

**Social Policy and the Global Crisis: consequences and responses**

Budapest (Hungary), 2-4 September 2010

**Social Work active practices within the new social policy trends:  
a Portuguese perspective**

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**Stream 5: Social Work and Social Policy: control or empowerment?**

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## 8th ESPAnet conference 2010

### Social Policy and the Global Crisis: consequences and responses

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Stream: **Social Work and Social Policy: control or empowerment?**

Abstract

#### **“Social Work active practices within the new social policy trends: a Portuguese perspective”**

The institution of public policy schemes and the bureaucratization of social policy systems provided the historical structural context for the consolidation of social work as a profession. Rapidly, the profession became mainly public and its scope as policy administrator has deeply enlarged. Many have argued that in this process social work have gradually been drained from its core foundations and turned into an administrative and managerial practice.

The trend in contemporary societies is for the reinforcement of an instrumental rationality focused on competitiveness, efficiency, efficacy and result-oriented practice; this rationale is not alien for social work, which more and more is influenced by this kind of inspiration. The consequences have been diverse and topics like the de-professionalization thesis, managerialism and evidence-based practice are definitely in social work agenda.

In this sense, new influences in social policy have a strong implication in social work and, otherwise, the ways in which social workers face the mission of the profession strongly condition the horizons to which social policy can aim at. The new directions in social policy towards activation, individualisation, contractualization and so forth are key elements for the comprehension of today's social work practice.

This paper will discuss how active social policy gave birth to an “active social work” and what kind of issues does it raise to the profession, taking into account the acknowledged IFSW definition of social work. One of the most relevant discussions in this realm concerns the notion of empowerment and its extent from individual to community levels. The analysis will rely under data collected from empirical studies on social work and social policy in Portugal.

**Key words:** Active Social Policy, Active Social Work, Empowerment

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## Introduction

This article intends to discuss how active social policies gave birth to an “active social work” and what kind of implications come with that turn.

The central argument develops in three main parts: firstly, it is emphasised the intricate relationship between the institution of the welfare state and the professionalization of Social Work; secondly, the main traits of contemporary welfare mutations are pointed out; and, thirdly, it is discussed how those changes affect social work, turning it into an “active social work”.

In the end, it is highlighted the questions arose by this turning and the problematic consequences and challenges it poses to contemporary social work, with special regards to what is happening in professional practices.

The article concludes with a reflection on the place and scope of empowerment-oriented practices in the context of the newly emerging active social work.

The empirical data presented are part of three different research projects developed by the authors. Two of them refer to the study of the main social assistance institution in Lisbon: one analysed professionals, their practices and their perspectives on front-desk intervention (CET & CESSS, 2008), and the other endeavoured an in-depth approach to clients of social assistance services (Castro *et al*, 2010). The third data source derived from a PhD research on contemporary trends and changes in social work (Amaro, 2009).

All quotes were taken from interviews, mainly with social workers, but also with clients, and from interview reports made by «mystery clients», used as a methodology for data collection in the first study presented.<sup>1</sup> Translation was freely undertaken by the authors.

## The welfare state and the rising of Social Work as a profession

As Robert Castel (2005) argues the future of the welfare state and social work were closely linked during the period that followed the Second World War. In this point of view the social

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<sup>1</sup> The «mystery client» consisted on a research methodology which sent to social assistance services fake clients, with previously prepared stories and with guidelines for what to observe and to ask for. At the end of the first interview each “client” wrote a report and the situation was disclosed to the professional involved. All social workers potentially involved in that methodology were aware that in a certain period of time a number of «mystery clients» were ought to appear at the service, but they were only informed about the forged situations after the first interview and before they start to undertaking diligences.

work and welfare state development share a common dynamic: the reinforcement of the welfare state and the professionalism in the social work and social field in general<sup>2</sup>.

The institution of public policy schemes and the bureaucratization of social policy systems provided the historical structural context for the consolidation of social work as a profession. Rapidly, the profession became mainly public and its scope as policy administrator has deeply enlarged. Many have argued that in this process social work have been gradually drained from its core foundations and turned into an administrative and managerial practice.

The consolidation of social work historically tried to combine social responsibility, moral commitment and scientific base, constituting “a kind of a contract which connects humanity in responsibility: each one receives what the others give and each one gives what the others receive” (Martins, 1999: 23). In this sense, the purpose of social work was by the time of its institution to “conciliate the Christian and humanistic life perspective with the capitalist dimension of labour relations” (Mouro, 2001: 57).

As Soydan puts it, social work comes from the association of the ideals of human progress, with a scientific analysis of societies and with the idea that analysis can direct the intervention: “the social work practice to help people in need and to transform and increase the living conditions of people is linked to the scientific analysis of a given historical context. From the point of view of the history of ideas, this depends on two facts: the emergence of the scientific analysis of society during the eighteen century and the application of the social scientific analysis and the prognosis as a tool for working the social change” (2003: 32).

The purpose of social work as professional activity in modern societies is, in this sense, associated with the upcoming of social science, which means, with the scientific way of producing analysis over societies, and with the idea that social conditions can and should be altered according to scientific models and theories. Social work practice arena is, then, the one of a social pact aiming at an ideal of human progress, social justice, democracy, equality and self-determination. This was how social work was established as a practical activity, with a scientific base and a humanistic insight.

The European social model, with the welfare system and social policy, became the hegemonic framework for social work with the necessary implications for the structure of social work practice. It is at this regard argued that it is not possible to talk about social work changes without referring to present social policy trends, and to talk about transformation of the welfare systems without taking into account its implications for social work.

Indeed, social work may be considered as a modernity profession, once it is founded in some of the basic principles of modernity such as human rights, social justice and equality. It is,

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<sup>2</sup> The social work birth as profession is previous to the Second World War, more precisely it has occurred with the welfare state origins, but its expansion and consolidation took place in the context of the development of the welfare state and public social policies in the 1940s.

consequently, critical to social work to understand what kind of problems come with the shaking of that axiological framework.

As Castel points out, the «classic» social work (from the end of the Second World War until the mid-1970s) functioned as a part of the social progress and integration model represented by the welfare state but it was deeply affected by the welfare state and social progress crises (cf. Castel 2005:29).

### **Social policy turn and the side effects for Social Work**

Since the “thirty golden years”, the welfare systems in Europe have been facing multiple challenges and threats to its sustainability. As a landmark of the European social pact, policy makers were never keen to give up on its foundations, even though its goodness has been increasingly questioned from all quarters of society.

From 1974 onwards a series of events and factors stood up to show the frailties of the European social model. Pierre Rosanvallon points out different critical dimensions for that crisis: financial, ideological and philosophical. The first consists of the crossed processes of gains and expenses and of the first oil crises. The ideological crisis refers to the legitimacy crises and the spread-out idea that the State can't manage (Rosanvallon, 1984). The philosophical crisis is linked to the questioning of the solidarity principle in face of the responsibility principle, to the incapacity of the State to reduce uncertainty and to the tendency of reduction of the risk coverage (Rosanvallon, 1995).

Nowadays, the crescent complexity of (post)modern societies, the fragmentation of the social realities, the disappearance of full-employment, the precariousness of the labour market, together with the deepening of the “crisis-factors” that signalled the beginning of the mid-seventies crisis of the welfare state, set the context in which all social policy is being challenged and changed. These changing trends suffered a significant acceleration with a generalised atmosphere of crisis, uncertainty and vulnerability coming from the different domains of reality (financial, economical, social, cultural, and so forth), which is installed.

In fact, the core changes operating in the European welfare systems since the late nineties pointed to an activation, a territorialisation and an individualisation of social policy. These changes are part of a broader societal change and reconfiguration of the welfare state that are leading to nuclear changes in conceptions of solidarity, citizenship and social rights (cf. namely Soulet, 2005; Ion, 2005).

With illustration purposes, the following figure summarizes the main changes referred in the societal and welfare state spheres.



**Figure 1 – Societal Changes and Welfare State Reconfiguration**

Source: Branco (2009) based on CET & CESSS (2008), Acolhimento e Construção da Autonomia dos Clientes na Santa Casa da Misericórdia de Lisboa, Relatório Final, Lisboa.

The activation is one of the most paradigmatic characteristics of the new policy framework. As opposed to what increasingly have been considered the passive social policy schemes of the past, the activation appears as refreshment on the ways of understanding solidarity, commitment, rights and duties and the social pact. Relevant criticism of post-war welfare systems relied on the idea that the universal and guaranteed rights and benefits stimulate the inactivity and passivity of beneficiaries, who tend to accommodate to a welfare dependent condition. At this regard, the new generation of social policy should put the emphasis on the counterpart, that is, no one should benefit from a social policy measure without actively doing something to change the situation that brought him/her to the welfare system in first place.

The logic of activation is intertwined with the logic of insertion. To put it bluntly, there is a focus on the labour market as the main sphere of social integration and the major part of social intervention is targeted to this end. In this sense, it might be said that there is a switch from integration to insertion purposes in social policy. In an approximate meaning some authors argue that there is movement from welfare to workfare in the European social model (Alonso e Ortiz, 1996; Boyer, 2007; Paugam, 2007, among others).

Thus, this ideology comprises a conception of active citizenship that should be conceptualised and assessed in terms of the participation (or the willingness to participate) in the labour market. Such a framework points to an individualistic approach of the social problems, which puts the emphasis on the willingness, the manifest disposition, of the individuals to commit to society through work.

Even if it is acknowledged that the Anglo-Saxon model is much more labour-oriented than the European model, both are crossed by this focus on policy efficacy which brings the centre of the intervention process to what can be defined as a counterpart, how can it be contracted with the beneficiary and how can it be measured for latter assessment.

The consequences of this overarching tendency to social work are obvious: the issue of contract establishment and negotiation became critical for social workers. There are two implicit and paradoxical ideas under the notion of (social insertion) contract: on the one hand, it presupposes the existence of a symmetrical relationship between parts and the availability of real opportunities; on the other hand, it highlights the lower and more vulnerable statute of the other, not being capable of running his/her own life without a contract that establishes the most basic and nuclear aspects of reality that everyone else is able to undertake on their own.

Together with this, social intervention is becoming more and more confined to the instruction and development of administrative processes, mainly concerned with control issues. Practice is becoming to a greater extent more instrumental than substantive and concerned with the results rather than with process. Social workers are now directing their attention to the status of individuals towards contract adherence and the presentation of results.

Very often professionals don't seem to feel comfortable with the implications of this emerging ideology for the intervention processes, as it is illustrated in the following examples:

***“It is a power [that social workers have] that humiliates, submits, belittles citizens (...).” (Academic social worker, 2008)***

***“[There is] a tendency to put on clients problems that actually are not theirs, clients have lots of problems, but it is problems related to the institutional system, the institutional organization, to social policy, that have to do with social changing (...), that happens too often.” (Academic social worker, 2008)***

***“Most times it is the component of the individual responsibility which is valued and, therefore, intervention is undertaken according to that; so, he/she is the one who have to change, to adapt, he/she is the one who is dysfunctional (...).” (Social worker, 2008)***

On the part of the clients it appear that many proceedings of “active intervention processes” remain beyond their comprehension and their capability of mastering the working process in which they should be playing the main part.

***“I was caught unexpectedly; I went to an interview to sign the agreement and there were many professionals in the same room and they made me sign the agreement (...) I didn’t know what was I signing because they were too many, from the health sector, I felt I was under pressure, I’ve trusted her because she is my social worker, isn’t she? “Hey, you have some papers here, just sign it up!” and I did, it was to sign and leave, you know what I mean?” (Social assistance client, 2009).***

The territorialisation and decentralisation process refers to the growing tendency to design social policy programmes and measures based on territory-oriented delimitation and administration and institutional flexibility. By contrast to centralised, generalist and universalistic schemes, a logic of positive discrimination of populations and territories is privileged in this orientation (cf. Castel, 1995; Whull, 1996). As a positive dimension this trend in the contemporary social policies can promote more contextualised and specific measures. But it can also to be considered as a «focus-policy» (Faleiros, 2001) with a limited impact on social inequalities and social disadvantages and/or analysed from the point of view of the «insertion local regimes» concept (Bouchoux at al., 2004). In this perspective, the interactions between the socioeconomic contexts, local labour markets, institutional local actors and social policy users profile produced different impacts on poverty, social exclusion and other social problems and needs.

Another convergent dimension of this process is also the growing passage of responsibilities from the State to voluntary sector.

Nowadays the individualisation is, probably, the most stressed dimension on social policies in general and in social assistance and social inclusion schemes (Franssen, 2003). In a tendency that can be observed since the 1970s it is today more and more effective that the autonomy and the responsibility are a normative requirement in all spheres of social life and also in the social policies field (Breviglieri, 2008). It is in this way that the new rules of social assistance policy, and social policies in general, are guided by the requirement of active demonstration of skills and responsibilities as a condition for the development of public policies of recognition (Patrick, 2000 quoted by Canteli, 2006: 5).

It is well reckoned that under contemporary wider social mutations the individualism appears as one of the most regarding processes. Presently, being an individual means to be an actor, with agency capacities, to be entitled to rights and duties, to have contractual capacity and to be autonomous and emancipated. Robert Castel, in his acute analysis of today societies (1995, 2009), argues that the individualisation processes are very problematic, since there are a number of conditions needed to fully attain it. The most capable tend to adhere to an individual rational and disengage from society, while the less capable are left alone in their failure to become an individual in that sense.

Castel used to conceptualise this as two kinds of individualism: positive individualism and negative individualism. In his view, both are equally problematic in their relation with the society as a whole. More recently, Castel (2009) re-conceptualised such process as two types of individuals: hypermodern individual by excess and hypermodern individual by default.

The first is characterised by a loss of a clear notion of life in society, and consequently of a collective good; there is a total immersion in subjectivity, with the development of a hedonistic and psychological culture; the individual is seen as an end in itself and as the measure of all things; in sum, there is a general law of self-sufficiency. On the other hand, the hypermodern individual by default is someone not capable of becoming an individual, with a profound lack of supportive social capitals and without being able to access or create resources important for the construction of their individuality. Here, the person tends to be socially disconnected too (Castel, 2009: 424-449).

According to this perspective, despite the fact of being a sign of success or of failure, there is an increasing phenomenon of disconnectedness among individuals and between individuals and society. To that disembedding Castel calls disaffiliation.

That means that more and more, at their work, social workers are faced with people with a serious problem of linkage with society. More than the deprivation, the scarcity of goods, the lack of a job, these people are anomic in the sense that they don't develop positive relations with society. Social workers are much more oriented to work with the hypermodern individuals by default than by excess. These are essentially cases of continuous ruptures with the different social spheres until the bottom of social life in the most complete loneliness. Lets see, as an example,

***“I used to be employed as everyone else. Married. I’ve got divorced. I lived with my wife, with my daughter and my mother. After the divorce my life changed (...). Meanwhile my mother died. My daughter, with 17, decided to get independent and left home (...). And when I realised, I had stopped paying rent and the bills. It seems that my brain stopped. I lost interest. (...) Than, when I realised, I received a letter of eviction (...). When I realized I was downtown asking a passing boy where could I sleep? And it was the first night ever I slept in the streets. (...) I’m always thinking about suicide (...). I became completely out of control and, since than, I never felt I was a controlled person anymore.” (Social assistance client, 2009)***

In regard to these disaffiliation processes authors as Marc-Henry Soulet (2007) refer to the recent need for social workers to pay attention to identity processes of their clients in order to reconstruct identities, give meaning and foresee alternative pathways.

All the changes in social policies above outlined, underneath its positive side, pose problematic questions to social work intervention. In this base it is questioned to what extent contemporary social work is contributing to social and individual change or it is established as

an expertise fieldwork for managing poverty. Then our working hypothesis is that in face of an active welfare state it emerges an «active social work» facing new challenges and issues.

### **Towards an “active Social Work”?**

As it was introduced earlier, in our point of view, the winds of change of contemporary social policy are not harmless to social work purposes, procedures and goals. Indeed, we support the thesis that the presented streams of change in social policy have deepened the instrumental character of the profession.

By the instrumental character of the profession we mean that increasingly social work, and more significantly in the public sector,<sup>3</sup> is focusing its attention on procedures, and the importance of accomplish all the foreseen steps despite the assessment of the real clients situation, is concerning with results rather than with the process, is mistaking efficacy with a blind quantification of practices and is overvaluing the importance of the so-called technical procedures in disregard to an underassessment of the real effects of the intervention processes in social and individual transformation.

***“I think we need to reorganize work towards an individual changing perspective. This thing about the average weekly number of individual interviews per professional is something frankly excessive, from the point of view of the professional class as well as from my personal point of view; but, in fact, these are the rules ... In average, the guidelines for two half-times are to do 16 interviews, which is more than a lot, since in the context of social accompanying I have to understand who is that person that comes to the service (...)” (Front-desk social worker, 2007)***

Therefore, it might be stated that with the development of the welfare systems, social work has gradually turned into a “cog in the wheel” of the administrative and bureaucratic public systems of policy measures application and execution. This almost irresistible tendency have, in many cases, lead to a confusion between social work and activities of administrative and technocratic management of the social field, which finds legal frameworks as the basis for practice instead of axiological and theoretical grounds. This excess of bureaucratisation, together with instrumental ultra-rationality of contemporary world, drains the profession from its substantive contents, namely from the critical role of the different political, ethical and theoretical agendas of social work, and overwhelmed practice with instrumental, managerial and procedural concerns.

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<sup>3</sup> Although the process of transference of state competencies to the third sector, under the scope of protocols framework, is having a «contamination effect» of this sector with the trends observed within the public sector.

This process is called as “methodological finalism” (Amaro, 2009), meaning that more than the person, the professional relationship, the co-construction of narratives and the awareness for rights and values, it gains more importance for professional practice the mastering of assessment and planning techniques, the levels of efficiency and efficacy reached and the number of benefits attributed. In this sense, social work intervention increasingly becomes more managerial-bureaucratical and less relational-political.

***“But time is very short, so there should be... at the level of bureaucratisation it should be less and the administrative work shouldn't rely so much at the social worker shoulders. There is the bureaucratic dimension of the situations, of the processes, of the software (...) and the monthly statistics” .(Front-desk social worker, 2007)***

A responsible for the organization of a front-office service puts her thoughts about this as following:

***“A social work technician does the assessment, the diagnosis, the agreement/contract, despite its nature – minimum income or social assistance – and someone will have to do the social accompanying work, it might be the social work technician or it can be delegated to another competent technician; I think the social educator would play that role very well, to accompany those actions (...)” . (Front-desk social worker (coordinator), 2008)***

As we can see in these testimonials it is left to social workers the most managerial and bureaucratic tasks making that the more substantive, or if we prefer, the most honorable sphere of action of social workers, which is the establishment of empathic relationships, the capacity of helping and support others, the development of trust and security, tend to fall in the hands of other professionals.

Following this line, we assist to the growing of professional approaches to practice as risk analysis and management, as managerialism, as competence-based and evidence-based practice and as management of care. All these trends develop a complex net of procedures that the fieldworker must follow, which is supposedly tested and efficient and that interchange means into ends and take as foundations of the profession the accuracy in tools application. The proposed concept of methodological finalism is used precisely because it is observable that following the methodological steps becomes an end in itself and contains what the more important is taken into account in professional practices.

A «mystery client», used in a front-office service as a research methodology, noticed that during the first interview with the social worker,

***“A doubt remained: the social worker posed exclusively the questions that she couldn’t avoid to pose. Why? Why does she save in answer time? Or why doesn’t she try to find a solution adequate to the specificity of the client who stands in front of her?” («Mystery client», interview report, 2007)***

Indeed it became clear in this study that there is an enormous pressure over professionals for showing results, which means to do as much as interviews as they can and to provide an «answer» in the shortest possible period of time. In parallel it is also perceived as crucial the role of verification of the authenticity of the situations exposed by clients. That means that, with the amount of time available, all the social worker can do is practically to take note of what the clients are asking for and make sure that they are entitled to that benefit. While some professionals appear to think that this is what a social worker should be; others feel uncomfortable in that role. For these ones the ethical and methodological framework points to the importance of constituting an empathic relationship, which promotes participation and empowerment in order to achieve client’s autonomy and to enhance other levels of intervention.

***“The fact that the professional doesn’t have much time makes he/she forget some very important dimensions in social intervention. One of these is the relationship between partners, the professional become so overwhelmed with interviews with clients that it is left very few time for this dimension, which I consider crucial. I think we should have more time to work in a community-based relationship with other partners, to look for more adequate answers to populations needs. I think it is exerted a pressure over professionals which is not stimulating to that kind of work” (Front-desk social worker (coordinator), 2007)***

Such concerns contrast with a strong instrumentality of intervention processes. When we tried to design the *topography of intervention* we were faced with an assessment focused mainly on a means-test approach, on an attitude test towards clients, on a feeble use of a biographical approach and of a global/holistic view of client’s situation. At this regard, Webb argues that “social work is abandoning a holistic approach to working with clients in order to rationally align itself within the dominant politics of neo-liberal managed care” (Webb, 2006: 7). This can also be shown in professionals’ own words:

***“Therefore, to understand that it is important to see if the person is being truthful or not in the type of information given, nonetheless afterwards I... logically when the person tells me [his/her children] are studying (...) I have to articulate with different partners, in this case with schools, to verify if the information is actually real or not and if indeed that child is or isn't studying in concordance to the situation the client described. So, we must do this articulation and data-cross.” (Front-desk social worker, 2007)***

Following to the intervention plan, sound evidence showed that a more comprehensive view of client's life project is almost completely absent and that there is a tendency to a high instrumentality and standardization in the answers to different situations. Only rarely the own client resources and initiatives are taken into account and there is almost no work on the reconstruction of client's narratives and identities. Towards increasingly complex and difficult situations, paradoxically, the intervention processes tend to a simplification and reduction to their sole instrumental levels.

***“The social worker didn't know how to value the real client' problems (...) It happened with the issue (...) of Professional autonomy (she forwarded to employment bureau even when the client explained that he didn't want to work to someone else as in numerous occasions he wasn't paid by his work), she excessively valued professional training, though the client have explained that he have competencies in the field of electricity.” («Mystery client», interview report, 2007)***

In another dimension, the contractualisation and evaluation of intervention are scarcely used. The first, rather than an instrument to stimulate citizenship, is mainly used as an instrument to introduce client responsibility logic and only more residually to establish the responsibilities from services and society as a whole towards individuals. The second is rarely referred to and when it was, social workers heighten its use as a controlling tool of client's path. Therefore, it became evident that neither the contract is used as an instrument for co-construction with the client; neither evaluation procedures are systematically defined.

***“(...) to confront him with the situation and try to understand why he isn't putting the contracted action into practice (...).” (Front-desk social worker, 2007)***

***“When there are inputs, when there are gains for people, when it is possible to find a job, even if the foreseen deadline is not accomplished; in most cases we do not set a deadline, in fact the deadline is the one of the subsidy. After all, there is a deadline that corresponds to the subsidy deadline.” (Front-desk social worker, 2007)***

At the same time, very often, the supposedly supportive technological systems, which should ease the management of the volume of social situations, introduces other levels of difficulty and entropy that jeopardizes even more the consistence of the working processes.

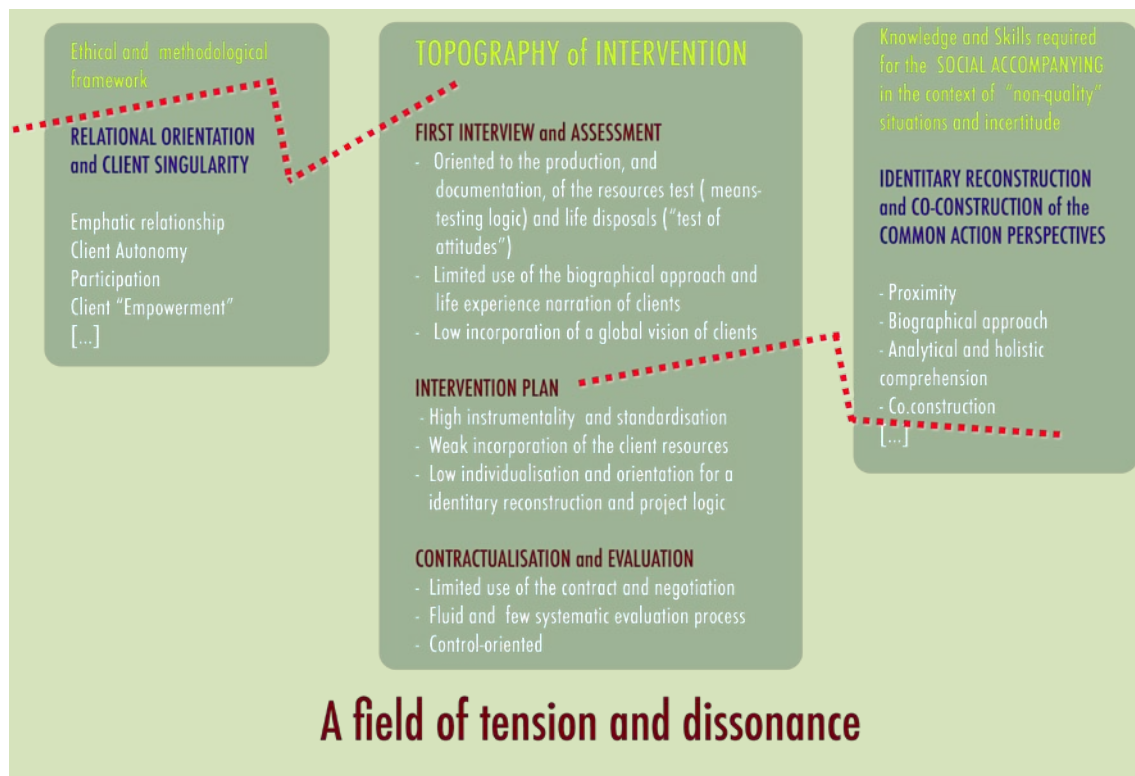
***“(...) but the system is so slow that we spend an entire day doing an insertion plan (...) this is a waste of time in front of a computer (...).”  
(Front-desk social worker, 2007)***

***“(...) We have a system too much slow that what should be developed in one hour takes the entire afternoon, therefore it is a constraint resource.” (Front-desk social worker, 2007)***

Apparently, using the software is so time-consuming that it appears that the time to actually be with clients constructing with them, for instance, the insertion plan is considered a negligible dimension of the social accompanying work.

The intervention processes conceal tensions, paradoxes and contradictions, which are very difficult to deal with in practice, along with the pressure to solve problems and show some short-term results.

With illustration purposes, the following figure shows how these tensions are set in the intervention scene (Figure 2).



**Figure 2 – Social work logics of action in social accompanying**

It seems that in a historical context in which vulnerable people needs more than ever stability, security and long and deep intervention processes, there is an overwhelming ideology of short-termism that is gradually gaining space and refraining wider and more accurate intervention from developing. But still there is a paradox which put in the same basket the highly instrumental ways of doing with a pervasive discourse of the individuality, the construction of joint narratives and of the importance of rebuild and/or reinforce the work on identities.

Social work for singularity (Ion, 1998) entails a long-term continuous professional relationship, with an interactive nature, contextualized and little codified in institutional rules. This is largely the proposal of authors like Ion (1998), Soulet (2005), Astier (2007), Duvoux (2006), Branco (2008), among others, that only rhetorically is being followed by an «active social work», instrumental, standardized, chained in the discourse of efficacy and measurement and focused on results.

Despite the significance of acknowledging the other in his/her specificity, the danger of this discourse is to entirely focused on what Soulet (2007) calls the «perfectibility stereotype», which situates the frame of analysis under the assumption that individuals are the source of their own problems, but simultaneously are the resource for its solutions and, in the end, are responsible to conduct their own lives. Notwithstanding the undeniable force of individual will, that subjectivity rational collides with objective phenomena such as massive unemployment, fragile labour relationships, weak social networks, narrowing of the traditional structures of socialization and solidarity, and so forth. These compose the external conditions of vulnerability to which individuals are exposed in contemporary societies.

It is in this sense that several authors note the paradox that was converted integration deficits in individual issues. In this sense social interventions will be threatened by a preponderance of what Dubet (2004) calls the rule of interiority: the propensity to look solely to the individual reasons that account for their situation and to mobilize only personal resources to overcome it. But as Astier (2006) points out the more crucial challenge is to promote compliance the modern individuation without reducing «the right of the city».

These problematic set the questioning points about the contemporary social work contribution to the crucial rethinking of the social question and the re-foundation of a new societal pact.

This commitment requires a critical thinking on activation influences in social work being important that social workers manage to free themselves from technocracy grids and don't give up from the substantive content of the profession. Together with Dominelli, we argue,

“Social work is going through a turbulent time. It needs a new vision that advances active citizenship for poor people – a citizenship of equals, which requires personal and structural changes in the existing social order. The current technologies of

governmentality have produced enormous waste in human talents and caused untold suffering. These arrangements have to be replaced by those that are rooted in equality between peoples who share resources, treat one another with dignity and respect the earth's physical and social resources as the heritage of each and every individual and community on the planet. This is the basis of social work's new empowering vision" (2004: 253).

In this perspective, it makes sense to set a clear nexus of relations between the notions of empowerment, the trends of individualization and the logics of action of the schemes and social policy measures in the context of the active welfare state. It is the analysis we will develop next.

### **Active Welfare State, Social Work and Empowerment**

The conceptual universe of the notion of empowerment covers a wide range of aspects and meanings. The recognition of the multiple meanings of the term implies, then, that there is a plurality of conceptions of empowerment within a continuous polarized by the individual dimension of change and the collective dimension of change.

The notion of empowerment adopted here follows the Le Bossé (2003) perspective, which sustains that the concept has at least four important components: 1) the capacity of acting on reality according to its own aspiration and aims; 2) the existent relation between social factors and individual characteristics and its implications to reading, interpret and act over reality; 3) knowledge of the exact context of practice, and 4) participation of all actors involved and the establishment of clear goals. There is, in this sense, an entire dimension of work that points to conscience awareness that outweigh the individual stance. In this sense we adopt an understanding of empowerment as *(development of) the power to act*, because, as Le Bossé argues, empowerment is characterized precisely by the connection between the putting it self into action and the availability of resources it requires.

The empowerment perspective continues to be central in social workers frameworks for action, nonetheless it is today visible the importance of integrating the different spheres of social intervention and social life, and not merely the individual realm. It is, thus, more and more, acknowledged the crucial and strategical role of the structural and community dimensions to work with empowering purposes.

With the sole individualistic perspective, empowerment takes the risk of becoming just a new label for deepening the phenomena of social isolation and individualism through an excessive transference of responsibility/culpability for social vulnerabilities to individuals' shoulders. Indeed, according to this, once capacitated, it depends exclusively on individual's will to develop a trajectory of integration.

Under such a rational, social work can only be far from being an emancipatory practice and it is much closer to controlling purposes. In fact, at present it is important do de-codify the

orientations under the empowerment discourse to understand the real nature of practices in the field.

The contract, for instance, taken as a pact between social workers and institutional services representing society and the client, could and probably should be an important methodological step to develop a co-understanding of the world and of the exposed situations between the actors involved. It could be a supportive tool to empower, to re-construct identities and to discuss the meaning and the role of counterpart. Instead, it seems that it is mainly used as a control device and as a means to “objectify” the interventions, reducing it to a number of actions to undertake. Paradoxically, even when it is used as a means of responsabilisation that never entails the own responsibility of services, of professionals and of wider society for creating the needed opportunities for a fully social integration.

***“(...) we reach to the point in which a certain action is considered to be needed for both me and the client, they commit themselves to go to a certain place and then we confront, we get in touch with that institution to know if the client actually showed up, if he/she is or isn’t following the agreed, and then if necessary we confront the person with facts (...)”  
(Front-desk social worker, 2007)***

But even when we stay only at an individual level, the empowerment perspective can’t be used uniquely as a means to transfer responsibility to individuals. According to Ninacs, individual empowerment is sustained by four spheres; participation, competencies, self-esteem and critical conscience. It is about simultaneous intertwined steps in each sphere, which together and in interaction proportionate the passage from a powerless state to a stage in which the individual become able to act according to his/her own choices (Ninacs, 2003: 23).

Allegedly, this new generation of social policy comprises two connected movements: one directed to the construction of the individual as a person, with a specific identity; and the other pointing to the individual as a contractual and accountable personality. First, the assumption of a social existence, then the acknowledgement of the power of agency; and this should be entrenched with the bridging of the individual with the collective level (Le Bossé, 2003).

Interestingly, when we look upon professional discourses we find different conceptions of empowerment and all of them tend to rely on the individual sphere. For some, empowering consists on informing, for others it is mainly directed to offering training or educating people; yet for others it refers to a dimension of citizenship promotion and of giving power to people enabling them to claim for their rights. In regard to professionals’ sayings,

***“For instance, there are people with plenty difficulties, they don’t even know that certain services exist and how to access. Gradually we get to work that kind of things with people and, with the passing time, we see that people become able to go to the services on their own and can even identify other services that can also support and guide them. This is just an example”. (Front-desk social worker, 2007)***

***“Of course empowerment is important, this means to give them tools, to be with them more systematically, maybe more sequentially, in a step-by-step way, so they would be able to walk on their own without any kind of support. Maybe it will be only needed, in an intermediate phase, a piece of advice or suggestions; maybe in a third phase or in a last phase we won’t be needed at all, the client will be totally autonomous (...) there are lots of situations that don’t come to that level. Really a lot”. (Front-desk social worker, 2007)***

Even though most front-desk social workers state that they cannot overpass the individual level of intervention, they reckon the community-based social work as a critical sphere for producing sound social change. It seems that in the individualism era, when a lot of emphasis is put on subjectivation and individuation of policies and intervention, group and community work still have a key-role to play in perspective alternative ways of addressing social problems. Professionals are aware of that role but somehow they find themselves unable for its development or skeptical about its actual possibility.

***“More and more we have to work with community and with partners in community. We are still working alone and that road takes nowhere! Maybe it is our fault, because historically the institution have been pretty much self-centered, finding the answers inside itself” (Front-desk social worker (coordinator), 2007)***

In adopted conception, Social work practice should have an individual empowerment intentionality, which equips individuals with tools, capacities and autonomy to interpret and change their own condition, but which simultaneously claims for a more collective dimension. At this regard, Faleiros argues that

“It isn’t all about the development of clients’ advocacy or the encouragement and implementation of a better ability to solve problems, but mostly to understand and intervene on the very process of oppression and fragility, at different levels, so a process of trajectory change and of clients reinforcement are combined” (1996: 12).

In fact, the empowerment perspective must be attentive to the game between individual capacities and structural opportunities, given that ones are meaningless without the others. In sum, the perspective adopted goes in line with the proposal of Le Bossé of understanding empowerment as *(the development of) the power to act*, since empowerment is precisely characterized by the combination of the putting into action with the availability of resources it

demands. The empowerment processes departs from the assumption of the availability of individual (competencies, personal efficacy, capacity for conceiving and develop a project, among others) and collective (the existence of individual and collective possibilities for action, availability of financial resources, of information, the conditions for accessing and using services, among others (Le Bossé, 2003).

Within the increasing complexity of today's world, many professionals at the front-desk services revealed the feeling that they can only touch the surface of social reality, because there isn't time enough to go further. Additionally, they tend to think that it is very difficult, in some cases almost impossible, to empower the kind of people who approach services. In this sense it is clear from the part of professionals that there are, at least two levels of intervention: the individual and the collective.

***“Community investment implies that things are thought about at a medium and long-term perspective, but maybe the results linked to such an intervention probably will have another... it may constitute an added value and function as preventive element to some situations. Maybe the front-desk... I feel that perhaps things are seen only under surface, we are not able to work on, to reach the causes. Probably if the intervention dimension were different, we could manage to reach that goal”. (Front-desk social worker, 2007)***

As true as it is, it seems that something is really upside down when professionals at the front-desk, which is the locus by excellence to approach and understand people, signaled their lack of time and conditions to explore individual situations, to identify the causes of their problems and to relate their situations with each other in order to collectively address problems.

It emerged that social workers don't do that work because their time is being consumed in an assembly line of interviews and benefit attribution. In that «struggle» they don't even get a perception of what are the results of their work. It seems that the active welfare state produces the social and institutional conditions for an «active social work», and, simultaneously, for a «fordist social work».

Then, the question is: whose interests are serving that kind of practicing social work? Who gets empowered with such an approach?

### **Concluding remarks**

Through its historical pathway, social work has passed numerous transformation processes. In contemporary societies, views and rationales around welfare state, in general, and social policy, in particular, set a turning point towards active social policy. These changes put forward principles derived from an instrumental rationality, focused on efficacy, results production, procedures tight definition and contractualisation.

As Catherine McDonald (2006) argued, in social work staying solely with the rationality and efficacy principles of the (evidence-based) practice dangerously narrows the scope of the

profession, in terms of performance and project. It is in this sense that it appears to be relevant to question the consequences of the establishment of an active social work, corresponding to an active social policy.

Indeed it was evidenced that there is a strong tendency to deepen the administrative and management dimensions of the professions, in a way that might risk the actual social work' identity integrity. There is, in the field, a tendency to reduce the increasing complexity of situations by avoiding the in-depth knowledge of situations. As Webb stated, reality complexity is reduced by a superficial process of data generation in the field (that doesn't go into the core of situations), giving place for the emergence of an administrative social worker (Webb, 2006: 141-150).

We seem to be faced with a mixed social work practice, which combines traits from old and new social policy perspectives. From the past, social work practices maintain the control purposes and standardization of practices; from the present trends, it incorporates the individuation, the contractualisation and the segmentation of responses.

The empowerment discourses can be both resistant as well as reinforcing of such processes. It will reinforce active practices when it is understood as an approach exclusively centred on individuals capacities. It will be resistant when it is perceived as a balance between capacities and opportunities, with the undeniable bridge between individual and community levels.

This basic approach to empowerment perspective seems to be far from being widely understood by professionals and policy-makers. Hence, paradoxically we encounter assembly-lines at the front-desk services, mainly concerned with the match between users' types and resources' types, which, at the same time, address clients as individuals responsible for their own trajectories.

In such a process, social work seems to lack time for doing what can be seen as the core of their professionalism: accompanying clients, co-constructing life projects, re-building identities, and so forth, promote politics of recognition and social justice according the clients needs and aspirations.

To conclude, it might be said that active social work practices narrow so much the scope and the horizon for practice, that at a last resort empty social work from its soul, aims and ethical and political purposes.

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