

# Social Question and Professional Intervention by Social Workers

Questão Social e Intervenção Profissional dos Assistentes Sociais

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**ABSTRACT** – This article is a result of a master’s dissertation based on a qualitative research project conducted with six social workers involved in various socio-occupational contexts in the city of Porto Alegre. The study’s results reveal a theoretical weakness in the understanding of the social question and a reduction of instrumentality to the use of instruments during professional intervention. The theoretical weakness becomes evident in the difficulty of linking the expressions of the social question with their common generating axis, in an economicistic reductionism and in the appropriation of the institutional object as if it were the professional object itself. The reduction of instrumentality to the use of instruments becomes evident in the fragile association of the theoretical-methodological and technical-operational dimensions during their interventions.

**Keywords** – Social Work. Social question. Professional intervention.

**RESUMO** – Este artigo é fruto da dissertação de mestrado, oriunda de uma pesquisa qualitativa realizada com seis assistentes sociais que atuam em diferentes espaços sócio-ocupacionais na cidade de Porto Alegre. Os resultados do estudo evidenciam uma fragilidade teórica na apreensão da questão social e a redução da instrumentalidade ao uso dos instrumentos durante a intervenção profissional. A fragilidade teórica fica evidente na dificuldade em articular as expressões da questão social com seu eixo gerador comum, no reducionismo economicista e na apropriação do objeto institucional como se ele fosse o próprio objeto profissional. Já a redução da instrumentalidade ao uso dos instrumentos fica evidente na frágil articulação das dimensões teórico-metodológicas e técnico-operativas durante as intervenções.

**Palavras-chave** – Serviço Social. Questão social. Intervenção profissional.

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The purpose of this paper is to provide a summary of the results obtained by a master's dissertation<sup>1</sup> which, based on successive theoretical and empirical movements, sought to reveal how social workers apprehend the social question and intervene upon it in the work processes in which they take part in Porto Alegre.

The research was of the qualitative type. The analytical process made use of the semi-structured interview and asystematic observation techniques to gather information and review the content (BARDIN, 1977). The dialectical-critical method was adopted to conduct the study, as its core categories encompass the totality, historicity and contradiction. The research subjects, interviewed from June to August 2007, are six female social workers trained in Rio Grande do Sul and working in Porto Alegre in a wide range of fields, such as health, housing, social security, social work and courts.

On a daily basis, social workers face various expressions of the social question,<sup>2</sup> like violence, poverty, unemployment, no health care, no education, homelessness etc. These professionals intervene in situations where the elderly have their constitutional rights violated, children and teenagers are involved in drug trafficking, women are victims of physical abuse, in short, those are a few of the social question expressions they come across in the work processes in which the social workers are inserted.

Apprehending such situations as expressions of the conflict between capital and labor marks off the specific features of Social Work in the socio-occupational arena. That is why people from other fields working in the institution not always have the same understanding of the institutional needs. Social workers seek to understand how the processes deriving from society's economic framework<sup>3</sup> generate the social question and how they interpenetrate and manifest themselves, for instance, in the lives of senior citizens whose rights have been violated, offending teenagers, women victims of abuse, and in other borderline situations social workers encounter, as well as the subjects' actions to face them.

Such apprehension becomes a way to unveil reality based on the dialectical-critical method's core categories, which are historicity, totality and contradiction. There are different apprehension and intervention levels that reveal the interactions between specific and broader situations (BAPTISTA, 2002).

Interventions are guided by the teleology, once that there is intent in the act of intervening, which is conditioned and steered by one's theoretical apprehension of the concrete reality. Therefore, we understand that apprehension and intervention are permanently related as social workers do their job, once that the diagnosis, which results from the theoretical apprehension of the phenomena presenting themselves as expressions of the social question, encompasses the interventive aspect.

Apprehension is the diagnostic side of their work. It is the skill necessary for social workers to understand reality as they successively come across expressions of the social question. Hence, apprehension requires theoretical bases that guide their take on reality. Apprehension is part of their instrumentality, as the latter encompasses both technical procedures (interviews, home visits etc.) and coordinated strategies and theoretical mediations (GUERRA, 2002).

The theoretical-methodological issue is related to how one sees and explains society, and the education proposal, which does not separate history, theory and method, is typical of the critical-dialectical matrix (SIMIONATTO, 2004). The word apprehension refers to one's understanding of reality based on a theory that guides how the latter is seen and social workers' education, that is, it refers to the theoretical bases activated in the work process in which social workers participate.

## The heterogeneous notions about the social issue

The social workers interviewed have trouble understanding the social question based on its common genesis (capital-labor conflict), and there are heterogeneous notions about the topic which, most of the time, is understood as synonymous with social issues.

Understanding the social question as a broad phenomenon prevailed among the interviewees. To Faleiros (2001), the term social question is too broad to be taken as the subject-matter of a specific professional category. From his point of view, the social question is taken very generically by the training proposed by the ABEPSS (Brazilian Association for Social Work Training and Research), considering it is impossible to treat the capitalist system's contradictions through the actions of a single occupation, as much as it is not viable to conceive the social question as the specific, exclusive subject-matter of Social Work.

The author says that the capitalist system's contradictions cannot be solved solely by social workers' work and that the social question is not the exclusive subject-matter of this professional category. However, that which defines the specific features of Social Work with respect to the social question is apprehending the latter as a consequence of the contradiction between capital and labor. Overall, social workers understand that building an inequality-free society requires changing the capitalist social order and that to do that workers need to come together around their class interests. According to Simionatto (2004), the dialectical-critical method marks off the specific features of Social Work in its diagnoses of reality, that is, in the realm of the social question, and it is also the only method compatible with the ethical-political project designed collectively by the category as well as with the training proposed by the ABEPSS, which does not separate history, theory and method.

In the master's research conducted, their various notions about the social question and their trouble to understand it based on its common genesis derive from their weak apprehension of the dialectical-critical method. Because they are unable to apprehend the method, they fail to recognize the root cause of the social question and many of the latter's expressions, as they do not employ historicity, totality and contradiction to unveil reality. The most the interviewees could do was approach the social question only through inequality or only through resistance, which shows their trouble to understand the contradictory aspects manifested in the inequalities and resistances that take shape in the expressions of the social question.

We found that the interviewees have a hard time to associate the broad and the specific, the totality and the particularity, that is, the social question and its expressions, and that is why we believe their theoretical knowledge is weak to grasp the determinations of the capitalist society's founding relationship with the other social phenomena.

The social question must be understood through its common genesis. However, social workers hold multiple, contradictory notions about their professional subject-matter, indicating that they have problems to theoretically understand the social question category and its practical mediation (MACIEL; TÜRCK, 2004).

Even when it is recognized as social workers' professional subject-matter, the social question is not always associated to its root, that is, as a result of the exploitation of labor by the capital. Therefore, we agree with authors who say there is no even understanding of the social question genesis (MACIEL; TÜRCK, 2004; MACHADO, 2007). Such apprehension problems may originate in the academic medium, considering that there is no consensus about the topic among theoretical productions as well.

Pastorini (2004) criticizes some authors' insistence on affirming the existence of a new social question. That means looking for the new and leaving aside the characteristics that have followed the capitalist society from its beginning without explaining why such characteristics have existed for so long.

The contemporary "social question" in capitalist societies retains the characteristic of being a concrete expression of the contradictions and

antagonisms found in the relationships between classes, and between the latter and the State. However, capital-labor relationships are not invariable, nor is the way capital and labor are organized: that is why we agree with the idea that there are new features in the manifestations of the “social question”, which is very different from saying that the “social question” is another, given that it would mean saying that the previous “social question” has been solved and/or overcome (PASTORINI, 2004, pp. 14-15).

To the author, speaking of an old social question in opposition to a new one does not help understand the social question today. Although this phenomenon may express itself in several ways, it has not lost the essential, constitutional traces of its origin.

Pastorini (2004) emphasizes that reality must be apprehended based on an outlook of totality, which is in motion. It is only based on historic cross-sections that one is able to understand such motion, albeit not while thinking linearly about the past and future, the old and the new, but by apprehending history from a dialectic relationship comprised of continuities and breakups.

Therefore, such apprehension problems may originate in the academic medium, considering that there is no consensus about the topic among theoretical productions as well. Maybe that explains the heterogeneous understandings and why social workers oftentimes cannot recognize the subject-matter on which they are supposed to operate and its origin.

Like all categories extracted from reality, the social question cannot be seen concretely for it can only be viewed in its expressions: unemployment and illiteracy, among others. The social question does not present itself as the determinations of the conflict between capital and labor. There needs to be a theoretical abstraction to understand that such manifestations are tied to the social question (MACHADO, 2007). For that abstraction to exist, one needs to have theoretical knowledge of the dialectical-critical method that provides the light for social workers to read the reality. According to Prates (2003), choosing a method over another is above all a political choice, in order to actually materialize the proposal of professional training. It is a strategic process that requires theoretical-methodological consistency.

The academia is the venue where the debate takes place; it is the venue of greatly relevant theoretical discussions. It is upon the battles of ideas that knowledge is furthered. Nevertheless, many ideas that present themselves as “new” reissue old strategies that uphold the existing state of affairs (PRATES, 2003).

We believe that the discussions about the “new social question” and the end of the centrality of labor reissue conservatism, are part of the dominant classes’ strategy to reach the cultural hegemony of capitalism, as though this system were irreversible, denying the contradiction between capital and labor, historicity and totality, fragmenting knowledge. When such discussions are established in the professional training venue without critical thinking, a chasm is generated between what instructors teach and the education project, which considers that history, theory and method are inseparable.

In the past few years, the profession has substantially changed its ethical-political bearings; however, many social workers graduated before such changes introduced into the new curriculum guidelines in 1996. Social workers graduating after the ABEPSS curriculum reform did so in a context adverse to the training proposal, which increases the lack of theoretical depth. As Maciel (2006) states, the university reform has put a strain between specialized, operational training and generalist, intellectual training, which clashes against the ABEPSS guidelines for Social Work. Among the interviewees, there are social workers who graduated before and during the university reform, and their lack of theoretical clarity about the subject-matter of study and professional intervention derives in part from an education that took place in different, controversial contexts.

It is the dialectical-critical method that allows social workers to unveil the reality based on a mediation system that permanently renews itself, making it possible to incorporate the new not in a

spontaneous way but based on critical thinking (SIMIONATTO, 2004). The theoretical-methodological principles provide social workers with the bases to read the reality and expand their view regarding the social question. The latter does not reveal itself in its immediate expressions, which are the subject-matter given<sup>4</sup> to social workers in institutional venues. The production relationships that generate the social question and frame social relationships must be apprehended in the relationship between social worker and user.

### **The economicist reductionism in the apprehension of the social question**

The study revealed an economicist reductionist understanding of the social question, since the latter is reduced to poverty by the interviewees, which makes it impossible for them to apprehend their professional subject-matter in its entirety. The social workers interviewed believe that they need to adopt different theoretical currents from those recommended by the training proposed for Social Work, so that they may understand some of the needs they work with and intervene on them. The testimonial below is illustrative:

[...] we are always reviewing this subject-matter, because the subject-matter blends into some things, [...], many times we ask ourselves whether we have clearly identified our subject-matter [...]. We work with extremely low-income families and others that make 6 minimum salaries [...]. Then, many times, we ask ourselves: what is our job? Is it only with the expression of the social question in those low-income families or can we include those other people who make six minimum salaries as well? So, it is not clear [...]. The subject-matter is the social question. But as I have told you, we do not work only on that; there are other fronts. Then you will ask me: what is the subject-matter? Well, that is the point. Our forte are low-income families, this expression of the social question [...] we need some knowledge of Psychology [...] because when we go into a home, people show their true colors [...] We see a lot of the in-family violence question [...].

Economicist reductionism is revealed in this testimonial that relates the social question solely to poverty. The interviewee does not see the social question in the lives of users who make six minimum salaries. However, such users belong to the working class; they experience the processes of alienation once that they are deprived from enjoying the wealth their work generates.

A simplistic understanding of the social question is found among social workers of all education levels, who work in various institutional venues. Several professionals who work as teachers are not familiar with the dimension of the dialectical-critical method; they believe that the social question is unable to explain the phenomena found in society and that many needs social workers come across cannot be analyzed based on capitalism's founding contradiction. A few topics (in-family violence, drug use etc.) are dealt with from an individualizing perspective, as though separate from the production relationships, which leads students to look for references in other fields of knowledge because they are not aware that their own field provides the theoretical and methodological inputs for them to intervene on certain needs.

Such complementary readings are important and may help them understand several topics; however, a lack of knowledge of and association with the dialectical-critical method may generate a few mistakes. Many social workers, including instructors, fail to identify that the method offers theoretical elements to apprehend some needs and intervene on them. They are needs that do not directly derive from the conflict of classes but are associated with the totality of production relationships, such as in-family violence and drug use. The totality category makes it possible to analyze a family experiencing in-

family violence in a broader context, as a family that suffers from the lack of security and the impositions of the working world, who experience exclusion and other socially constructed violence processes.

The inequality and exclusion processes originate from the disparity between the social classes; they are intrinsic to the capitalist system. A wide range of ways to resist social injustice are also expressions of the social question. In addition to totality, historicity and contradiction help build such understanding. Therefore, the dialectical-critical method is capable of providing the light for one to read the reality and give social workers the bases for them to work in any situation, on all needs. Theoretical reductionism exposes the lack of understanding about some expressions of the social question from the critical theory standpoint.

A few topics related to gender, in-family violence and drug use were not associated with capitalism's domination relationships and it became clear they have trouble understanding the social question in the lives of users who do not live in extreme poverty. We found that their take on reality is in a way disconnected from the totality. According to Iamamoto (2005), the social question must be apprehended in its totality, rejecting isolated analyses of the reality, be they economic, political or cultural in nature.

Universal connection is one of the laws of dialectics, indicating that all phenomena are related (MARTINELLI, 1991). The needs stemming from situations like in-family violence and drug use are associated with the production relationships, as determined by the contradiction found in capitalist society. At first, such needs do not show themselves as a determination from the conflict between capital and labor. It is up to social workers to apprehend such situations, apparently disconnected from the social question, as a product of such conflict-ridden relationship, which is concealed exactly so that it may lose its changing power.

We believe that the university reform, combined with the acritical incorporation of discussions about the "new social question", has helped increase the lack of theoretical depth on the part of Social Work students. Hence, the superficial debates about the existence of a "new social question" confound students undergoing training and clash against a critical theoretical standpoint compatible with the ethical principles assumed by the category of social workers. Such process enhances the reductionism in the apprehension of the social question, theoretically weakening the professionals who, for failing to understand the dimension of their subject-matter, get the institutional subject mixed up with their profession's subject, accepting the identity attributed to them (MARTINELLI, 1991).

### **Reducing work tools to the use of instruments**

The application of operative techniques, such as interviews, individual or group approaches, home visits, preparing projects, preparing technical opinions and social studies, in short, the techniques and tools that social workers use are mediated by their theoretical-methodological knowledge. Based on the needs identified in the reality, such professionals set their intervention goals and the most suitable means of work (GUERRA, 2002).

According to Guerra (2002), the instrumentality of Social Work encompasses, besides the instruments and techniques (the technical-operative dimension), theoretical knowledge and the teleological guidelines (theoretical-methodological and ethical-political dimensions). The author cautions that instruments and techniques should not be given a greater importance than other components that guide their work. All those elements must be dialectically coordinated because, when human activity is limited to the instrumental aspect, the ontological nature of social relationships is disregarded.

Said author highlights that, as they carry out an activity, social workers act as critics and not only as technicians once that, to master their tools, they absolutely have to understand their purposes and how to achieve them. According to Guerra (2002), action methodologies and technical tools cannot be given independence once that, by making them independent, social workers turn an accessory into

something essential. The technical-operative apparatus only makes sense when social workers use them while having clear goals in mind, when they define the latter based on a diagnosis.

Social workers are relatively independent, for they lack the resources required to set their workforce in motion. Hence, the institutions that hire and offer some of the means of work also organize the work process in which social workers take part by assigning them roles (IAMAMOTO, 2005).

From the interviews we found that the techniques used by the interviewees were those that suited the accomplished of the institutions' goals, such as meetings to explain the contract, interviews to explain benefit-granting criteria, interviews to talk users into committing themselves. Therefore, it became clear that both the interventions' techniques and goals are determined beforehand by the institutions.

Social workers should not merely adapt themselves to institutional schedules but, on the other hand, cannot deny the institutions' activities and goals in the process of reframing their subject-matter, because such motion starts with the "putting institutional needs in operation [...] the institutional need is the starting point" (BAPTISTA, 2002, p. 32).

As Baptista (2002) says, the intervention planning's subject-matter is reframed based on social workers' successive instances of contact with the reality that first presents itself in the institutional environment. Social workers apprehend such reality based on the core categories of the dialectical-critical method – totality, historicity and contradiction.

According to TÜRCK (2008), the knowledge process is the movement in which social workers coordinate theory and practice for, like Baptista (2002), she understands that the process of unveiling the subject-matter is steered by the method's categories. Such unveiling process is put into operation through successive meetings between social workers and users, in which the professionals employ instruments and mediate them with the theoretical-methodological knowledge that is also included in the tools, allowing social workers to theoretically apprehend the content of accounts that emerge in interviews, home visits etc. (TÜRCK, 2008). Therefore, the planning process (BAPTISTA, 2002) and the knowledge process (TÜRCK, 2008) make it possible to mediate the theory and the practice because the instruments used in both propositions encompass the theoretical-methodological, ethical-political, and technical-operative aspects found in social workers' training and work.

It is clear from the study that, for failing to understand the dimension of their professional subject-matter, the interviewees adopt a technical approach to "juggle" the needs they find and separate the use of techniques from the theory, which guides the action. Their weak understanding of the social question makes social workers resort to techniques in a way that breaks from the theory and appropriate the institutional subject-matter as though it were their professional subject-matter. Their professional goals are contradictory, when compared to the institutional goals, which tend to break apart the services they propose to provide, thus obstructing the full guarantee of rights.

Theoretical weakness in apprehending the social question leads social workers to pragmatism: they have trouble understanding the dimension and contradictory nature of their job's subject-matter. Besides using the techniques in a way that is disconnected from the theory, they are unable to prepare a higher quality diagnosis of reality, and their work instruments are reduced to tools, which interferes with the end-product.

We found that the interviewees use similar techniques. The social workers do not have problems in using the instruments, such as interviews, home visits etc., but do when diagnosing the reality. In other words, the interviewees are unable to associate the theoretical-methodological aspects with the technical-operative ones. Thus, theoretical-methodological skills are not activated as part of the work instruments that social workers place between themselves and the subject-matter which, through their intervention, will be submitted to the process of change.

Nevertheless, theoretically understanding the social question is no guarantee of professional practice committed to the working class' interests because, in addition to theoretical depth, one needs to

pay attention to the strategies for putting interventions into operation. Hence, it is necessary to build an intervention path that is gradually unveiled by social workers based on their relationship with the reality of the institution in which they are inserted and with the users. In this process, it is necessary to reframe the intervention subject-matter by theoretically apprehending the reality based on successive contacts that take place through instruments like interviews, home visits, and others, while mediating the techniques with the theory that guides the action.

### **Provisional considerations**

In short, the study's results reveal that the social workers interviewed use the theoretical-methodological dimension in a weak, inconsistent way, there are varying notions about the social question, they have trouble understanding the latter based on its common genesis (capital-labor conflict) and on its contradictory nature (inequality-resistance). The interviewees have an economicist reductionist understanding of the social question, since the latter is reduced to poverty, which makes it impossible for them to apprehend their professional subject-matter in its entirety. The social workers use intervention techniques in a way that breaks from the theory and appropriate the institutional subject-matter as though it were their very own professional subject-matter. Additionally, they reduce their work instruments to the tools used in their interventions.

However, it must be noted that the results presented are not definitive, as they were based on a dialectical perspective. That is why it is impossible to exhaust the analysis of data and make generalizations. Without a doubt, the research carried out brought many challenges faced by Social Work to light. Based on them, we need to think and intervene proactively to actually apprehend the work subject-matter and intervene on the latter.

The propositions in this study point to the need for greater rigor when adopting the critical social theory; that is why ongoing education is important as a device capable of helping overcome one's theoretical weakness in apprehending the social question and avoid reducing the set of work instruments to the use of tools.

Based on these provisional results and in an effort to help social workers overcome their challenges, we believe that universities, the organizations representing social workers and the institutions these professionals work for could hold debates and refresher courses through agreements to fund the courses and so that the professionals are granted time to attend them. Instructors also need to assess their work and theoretical principles, considering they have the responsibility of training social workers.

It has also become clear that we need more in-depth studies on how the social question has been put into operation as a work subject-matter in the socio-occupational environments where social workers work. Getting closer to the professional practice requires strengthening the bonds between universities and the institutions where social workers work, and may take place through extension and research projects.

It is essential to collectively discuss the dilemmas of Social Work, review strategies, assess the results of social workers' professional actions, and rethink their insertion in the various fields. To do that, we need to foster the debate among Social Workers in their totality, overcoming the isolation between those who dedicate themselves to teaching/intellectual production and the people who work directly with users. Social workers' collective participation and organization are vital for us to set up spaces where we can exchange ideas and overcome our limits.

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<sup>1</sup> The research that culminated in the Master’s dissertation authored by José Wesley Ferreira, advised by Prof. Dr. Ana Lúcia Suárez Maciel, was approved by the PUCRS Ethics Committee. The definitive title of the dissertation defended in the Graduate Program at the PUCRS Social Work School was *Questão social: apreensão e intervenção no trabalho dos assistentes sociais (Social question: apprehension and intervention in social workers’ job)*.

<sup>2</sup> The social question is “the set of the mature capitalist society’s inequality expressions, which share the same root: social production becomes increasingly more collective, work becomes widely social, while the appropriation of its fruits remain private, monopolized by a portion of society” (IAMAMOTO, 2005, p. 27). In short, the social question expresses the capitalist society’s inequalities and ways of resistance to social disparities.

<sup>3</sup> The set of production relationships makes up society’s economic framework, the actual basis, upon which a legal and political superstructure is built and to which certain forms of social awareness correspond (BOTTOMORE; OUTHWAITE, 1996, p. 302).

<sup>4</sup> To Türck (2008), the subject-matter given is the apparent need.