which were established as the pre-analytical categories of the research (Berasaluze & Ariño, 2014, 109):

- Contextual-organizational axis. This reflects on relationships between a dilemma or difficulty and contextual variables. These variables might be cultural, economic, political, or legislative, but they might also be organizational in the context of a social services unit. We believe that organizational context can represent an opportunity and/or obstacle.
- Technical-methodological axis. This addresses the technical and methodological factors impacting on the difficult professional situation under discussion. It considers different options that these factors can include and exclude and positive and negative impacts that they can produce.
- Intrapersonal axis. This refers fundamentally to how a situation affects people personally, in terms of professional practice and their social role and identity. It queries which aspects of this impact allow us to advance and which do not.
- Interpersonal axis. In the practice of social work, different points of view and even confrontation can occur around differences in analysis and the deployment of alternative possible strategies. Conflict can occur in relations between a social worker and a client and their peers. It can also occur within social work teams, where collaboration can create synergies or, alternatively, become an impediment

to reaching agreements about the management of a particular case. This axis addressed these concerns.

- Epistemological axis. This axis reflects on knowledge (concepts, theories, models, etc.). It considers needs in this area in order to better understand and overcome difficulties.
- Ethical-ideological axis. This axis addresses ethical-philosophical principles and aspects of ideology which influence understanding, analysis and the selection of strategies for improvement and change with respect to a specific difficult situation.

- *Notes from each monitoring session*

In each supervision session, the research team made up of research staff and social services professionals took notes. These notes were added to the description of the specific difficult professional situation under discussion. Each participant reconstructed the document based on their case, incorporating the contributions and reflective learning from each session.

In addition, within the teaching-research team, two participants took on the role of participating observers. They took notes on everything that happened in the sessions.

- *Verbatim transcription of each supervision session*

All sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for later observation, reading, and analysis.

- *Reading the transcripts of each session based on codes*

The transcripts were studied and analyzed to identify concepts and contents related to the axes of analysis-reflection detailed above. This systematization of relevant and reiterated concepts and content was used to re-construct the pre-analytical conjectures throughout the process.

- *Development of the pre-analysis in each supervision session*

In each supervision session, we conducted pre-analysis with three objectives: to bring together the documents or content corpus involved, to formulate guidelines for the analysis, and to establish indicators or codes that showed up issues present in the material analyzed.

- *Making pre-analytical conjectures and categories*

The pre-analytical conjectures or hypotheses and analytical categories were revisited in analysis meetings after each supervision session. These were then revisited in sessions with social services professionals and in the meta-supervision sessions.

This analysis built up general sense around the content of the transcribed texts and dialogues in relation to the objectives of the research and with respect to relevant critical theory. The reading and rereading of the research materials involved

making hypotheses that deliberately brought us closer to understanding the discourses, in a movement from description to interpretation.

- *Oriented reading*

For the reconstruction of analytical hypotheses, documentary review and discussion were carried out in analysis and contrast meetings in supervision and meta-supervision sessions.

After the free reading of the research materials, we carried out a second directed or intentional reading in order to evaluate the hypotheses and develop more elaborated and specific meanings. This process took advantage of the *annotations to the text* that each researcher added to the margins of writings collected in the supervision sessions and related to the conjectures and the categories of analysis. Through these means, we constructed several lines of argument from which to draw conclusions.

- *Integration and final reconstruction of the findings*

As a final step, findings were drawn up. In this case, this included the construction of new meanings favorable to change. The most relevant conclusions are described below.

## **3.2 Basic Conclusions of the Research**

### **3.2.1 Core Difficulties**

The core difficulties identified through the research were recognized by all participants in the study. This achievement was valued positively, insofar as it helps to better understand certain insecurities related to the daily practice of social work in a local social services unit. Four principal difficulties were identified as a result of the process of generating hypothesis based on the dialogue and materials worked on in the supervision sessions, as well as in the subsequent analysis meetings. These are detailed below.

- *The excessive standardization and bureaucratization that characterizes social services contributes to the de-skilling and de-professionalization of social work*

Standardization and bureaucratization is a structural trend in public administrations in general and social services in particular. The complexity involved in social work interventions exposes a system full of insecurities and uncertainties. This system tends to turn rules and bureaucracy into basic tools from which it derives power, security, and control. Norms, protocols, and procedures are emplaced in the instrumental toolkit of social work professionals, to the detriment and exclusion of their own theoretical-methodological frameworks and the abandonment of a more natural, collaborative praxis with citizens. If participation and transdisciplinary scientific knowledge no longer guide us in our professional practice and instead we raise

rules and bureaucracy to the status of science, we are doomed to the de-skilling and de-professionalization of social work. Social work personnel are converted into technicians of social interventions, understood more as aseptic exercises than as collaborative praxis or democratic and critical actions.

In the research we found evidence to support various hypotheses already raised by other authors. The dynamics identified put us at risk and must therefore be taken seriously and addressed on different fronts. In this regard, the main conclusions make reference to situations in which bureaucratic management and processing from a protectionist and technocratic position lead to de-professionalization. This generates learned helplessness, conformity, and low self-esteem in social work professionals (Hernández-Echegaray, 2019).

Linked to this difficulty, the following participative constructions resulting from the research should be noted:

- An overly protectionist institutional conception focused on control of spending promotes the expansion of welfare administration functions. This converts the management and processing of resources into a disproportionately demanding task in social services.
- The processing of resources is a fundamental task of social services and part of social action. However, inadequate coordination, organization, and planning together with the sheer scale of management demanded means that it ends up becoming a demotivating burden for professionals.
- Bureaucratization brings with it arduous and grinding work processes that contribute to overload and a loss of creativity and critical reflection. Additionally, excessive standardization imposes a protocolization of intervention processes. This confuses administrative procedure with effective professional practice.
- Qualified male and female social workers go through a second period of professional evolution at the hands of the social services system. This survivalist style training is a type of pseudo-behaviorist socialization centered on case and resource management.
- *The assimilation of social work by social services leads to an agglutinated system that puts professional identity at risk*

In the evolution and development of social services, we observe an increasingly *orderly* and standardized system, which is less flexible and leaves less space for creativity. This makes it more difficult to carry out the critical and dynamic social work that is better adapted to taking advantage of opportunities that emerge in the dynamic terrain of citizenship and social change. The social work system progressively comes to resemble an *agglutinated system* (Minuchin & Fishman, 2004). These systems may be characterized as follows: They have diffused borders or limits, and there is a confusion of the social services system with the social work system, a lack of freedom and autonomy, loss of identity, excessive dependence, an abandonment of social justice concerns, and a confusion of objects, objectives, roles, functions, and tasks. A number of authors have described “the servitude that work methods imposed by social services entails for social work” (Pelegrí, 2014, 12).

The conclusions of our research only place more emphasis on this idea of servitude. They also identify some specific dynamics and situations that demand a response. These include the assimilation of social work by the social services system. The praxis of social work is mediated ideologically, technically, and procedurally by its institutionalization. This can induce an abuse of power and certain asymmetric relationships (superior-inferior), without taking into account the importance of the two-way collaboration that recognizes that people are “experts in their own lives.” “To take for granted that subjects are ignorant is to cultivate a passion for ignorance” (González & Rodríguez, 2020, 147). Some other conclusions in this regard:

- The assimilation of social work by the social services system puts at risk the quality of care and marginalizes reflexive and collaborative social work. This produces a distorted and often negative image of social workers as figures of control, rather than of collaboration and support. This can lead to the disengagement of people being misread as refusal or resistance to abide by the rules, or even as resistance to accepting the best wishes of professionals. This in turn can evolve into an abuse of power or “euphemization of violence” (Bourdieu, 1991) concealed or masked behind the mandates of the system.
- In terms of the experience of social workers, our feminized socio-professional status is already fragile as “social care and assistance, while fulfilling essential economic and social functions, is still not perceived as a path to social and professional success” (Lorente & Luxardo, 2018, 105). The dynamics of servitude mentioned earlier is an aggravating factor.
- There is no participatorily constructed, recognized, and shared theoretical-methodological framework for social work in the social services system. The methodologies deployed respond to the instruments and regulations of the system rather than the decisions and professional strategies of workers.
- Population labels and expert diagnoses (unilateral rather than participatory) impede the collaborative construction of strategies for change and improvement.
- *The disciplinary weakness of social work leaves professionals in a vulnerable and fragile position when facing both the social services system and the demands of their work with the public*

It has become clear over the course of this research process that social work has been weakened both professionally and as a discipline. It represents a body of knowledge in need of further epistemological depth and professional action (Zamanillo, 2008). Given the paucity of knowledge useful in terms of daily professional practice, the rules of the social services system come to determine the *what* and *how* of professional duties. With respect to the demands of users and society, in the absence of a common theoretical-methodological-technical framework, professional praxis, as we have already indicated, becomes administrative and instrumental in nature. It is basically reduced to the allocation and management of resources.

This disciplinary weakness becomes manifest in a number of areas. These include the complexity of its object; the underdevelopment of an analysis that takes

into account the parameters of social work and the participation of users and citizens; the vulnerable position of our profession within the institutional system; the inadequate development of disciplinary and transdisciplinary instruments and techniques more responsive to processes of democratization in a given time and place; language excessively constrained by established categories; a lack of research around social work and collaboration between universities, professionals, and local communities; the commodification of resources; and a lack of collaboration through networks. Authors such as Zamanillo (2008) allude to the marginal status of the theoretical-practical heritage of social work. This is due on the one hand to an emphasis on practice and, on the other, to a relative lack of theory directly engaged with this practice. We advocate for a disciplinary logic that transcends a disjointed, solipsistic discipline and that, from both solidarity and transdisciplinarity, produces knowledge for social transformation.

With respect to the demands made by society in general on our profession, we have found that social work limited to interventions with individuals or families makes the *social question* invisible. This impedes a critical analysis of disaffection and social disadvantage. In the words of Zamanillo and Martín, “the silence on the structural factors that produce and reproduce inequity, poverty and social exclusion is alarming. We think that an emphasis on individual-family social work must not be to the detriment of, or substitute for, community based social work” (2011, 111). Further points related to the question of fragility include the following:

- There is a lack of research in terms of both theory and applied studies. Models of social work are not sufficiently developed, which in turn mean that case assessments are based fundamentally on administrative protocols (administrative diagnoses) and not so much on professional criteria.
- The use of crystallized concepts to define situations or problems hinders collaborative dialogues based on freedom and two-way relationships. This leads to greater difficulties when evaluating the processes and results constructed through professional praxis in collaboration with individuals and the public.
- Confronted by historical-social complexity, multiple and diverse demands, and citizens trained to see only the availability of resources, professionals find themselves forced to resist the quick and easy option of conceding to proposals and requests that have been touched up in order to qualify for particular resources. These requests need to be resisted in order to make space for alternative responses based on social reconstruction in response to a collective demand, in accordance with social work criteria.
- Displays of discomfort, frustration, insecurities, fear, etc. could have more to do with the position social services hold in the overall system and with a certain marginality as a discipline and in terms of social status weakness than with personal emotional fragility.
- *The exercise of social work puts into play the whole human being who practices the profession*

The different supervision sessions revealed that professionals need to establish links or relationships with individuals, families, groups, and/or the community to properly carry out their work. These relationships need to be based on empathy, trust, acceptance, reciprocity, and horizontality. To create these relationships, in addition to expertise and technical skills, there is a need for authenticity demonstrated through the involvement and commitment of the professional. This involves intrapersonal work and the development and construction of a personal-professional identity, through reflexivity, self-knowledge, self-criticism, and ethical-epistemological engagement. This demands commitment by professionals and also of the institutions in which they practice their profession. Professionals are not always aware of, or can be perhaps reluctant or unable to undertake, work that is necessary in this respect. Institutions, with their utilitarian and short-term perspectives, do not often demonstrate a willingness to engage in this area. As a result of this, further difficulties arise:

- Bonds and relationships are themselves processes that transform both members of the public and professionals. These connections must necessarily be founded on freedom, trust, mutuality, and complementarity. They must therefore be understood as the axis of social work praxis.
- A relationship that responds to these premises should not take on inappropriate responsibilities handed over from public institutions. Neither should it limit itself to assistencialistic and asymmetrical practices.
- The emotional discomfort observed (frustration, insecurity, fear, loneliness, suffering, etc.) also indicates a need to care for professionals as people. It should not be forgotten that some work, personal, and professional factors (isolation, work stress, loneliness, non-shared responsibility, inadequate spaces, a lack of recognition, hierarchical subordination, etc.) do not favor personal well-being or professional development.
- Elements drawn from the personal sphere such as values, experiences, etc. are present in professional relationships, which provoke, on many occasions, conflicts of values, control exercised as assistance, transfers and counter-transfers, etc., and ethical dilemmas between different principles: autonomy and freedom against dependence and protectionism, etc.

### **3.2.2 Strategies for change**

The identification of core difficulties has helped us to better understand social workers' experiences in social services, as well as the conditions and consequences of their current professional practice. On the basis of this process of analysis, the entire research team met together to develop some strategic lines for action-transformation. Three basic strategies or areas were identified for the improvement of social work in local social services. Each area contains a set of actions designed for the realization of material changes. The three areas together with their corresponding sets of actions are summarized below.



- *Professional self-care is only possible through the construction of one's own professional identity, on the basis of personal and professional development*

One of the lines of action proposed is linked to personal-professional care and self-care, due to the importance of this in moving toward change and improvement. This was verified in the analysis of difficulties. Some actions proposed include:

- The generation of spaces for reflection and professional exchange, by way of self-training and a collective construction of knowledge. The idea is to produce knowledge to transform the living conditions and coexistence of citizens.
- The incorporation of professional supervision (group and/or team) in the annual plans of the organizations, on a voluntary and rotating basis.
- Improving the functioning and cohesion of work teams, understood as support for professionals, through leadership training for team leaders and a redefinition of team meetings. Beyond their role as forums for the simple transmission of information, these should become spaces to develop criteria, evaluate actions, and address the relational dynamics of the team.
- The inclusion of social work professionals in supervisory and policymaking roles.
- *Strengthening social work demands reviewing, rebuilding, and extending the corpus of knowledge around social work, including theoretical models, methodologies, and techniques*

In this second area, we address aspects related to the discipline of social work and its need for reinforcement. While this area may perhaps be that which requires the most effort and dedication, it is also the one that can produce the most wide-ranging changes in the discipline. Some possible actions were identified:

- The elaboration of a theoretical-methodological-technical framework for social work in local social service units that incorporates democratic mechanisms for participation-action related to justice and the well-being of citizens
- The adaptation of ongoing training specific to the discipline of social work
- The training of social work professionals to work as supervisors
- The development of research based on PAR methodologies in collaboration between academia and practicing professionals, both about and for social work
- The transfer of knowledge and professional practices
- *Responding to social issues requires the participation of citizens and reflexive and critical praxis on the part of social workers, in order to develop strategies for democratization and social transformation*

This third strategy is related to a need not to lose sight of wider social issues. The structural genesis of social inequalities was reiterated throughout the process of reflection and analysis involved in this study. Some of the actions proposed included:

- The generation of spaces for citizen participation
- Drawing attention to contexts and circumstances that generate violations of social rights, and in doing so shifting the burden of blame and responsibility

- The differentiation of social services and social work systems, clarifying issues such as social function, objects, objectives, methodologies, techniques, limits, jurisdictions, etc. in accordance with values, priorities, subjects, and processes that prioritize inclusive and transformative social action
- The improvement of the organization and planning of services and welfare payments and the simplification of bureaucratic-administrative procedures
- A more reasonable adjustment of staff-client ratios, workloads, and the distribution of responsibilities in work teams
- Compliance with legislation around social services and a guarantee of sufficient funding

#### **4 Conclusions: Light on the Horizon of Participatory Action Research Supervision**

Whoever reasons, Mairena declares, affirms the existence of a fellow human, a need for dialogue, and the possibility of mental communion between people. But reason, a Socratic invention, is not enough to create human coexistence. This also requires cordial communion, a convergence of hearts in the same object of love. To abolish dialogue is to renounce, in short, human reason (Machado, 1989).

As an ethical imperative, we understand that in social work there is no research without participation. Context is established through dialogic collaboration, which Paolo Freire might identify as dialogic actions of “authentic communion.” These “promote understanding, cultural creation and freedom” (1975, 67). To paraphrase Mijaíl Bakhtin (1993), it is in dialogue between people that meanings are constructed as a result of a collective reflection.

We began our work on the *PARS* model on the basis of these principles, seeking to combine research and action. We sought to base the process on collaboration and positive reconstruction, in order to offer an alternative to positivist research. This alternative revitalizes participatory action and the search for paths toward social transformation. We understand supervision as an option that responds to the methodological, ontological, and ethical considerations detailed above. As such, it can contribute to social work as an academic discipline and as a practice within a social services unit.

This model aims to realize critical-reflexive analysis with respect to a series of aspects and commitments, through observation and self-observation. These aspects include, among others, the question of who is involved; what responsibilities we share and the importance of context; how we name and rename difficulties and dilemmas and with what theoretical-practical frameworks; the effects of our choices, expectations, emotions, and decisions and those of the people with whom we work; how the theory and practice of social work come together; what regulations and procedures affect decision-making and the development of strategies for action and change; which rules regulate and/or constrain the profession; and how we

understand social issues and the breach between working with individuals and addressing wider social issues.

The application of the *PARS* model in research on the improvement of social work in a local social services unit revealed the potential of this methodology, both from the perspective of the process, since it has facilitated learning and a reconstruction of knowledge for all participants, and from the perspective of constructive collaboration in specific social work contexts. Through an application of the *PARS* model, we offered an alternative to the focus on individual knowledge. We jointly engaged in a process of resignification that produced shifts which are a step toward making psychosocial changes necessary for the effective professional practice of social work. However, we do not pretend that our work is neither generalizable nor trans-historical. Instead, it is shared knowledge produced within its historical and geopolitical context.

Finally, it is important to recognize that this is laborious research process, which requires a significant commitment from the participants. Even so, we reaffirm our opinion as to the ultimate value of the project. As is the case with social work, we know that our fate is to always be *under construction*, moving toward democratic social transformation.

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