

ARTICLE

Systematisation of experiences in Social Work: Practice and knowledge construction from a historical perspective

Sistematización de experiencias en Trabajo Social: Práctica y construcción de conocimiento desde una perspectiva histórica

Claudia Bermúdez Peña¹

Universidad del Valle, Colombia.

Received: 10/12/2024

Accepted 10/04/2025

60

How to cite

Bermúdez, C (2025). Systematisation of experiences in Social Work: Practice and knowledge construction from a historical perspective. *Critical Proposals in Social Work Critical Proposals in Social Work*, 5 (9), 60-82. DOI: 10.5354/2735-6620.2025 77004.

Abstract

This article explores the construction of knowledge in social work, recognising the contribution that the systematisation of experiences has made. It positions practice as an epistemic axis and acknowledges its role in generating situated and transformative knowledge. The objective is to contribute to epistemological reflection by addressing key issues that have shaped debates in the history of social work about discussions in the social sciences: practice as a source of knowledge, the construction of knowledge, and the systematisation of experiences as a research modality.

Thus, from philosophical reflections to decolonial and Global South perspectives, including the contributions of the systematisation of experiences in Latin America, the conceptual problem posed is that, despite the epistemic subordination of practice to theoretical knowledge in the social sciences – which establishes

Keyword:
Social Work;
systematisation
of experiences;
knowledge
construction;
practice

¹Contact:: Claudia Bermúdez Peña, Colombia. claudia.bermudez@correounivalle.edu.com
April 2025. Vol. 5, Num. 9, 60-82 ISSN 2735-6620, DOI: 10.5354/2735-6620.2025 77004 .

a hierarchy that limits the recognition of other modes of knowledge rooted in social practices – this knowledge persists and operates within everyday life.

The argumentative development follows a structured approach: first, it examines the philosophical context that situates practice within Aristotelian phronesis; second, it discusses the contributions of Pierre Bourdieu and Michel de Certeau regarding practices; third, it explores debates on the topic emerging from the Global South; fourth, it connects these discussions with the reflections of two pioneers of social work – Octavia Hill and Mary Richmond; and finally, it highlights the debate that took place during the reconceptualisation movement in Latin America, where the systematisation of experiences gained significance as a response to epistemic inequalities. The conclusions emphasise that systematisation, beyond being a bridge between theory and practice, is an exercise in decolonial resistance and a political act democratising knowledge production.

Resumen

Este artículo explora la construcción de conocimiento en Trabajo Social reconociendo el aporte que la sistematización de experiencias ha realizado en ese sentido. Se sitúa a la práctica como eje epistémico y se reconoce su papel en la generación de saberes situados y transformadores. El objetivo es contribuir a la reflexión epistemológica a partir de asuntos que han atravesado algunos de los debates en la historia del Trabajo Social en relación con debates de las ciencias sociales: la práctica como fuente de conocimiento, la construcción de conocimiento y la sistematización de experiencias como modalidad de investigación. Así, desde reflexiones filosóficas hasta las apuestas decoloniales y del s, como las reflexiones que la sistematización de experiencias ha propuesto en América Latina, el problema conceptual que se plantea es que, pese a la subordinación epistémica que la práctica ha tenido frente al conocimiento teórico en las ciencias sociales, y que plantea una jerarquización que limita el reconocimiento de otros modos de saber relacionados con prácticas sociales, estos saberes perviven y operan en los mundos cotidianos.

El desarrollo argumentativo aborda, primero, el contexto filosófico que posiciona la práctica en la *phronesis* aristotélica; segundo, las contribuciones que sobre las prácticas realizaron Pierre Bourdieu y Michel De Certeau; tercero, los debates sobre el tema surgidos desde el Sur Global, para enlazar con las reflexiones sobre el tema que dos pioneras del Trabajo Social -Octavia Hill y Mary Richmond- realizaron; y

Palabras Clave:
Trabajo Social;
Sistematización
de experiencias;
construcción de
conocimiento;
práctica

finalmente, se destaca el debate propuesto durante la reconceptualización en América Latina, en el que la sistematización de experiencias adquirió relevancia como respuesta a las desigualdades epistémicas.

Las conclusiones destacan que la sistematización, además de ser un puente entre teoría y la práctica, es un ejercicio de resistencia decolonial y un acto político que democratiza la producción de conocimiento.

Introduction

This article aims to contribute to the epistemological reflection on issues that have crossed some of the debates in the history of Social Work, in particular, and of the social sciences, in general: practice as a source of knowledge, the construction of knowledge and the systematisation of experiences as a research modality. To this end, I have proposed a historical-critical analysis of how some debates have taken place in this direction.

62

Firstly, I trace the debate on practice as a source of knowledge in Western thought, taking up the Aristotelian notion of *phronesis* (practical wisdom) and contemporary debates, in which I highlight the approaches of Pierre Bourdieu and Michel De Certeau, who take up the discussion on practice and place it at the centre of their reflections. In this process, I link with debates arising from Social Work. Secondly, I consider the climate of this debate from the Global South, paying special attention to Latin America.

Thirdly, I place the reflection within the framework of the profession of Social Work, taking as a starting point the reflections on the subject put forward by Octavia Hill and Mary Richmond as pioneers. Hill, with a reflection from practice, and Richmond, with a reflection from and about practice. Then, I highlight the debate in Latin America during the period of reconceptualisation, specifically what was published in the magazine “Hoy en el servicio social”, and particularly the reflections of Herman Kruse at that time.

Practice as an epistemic site in Western thought

In the history of Western thought, we identify moments in which practice has been recognised as a source of knowledge, although it has not always been valued in that place. For example, in the classification of the dispositions of the soul that lead to truth,

Aristotle pointed to *phronesis*² as a mode of “practical wisdom” close to an intellectual virtue, which allows one to discern what is good, both for oneself and for the community (Aristotle, 2005). In this sense, *phronesis* does not relate to the application of abstract principles and instead implies a deliberative capacity, the basis of which is an ethical and prudent judgment. That is, a judgement formed based on knowledge acquired over time in interaction with those with whom life is shared in common, and which is expressed as reflective action oriented towards the greater good within the framework of shared experience. In this sense, *phronesis* refers to practical knowledge that is not necessarily theoretical or universal.

Despite this recognition of practice as a source of knowledge, Aristotle is attributed with a “praise of the *vita contemplativa*”, as he seems to give theoretical reflection a higher place than practice, which would be contained in the *vita activa*.³

This exaltation of the *vita contemplativa* influenced Western modernity and was expressed in the rise of positivism. Theoretical knowledge was positioned, and the practice was relegated to a subordinate role, which was understood as applying theory. By devaluing practical knowledge from everyday life, positivism prioritised the search for objectivity and universality. At the end of the 19th century, the nascent social sciences adopted positivism as a path to knowledge, placing practice secondary to theoretical knowledge.

This epistemological hierarchisation generated tensions that persist in contemporary social science debates, although it has been questioned in recent decades, especially from the Global South. In this framework, social work was understood as a subaltern (Lorente Molina, 2002), given that the discipline found in practice is a central axis for constructing knowledge from reflexive and situated action.

At the end of the 20th century in the West, authors such as Pierre Bourdieu (1991) and Michel De Certeau (2000) took up the discussion on practical knowledge from perspectives different from the Aristotelian one, questioning the hierarchy that subordinated practice to theory and highlighting its epistemological place. We present their approaches briefly.

² There are five dispositions of the soul identified by Aristotle: the *téchne*, the *phronesis*, the *episteme*, the *Sophia* and the *Nóus* (DI Pego, 2019)..

³ This approach is framed by the Greek distinction between *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa*. While the former is linked to action and engagement with the affairs of the world, the latter is related to theoretical reflection, which implies taking distance from the world. Contemplation is in this context considered one of the highest human faculties, while practice is understood as an inferior faculty, which also distracts from the possibility of attaining full contemplation.

For Bourdieu, there is a ‘false opposition’ between objectivism and subjectivism, which he describes as ‘ruinous’ (Bourdieu, 1991, p.47). According to the author, both approaches share the same presuppositions of theoretical knowledge, as they imply taking distance from their object of study, adopting an external stance that privileges abstraction over interaction with reality. In this sense, both would be close to the *contemplative vita* as they separate knowledge production from practical experience and participation in the social world.

Bourdieu considers that practical knowledge, closer to the *vita activa*, is at the origin of the ordinary experience of the social world and emerges in everyday participation, silent observation and interactions with others. Its very nature causes it to remain hidden in its evidence, as it operates implicitly in everyday life. In this sense, practical knowledge is only “revealed” retrospectively through an exercise of reflection, which allows the underlying meanings and dynamics implicit in everyday actions to be identified. This approach highlights the tacit nature of practices and recognises them as knowledge builders.

Bourdieu argues that mastery of practice principles is acquired through learning by familiarisation, which does not necessarily pass through discourse or consciousness. It is an “anonymous pedagogical action” (Bourdieu, 1991, p.125), exercised collectively by the environment without the intervention of specialised agents or formalised moments. Incorporating practical schemas occurs implicitly and through everyday interaction with the social world.

For his part, De Certeau called everyday practices “arts of doing”, defining them as “an extensive set, difficult to delimit, which we could provisionally designate under the title of procedures” (De Certeau, 2000, p.50). For the author, it is important to explore a creative and, to some extent, “subversive” dimension since they are not simply passive processes of adaptation to structures but places from which strategies of resistance and resignification are woven. Indeed, in their everyday lives, subjects construct new meanings by re-appropriating hegemonic impositions and transforming them according to their realities and needs. From this perspective, everyday practices are mute procedures, bearers of dispersed creativity that manifests in how individuals use the tools of their environment to intervene in structures and endow them with their meanings. In other words, practical knowledge is not devoid of agency; instead, it is situated knowledge in which individuals transform structures from within with the tools the context provides them.

The authors agree in recognising practices as processes that transcend repetition and position them as an epistemic place, from which not only knowledge is constructed that cannot be reduced to universal categories but also resistance. Bourdieu and De Certeau invite us to rethink practice not as a sphere subordinated to theory but as a negotiation space in which the structures that shape social life are transformed. These reflections are consonant with the systematisation of experiences, which is committed to recovering the knowledge of practice as a constructor of knowledge based on a reflective exercise.

The debate on practice from the Global South

In recent years, the Global South has established itself as a reference point for questioning the hegemonic ways of knowing proposed by the West. Indeed, post-coloniality has questioned and problematised how the West invisibilises, subordinates and delegitimises knowledge from other cultural and historical contexts since the mid-twentieth century. These initial critiques, driven by African⁴ and Asian⁵ intellectuals, set out to deconstruct colonial narratives of knowledge, opening the way for diverse and situated epistemic perspectives.

65

In Latin America, the questioning and resistance to the various forms of coloniality – of power, knowledge (Quijano, 2000) and being (Maldonado-Torres, 2007) – have been permanent, almost from the very moment of the so-called “conquest”. This process has been accompanied by criticism and the permanent search for alternatives and proposals to rethink the relations of knowledge and power.

An early example of intellectual resistance and non-European critical discourse was represented by the Indigenous chronicler Felipe Guamán Poma de Ayala, who in 1615 wrote “Nueva corónica y buen gobierno”, a work in which he not only denounced the abuses committed by the Spaniards but also presented a proposal for coexistence based on respect and the integration of indigenous knowledge. His text is a key testimony of Indigenous agencies in constructing their narratives and in the dispute for the legitimacy of expertise in the colonial context.

⁴ Such as Franz Fanon, Valentin-Yves Mudimbe, Achille Mbembe, among others.

⁵ Edward Said; Gayatri Spivak, Partha Chatterjee and others stand out.

Similarly, in the 19th century, Simón Rodríguez, known for having been Simón Bolívar's teacher, focused his analysis on the question of the direction of Latin American nations after independence. From there, he stressed the importance of recovering the "knowledge of the people" and reclaiming local traditions to construct emancipatory educational and social projects. In the 20th century, between 1931 and 1940, the pedagogical project of the Warisata School in Bolivia, promoted by Elizardo Pérez and Avelino Siñani, stood out. Their model proposed an education that provided intellectual instruction and recovered the ancestral traditions of the Aymara and Quechua indigenous peoples, integrating work and production as the fundamental pillars of learning.

Similarly, Paulo Freire (1969) reflected on the knowledge of historically silenced sectors, whom he called "the oppressed". He questioned the dynamics of epistemological domination that sought to convince these groups of their supposed ignorance and proposed the "dialogue of knowledge" as a tool for emancipation. For his part, Orlando Fals Borda (1991) put the hierarchies of knowledge under tension through participatory action research (PAR). His proposal, based on collaborative and situated work, questioned the dominant vision of the social sciences and highlighted the centrality of communities as agents of social transformation⁶. In this order, research would cease to be an exclusive exercise of the academy and become a process of co-construction with social actors.

66

These examples show that Latin America has been building the foundations for a critical project that not only questions the hierarchies imposed by the West but also vindicates ancestral knowledge and practices as an alternative to modern colonial understanding. In turn, this process has promoted proposals for social transformation, demonstrating that the South is not only a place for the reception of knowledge but also for creation, reflection and epistemological re-signification.

A turning point in theoretical and epistemological deconstruction in Latin America was given a significant boost in 1992 in connection with commemorating the 500th anniversary of the 'conquest'. Intellectuals such as Aníbal Quijano, Enrique Dussel and Catherine Walsh, among others, promoted what became known as the "decolonial turn", which was based on the recognition that coloniality did not end with the independence of Latin American nations but persists as a structure of power and knowledge. Indeed, the "conquest" did not succeed in completely erasing ancestral traditions such as those of Indigenous peoples and Afro-descendants; on the contrary, they continued to be

⁶ A line of facts from Guamán Poma to Fals Borda is proposed by Marco Raúl Mejía in a lecture published on video on June 5, 2024. (International Centre, Other Voices in Education, 2024). A line of facts from Guamán Poma to Fals Borda is presented by Marco Raúl Mejía in a lecture published on video on June 5, 2024 (International Centre, Other



practised clandestinely, “behind the back” of the colonial order, but maintaining their vitality under the guise of subjugation.

The debates in the Global South not only questioned epistemological imposition but also broadened the view that knowledge does not emerge exclusively from academia or theoretical abstraction but also from lived experiences, relations with the environment and everyday acts. In this order, the task is to provoke the emergence of the submerged (Rauber, 2020), i.e., to bring to the surface that knowledge which, although it has been hidden or denied, remains alive and is expressed in practices and traditions. Thus, we are faced with a challenge to universality. What is at stake is to explore other ways of interpreting and transforming the world, to revalue the knowledge of practice as living knowledge, and from that place, to open paths towards a plural and situated understanding of human realities.

This perspective not only looks to the past but also the present, reclaiming practices as a space for creating meaning and knowledge. From this perspective, practice is where power relations are negotiated, identities are re-signified, and knowledge that challenges imposed epistemological hierarchies is generated.

Practice as a knowledge builder in Social Work

Since its origins, Social Work has placed practice as a central axis in its professional practice and the construction of knowledge. In its first formulations in the Global North, it is possible to identify, in the nascent discipline/profession, a concern for the search for alternatives in the face of specific social problems that affected individuals, groups and communities. This work was developed from territorial proximity that enabled a direct approach to diverse realities while generating the need for critical reflection on these experiences. Social Work proposed strategies, built routes, and promoted reflections to understand and contribute to the different social realities from its practical practice. From this place, the practice was configured as a space of knowledge in itself, in which action and reflection were dynamically articulated, challenging the epistemological hierarchy that subordinated the knowledge of practices to theoretical knowledge.

On the other hand, Social Work was introduced in both academic and non-academic circuits for the dissemination and circulation of its knowledge, which allowed it to

establish a dialogue with other fields of expertise and, simultaneously, with the practical needs of society⁷. One of these key spaces was the National Charity Conferences, held in 1874 in the United States. These conferences were spaces for sharing experiences, debating and contributing to decision-making. Their impact transcended the professional sphere, playing an essential role in generating opinion and circulating ideas on social issues. From this point of view, we can affirm that social work debates contributed to the development of social sciences.

Indeed, social work actively participated in the theoretical, methodological and epistemological debates that ran through the social sciences in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. An example is Jane Addams' contribution to the Chicago School of Sociology, whose origins were marked by an interest in the micro-social and an applied approach⁸. Addams not only made a critical written contribution that emphasised reflection on the relationship between theory and practice but also stood out for her feminist sensibility, and ethics guided by principles of social justice, "always within the framework of American pragmatism that she helped to found and expand" (García Dauder, 2010).⁹

68

In Latin America, the debates on the relationship between theory and practice acquired a particular nuance based on two intertwined movements: the movement for the reconceptualisation of Social Work and the movement for the systematisation of experiences (Martin Barbero and Hleap Borrero, 2012).

The reconceptualisation movement in Social Work was a self-reflexive and critical process that questioned the conservative foundations of the discipline/profession on which Social Work in Latin America was founded. In this sense, it set out to denounce the influence of functional structuralism, Catholic moralism and charitable practices, which, taken together, were insufficient to respond to the challenges and complex realities on this side of the world. As a result, it prompted a reorientation from which theoretical and political alternatives more aligned with the regional context were tested

⁷ In countries such as England and the United States, social work found a home in universities, but this was not the only training scenario. For example, Mary Richmond, from the Sage Russel Foundation, gave training courses that did not necessarily lead to a university degree. Similarly, Jane Addams, even though she had a direct relationship with the Chicago School, gave lectures in different regions in academic and non-academic settings (Bermúdez Peña, 2016).

⁸ The School was initially interested in generating applied knowledge in micro-social spaces, bringing university students into settings where charitable organisations were present and introducing courses that sought to prepare them to address social problems to establish a relationship between theory and practice (Tolman, 1902).

⁹ This School changed its orientation in 1927, under the direction of William Ogburn, who argued that sociology should distance itself from any kind of social intervention, because, as a science, it should not be interested in "making a better world", but in discovering new knowledge (Ritzer, 1997; Soffer, 1982), privileging theoretical knowledge over practical knowledge.



and explored. As Quintero Londoño (2019) points out, “the old Social Work became insufficient” in the face of emerging demands, giving rise to a plurality of perspectives that inaugurated a cycle characterised by diversity and divergence. This movement not only established a break with imported hegemonic paradigms but also encouraged the search for a social worker committed to social transformations and the recognition of local specificities. Latin American Social Work thus adopted a critical approach that challenged dominant epistemologies and proposed a break with conservative paradigms.

In this context, the systematisation of experiences acquired a central role, consolidating itself as a necessary research exercise to revalue professional practices to advance in the articulation and dialogue with the social sciences and other practices, such as popular education. It is therefore relevant to examine the debates on which this discussion was based and which positioned the systematisation of experiences as a way of constructing knowledge in Social Work by recovering the understanding of practices.

To this end, we have opted for a two-pronged historical approach. Firstly, we approached the reflections of two pioneers of Social Work, Octavia Hill and Mary Richmond, considering that their contributions laid the foundations for thinking about the research-action articulation from reflection on and from practice. Secondly, we explore the debates in Latin America, focusing particularly on the publications of the journal “Hoy en el servicio social” during the reconceptualisation process. We highlight the role played by this publication in the dissemination of key ideas at that time. In particular, we recover the contributions of Herman Kruse, whose reflections were fundamental in promoting the systematisation of experiences as a research exercise within Latin American Social Work.

Octavia Hill: Reflection from Practice

Although we do not find in Octavia Hill’s work a reflection on practice as we understand it today, we can identify in her approaches an early effort to understand poverty in nineteenth-century industrial England through direct intervention. Her reflections *on* practice offer a perspective on how specific sectors of society at the time understood and tackled various social problems, setting a precedent for constructing knowledge from practice.¹⁰

Octavia Hill’s work developed in the context of profound inequalities, especially in the urban context of 19th-century England. From her practice, she constructed a model

¹⁰ She shared the same geographical and historical context with Marx and Engels. And although with different views and aims, their approaches developed in parallel. While Engels documented the situation of the working class in England from a structural viewpoint, highlighting the contradictions of capitalism, Hill aligned herself with Victorian reformist ideas, understanding poverty as a result of individual character, advocated direct action and documented

of intervention that combined improving the housing conditions of “the poor”¹¹ with an educational-moralising approach. Her proposal not only sought to transform the physical conditions of the settlements through the construction of community spaces such as schools and parks but also promoted an idea of reform based on values such as discipline, thrift and sobriety, based on religious principles that were expected to be “transmitted” through the example and “advice” of volunteers, who carried out an educational task. For Hill, it was essential to establish a close and long-lasting bond between the volunteer, who used home visits as part of his strategy, and the beneficiary, based on trust to foster autonomy.

In this sense, her work offers an early reflection on practice as a means to understand and guide action from a meticulous organisation of social aid, combining material reform and moral reform (Bermúdez Peña, 2016).

Hill asked volunteers to systematically record information, including a detailed description of the assistance mechanisms, as well as limitations and errors that could compromise the effectiveness of the process. Therefore, she considered it necessary to train volunteers to observe, document and analyse the action. The planning of assistance, the administration of resources, and the articulation of efforts between official institutions and charitable organisations were other pillars of her work. She also adopted “scientific charity” as the guiding principle of her actions. This approach argued that aid should be based on “objective” scientific knowledge – science and reason – and not on “sentimentality” as a way of combating “indiscriminate charity” (Holmes, 1896, in JAMA Network, n.d.). According to this approach, if all social reformers united and their ideas were scientifically and rigorously examined, it would be possible to determine social laws accurately, allowing for science-based social reform and effective control of social processes.¹²

Hill took her reflections beyond the practical sphere; the lecture “*The importance of helping the poor without alms*”, which she presented to the Association for the Promotion of Social Science in Bristol in 1869, shows this and highlights her interest in establishing a dialogue with the nascent social sciences. Direct management in the

¹¹ We refer to ‘the poor’ as the term of the time, but we assume that it relates to impoverishment and impoverished people, which is why we will use the latter term at some points.

¹² For some authors, the idea of “scientific charity” was a way of covering up eugenic actions, not only because they promoted the control of populations considered “problematic”, but also because through the cloak of science, they sought to legitimise social exclusion. This debate is particularly relevant in the context of the late 19th and early 20th century, “They did not want to see those poor unfortunate souls suffering in the squalor of the streets and in the asylums (...), with the sole purpose of eliminating the defective classes from society so that they could not procreate. The Charity Organisation Societies wanted to isolate the defective class in asylums to prevent them from “reproducing” (Stuhler, 2020, para 2).

territories, home visits, and contact with families reflected her conviction to understand local realities to intervene more effectively. However, her work was not without its critics. She was questioned for her limited focus on the administration and distribution of aid, without addressing the structural causes of poverty or proposing strategies to transform the conditions that generated it. Thus, although her proposal contributed to the professionalisation of social work, her approach remained anchored in a welfare model with a strong moralising component.

Reflection on and from Mary Richmond's Practice

After the home visit, you go out thinking about the letters you want to write, the phone calls you want to make, the visits you have to make to other parts of the city, etc. However, you have to back to the office, after making several visits related to other cases, and all that has, to some extent, faded from your mind.

The only way to get good results is to systematise the information obtained in the first interview, to retain the feeling you had when you left the house, and to set immediately into action. (Richmond, 1917)

71

After the home visit, you go out thinking about the letters you want to write, the phone calls you want to make, the visits you must make to other parts of the city, etc. However, you have to return to the office after making several visits related to different cases, and all that has, to some extent, faded from your mind. The only way to get good results is to systematise the information obtained in the first interview, retain the feeling you had when you left the house and set the action in motion immediately (Richmond, 1917).

Mary Richmond was an active participant in the National Charity Conferences of the United States, which had been held annually since 1874. At the 1891 conference, Richmond presented a short paper. She noted that much of her work involved reading and analysing volunteer and visitor reports, articulating the charity's work. This enabled her to understand how the volunteers operated on the ground, the issues they identified, and the strengths and difficulties in their work, which coincided with Hill's work. Richmond highlighted issues that she felt were right and urged collaborative working. She insisted on efficient resource management.

At the 1907 Conference, Mary Richmond presented a dissertation on “the friendly visit”, emphasising its importance as a strategy for generating links between subjects from different realities. Her reflections were based on correspondence with 60 visitors from 12 cities who shared their experiences. Richmond emphasised that the friendly visit should not be understood as an intrusion into the lives of families but as an accompaniment in the search for solutions to crises, always under confidentiality and respect. She also stressed that this exercise not only contributed to the well-being of the families served but also promoted the personal growth of the visitors. She suggested that volunteers, in addition to contact with the families, should connect with the neighbourhood and the city, suggesting a context analysis of particular conditions. She also stressed the need for training courses and the creation of training schools. Finally, she noted the importance of strengthening the training of visitors by creating specialised courses and schools to qualify their work.

We can see in Richmond the first traces of a reflection on practice, which is nourished by the “voices” of the visitors and enriched by the author’s interpretation of her own experience. Richmond sets out what she considers to be the qualities needed to be an effective volunteer. There is an effort to transcend personal experience and engage in dialogue with others. In these early dissertations, she does not explicitly link practice and theoretical knowledge. This link is visible in the *Social Diagnosis* (1917). In this work, we can see more clearly how the author reflected on her practice in dialogue with theoretical knowledge.

72

Richmond’s first exercise was to make explicit her place of enunciation as a social worker, her motivations and concerns, and the “behind the scenes” of the publication. She highlighted the relevance of a comparative work based on case experiences using social workers’ accounts. This suggests broadening her perspective and, in a way, a reflection on collective practices. She also reviewed authors from different disciplines (medicine, history and applied psychology) who offered complementary perspectives to her proposal. In this sense, she affirmed that Social Work relied on external frameworks and had its approaches, positioning itself as an autonomous and reflexive discipline (Richmond, 1917, p.74).

Thus, we can see key moments in the methodological process:

1-Gathering accounts of practice: Richmond asked a group of social workers for brief descriptions of their methods and experiences in making decisions and defining a treatment plan (1917, p.27).

2-Formation of a research team: hired two experienced social workers (one in family work and one in medico-social), who analysed reports. According to Richmond, the purpose was to “discover” best practices in social work (1917 p.28).

3-Interviews with social workers: In addition to reviewing reports, they conducted interviews with other colleagues linked to medico-social entities or dedicated to the care of minors (1927, p.28), which enriched the written documents.

4-Editing and reviewing reports: A small number of reports were edited and used by teachers at conferences for academic purposes. They were also subject to peer review. She clarified that measures were taken to preserve confidentiality (1927, p.29).

5-Brief statistical analysis: Richmond acknowledged the limitations of statistical treatment but pointed out its importance as an approximation, which allows us to observe a complementary view and a commitment to methodological integration, albeit incipient, between the quantitative and the qualitative, with all the potential that may derive from this.

73

In this process, we also note a perspective of complementarity between practical experience, data systematisation and reflective analysis, which somehow manages to position Social Work as a discipline capable of generating knowledge in a process that articulates research and intervention. For the author, the practice of social work requires not only practice and theoretical knowledge but also a “strong personality”. From her perspective, the method should not ignore the individuality of the social worker, which leads her to reflect on a triad at the moment of action: practice, theory and individuality. On the other hand, she stressed the importance of diversifying sources of information and stated that trade unions and co-workers can play an underestimated role. In this sense, she seemed to promote a broad and contextualised view. She said that while the evidence gathered can be used to confirm or refute theories, it is a creative act far from being a mechanical activity.

Although incipient, it is possible to identify in this work several features that we now associate with the systematisation of experiences. Firstly, Richmond treats practice as a

source of knowledge, provided that the social worker's reflective exercise accompanies her action and that sources are diversified. Secondly, she stresses the importance of reviewing theoretical sources and exploring the views of specialists, as well as the willingness to receive criticism.

Although their perspective includes diverse voices (accounts from social workers, specialists and other collaborators), the voices of the recipients of the actions are notably absent, being limited to the exchange between practitioners and academics.

We want to highlight how, in these two pioneers of Social Work, we find an early reflection from and on practice, which leads us to suggest that since its origins, reflection on practice has been relevant in the configuration of the discipline-profession. However, the criticisms of their work show that, in some way, they reinforced a moralising approach to poverty. We, therefore, wonder to what extent, in addition to responding to social needs, their views contributed to legitimising forms of social control of populations, which contrasts with the turn taken by the Systematisation of Experiences in Latin America. Indeed, while Hill and Richmond had institutional hierarchies as a framework for action, in Latin America, systematisation became a critical exercise in the vindication of popular knowledge, promoting a situated and transformative reading of Social Work.

74

The systematisation of experiences in Social Work from Latin America

During the reconceptualisation movement, the debate on the relationship between theory and practice took on new dimensions. In the 1960s and 1970s, the discussion was linked to the search for the positioning of Social Work as a discipline with its theoretical foundations and aspirations of scientificity. The systematisation of experiences was assumed as a possibility to face these tensions, understanding practice not only as a space for intervention but also as a source of knowledge. To approach this section, we have considered two scenarios: the setting on the subject which appeared in the magazine "Today in Social Service" and the approaches of Herman Kruse.¹³

¹³ Es importante señalar que para ese momento la disciplina/profesión se reconocía como Servicio Social. Por ello haremos referencia de modo indistinto a la denominación Servicio Social y Trabajo Social.



The magazine “Hoy en el servicio social”, created in 1964, was an essential stage for the approach and circulation of debates and reflections on Social Work in Latin America during the reconceptualisation.¹⁴

From its beginnings, it highlighted the exercise of systematising experiences as a relevant task in analysing and improving professional practices. For example, in issue 1, Clelia de Del Pozo, while describing systematisation as a stage in the process and understanding it as a way of organising information, presents the results as a technical-social report which, from her point of view, would contribute to decision-making. She emphasises that systematisation makes learning and recommendations for other experiences visible (De Del Pozo, 1964-1965).

In issue 4 of the journal (1965), Herman Kruse stated that one of the most significant challenges for Social Work was to systematise experiences to construct a theory of the discipline from Latin America. He said that “in our continent, the practical experience of Social Service is much greater than its theoretical elaboration” (Kruse, *Movilidad social y los cambios sociales en América Latina*, 1965), which limited the potential of Social Work. In the same way, he questioned the application of alien methods, which he considered to be of little scope in the face of the complex dynamics of Latin America. From his point of view, systematisation was not only a methodological tool but also a critical, creative process, a political and epistemological act that made it possible to generate relevant knowledge for the region, to break with imported models and to develop theoretical frameworks that reflected local realities.

Kruse’s call to systematise the experiences sought to make the discipline/profession a social science committed to the continent’s realities. The aim was for social work to respond to needs and questions and contribute to transforming social structures that perpetuate inequality.

In issue 7 (1966), Alberto Dufour summarised the ideas presented by Renee Dupont at the second Latin American regional seminar on Social Service held in Montevideo. Dupont proposed differentiating between research “for” and “on” Social Service. She saw research “for” as operational and focused on what needed to be done to guarantee a more scientific and practical orientation, while research “on” sought to analyse and understand what was already being done in the professional field. It is in this context

¹⁴ La revista “Hoy en el Servicio Social” fue impulsada por un colectivo comprometido con esta renovación, integrantes del grupo ECRO (Esquema Conceptual Referencial Operativo), reuniendo a profesionales que comenzaron a pensar y escribir sobre un Trabajo Social auténticamente latinoamericano. La revista jugó un papel crucial en la difusión de nuevas formas de entender y practicar la profesión, alejándose de modelos importados y promoviendo una perspectiva crítica y contextualizada.

that he suggests “systematising isolated and little-known experiences” (Dufour, 1966), understanding it as a mode of research “on”.

In issue 9 (1967), Dupont expanded on his proposals, pointing out that his objective was to awaken “the spirit of inquiry in the new generations of professionals” (Dupont, 1967), encouraging them to carry out sustained research to broaden their reflection. Dupont, taking as a reference the systematisation of experiences in the United States, highlighted the achievements of the discipline on that side of the continent and recognised the limitations faced by Latin America in reaching those levels of reflection: “systematising experiences, as has been done in the United States, requires a large number of them, developed over long periods and duly recorded, and we are only just accumulating them” (Dupont, 1967). This is relevant, as it shows that the systematisation of experience has been present in the development of the discipline/profession.

In issues 10-11 (1967), Seno Cornely emphasised the need for systematisation at the regional level and proposed the creation of a commission of technicians to study the conditions of our continent, to guide the systematisation of experiences and advance in the elaboration of a Latin American theory of Social Service. Like Kruse, he believed in the search for his theory through the systematisation of local practices, overcoming dependence on external models.

76

Although the systematisation of experiences in Latin America represented an advance in the recognition of situated knowledge, it also faced criticism. In some cases, it has been pointed out that its narrative nature could generate fragmented knowledge that is difficult to generalise (Jara, 2018). It is also necessary to reflect on how systematisation has been used to validate experiences without profoundly reflecting on the power relations that permeate Social Work. How can we ensure that systematisation documents practice and generates critical and transformative knowledge?

Herman Kruse: systematisation of experiences and theory building

Kruse (1972) reviewed studies that considered the theory-practice relationship in the Social Service. For the author, this reflection had begun 25 years earlier in the United States; at the time of his reflection, it was just beginning to develop in Latin America, partly due to the impetus of the International Solidarity Institute (ISI), financed by the German Konrad Adenauer Foundation. This institute was present in the region

between 1966 and 1969. Initially, it sought to promote the exchange of experiences between German and Latin American social workers. Still, it later supported the reconceptualisation process, considering it a “movement worthy of encouragement”, given its search for emancipation from European and North American influences and the construction of its methodology oriented towards the production of social change. Thus, the ISI invited social workers from the region to systematise their experiences, with “Fieldwork as a source of theory in Social Work”¹⁵ as a reflective axis.

Kruse pointed out that in North America, national social work has identified that social work builds theory from practice by systematising experiences. He highlighted Dupont, Vera R. Holz and the Araxá Document (1967), which, in his view, represented a collective effort of theorising in reconceptualisation. He stressed that critical analysis of practice could be the best way to reconstruct Social Work theory. He called for a writing exercise and, in that sense, drew attention to figures in reconceptualisation who, although internationally prominent, had not written books.

Conclusions

77

In the brief historical overview presented in this article, we show that Social Work, since its origins, has had a disposition to reflect on and from practice. This has allowed it to construct knowledge from a different place than that set out in the hegemonic paradigm imposed by the emergence of the social sciences in the West, which subordinated practice to theory. Social Work faced epistemological tensions that led it to be relegated and subalternised by opting for the knowledge of practice in dialogue with theoretical knowledge. However, this option and the use of mechanisms for documenting, analysing and reflecting on and from practice allows us to observe a conception that does not fragment knowledge of action. Recognising this disposition towards the construction of knowledge does not mean ignoring the aspirations of social control and moralising approaches to action.

Now, the Aristotelian notion of *phronesis*, as a mode of practical wisdom acquired in coexistence with others and oriented towards the common good, allows us to identify in practice a way of knowing, which was not valued in its epistemic dimension in the West, as is also shown by more contemporary works such as those of Bourdieu and De Certeau.

¹⁵ This was the same name as the 1971 seminar in Ambato, Ecuador, which was also supported by the ISI. For some authors, this seminar represented a milestone in the discussion because it represented a break with the Pan-American congresses held previously and because it brought together social workers from all over Latin America to present the systematisation of their experiences and to reflect on their theoretical potential (Fallas Jimenez, 2023).



Although it is clear that the systematisation of experiences has been an exercise that has been present since the origins of the discipline/profession in Latin America, it took a particular turn within the framework of the reconceptualisation movement. Indeed, unlike its development in the North, in which systematisation was linked to the search for technical and administrative efficiency, in Latin America, it was assumed to be a critical exercise in the construction of knowledge committed to local realities and social transformation. Authors such as Herman Kruse and the debates in the journal *Hoy en el Servicio Social* show this. Systematisation promoted the recovery and valorisation of professional practices and the construction of interpretative frameworks of its own, putting tension on the dominant epistemologies favouring positivist and external approaches. Thus, it became a political act of democratisation of knowledge and an exercise in resistance to imported theoretical models, participating in social science debates, articulation with practices such as Popular Education, and actively participating in social processes of various kinds.

In this order of ideas, Social Work in Latin America proposed a different understanding of the relationship between knowledge and action. In this process, the systematisation of experiences established bridges between theory and practice, becoming a space of articulation between research and intervention. Systematisation from this perspective reaffirms the need for situated, committed epistemologies and dialogue with social actors.

In short, the construction of knowledge in Social Work has been a continuous and situated process, which starts from practice and returns to it in an exercise of re-signification. From the initial philosophical reflections to the contributions of the Latin American and Global South, this journey highlights the value of practices as a source of knowledge capable of transforming both the discipline/profession and the concrete social realities. Reflections on practice and local expertise are intertwined with a political stance vis-à-vis power structures. Kruse proposed constructing knowledge by breaking with colonial hierarchies by reclaiming practice as a place of knowledge.

As contemporary debates on epistemologies of the South question Western modes of knowledge production, Social Work is challenged to engage in dialogue with these perspectives without losing sight of its situated character and its commitment to social intervention.

Bibliographical references

- Arendt, H. (2013). *The human condition*. Buenos Aires: Paidós.
- Aristotle (2005). *Nicomachean ethics*. Madrid: Alianza.
- Berger, P., and Luckman, T. (1978). *The social construction of reality*. Buenos Aires: Amorrourtu.
- Bermúdez Peña, C. (2016). Rereading history: Circulation and routes of dispersion of early social work knowledge. *Prospectiva*, 65-91. doi:10.25100/prts.v0i22.1237
- Bourdieu, P. (1991). *El sentido práctico*. Madrid: Taurus, Humanities.
- Bourdieu, P., and Wacquant, L. (2005). *An invitation to reflexive sociology*. Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI editores.
- DI Pego, A. (2019). Heidegger's traces in the human condition. A buried dispute around Aristotelian praxis. *Ideas y Valores*, LXVIII(171), 185-207. doi:10.15446/ideasyvalores.v68n171.62985
- De Certeau, M. (2000). *The invention of the everyday*. Mexico: Universidad Iberoamericana, Department of History.
- De Del Pozo, C. (1964-1965). Informe sobre un programa de construcción de viviendas por el sistema de ayuda mutua y organización y desarrollo de la comunidad. *Today in Social Service*, 21-35.
- Dufour, A. (1966). Crónica de un Encuentro Latinoamericano -2º Seminario Latinoamericano de Servicio Social. *Today in Social Service*(7), 29-39.
- Dupont, R. (1967). Project to unify working criteria and theory development in Group Social Service. *Today in Social Service*.(9), 18-26.
- Fallas Jimenez, Y. (2023). Los organismos internacionales y la formación profesional de Trabajo Social. 1950-1960. *Revista de Ciencias Sociales*, 3(181), 123-135.



- Fals Borda, O., Rahman, M., De Roux, G., Salazar, M. C., Gianotten, V., & De Wit, T. (1991). *Action and knowledge. How to break the monopoly with Participatory Action Research*. New York: Cinep.
- Freire, P. (1969). *Educación como práctica de libertad*. Montevideo: tierra nueva.
- García Dauder, S. (2010). The forgotten history of the women of the Chicago School. *Revista Española de Investigaciones Sociológicas*(131), 11-41.
- Geertz, C. (2003). Dense description: Towards an interpretive theory of culture. In *La interpretación de las culturas* (pp. 19-39). Barcelona: Gedisa.
- Guaman Poma de Ayala, F. (1980). *Nueva Crónica y Buen Gobierno*. Mexico: Siglo XXI.
- Hill, O. (2021). First steps in Social Work. Housing the poor in London. In P. Hassam, *The work of volunteers in charity organisation* (p. 114). Buenos Aires : Clacso - UNL.
- Holmes, B. (22 June 1896). *Scientific Charity*. Retrieved from Jama Network: <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/article-abstract/458935>
- International Centre, Other Voices in Education (5 June 2024). *Marco Raúl Mejía: Educaciones populares, sistematización y movimiento pedagógico*. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JASAVvtj9hE>
- Kruse, H. (1965). Social mobility and social change in Latin America. *Today in Social Service* (4), 41-46.
- Kruse, H. (1972). *Introduction to the scientific theory of social work*. Buenos Aires: Ecro.
- Lorente Molina, B. (2002). Social Work and Social Sciences. Poder, funcionalización y subalternidad de saberes. *Social Work National University of Colombia*, 41-60.



- Maldonado Torres, N. (2007). On the coloniality of being: contributions to the development of a concept. In S. Castro Gómez, & R. Grosfoguel, *El giro decolonial, reflexiones para una diversidad epistémica más allá del capitalismo global*. (p. 308). Bogotá.
- Martin Barbero, J., and Hleap Borrero, J. (2012). *The systematisation of experiences as a Latin American movement of social management of knowledge: its educational dimension*. Universidad del Valle.
- Mowat, M. G. (July 1956). Octavia Hill. *Social Work*, 13(3), 201-2012.
- Quijano, A. (2000). Coloniality of power, Eurocentrism and Latin America. In E. Lander, *Colonialidad del saber: eurocentrismo y ciencias sociales: Perspectivas Latinoamericanas* (p. 246). Buenos Aires, Argentina: Clacso.
- Quintero Londoño, S. (2019). Context, trends and actors of reconceptualisation. *Eleuthera Journal*, 20, 179-198. doi:10.17151/eleu.2019.20.10
- Rauber, E. (26 February 2020). *Irsurgencia Magisterial*. Retrieved from Epistemologies from below. Clues for situated critical thinking, with class belonging.: <https://insurgenciamagisterial.com/epistemologias-desde-abajo-pistas-para-un-pensamiento-critico-situado-con-pertenencia-de-clase/>
- Richmond, M. (1917). *Diagnóstico Social*. Costa Rica: Universidad Costa Rica.
- Ritzer, G. (1997). *Contemporary sociological theory*. Mexico: McGraw Hill.
- Soffer, R. (1982). Why do disciplines fail? The strange case of British sociology. *The English Historical Review*, 767-802.
- Stuhler, L. (26 June 2020). *Scientific Charity Movement & Charity Organization Societies: 1872*. Retrieved from Social Welfare Library. History Project: <https://socialwelfare.library.vcu.edu/programs/mental-health/scientific-charity-movement-charity-organization-societies/>
- Suñol, V. (2013). The Aristotelian discussion on modes of life. *Topics*, 9-47.
- Tolman, F. (1902). The study of sociology in institutions of learning in the United States. *American Journal of Sociology*(8), 85-121.



Vera Quiroz, A. (23 June 2018). *Latin American Centre for Social Work*. Retrieved from Trabajo Social chileno y la reconceptualización: Apuntes para re-mirar: <https://celats.org/publicaciones/revista-nueva-accion-critica-8/trabajo-social-chileno-y-la-reconceptualizacion-apuntes-para-re-mirar/#:~:text=La%20reconceptualizaci%C3%B3n%20intenta%20dar%20una,cambio%20consciente%20de%20sus%20realidades>

Acknowledgments

Thanks to the School of Social Work of the Universidad del Valle for facilitating spaces for academic reflection on the discipline/profession.

Author biography

Claudia Bermúdez Peña. PhD in Social Sciences, Universidad Nacional General Sarmiento, Argentina. Master in Popular Education, Universidad del Valle. Social Worker, Universidad del Valle, Colombia. Currently, Professor, School of Social Work, Universidad del Valle.

E-mail: claudia.bermudez@correounivalle.edu.com

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7313-9327>

