

Research Report on Social Work Theory and Practice in the World during the Pandemic

Alexandra Mustafá¹

Executive Summary

The Research Theory and Practice of Social Work in the World in Times of Pandemic was carried out in 5 countries (Argentina, Brazil, Italy, Spain and Sweden, with the support of IASSW-AIETS). 103 video conference interviews were broadcast live online and made available to the academic world.

The team of researchers was formed based on contacts from activities within the IASSW. Several online meetings were held to discuss the essence of the proposal. Seminars were held on the central theme of the research (awareness raising). A methodology was established for conducting the interviews, analyzing the data and writing the final text. Specific interview activities were carried out according to the know-how in force in each country. The field of analysis and the drafting of the chapters of the book aimed at by the research was entered. There was a period of local work, during which the main theme emerged with its conclusions. Then came the period of formally structuring the book and the more challenging period of translating it into the many languages required, which proved to be a *lectio difficilior* within the activities, but which was overcome and resolved with excellent results, leaving everyone with a lesson to take into account in future research.

Rationale and purpose of the project

Taking our cue from Paulo Freire (1970), we investigated how the awareness of the emergency and the consequent anticipation of professional actions to deal with it occurred at the level of the organizational system observed in the country of reference. Each nationally characterized research team conducted in-depth interviews in their country of operation and analyzed them, referring to standard dimensions of analysis: ethical-political, theoretical-methodological and technical-operational.² This foundation was the one used to inaugurate the research and training of the team of researchers who, in a second phase, looked at the theme of "awareness" and broadened the theoretical framework to include, in addition to Paulo Freire (cit.), contributions on the theme of awareness from the theories of Jean Piaget and Vygostkij.

The objective of the international research project "*Theory and Practice of Social Service in the World in Times of Pandemic*" was to learn about the readjustment practices of social work

¹ Professor of Social Work at the Federal University of Pernambuco – UFPE – Brazil. He was already a Member at Larger IASSW from 2020 to 2024.

² This ethical-political, theoretical-methodological and technical-operative dimension comes from the work of Yolanda Guerra: *Instrumentalidade do Serviço Social*, São Paulo: Cortez, 2018. In this research, there is an adaptation to all specific needs.

in times of pandemic, identifying particularities, similarities and divergences between the *modus operandi* of social workers in Argentina, Brazil, Italy, Spain and Sweden.

Description of the process of implementation

IASSW-AIETS (*International Association of School of Social Work*) turned its attention directly to the issue of pandemic in 2020. Among the measures it took, to better understand and better implement at that and similar junctures, issued the call "Social Work Education Under Covid-19: A call for international projects."³ . As a member of IASSW, Brazilian professor, Alexandra Mustafá immediately set up and proposed a research project with the aim of investigating how social workers around the world became aware of the pandemic emergency and what was the subsequent rebound of that awareness into professional action on their part.

Thus, Professor Alexandra Mustafá set out to contact a select group of researchers in Social Service so as to form the team to put in place the international research *Theory and Practice of Social Service in the World in Times of Pandemic*, which was submitted to the International Association of Schools of Social Service (IASSW-AIETS) and received prompt approval.

The research was developed in five countries, three on the European continent: Italy, Sweden and Spain; and two on the Latin American continent: Brazil and Argentina. A stable team of 16 researchers was established under the coordination of the Federal University of Pernambuco of Brazil (Universidade Federal de Pernambuco). Eventually, with great adherence, the research team consisted of: Argentina: Diana Crisistelli (DGCyE); Brazil: Alexandra Mustafá (Federal University of Pernambuco), Salyanna de Souza Silva (Federal University Espírito Santo), Ramiro Marcos Dulcich Piccolo (Federal University Fluminense), Márcia Maria da Costa (Federal University of Alagoas), Gisele Ribeiro Anselmo (Federal University of Rio Grande Do Norte), Elizabeth da Silva Alcoforado (University of Pernambuco); Italy: Lluís Francesc Peris Cancio (La Sapienza University of Rome), Maddalena Floriana Grassi (University of Bari Aldo Moro), Maria Lorenzoni Stefani (Social Worker ISTISS advisor, Italy), Elena Spineli (Social Worker advisor); Spain: Josefa Fernández Barrera (University of Barcelona) and Belén Parra Ramajo (Universitat de Barcelona), Miguel-Ángel Mateo-Pérez (University of Alicante) and María-Asunción Martínez-Román (University of Alicante), Arantxa Rodríguez Berrio (University of Deusto), and Emma Sobremonte Mendicuti (University of Deusto); Sweden: Jessica Jönsson (University of Örebro) and Maria Bennich (University of Örebro).

Immediately thereafter, we began to optimize a scientific and unprecedented methodology to make the apenna-approved research work with the best possible quality, since several aspects of it, such as the linguistic variety of the researchers involved (Italian, English, Spanish, and Portuguese); the cultural diversity and their training were compounded by the need for technological updating (since the pandemic brought about a huge transformation of protocols, programs, and applications to be used in the world from then on) and challenged us greatly, but also served to push us in the construction of a set of functional procedures.

It is worth noting that this research, in addition to being on the topic of the Covid-19 pandemic, was developed while the pandemic itself was taking place, so that the researchers were also immersed in the tragic environments that that situation produced, demanding of each one great

³ Available at the link: <https://www.iassw-aiets.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Social-Work-Education-Under-Covid-19-A-call-for-international-projects-Revised-call.pdf>

capacity to manage his or her research action, to the detriment of the situation. Thus, it should be noted that what spoke loudest was professionalism and training in social work, which proved to be strong and efficient, as well as resilient.

To structure the research procedures, we began to: meet online and via e-mail and built as best we could systems de exchange of information, documentation and collective study. All of this, not without great challenges, led to the triggering of the work, which basically materialized in interviews with social workers who faced, firsthand, the pandemic, in their work environments.

This mapping allowed us to identify what changes have already occurred and are expected and desired in the working methods of social workers in different work settings and in social work teaching. The research was conducted between December 2020 and December 2022.

Three general meetings were held in the first five months of the research to establish the methodology and several meetings according to the country context.

The methodology was the same in each country:

1. analysis of the impact of the pandemic,
2. study of public measures,
3. analysis through qualitative interviews with social workers chosen for its significance and field of intervention,
4. trying to consider a plural number of professionals.

The contents of the interviews were defined with a single template for all countries. After the survey phase, two more general meetings were held for data analysis:

1. Between January and October 2021, 103 interviews were conducted with social workers who had an active professional role in different fields of intervention during the pandemic period of the year 2020 (February-December).
2. The number of interviews was parameterized based on the number of universities involved:
 - a. 6 interviews were conducted in Argentina,
 - b. 55 in Brazil,
 - c. 15 in Italy,
 - d. 18 in Spain,
 - e. and 9 in Sweden.

The conceptual framework of the research is based on Paulo Freire's (1970) concept of consciousness-raising. The research team questioned the meaning of the research object in each country. Instead, the organizational contexts that characterize social work, and within which the concepts of consciousness and consciousness-raising can be observed, make clear the process that social workers are called upon to go through professionally, moving from a moral-individual dimension to an ethical-collective dimension of consciousness.

Social workers have been called upon not only to become aware of themselves as professionals, but also of themselves in the organizational and social context in which they work with other professionals and with the beneficiaries of the interventions and systems of action they implement.

The process, then, of conscientization as applied to social intervention and, specifically, to the work of the social worker in an emergency health care setting brings to the attention of our analysis the need to make at least two steps:

1. from a state of unconsciousness to that of individual and collective consciousness of the self as an individual and of the self as an organizational and social context;

2. from a structure of automatic actions, related to unconsciousness, to one of organized actions directed toward social change, related to becoming aware of what one is and what one needs to become in order to respond to the needs of the context, the organization, and the individual.

Social work, in this sense, responds to itself as a profession, to the organization as a working tool, to the context as a service to the population and aimed at realizing and consolidating its well-being.

The methodological framework used is qualitative and is inspired by a semi-founded constructivist approach. While based on theoretical and analytical categories of reference, it leaves room for themes from the narratives of the interviewees.

The primary technique chosen for collecting information was the narrative interview, while the selection of the social workers interviewed was reasoned, aimed at identifying a group of subjects as heterogeneous as possible in terms of number of years of experience and type of role and organizational function, but especially in terms of area of intervention.

The type of analysis carried out was thematic analysis, aimed at identifying themes related to the concept of consciousness that derived directly from the field experiences of social workers.

In addition, the method of analysis was in-case and cross-case in order to have the possibility to cross-reference the themes related to individual experiences with those related to the set of experiences collected.

A. Interviews

The interviews were formulated from six questions, so that:

1. The first three could contemplate aspects related to the awareness of the pandemic phenomenon and its impact on the engagement of professional activities in the different socio-occupational spaces in which social workers acted.
2. The last three questions referred more specifically to bringing out aspects related to the performance of social workers themselves, seeking to extract the novelties and capacities raised in professional action, focusing on the ethical-political, theoretical-methodological and technical-operational dimensions of professional practice.

Therefore, we can elaborate on the objectives of the questions focused on these two main questions:

1. Awareness Taking and
2. Theory and professional practice

In an epistemological retrospective, we can clarify the guidelines and fundamentals that guided this formulation.

B. Seminar on Awareness Taking

For an in-depth theoretical exploration of the category of Awareness Taking, a general online seminar and several smaller meetings were held with all teams of researchers from all countries involved in the research.

Each team presented a systematization of their theoretical research on the topic, based on studies by authors from their own countries and their academic base and those who are universally known and have left a legacy on awareness reflection, such as Paulo Freire, Piaget, and Vygotsky.

Thus, the presentations expressed the understanding of the researchers who also relied on their own reflections and theorizing on the topic of Awareness Taking, which, in dialogue with the

selected authors and based on their own theoretical accumulation and experience, were sufficient to formulate concepts and a production of knowledge on the topic, that later, would be capable of basing the analysis of the interviews and the formulation of the final text that constitute the chapters of the book the represents the final results of the research.

C. Research and systematization of data collected in interviews

The conclusions we reached in this General Seminar and from the conduct and analysis of the interviews indicate that awareness take is a process that occurs in a dialectic between contact with reality and mental processing, in terms of understanding the phenomenon and a stance in the face of the phenomenon itself, which can lead to necessary action to confront and overcome it. This process can be gradual and slow or faster, depending on how reality presents itself. In the case of the Covid-19 pandemic, social workers were faced with a situation of widespread panic on the part of the population, given the lethality of the disease and its magnitude, as well as its unprecedentedness. And, initially, they, the social workers, were also caught up in this panic when they were asked to act in areas where the risk of contagion was highest, such as hospitals, shelters, and health care institutions in general, where contact with people posed the risk of contracting the disease. When they were requested, they were obliged to make a recognition and analysis of the situation, which led them to realize that:

1. They had to assume the duty to act as social workers at that time despite the risks and
2. They should develop efficient and as safe as possible adaptive methods of action in such institutions.

This was the awareness take process that led them, gradually, to overcome that initial attitude of panic and deal with that panic installed in the population, in order to help control it and develop a rational attitude, capable of spreading calm and response-seeking to that globally widespread disaster.

Therefore, social service has been increasingly recognized as a profession of interest and need for action in emergency situations.

The data presented by that reality called for immediate, but expertly thought out action by professionals who, overcoming the initial moment of panic, placed themselves in a mental posture of seeking information for greater knowledge of the phenomenon and searching for alternatives that would characterize increasingly rapid and efficient awareness.

This mental and practical posture, understood as praxis because it involves theory and action, required that the mental attitude elaborated in consciousness save all the knowledge accumulated in professional training and professional experience, as well as make use of all the ethical principles underlying the profession's codes of professional ethics and ethical-political projects to assume an attitude of prominence and innovation in dealing with the pandemic crisis.

D. Writing the book chapters

Each team from each country was asked to write a chapter for the book, based on the analysis of the interviews conducted. A script was suggested for writing the text which covered the following items:

1. An analysis of the country's social, economic and political situation during the pandemic, including information on the structure of health and care policies in the respective countries;

2. Analysis of the process of social workers becoming aware, highlighting emerging aspects that hindered or facilitated this process, such as expressions of denialism and the attitude of government officials towards protecting the population against the virus;
3. Analysis of the answers given by the social workers in terms of common and divergent points, highlighting innovations in terms of social work theory and practice based on the following dimensions of the profession: ethical-political, theoretical-methodological and technical-operational.

It was agreed that each team would write a chapter in the original language of their country with a version translated into English, considering that the book would be published in multiple languages to reach the maximum number of professionals around the world. Complying with this agreement presented challenges, especially with regard to the English translation, which led to an extension of the deadline for publication, given that not all the teams managed to submit the English version, placing a heavy burden on the shoulders of the coordinator who, despite the unexpected increase in tasks this entailed, causing a significant delay in the basic schedule, took on the task and carried it out with sufficient quality.

The book is due to be published on the ISTISSS (Istituto per gli Studi sui Servizi Sociali) website, which required another increase in activity, since it was understood that an Italian version would also be necessary, which the coordinator also took on the task of promoting.

This report, moreover, is a sine qua non for the publication of the book, since all the money allocated to this project was earmarked for the publication of the book itself, while all the researchers (including the coordinator) worked on the project on a voluntary basis.

Discussion of outcomes and/or feedback to the project

The very process of activating the interviews, while including the social workers surveyed as participants in the scientific process of thinking about the essence of the Covid-19 pandemic and its repercussions on professional doing and thinking, generated a lot of discussion that is still ongoing, encouraging professionals to never lose the scientific dimension while practicing their profession.

In addition, during the interviews, one of the questions asked the interviewees to give a testimony about the importance of this research, which has already generated a lot of feedback and today we can count on the possibility of reconvening the interviewees and engaging them in a possible second round of future reflections.

In particular, the live video programs, which were used by the Brazilian team to involve the more than 100 social workers in discussing the research questions, stand out as a possible new instrument for academia to provide assistance to professionals in the field, involving them in a theoretical and practical reflection that brings them closer to their training and to science itself.

These programs, called *Crivando a Pandemia*, had a national audience. They were held weekly and the people who watched interacted via YouTube chat, giving their feedback on the testimonies that were being broadcast online, as well as the reflections and considerations made during the interview.

In other words, it was an instrument for bringing together professionals in the humanities and social sciences at a time of forced isolation. These programs are available on the playlist of the IASSW-BRASIL channel and will serve as analysis material for other researchers, such as Erica Lima, who will be writing her master's dissertation using these programs as an object of study and analysis.

The Results

INTRODUCTION

The transferability of this project to other contexts, in many ways, is high, as it involved bringing together high-level researchers from various countries and practically forging methodologies that enabled interaction despite the linguistic and cultural challenges.

The meetings of the team of online researchers were polyglot, using simultaneous translation to facilitate mutual understanding between the participants. This is a solution to the IASSW's linguistic challenge, since there are several languages in its meetings and not everyone who interacts knows English.

This aspect of the methodology can therefore be applied to many other situations.

As for the aspect of including the interviewees in thinking about the object of the research, carrying out a process of suspension of the real, it also seems to us to be very useful, since the research took place during the period in which the Covid-19 pandemic was taking place.

This process of doing science together with the interviewees is in line with the modern notion that every human being is, in some way, a philosopher and can contribute to understanding the data insofar as they are also data providers.

In this way, the IASSW can draw inspiration from this research for future activities with social workers engaged in any kind of emergency action around the world, making it easier for those who are caught up in it to integrate into the research as a real scientist in their own right.

The researchers were also encouraged to write chapters for a book, so the results of the research will become public and not all research ends with a book. And this is a theoretically systematized book, contributing to the production of knowledge in social work, which will be socialized in several languages, increasing the reach of the results themselves.

The interviews conducted in this study clearly confirm that the pandemic period was an extremely interesting phase for analyzing the behavior of social workers.

One will be able to understand it better with the reading of the book that is result of the research as one understands that social workers experienced an exceptional upheaval in their daily routines, and this upheaval produced several transformations that deserve to be considered as much with regard to training as to social work practice.

The overall conclusions of the research inspire us to say that, in summary, the social work profession has been crucial and indispensable on the front lines of the fight against the pandemic, and that all the knowledge accumulated in this confrontation represents irreplaceable intellectual and practical growth that should serve as an essential element in professional training and practice in all spaces, such as universities, colleges, schools, entities representing the profession and others.

Products resulting from the research to date:

MUSTAFÁ, Alexandra; PERIS CANCIO, Lluís (Org.). **Social work during the pandemic: awareness, theory and practice.** (2024) A multilingual book (one version in Italian, one in English and one in the researchers' original language: Portuguese, Spanish, Swedish and Italian) already in the process of being published on the ISTISS website (Istituto per gli Studi sui Servizi Sociali) Available at the following link: <https://www.istiss.it/2024/09/11/il-servizio-sociale-durante-la-pandemia/>. This book contains the results of the research carried out in the five

countries involved and is made up of chapters written by the members of the research team, all of which include several quotes from the social workers interviewed and an analysis of the situation in the respective states during the Covid-19 pandemic.

DA SILVA MELO, Cleomar Jamyson. Elements to Think About the Theory and Practice of Social Work in Pandemic Times: Analysis of interview n°25 of the Program Crivando a Pandemia of the Covid19.

The general results of this research

This research has shown that the Covid-19 pandemic has found the health and welfare structures of the world's countries weakened by a previous action that was being promoted in the countries to cut funds and neglect social policies, based on the false assumption that human beings were destined to face the social jungle just as they were naturally destined to face wild beasts and bad weather in the lower Paleolithic period. Our discovery during the research reveals that this was, and continues to be, an action of the so-called neoliberal movement, which prioritizes fiscal adjustment policies (blind obedience to the claims of authenticity of the perverse laws of the market to the detriment of the essence of life in society, which is that of living together for mutual protection) and so-called austerity (which is actually nothing more than greed, euphemistically called). Thus weakened, the institutions (which essentially exist for social and health protection) were ignored by the politicians (then heads of state), who were ideologically dominated by those life-devouring fallacies.

In European countries (Spanish, Italy and Sweden), the research found that there has been a real and serious crisis of the welfare state: in Sweden, for example, the research proved that the state has been called by some influencers of public opinion (who are nothing more than transmission belts for so-called neoliberal ideas) the “People's Babysitter”, because, they said, through social policies (which had been offering the social rights acquired and recognized as necessary by a progressive mentality that well recognizes the reason for life in society: protection from the beasts and the weather) the state was preventing them from using the people as their object of ultra-exploitation. In other words, the research showed that the discourse of the so-called. Neoliberals hides the real reason why they attack the state.

The social workers realized, during the collapse of the Pandemic on the masses, that this abandonment was in full swing and that it had de-instrumentalized the protection processes, so they decided to create, on their own, valid and functional instruments and alternatives to efficiently combat the threats of the pandemic. Focusing on the process described here and better explained in the book that is the main fruit of this research, you can see what they did and the scientific basis of that operation: networking; organizing spaces while respecting the need for social distancing; using the available media to hold educational and management workshops with families and groups to generate collaboration and awareness of the danger in progress and the problems arising from that danger, such as: gender violence, depression erupted and hidden due to social isolation; the creation of meetings in open spaces with protective techniques (use of masks and social distancing) to dialogue about the situation, generating rational solidarity and an opportunity to speak, which produced an exchange of knowledge and information, bringing out an awareness of

the validity of collective action when it is organized participatory and pan-theoretical. The workshops carried out using academic techniques learned during university training, for example in Argentina, were able to activate very high quality study groups that generated awareness of the need for collective control and coping with the pandemic, while also making those involved realize that they too are actors and managers of society when they assume their demiurgical role, since in that dilemma the politicians had practically abandoned the populations to God's will.

An important observation in this context was that in all countries, the state measures only began to be implemented by the states after the WHO officially declared the reality of the Covid-19 pandemic, which was also slow to show itself ready for such an emergency. Thus, social workers working in the health sector have accumulated knowledge of endemics and pandemics that have occurred at other times, and they have used this knowledge both to become aware of the seriousness of the situation and to take action.

In particular, the Latin American countries, represented by Argentina and Brazil in this study, received news of the outbreak of the pandemic in the media and, in a way, this gave them an advance view of what was to come in their countries, making them anticipate the entry of the virus there and take action to nullify its inoculation.

The ethical and epistemological fruit of the research

As we saw above,

“The general conclusions of the research inspire us to say that, in summary, the profession of social worker has been crucial and indispensable in the front line of the fight against the pandemic, and that all the knowledge accumulated in this confrontation represents an irreplaceable intellectual and practical growth that should serve as an essential element in professional training and practice in all spaces, such as universities, colleges, schools, representative entities of the profession and others.”

This requires further study because, faced with the pressure demanded by the advent of the pandemic, social workers worked, for example, with the elderly and, theorizing about the new reality that had dawned on them, they forged practices of prevention, control and monitoring of that segment, which was in shelters, totally exposed and without the possibility of family protection, in order to structure multi-type monitoring, i.e. both face-to-face and through the use of the information technologies then available to combat the danger of contagion and prevent deaths, depression problems among elderly users, through innovation in the management of the general and specific day-to-day running of those shelters. This fruit was recurrent in all the countries that took part in the research, constituting a permanent acquisition of knowledge for Social Work worldwide as a whole. Particularly noteworthy in Brazil was the experience of the so-called ILPI 26 Laboratory, coordinated by gerontologist social worker Sálvea Campelo (interviewed during the research - see this interview at the link: <https://www.youtube.com/live/K2CL41lrUco>) who coordinated that laboratory in a scientific and technical-operational manner, managing with such resources and with the ethical awareness required in that juncture, to obtain unprecedented results and total control over the danger of

contagion, preventing deaths of the elderly throughout the State of Pernambuco (Brazil) which has a territory of no less than 98. 312 km².

Social Visibility of the Profession during the Pandemic

Before the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic, the invisibility of social workers was something established as historical. Mainly because today's societies were established on the basis of the subjugation of the impoverished masses, using their labor to leverage the wealth that a minority maintains without sharing it fairly with those who enrich them. In other words, that mass, which is ultimately the privileged public of Social Work, is also socially invisibilized in history, as it is considered to be nothing more than a labor donor for those who take advantage of it to enjoy unjustified privileges. This has repercussions on the precarious working conditions in which social workers find themselves, because, since they are intellectually well endowed, having graduated from higher education schools, those who are in power prevent public opinion from perceiving social workers as providers of means for collective life. This meant that social workers themselves were neglected, and in many cases they didn't even have simple personal protective equipment to work on the front line of the pandemic. However, it also happened that people who had never needed assistance began to have that need and, for example, to attend food distribution lines, PPE distribution lines, public hospitals and then found themselves needing to turn to social workers and their services to help them in crucial moments of crisis and life insecurity. In this way, social workers, when they were freed from the control of their power, became aware of their social strength, as they realized that they play an extremely important and strategic role in keeping the societal edifice afloat. In other words, the research was able to show how, from now on, there is no way to continue minimizing the centrality of the social worker in everyday life, as they have finally been perceived by many as true social demiurges.

Conclusion

Although the results of this research are quite explicit above, they are not exhausted by what we have just said, because the book in question contains the text of the social worker researchers from each of those countries and by reading them you will be able to see, at first hand, this realization that must take place, With the blessing of the IASSW and its support for this new vision of the profession as demiurgical and highly strategic in societies, we invite those interested to read it, and we also call on them to join us for the next events that we intend to produce in order to make these findings socially acceptable.

Happy reading.

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