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ARTÍCULO DE INVESTIGACIÓN

**Análisis de caso en protección a la infancia:
un universo epistemológico para intervención social**
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Resumen

Este artículo teórico-reflexivo nace con la intención de ofrecer al lector una malla epistemológica lo suficientemente rica con la que abordar la complejidad de los casos atendidos desde protección a la infancia en el ámbito madrileño. A través de un análisis de caso, producto de un proceso de supervisión profesional, se revisan cada uno de los mapas con los que se abordan las dificultades de las familias: el sistémico, el constructivista, el construccionista social y el post-estructural. La supervisión se presenta como un método de investigación de segundo orden, asociado a la investigación-acción-reflexión. Con la supervisión se toma conciencia sobre los propios actos y pensamientos, y se amplía el abanico de posibilidades de intervención. Se adopta una óptica multidimensional para crear una dinámica de pensamiento que supere las clásicas dicotomías del trabajo social. Este proceso de supervisión y análisis de caso muestra, como resultado, el alto coste que tiene para la práctica profesional la aceptación de posiciones excluyentes, que tienden a oponer lo individual a lo comunitario; lo terapéutico al control, lo material a lo emocional, lo técnico a lo cotidiano, etc. En esa aceptación dicotómica se pierden las posibilidades de intervención relativas a lo no-dicho, lo no-categorizable, lo no-fragmentable. Esta propuesta se plantea como respuesta no solo técnica, sino ético-política para fortalecer la práctica y educación reflexiva del trabajo social sorteando los efectos perversos que el enfoque gerencialista de la disciplina tiene en la profesión, y más concretamente en protección a la infancia.

Palabras clave: protección a la infancia, epistemología, sistémico, construccionismo social, post-estructuralismo, teoría-práctica.

Abstract

Child Protection Case Analysis: an epistemological universe for social intervention

This theoretical-reflexive article aims to offer a sufficiently rich epistemological framework with which to approach the complexity of cases assisted by child protection services in Madrid. Thus, through a paradigmatic case analysis, product of a professional supervision process, each of the intervention maps are reviewed: the systemic, the constructivist, the social constructionist and the post-structural. Supervision is presented as a second-order research method, associated with action-research-reflection. Through supervision, one gains awareness of one's own actions and thoughts, and broadens the range of possibilities for intervention. Accordingly, the case is presented throughout the

text from the different maps indicated. Thus, a multidimensional perspective is adopted, required to create a dynamic of analysis that overcomes the classic dichotomies of social work. This process of supervision and case analysis illustrates, as main result, the significant cost for professional practice of accepting excluding positions, which tend to oppose the individual to the community; the therapeutic to the control, the material to the emotional, the technical to the mundane, etc. This dichotomous acceptance reduces the possibilities of intervention related to the unsaid, the non-categorizable and the non-fragmentable. Finally, this proposal is not only a technical, but also an ethical-political response to strengthen the reflective practice and education of social work, avoiding the perverse effects that the managerialist approach of the discipline has on the profession, and more specifically on child protection practices.

Keywords: child protection, epistemology, systemic, social constructivism, post-structuralism., theory-practice.

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1. Introduction

Child protection work requires, like social work in general, a permanent theoretical-technical and epistemic reflection. In particular, the fact that professional intervention is usually activated around scenarios of high social vulnerability such as poverty or severe relational conflict, among others, represents both a challenge and an opportunity to carry out the commitment to reconsider its practices. These complex scenarios addressed by family social workers are not independent of the growing tendency of professional practice to implement socio-educational models over others (Morris et al, 2008). The hegemony of these practices responds to their high compatibility with the dominant institutional mandates akin to managerialism (Trevithick, 2014), in which the motto is the substitution of the problem with a standardised solution that eliminates the symptom but does not address the crisis (Hoppania et al, 2021).

This approach focused on the administration of prefabricated solutions has two possible outcomes: one, successful and satisfactory for all actors, as the symptom, what-is-not-functioning, disappears for a certain period of time. Another, quite different, with a taste of failure and despair, as the symptom remains, changes or worsens. In the latter cases, the feeling of professional impotence is linked to ideas rooted in the imaginary of social intervention, such as "resistant", "uncooperative", "dysfunctional" families (Forrester, Wetlake & Glynn, 2012; Pelvas & Sotero, 2014; Togher, 2022). The

combination of these feelings of inadequacy leads to the blocking of the help process that ultimately results in the chronification of cases (González, 2023).

In situations like the aboved described, it is urgent to activate critical-reflective thinking (Melandro, et al 2016; Powell et al, 2022) and to expand the mind towards different but complementary epistemologies, such as systemic, constructivist and post-structural.

The combination of these multiple lenses allows for critical comprehension of the social realities that we deal with. It also facilitates that the theoretical-conceptual maps combine the pragmatic with reflexivity. The goal of this paper is to offer a theoretical kaleidoscope that is helpful to move around unpredictable and sinuous territories (Rodríguez, 2012), as well as reflecting on the multiplicity and heterogeneity of situations that child protection services deal with. The act of presenting different perspectives in an intertwined and complementary way responds to the need, detected in the professional supervision process (Revalier et al, 2023), of stopping the tendency to fragment human reality in dimensions that are impossible to understand in isolation (Carey, 2015). Also, to stop the blindness and deafness that services can develop throughout their practice regarding the implicit and silenced discourse of our clients (Kohli, 2006; Serrant-Green, 2010; Levitt, 2015 y Yaw-Kah, 2022). However, it is also an ethical-political proposal with which to resist the perverse effects of neo-liberal thinking that, with outstanding simplicity, turns people into problems as well as transforms collective challenges in individual diagnoses (Fergusson, 2008). Through a paradigmatic case analysis, product of a professional supervision process in Madrid's Child Protection Services, we will briefly present the current context of social intervention in Madrid and then move on to the maps, paraphrasing Bateson (1985), that guide our journey through professional practice, with a balance between theory and practice.

Starting point: the method and the territory

Before exploring the territory, it is necessary to frame methodologically the reflections and results offered in this paper. As mentioned above, an exhaustive case analysis has been carried within professional supervision process in the Child Protection Services of Madrid. In this sense, the article is based on two complementary methodological core elements. On the one hand, case analysis leads us to the systematization of practice as an essential research modality in social work (Cifuentes, 1999; Pérez Álvarez, 2009). It is characterized by the inseparability of theory and practice, emphasizing both the reflective and operative dimensions of the discipline. As Esteban-Carbonell and Olmo-Vicén (2021) point out, the systematization of a case allows deconstructing the practice, thinking it, conceptualize it and ultimately produce new knowledge. But it is also a call for collective reflection about the visible and the invisible. This is the only way to offer a framework of analysis that allows speaking in rigorous

terms (Zúñiga, 1992). In short, as stated by Zavala Caudillo (2010) systematization allows us to look at practice, to learn about ourselves and the relationship we establish with our subjects, to generate knowledge and to project new scenarios in practice.

On the other hand, professional supervision can be understood exclusively as meta-analysis of work, becoming a learning, training, education and support space for an institution and its professionals (Cruells, 2011). But it can also be seen as a second-order research method, associated with action-research-reflection. Through supervision, one gains awareness of one's own actions and thoughts, and broadens the range of possibilities for intervention (Berasaluze et al, 2023). Supervision is not solely at the benefit of the organizational dimension of social work, but it is also a privileged technique to support a reflexive and critical systematization, with an observing eye that is outside the internal dynamics of the institution and its staff. In this way, we approach the Clinical Qualitative Research model developed by Chenail (2011). In it, the clinical setting is maintained as a research laboratory. This avoids artificiality in the configuration of the research and takes advantage of the professional practice. It becomes the object and/or space of research in the here and now. Accepting natural samples of the clinical experience, studying annotated cases, reviewing the notes of the professionals or taking the intervention as ongoing research are, from this approach, valid instruments to understand how the users, as well as the professionals, shape the intervention. In this sense, this article defends professional supervision and the systematization of practice as two deeply interconnected tools at the service not only of practice but also of research.

On the other hand, it is necessary to contextualize the case locally to understand the movements of professionals and families. The case analysis presented here is located in the field of Child Protection in Madrid, specifically in the Child Care Centres (CCC). These devices contribute to the detection of situations of risk and lack of protection of minors residing in Madrid. They offer prevention, support and specialized care services to children and adolescents in situations of serious risk, presumed neglect, as well as to their families. As a specialized service integrated in the local Social Services Network, its functions are part of the Program of Attention to Minors and Families of the Government Area of Equity, Social Rights and Employment. The Child Care Centres carry out eight main tasks: a) initial assessment of risk situations of minors; b) evaluation of the family situation and, if applicable, of the lack of protection of minors; c) specialized family treatment; d) accompaniment and supervision of families that are not in treatment; e) support and monitoring of foster care of minors in extended families; f) technical support to professionals and resources that work with minors; g) prevention of child abuse and h) family monitoring once the care has been completed.

As can be seen, this service is required to work in a cohesive and coordinated manner at both the intra-institutional and inter-institutional levels. Madrid has a network of 12 Child Care Centres that provide territorialized care. Throughout the year 2021, the CCC have attended a total of 32,738 people belonging to 8,316 families. This represents

an increase of 7.8% over the previous pandemic years. Of the total number of people assisted, 13,679 (41.8%) were under 18 years of age and 19,059 (58.2%) were adults. In proportions similar to those of previous years, the group of adolescents between 13 and 18 years of age predominates (40.4%) and, with little difference, that of boys and girls between 7 and 12 (35%), although the group of children under 7 years of age also has an important representation (24.6%). The majority of adults are between 36 and 65 years of age (57.8%) and the most common types of families are nuclear and single-parent female (Madrid City Council, 2021).

As a complement to the specific contextualization of the case study, it is considered useful to present the general symbolic territory that frames social work in Spain. When it is claimed that the problems, we face today are more complex than the problems we faced in the past, we refer to the social changes of economic, cultural and political nature that have occurred in the last decades. These changes have seriously affected social cohesion, favouring high unemployment rates, the deterioration of long-lasting bonds, and the appearance of social tensions derived from the wildest form of globalisation (Ralston Saul, 2005). There is less quality care (probably due to a lack of time and mental energy), family conflicts are on the increase, support networks are getting weaker and, ultimately, a widespread decrease in social capital can be observed (Castel, 2014). From a critical point of view, it can be affirmed that this is the result of neoliberal and individualistic ideals and the impact they have on the daily life of each one of us (Dardot & Laval, 2021). Stating that the Western World can generate more wealth for some while fomenting economic inequality for others, is not totally untrue. Regarding social intervention, market deregulation, reductions in welfare state budgets, the supposed rationalisation of services derived from managerialism (Whiteside, 2004), push towards the planning and execution of social intervention, in which service outsourcing plays a key role (Ornellas, Engelbrecht & Atamtürk, 2020; Pastor-Seller, Verde-Diego, Gonzalez-Rodríguez & Peláez, 2021).

Social services nowadays, whether socio-educational or socio-sanitary, are offered by public administrations, the private sector, the third sector and an army of volunteers (Navarro-Perez & Gabaldón-Estevan, 2017). In this context, where the professional tries to clarify its professional identity while also responding to the institutional mandate to offer socio-familial services, the dissolution of the reflective professional (Schön, 1983) is only a matter of time. This professional figure is more necessary than ever since the situation we have just described intertwines with the inherent complexity of the situations that experts deal with. These situations show a multidimensional social reality that is relational and unpredictable. It demands an approach that goes from what is intrapsychic to what is intersubjective and relational, through what is social, economic, and organisational (Rodríguez, 2012).

Let us present the case.

Maritza is a distressed and anxious mother referred to child protection services after a visit to the Children Hospital. Her thirteen-year-old son tried to commit suicide by taking Maritza anxiolytics. She lives with her husband and her other son, who is nine years old, in the same house as her sister and her eight-month-old baby. She is of Ecuadorian origin, and she migrated (after her husband) fifteen years ago. She did not want to come to Spain but, she referred: "I couldn't support myself in Ecuador and I had to follow my husband, we had got into debt, and we needed my income, which was supposed to be higher in Spain, [...] but of course he had his family here". When asked, she downplays her anxiolytic consumption, and states (still downplaying): "I took them at that time, when I went to my general practitioner because I was very anxious". She says that Rodolfo – her son – does not leave the house and that he has few friends. Maritza is unemployed, and financial problems combined with her sister's stay in her house with a baby is, in her words, causing her husband to be "very violent, irritable and I think he is cheating on me because he can be gone for days and sometimes, he gives me money and sometimes he doesn't". She requests to keep this last detail a secret since, if her husband found out that she has talked about it, he would turn more violent. She describes the toughness, belittling and physical violence that the father uses with their son, Rodolfo. "He tells him that he is useless, that he has many opportunities that he did not have and he doesn't take advantage of them...", she explains. She was told at the hospital that her son was "looking for attention" and that he had told the on-call psychiatrist that "he is fed up with his parents' constant screaming and fighting".

We ask the reader to imagine having to face Martiza's and Rodolfo's situation at work. We also ask the reader to imagine the situation between mother and son as a new territory to be discovered. As professionals, we need to rely on several maps that can guide us through unknown territories. These conceptual and operative maps guide practice and inject the right dose of theory and practice. However, the theoretical maps that shape the conceptual and operational framework of each professional, are not unrelated to social reality or to the way it is considered. These are maps that derive from both the beliefs about the world that one has, and the ways to perceive it and act in it. This will influence the presumptions about the nature of social reality (Auerswald, 1976).

We are in a territory that is neither straight nor flat, but sinuous, twisted and tough. This is why one needs to zigzag, face the unpredictable, deal with the paradoxical and ultimately, activate thinking domains that are very distinct but necessary (Rodríguez, 2012). This situation, which is relatively common, shows how everyday situations in child protection services need a juxtaposition of maps with which to answer questions that concern both families and professionals. Back to the case we have presented some questions refer to specific aspects such as whether we are in front of a case of gender-based violence and it needs to be referred to a specialist.

Other questions refer to whether it is necessary to help the mother separate from her husband; or if the minor needs treatment for his symptomatology (inhibition, failure and absenteeism from school); or whether the appointment with the psychiatrist on call makes it difficult for the mother to link her son's symptomatology to family problems. However, these questions connect to more generic ones that are unavoidable in any situation, like: 'What difficulties do families identify and how would they like to be helped?' 'How does the professional world understand the problem that affects a family?' 'When do these two ways converge – if they do?' 'How relevant are economic and political matters related to child abuse or domestic violence for families and professionals?' 'Who do institutions work for?' 'Should professional intervention be based on expert knowledge exclusively or on everyday knowledge?' (González Abad, 2019). These questions refer to maps based on different - but complementary - perspectives on social reality: systemic, constructivist, constructionist and poststructuralist. The consideration of these different approaches makes the process of case analysis and case construction richer (Ubieto, 2009).

First map: systemic thinking

The systemic perspective in child protection services, is widely applied (Morris et al, 2008). Its utility lies in its ability to consider family as a contextualised and interconnected whole overcoming an analysis that is isolated of its symptoms and elements. In its beginnings, in the mid-20th century, and through cooperation among mechanical science, robotics, cybernetics and General Systems Theory (Wiener, 1958; von Bertalanffy, 1976), reality started to be observed as a group of interdependent elements, in which change in one of them implies changes in the rest of them. Internal characteristics are pushed to a secondary level and concepts like homeostasis, equilibrium or feedback appear and become the essence of this epistemological proposal. Furthermore, one of its main contributions is the idea that it is impossible to consider one part of a phenomenon in isolation from its relational context. Just like Paul Watzlawick, Janet Bavelas and Don Jackson point out in *Pragmatics of Human Communication* (1987), the core of the study shifts from the individual specifications to the feedback loop of the system elements. For these authors, the effects of A's behaviour over B, B's reaction and the context in which such interaction takes place is what is essential. This way, through the concepts of totality, circularity and equifinality-equicausality, the most revolutionary idea from this theory is manifested: living systems cannot be explained in terms of linear causality, which is why initial circumstances do not define exclusively the here and now of the relational dynamics.

The difficulties of different family members share a common denominator: the behaviours of all of them are co-determined (Haley, 1974; Satir, 1985; Minuchin, 1986). The idea of lineal causality is replaced by that of circularity (Tomm, 1988).

Thus, back to our case study, the father's hostility toward the son can be connected to a feeling of exclusion that is the result of the closeness that exists between mother and son; exclusion to which he contributes with his own behaviour when he walks away from his wife and rejects his son. In this respect, Gregory Bateson (1980, 1985) makes an essential contribution to the consolidation of the systemic theory with his work. The author of *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (1985) considers that it is necessary to transcend the subject's conduct and essence, and find the true analysis and reflection unit in the pattern that connects all the elements. This proposal, which focuses on relationships more than on element composition, leads to the reformulation of two concepts that are key in social sciences: person and context. The latter must be understood, not only as the external and circumstantial world of the subject-element but also as an inherent part of the person. Let's see that in our real case.

What the mother told to the family social worker in confidence (Roberto's father behaviour and her uneasiness with it, the father's delegation on the social services saying "take care of my child, he is unruly or sick") is the way certain intra-familial dynamics express themselves. Family-dynamics that end up shaping people's identities. The father delegates the task of finding a solution on the mother, the mother tries to find it in the social worker, her accepting such delegation excludes the father and eventually, the child inhibits himself in tasks that are relevant for his age (this can be clearly observed in school absenteeism). He does this to protect his mother, who is in a terrible situation.

The idea of a subjective context emerges, inviting us to take the inseparable "organism-in-its-environment" (Bateson, 1985) as the main unit of analysis and comprehension. In this way, in order to understand a segment of human behaviour, it is essential to deal with global and complete circuits, and not just with a selected few. Therefore, the individual is not but, in its context, and does not exist but interconnected with something. In this framework, the idea that the whole is more than the sum of its parts takes hold. It can be stated that, the same way psychoanalysis expands the mind inward with different categories of conscience; cybernetics expands it outwards, incorporating social and relational context to the person's psychic apparatus (op. cit). This way of looking at human beings is essential in the practice of child protection, since the complexity that affects intervention subjects, involves the epistemological impossibility to understand a specific conduct when isolated from its context and the network of relationships that organise its communicational pattern.

Second map: constructivism and social constructionism

Following the logic presented previously in which all living systems are open, interconnected and interdependent, it is appropriate to ask oneself what to do with the observer, that (initially) external element that is part of what it analyses. This expansion

of the look beyond the family and their circumstances is possible thanks to the contributions of constructivism. It allows us to question those who were only supposed to observe, analyse and prescribe. Humberto Maturana (1998) suggests the autopoiesis of living systems inspired by biological studies. According to the author, systems are “a discontinuous network of circular processes in which the produced molecules constitute the network that produces them through network of interactions” (p. 121).

The author points at an imbrication between the observed and observant systems, which implies the questioning of positivist principles such as objectivity and neutrality, especially in the task of understanding the ontology of living beings. This way, one of the main debates that second-order cybernetics introduces at the hands of constructivism, is the susceptibility of social phenomena to be discovered or constructed. With this question, the focus shifts from “what we know” to “how we know it”. Biological constructivism (Maturana & Varela, 1990), radical constructivism (Von Foerster, 1996) and social constructivism (Vigotsky, 1985) contribute greatly to find answers to the way social reality of open systems is known and conceived. In this sense, Heinz von Foerster (1996) suggests that introducing the observer as an active element of the observable reality means substituting the idea of reconstructing external reality with its constant construction by different subjects. According to the author, there are two linked processes that give meaning to this affirmation. On the one hand, it is necessary to understand that everything that is said, is said by an observer. On the other hand, everything that is said when describing or explaining a reality, is said to another observer.

A mutual construction of “real” emerges, which transcends truth and external reality as understood in a positivist approach (von Foerster, 2003). The mutual impact between observer and observed is so unquestionable that the wish to discover the external “reality” with neutrality and objectivity is unsustainable for the most radical and social constructivism. As Lev Vigotsky (1985) indicates, external reality is intrinsically connected to the mental world of its actors and the social processes that position them. Professionals that need to intervene in Rodolfo’s urgent situation, together with his family, organise the case from their perspective but also with the possibilities offered by the institutional context. At this point, it is appropriate to stop and wonder how the way we gather information, arrange data and in which thinking framework we carry out these tasks. These aspects end up shaping the case structure we work with (Auerswald, 1976). This means that it is all about embracing the possibility that data does not constitute the case per se, but rather it is the relationship that users and experts establish. This ends up providing meaningful and relevant information and, consequently, a case report that favours some moves instead of others.

Back to the case we are presenting, we would like to offer three ideas to illustrate this premise, which takes the observer/professional as a nuclear part of the case/problem/solution, same as the family and its members. These three ideas about possible cases could be formulated with the data we have related to the case study.

One possibility would be considering Maritza as a mother who is overwhelmed by the circumstances but with a notable capacity to learn, which would facilitate the empowerment needed to stop allowing violent situations. We would suggest working with the woman by teaching her how to set boundaries for her husband and child. Another possibility would be to place the child and his symptomatology at the centre of the case, turning inappropriate behaviour into challenges that are supported by relevant clinical diagnoses (in cooperation with other agencies). In this case, work would focus on an individual intervention with Rodolfo, which would help him manage his symptomatic conducts and that would partly imply delegating difficulties to the experts. A third opinion would include the father, who would have a central role in the family dynamics. He would be questioned in the hope of including him in the intervention, so the mother's rest depends on the father's activation and Rodolfo's control would depend on the emotional proximity with his father and not just his mother.

These are only three narratives or possible ways of all the ones that could be obtained depending on how professionals look at Rodolfo's family situation and which aspects they consider and cast aside. In sum, we can state that, depending on the way one looks at it, the result will be different. Therefore, the binomial observer-observed becomes unquestionable. When one includes the observer (experts and professionals) in the analysis equation, it seems inevitable to suggest a reflexive professional that does not only question and co-construct what "is brought to him as a given" but also what he personally brings from himself (López, Manrique & Otero, 1990).

In this line, social constructionism, considered one of the new postmodern voices (Healy, 2001), presents an interesting analysis of professional practices in which encounter, dialogue and conversation with the other is essential. In its ideas about questioning the dominant narratives and power relationships stagnant in modernity, it allows one to think about collaborative intervention perspectives (De Jong & Kim Berg, 2001; Healy & Meagher, 2004; Anderson, 2012; Sousa & Rodriguez, 2012; Madsen, 2014; Cardona & Campos, 2018). This way, a fair relationship with families is suggested, sacrificing the professional expertise and injecting doses of ignorance and curiosity.

Constructionists oppose to what they considered a slow but inevitable substitution of the client's history by that of the therapist's (Gergen, 1996). In the best-case scenario, in the traditional practice, after a real comprehension of the difficulties these disappear but at the cost of destroying, incorporating or replacing the user's biography by that of the professional. As Helene Anderson (2012) points out, the "illusion of understanding, or the safety about having a method, reduces the possibility of seeing and worsens our deafness for the unexpected, the unspoken and what has not yet been said" (p.85). The author mentions an attitude of not knowing, of doubt, that leaves professional speeches pending and invites the expert to become an apprentice with each new user, embracing greater freedom and humility. This approach believes in the client as an expert of his biography and as a co-creator of possibilities. Questions are not so much about what to do with users but how to think of clients and problems, and how to deal with them

(Madsen, 2014). Postmodern approaches in psycho-social work open new possibilities and ways to conceive device, expert and clients (White & Epston, 1993; Anderson & Goolishian, 1996; Hoffman, 1996; Gergen, 1996; Walsh, 2004; Van Lawick & Visser, 2015; Seikkula & Arnkil, 2016).

Related to case presented, out of the possible options with our subjects, the first two were implemented, although both failed. Let's share what happened.

After the mother's statement, the referral to the Women's Centre was activated, although Maritza only went to one interview there. She did not want to let the professional down, so she made excuses that were unfounded. On the other hand, mother and son never went to their appointment with the psychiatrist that the hospital emergency service had arranged for them.

Lastly, what would the third option mean? This option would involve including the father in the intervention process. This could possibly mean an additional challenge for the experts, since the father could decline the invitation, arrive late or barely participate. In these circumstances, a genuine curious attitude can be of help, so that the time and place of the interview can be used, not to point out his lack of commitment, but to learn about how Rodolfo's father understands what is happening in his family; what he would like to do but he cannot do; what limitations he encounters; what the current situation in his personal and family life remind him of; who he shares his worries with, and so on. Genuine curiosity can be the best ally to access an unknown world for the professionals (the world through the father's eyes) but even more so to help Rodolfo. It is about assuming that families and experts form what Jakko Seikkula and Tom Arnkil (2016) call border systems, since the family contributes with the problem and its own culture of doing things whilst the professional team contributes with the therapeutic mission, organisation, flexibility and versatility.

Third map: critical theory and post-structuralism

If there is something that cases like Rodolfo's share, is that human realities cannot be separated from the social determinants that create them. The type of situations that child protection works deals with demand attending to the subject's political nature and experiences. In this way, the binomial personal biography - social structure is essential. It is necessary to end with the dilemmas that oppose individual work to community work; emancipation to individualisation; assistance to control. It is time to restore the "Person-in-Environment" Approach (Weiss-Gal, 2008) since the above-mentioned dichotomies lead to a dead-end street, which is the reason why it is important to assume the tension between poles as an undeniable part of practice (Rodríguez, 2013). Once the macro context is introduced as an explanatory dimension of human conduct, it is necessary to recover critical theories of social reality in its broadest sense and use them as another helpful lens in child protection work (González Abad, 2023). This incorporation becomes useful for the analysis of institutions and its functioning. It helps to understand in what way the different social, organisational, personal and family

orders coexist. The British author Iain Fergusson (2008) points out that, from the critical perspective, "the issues that clients faced were not the product of their unsuitability or personal flaws, but the consequences of living in a society of inequality, oppression and class division" (p.99). Therefore, introducing structural variables like race and social class is useful when working with people, who are affected by migration processes, social disaffiliation, long-term unemployment and, ultimately, structural violence (Rogowski, 2014). In addition, the gender variable is key, since its role is essential both in presenting the situation and introducing the case, just like it has been illustrated. Structural variables are not taken as the causal axis in situations of violence and abuse. However, in a territory where psychopathologisation and individual responsibility is an attractive temptation, introducing the critical perspective in the analysis is a necessary antidote to maintain a coherent stance on professional ethic and social justice (Rossiter, 2011).

Back to Rodolfo and his family, it is essential to pause at the migrating process, which is minimised and often excessively rationalised by the family. This means bringing to light (in a socio-political act) unequal flows of wealth that make people migrate and leave their homes behind, as well as allowing investigation of psychosocial processes underlying this migration. Examples of these can be ambiguous loss (Boss, 2001), readjusting to a new culture, impact on primary social networks in families and their members, distortion of gender roles established in the country of origin, etc. (Falicov, 2007); and last but not least, the subtle manifestation of xenophobia and racism that families encounter in their everyday life (Dominelli, 1988).

The inclusion of a critical perspective does not only allow understanding reality avoiding prejudice and abuse, but it also refers to other microsocial questions that might be surprising to some. We say 'surprising' because, even though micro and macro go hand in hand in a complex way, the idea that both dimensions belong to different areas of study and intervention ruled for a long time. This dilemma is partly due to the static idea of power that dominated the reality analysis during modernity. However, post theories of today offer useful approaches for professions in social intervention, including the poststructuralist theories of Jacques Derrida (2003) or Michel Foucault (1980). These main contribution of these authors is the ability to see social change in a way that is anti-dogmatic, pragmatic, flexible and sensitive to context. It uses two key concepts. On the one hand, it redefines power. Power is not exerted. It simply exists in each relationship that people have with their surroundings. People have different positions in this environment, which is why it is necessary not to analyse it in terms of repression, but in terms of productivity. This way, Healy (2001) points out that power "does not only act to repress [people] but it also acts to produce its own sense of the self, to induce pleasure or build up individual capacities" (p.63). On the other hand, it suggests that, even if oppressive social structures exist, establishing social relations also favours global manifestations of power. Contrary to the deterministic tendency to establish a cause-effect relationship between superstructure and oppression, relational dynamics between

the different elements of a society that is multiple, changeable and localised, may or may not facilitate the appearance of powers.

Although post-structuralism offers important possibilities, there are two potential risks according to the experts (Healy, 2001; Fook, 2002; Fergusson, Ioakimidis & Lavalette, 2018). On one hand, its moral relativism can deteriorate the idea of social justice. This, together with a flexible and dynamic notion of power, can lead to a tolerated ignorance of forms of power that are fixed and dominating. In terms of violence, for example, it is just as dangerous to maintain the perspective of a permanent victim, as it is to deny the suffering and keep a situation where violence is not understood in psychosocial terms but justified instead (Fook, 2002). On the other hand, the interest on the symbolic and language domain can lead to eliminating the material dimension. Whilst what is local is an effect of what is structural, the experience of material poverty, sexism and racism cannot be ignored. In that regard, Healy points out (2001), and we support this view, that focusing on "social class", "gender" and "race" works "to understand and respond to the interaction between the structural and the symbolic in the genesis of social disadvantage" (p. 179). Beyond the challenges that critical theory offers, we argue that its implementation serves the transition from a behavioral-punitivist model to one of co-responsibility in which all parties are responsible for exploring and proposing new possibilities. It is the basis to reformulate the limits of the acceptable, the impossible and the possible, and to embrace a critical social work that includes the desirable and not only the executable.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this article has attempted to offer a thinking framework useful for child protection work ranging from systemic to critical theory through social constructionism and post-structuralism. This complementary movement responds to two interrelated purposes. On one hand, claims an innovative practice that helps to address the complex territories of child protection work.

An innovative practice that challenges the education of future social workers in the field of child protection. This case analysis hopes to have demonstrated the importance and feasibility of engaging different but complementary approaches to address complex cases. It is not about adopting an eclectic view of social work, but it is about not neglecting any of the dimensions in which the people for whom we work navigate. In the other hand, allows both professionals and clients to avoid the neoliberal logic, acquiring an increasing sense of control and agency on both sides.

Systematised practice, reflection-in-action shows that in situations of chronic exclusion, economic problems, altered intergenerational attachment patterns, situations of abandonment or abusive treatment, etc., it is urgent to pay attention to both psychosocial and socio-political details. This is why, we open our gaze to a panoramic understanding of the reality that challenges us, detecting contradictions, tensions, and

divergences. Only a holistic understanding of each situation allows an intervention that is connected to the reality experienced by the family and its members.

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