

An international comparison of social workers as street-level bureaucrats during the Covid-19 lockdown

Lluís Francesc Peris Cancio (La Sapienza Università di Roma)

This paper stems from the results of the project “Theory and practice of social work in the world in times of pandemic” funded by the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and involving eleven universities in five countries in Europe and Latin America: Argentina, Brazil, Italy, Spain and Sweden. The research lasted 24 months and aimed to analyse the practices involved in readapting social services to protect vulnerable people during the period in which the extraordinary measures to contain the pandemic were in place. In addition, through in-depth interviews with social workers selected as key actors, the research explored how an awareness of emergency arose and how it influenced the services delivered from the perspective of street-level bureaucracy theory.

Depending on the country, services have shown more remarkable resourcefulness depending on the degree to which they recognised the severity of the pandemic and the impact of the government’s stance and discourse, in some cases conspiratorial or even anti-scientific. In addition, there has been a marked reduction in the professional/client distance, an increase in inequalities in access to services, and a favourable reconsideration of the potential of new professional tools, such as digital social work, in establishing a relationship of trust.

Evidence indicates that working under emergency conditions, whether routine or during extreme crises, increases stressors and risks for SLBs (Paton, 2006), including traumatic injuries, posttraumatic distress, fatigue, and burnout (Sifaki-Pistolla et al., 2017; Davidovitz et al., 2021), as well as anxiety, depression, and other psychological disorders (Mao et al., 2018).

Brown (2020) describes how social workers reacted during the pandemic: these professionals strove to ensure access to necessary services for infected individuals, provided remote counselling, and organised ways to overcome clients’ isolation. In addition, they were active in distributing factual information to dispel myths and fears and reached out to agencies to assist with preparedness. Social workers were also challenged by pandemic restrictions on using human touch and physical gestures to offer support and express empathy, as well as constraints on face-to-face communication (Levin-Dagan & Strenfeld-Hever, 2020; Ben-Ezra & Hamama-Raz, 2021).

The purpose of the research presented in this paper was threefold:

1. to explore how social services experienced the pandemic period by comparing involvement in five national contexts;
2. to analyse how these professionals have enacted their tasks, according to street-level bureaucracy theory.
3. to examine the strategies used to guide social workers' professional role in a moment when they were potentially able to exercise more significant discretion in their action.

Taking the perspective of Freire (1970), we investigated how the awareness of the emergency and consequent provision of professional services aimed at dealing with it took place at the level of the organisational system observed in each country-system. Each research team conducted in-depth interviews in the country where it worked and analysed them, focusing on standard dimensions of social work analysis: ethical-political, theoretical-methodological, and technical-operational (Becker et al., 2012). This mapping was designed to identify what changes have already occurred and what changes are expected and desired in terms of social workers' working methods in different service-provision contexts.

The research was carried out between December 2020 and December 2022. A stable team of 15 researchers was been set up under the coordination of the University of Pernambuco of Brazil. Three general online meetings were held to establish the methodology, and several meetings took place in the first five months of the research according to the national context. The methodology was the same in each country: analysing the impact of the pandemic, studying of public measures, and conducting qualitative interviews with social workers chosen for their significance and field of intervention, with an eye to considering a range of different professionals. The contents of the interviews were defined using a single model for all countries.

Between January and October 2021, 103 interviews were carried out with social workers who, during the pandemic period in 2020 (February – December), had an active professional role in various fields of intervention. The number of interviews was parameterised according to the total population in each context and the number of universities involved: 6 interviews were carried out in Argentina, 55 in Brazil, 15 in Italy, 18 in Spain and 9 in Sweden.

The methodological framework best suited for studying discretion is qualitative (Barberis et al., 2019) and is inspired by a semi-grounded constructivist approach (Charmaz, 2006). Although based on theoretical- analytical categories of reference, it leaves room for researchers to identify issues as they emerge from the interviewees' narratives.