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“Social pathways, life-long learning and professional practices of Social Workers”

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Key Words

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Summary

This article focuses on the comprehension (Weber, 2004) of the process of the Social Workers' identity and professional (re) construction.

We assume that the training and practice of a profession are nurtured, not only by theoretical reference frames resulting from formal education which vary depending on space (the curricula of each institution and teaching method) and time (history of Social Work), but also by reflection from life-long learning and professional practices. As Craig Lecroy (2002) emphasizes *“Social work is, for many, a way to transform themselves, others and the community. Thus, much can be learnt by understanding the life and the work of social workers.”* (Lecroy,2002:2)

That is why we prefer to talk about the identity of the professionals of Social Work instead talking about the identity of the profession. Each professional is the product of learning and practice from life at school and school of life, as we will show with the voices of social Workers interviews. This research learn how important is to change the training of Social Workers from additive formation to reflexive formation supported on a biographical research and education.

The Problem

The Social Worker is mainly a person (Abraham, 1984) and it is this person, made professional, who interacts with the intervention target group. Of course the professional and the person are seen as dynamic, composite, mixed and unfinished processes: (Nóvoa, 1992; Vieira 2006; Maalouf, 2002; Laplantine e Nouss, 2002; Hall, 1997).

We intend to study the way of being of Social Work professionals, their action models and social intervention convictions stemming from the study of the designated parallel school, or school of life, aside from the formal education which grants them their diploma. It is in this intersection that the concept of habitus becomes vital. We rely on qualitative research and content analysis (Guerra, 2006) of narratives resulting from ethnobiographical interviews (Spradley, 1979; Vieira, 2003).

We will try to understand how Social Workers were “born” and trained, what ideas they have about the profession, how they “live” with it and to what extent their personal characteristics influence the professional development and vice-versa. So our main overall goals are the answers for the following questions: How do Social Workers explain their way of being and acting in the profession? Do they attribute all their competences to external factors such as schools, curriculum, professionalization, etc.? Or do they also value other dimensions (and which?) that only the ethnobiographical interview may disclose, such as models, both positive and negative, facts and critical incidences subjected and incorporated throughout life?

Methodology

The data collection and the analysis of testimonials, narratives, educational biographies and life-histories with professionals in this area, become fundamental methods and techniques of this investigation. Josso tells us that is important to question and reflect in more detail about the life-histories, named by the author as narratives of life, in order to better identify the processes of training (personal and professional) as a process of knowledge, “ [...] in particular the origin of the records in its form of telling or interpreting” (Josso, 2002: 107). We consider that all these methods are more indicated for us to know the more subjective domains of the individuals. This is because this method requires the contact with individuals and their realities as well as “a bigger proximity with the people and the work they develop” (Ribeiro, 2003: 23) An exhaustive interview provides autobiographical material that is presented in the informant’s own words, where they describe and speak of their life and give an exclusive testimony that allows the understanding of the professionals’ representations, the way they work and incidents/milestone in their journey of life. Seeming to be connected to other ways of investigation in the field, the life-histories are seen, in the anthropologic tradition, as away to understand the meaning that the social actors give their own practices and the facts of which they are impellers. Aside from that, as Conceição Moita refers: “only a life- history allows capturing the way in which each individual, staying themselves, is transformed. Only a life- history highlights the way each individual uses their knowledge, their values, their energies in order to give form to their identity, in communication with their contexts. In a life-history we can identify the continuities, the ruptures, the coincidences in time and space, transfers of worries and interests, the reference framework present in the various spaces of the daily life” (Moita, 1992: 116-117)

The biographical approach can make way for the dynamic observation of the individual in his personal, social, and professional context and understand the influence that these have on each others and on the individual himself, through questions asked about the interactions between the individual and the context(s) in which he finds himself.

Through narratives and life-histories it is possible to become aware of dimensions and teaching experiences, contributing to the understanding of the creation of a habitus, a way of experiencing/living the profession.

The Picture of a Social Worker

Dora was born in a small village located in Leiria’s outskirts, more precisely in “Chãs”. She has 34 years old, and is married. She has two children, one girl and one boy, aged four and two years old, respectively. She has a four years older brother. She works in the Social Security - Central District of Leiria, in the adoption team. She attended

primary, preparatory and secondary school in Leiria, and graduated in Social Work at the Superior Institute Miguel Torga in Coimbra.

Primary school: the basis for a peaceful and promising future.

Dora's childhood is marked by several situations that, in some way, touched her and which have been prevalent in choosing the profession that she currently practices. She recalls, with some bitterness and sense of injustice, the negative experiences that marked her passage through primary school, considering it as a slightly positive: *"I thought I was a little left out, a little set aside, [...] in fact I did not have a gratifying primary school, [...] I was the daughter of a farmer in a small village near Leiria, and most of my classmates' fathers were doctors, teachers... [...] I think I was discriminated and, because of that, I was not a very bright student. My primary was very weak."* This is why her schooling context may have been an important moment, because it contributed to her reflexivity and awareness of discrimination processes (Vieira, 1999). At this stage, Dora is a "village girl" who goes to city and feels discriminated taking in account that her friends were *"from social classes much higher than that she came from."* As a result of this, Dora is attentive to the reality that surrounds her, stereotyped by the simple fact of living in a small village.

By her life experience at this point, Dora supports, today, the idea that *"future parents should think carefully about which school they will place their children."* For this mother, *"the elementary school forms the basis for a peaceful and promising future schooling."*

"Give, give, give..." – The sense of justice and the profession choice

Dora grew up in a family environment involving love and protection, although she feels that her parents were, at certain times, very conservative. She feels privileged by the family that she has, because her parents have always been present in her education and also provided her a very happy childhood: *"They were very protective, they were always looking up to see who were my friends; in fact, this helped to build the person I am now [...]."*

She remembers people asking for money, and by these times, her mother used to call her back to reality: *"– Dora, they don't need it' [...] and my mother taught me in her way of seeing things."* When crossed with a beggar, the situation caused her so *"much confusion"*, that she used to say to her mother: *"Give, give, give ...!"* Perhaps for this reason, Dora considers that she always had a *"very personal sense of justice."* It is this feeling that predisposes to the career choice she will exercise in the future. She did not know that she wanted to be a social worker; however, she recalls that *"something was pushing me over there"*. Her childhood was the origin, some sort rudimentary principle for the career choice, a developing principle throughout her school path, until a specific moment, when she realised that her profile suited the profession. At the end of secondary school, she is given a graduation guidebook which included the Social Work course. At that moment, she decides what she wants for herself: *"This is what I want! I had no doubts, I only applied to it, I didn't apply for anything else"*.

The "Rubber Boots" and the Work Field

Dora says that Social Work has evolved. It is a profession that, in her opinion, has been

gaining recognition. As a Social Worker, Dora tells us that *“the profession was initially associated to altruism, to feeling capable of helping the poor. There was also the idea of a very elitist Social Work, the working people didn’t put on ‘rubber boots’ and did not go to the field, they didn’t roll up their shirts’ sleeves”*. Today, she sees the profession with a *“completely different attitude”* and says that these professionals are working to promote the other’s independence, so they become less dependent on subsidies and public services: *“we are trying to empower the other side and not creating dependency, [...] It’s like that old Chinese saying: [...] ‘Do not give the fish, teach him how to fish’”*.

She believes that Social Work is a promising profession, due to current socio-economic conjunctures that are making society facing a very complex situation: *“[society is] heading for the abyss, there will be increasing needs and the intervention area will change”*. Therefore, Dora thinks it is important to restructure the profession, in the face of changes that will be occurring. The society is constantly changing. In doing so, the whole also has to constantly adapt and rebuild itself.

As a professional, she is, many times, faced with situations where people already have a more real perception of social workers’ profession. However, they still incur the idea of *“subsidydependent culture...”*. However, she also sustain that the profession *“has a very positive connotation. [...] I’m not sure if it is me who sees it in the eyes of the others, but sometimes people reveal me ideas and it seems to me that they have a general good impression about the Social Work [...] is my vision, sometimes I have a ‘dreamy view’ of things.”*

The feeling of powerlessness and the magic wand

The happiness that Dora feels to be a Social Worker is evident. She refers, on several occasions, her fully professional achievement: *“I love what I do; I don’t see myself in any other profession... [...] These areas of Social Sciences have this “handicap” of working with people, with feelings ... we’re not working with crafts, [...] only with numbers, with paper and pen... we work with people and it’s for them that our work should be directed...”*. Talking about her devotion for Social Work, she admits that sometimes becomes *“[...] very difficult to make separate things... to get home, lock the door [...] because these life stories are not easy [...] There are stories that only exist in movies, and sometimes don’t even exist in movies”*. These are stories that will significantly contribute to the (re)construction of her personal and professional identity. Even practicing the profession in a “sweeter” area (adoption), she is sometimes invaded by a impotence feeling: *“[...] we’re struggling every day, with very complicated situations, where sometimes we don’t have the magic wand to solve the situations as people want to...”* Thus, the profession is not always easy; she is faced with situations which she doesn’t always agree. However, she would not change her career path: *“I had to be a Social Worker! [...] In the good and bad days, grey and “pink” ... but ... it was the profession which I would choose again!”*

The individual self on behalf of the profession

According to Dora, her way of being is intimately linked to her way of working. Although being a professional trying, somehow, to separate the personal dimension from the professional one, sometimes that is a difficult task to achieve. At the beginning of her career, she felt affected by encountered situations. However, despite the acknowledges she has reached throughout her professional experience, when situations

do not end up as desired, those facts become self-mirrored: “*there are times, when something doesn’t run well, or when there’s a child whose case isn’t going quite as expected, maybe I’ll walk a little more sad and discouraged, but then this makes us learn. These events, even if negative, they’re still formative.*”

Dora says that the values which she has been ruled by throughout life are exposed in her professional conduct. Those are the values that she tries to pass on to others; in doing so, she may be considered an intercultural professional. (Vieira 2009; Camilleri, 1990).

Conclusion

This text, although represents an essay on an ongoing research, including other interviewed social work professionals, shows that Dora assumes how important was her primary socialization to the construction of her professional *habitus* (Bourdieu, 2002) and attitudinal dispositions (Lahire, 2004) concerning the action. Her childhood has been full of critical moments which have constructed an opened mindset to understand the social problems and to have an active position in front of them. Probably, this case shows that personal attitudes of Dora’s life have been incorporated in her professional way of being Social Worker (“*my way of being is linked to my job*”).

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