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Crisis over crisis: Covid-19 and two innovation proposals from Chile

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ABSTRACT

Chilean Social Work has its origins and has developed facing crises. The first school founded in 1925—worked directly with infectious diseases such as tuberculosis and syphilis, exposing their causes: overcrowding, poor housing conditions, poverty and exploitation of working classes. The Pinochet's dictatorship and related political crises during the last decades have also impacted the development of social work. Recently, gross inequalities and further discontent about the neoliberal Chilean model broke out last year when mass civil protests took over the country. A new crisis emerged with the arrival of COVID 19 exposing poverty, inequality, oppression, and dispossession accumulated during the decades, just as in the inception of the profession. In this paper, we discuss two initiatives promoted by the Department of Social Work at the University of Chile which propose to address professional training in the context of political and sanitary crises. The first initiative 'Transdisciplinary Nucleus of Social Work' integrates research and intervention seeking to impact public discussions, creating integrated spaces of professional and academic training of undergraduate and graduate social work students. The second initiative 'Social Work Researchers Network—Online Training' provides students and social workers with free access to social work courses donated by the network's members.

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Introduction

Social work in Chile emerged and consolidated during times of crises and upheaval during the early 20th century. The first school of social work in Latin America, 'Alejandro del Río School' was founded in Chile in 1925 and emerged within the context of a health crisis, in which social workers were needed to address the rapid spread of infectious diseases such as tuberculosis and syphilis. Social workers were key players in identifying and denouncing overcrowding, poor housing conditions, poverty and exploitation of working classes as the causes underlying illness (Aylwin et al., 2004). While in its beginnings the profession had a strong public health inclination, the profession rapidly expanded to address social crises in other spheres as well (Illanes, 2006).

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Years later, the political and economic disaster triggered by Pinochet's dictatorship (1973–1990) impacted social work in a significant way. Schools of social work were closed during the first years of the dictatorship since they were considered a source of subversion due to the prominence of Marxist approaches underpinning professional training (Sepúlveda, 2016). Social work literature was burned and then prohibited as part of the intellectual censorship that affected social work at that time. Furthermore, the profession lost its university status, which meant that professional degrees started to be granted by private 'technological training centers' and 'professional institutes' created under Pinochet's privatization policy and education reforms. During the dictatorship, many social workers risked their lives working at the *Vicaría de la Solidaridad*, an institution that sought to defend human rights during the violent authoritarian regime (Del Villar, 2018). Others created and participated in alternative initiatives such as the Social Work Collective which aimed to counteract the authoritarian rationality underpinning social work training (Moyano & Pacheco, 2018).

Because of the proliferation of private universities during the dictatorship, the number of social workers has risen considerably since the early 1990s, increasing 356% between 1990 and 1999 (Rolando et al., 2010). The university status of social work was recovered in 2006 and currently there are 32 higher education centres delivering social work degree programmes throughout the country. These schools grant the professional title of social worker to those students who complete a five year qualification programme that includes theoretical, methodological and ethical training for professional practice and research. In October 2019 mass civil protests took over the country, contesting gross inequalities, social injustices and discontent with Chile's neoliberal model broken. Popular mobilizations denounced structural inequalities, widespread business collusion, tax evasion by big companies, corruption scandals in the army and police forces, low wages and pensions and, ultimately, the unexpired political constitution imposed during the Pinochet dictatorship. The arrival of COVID 19 to Chile in March 2020 struck the country whilst in the middle of a political crisis—a crisis over crisis. Along with the political unrest that began months earlier, the health crisis has had profound impacts on social work education in the country. Due to social distancing measures, universities have shifted to remote teaching methods which have exposed gross inequalities not only in regards to access to technology but also in terms of students' living conditions and access to basic services. This is particularly evident in social work students who, according to official university statistics, present higher levels of socioeconomic vulnerability in comparison to university students from other careers/schools. In response to these inequalities, many social work schools in the country went on strike, with students demanding assistance from universities regarding access to technology as well as the reduction of monthly fees amongst other demands. Further complicating the scenario is the history of student strikes over the last few years in Chile, which intensified in October of last year. These strikes have led to gaps in student education.

In this paper we aim to present two initiatives that contribute to improving access and quality of social work training in the current scenario of the overlapping sociopolitical and health crises. First, we describe the Transdisciplinary Nucleus of Social Work, which has been developed by a team from the Department of Social Work at the University of Chile. The second initiative presented refers to an Online Training platform created by the Chilean Social Work Research Network, an organization formed by social work

academics and researchers in 2015. Both initiatives aim to democratize the access to and improve the quality of social work training in Chile from an innovative perspective, seeking to counteract the consequences of these critical times in students' and practitioners' professional development.

Pedagogical innovations: the transdisciplinary nucleus of social work

The Department of Social Work reopened at the University of Chile in 2013 guided by a central theme: 're-founding the social is the task' (Facso, 2014). The Department's proposal is underpinned by two innovations: a disciplinary innovation that relies on the critical addressing of economy and culture, inequality and social discrimination, and a pedagogical innovation which consists of the replacement of traditional practices or placements by the notion of 'nucleus' (Facso, 2015). Nucleus aims to integrate research, development and intervention (R + D + I), based upon the advances of outstanding proposals of Research and Training Social Work Centres and the high integration research suggested by the CNID (National Center for Innovation and Development, 2016). The Nucleus set up a form of research, social intervention and transdisciplinary development where academics, students and professional teams work jointly in a 1 to 3 year programme where specific research and intervention projects are carried out.

This innovation has been a core aspect in addressing the current health crisis in Chile (Mascareño & Cordero, 2019; Matus, 2020), which is deeply shaped by the social revolt that broke out in 2019. In the current crisis, the Nucleus has been able to face the challenge of understanding social complexity from a new participatory perspective. In addition, this innovation allows the integration of experts, local professionals and community knowledge, creating and strengthening transdisciplinary exchanges. Links with public, private and civil society institutions have opened spaces for external collaboration and new opportunities for institutional integration seeking social impact. Counting on these advances, we have built digital platforms that have been used to deliver courses and workshops weekly. The content is developed by professors and students participating from current research projects along with professional teams. Following this scheme, we were able to graduate our 5th year in the middle of a health quarantine. The final exam was written work and an oral defence evaluated by three professors. The monographs with their evaluations are on a platform, including the students' videos.

The Nucleus of Effective Innovations in Public Policy (Niepp) has developed a research project funded by the National Agency of Science and Innovation—ANID Fondef N°17110033. In this research we studied child care systems in Chile, and analysed a series of governmental measures and reformulated them. This project contributed new policy designs, positioning itself in a relationship between crisis and innovation. The evidence maintains that in periods of high modification and uncertainty, potential spaces for substantive progress are generated. In this way, the problem/crisis that the project sought to face was the lack of a timely response from national children's services to poor care conditions, risks and harm to the children, little information to their families, lack of coordination of services, unequal level of

training of professional teams (Matus et al., 2018; Kaulino, 2020). The flaws in the key intervention decisions, the delay in the adjustments, and a lack of evaluation of the quality level of its offers, as well as the opacity in the effectiveness of its expenses and investments, make it difficult to incorporate the rights approach effectively into the operational management level. The solution proposed by the project consisted of the construction of an early warning prototype—an assessment tool to identify children and families at risk- and a multidimensional effectiveness index anchored in an intelligent connectivity platform. See Figure 1 for details about the problems and solutions to social work training proposed by this project:

The solutions are a second-order synergy, as they promote that the research produced can be known and used by others, and that participants learn together. At the same time, intervention proposals question what already exists in order to produce innovation. Research provides the basis to think innovative proposals. Working with research as a basis, intervention is understood as a process and innovation as an horizon (Christensenn, 2006; Howaldt & Domanski, 2016; Matus, 2020).

The whole project, reports and conferences and workshops conducted from this initiative are available at the website of Sat Infancia (Sat Infancia, 2020)

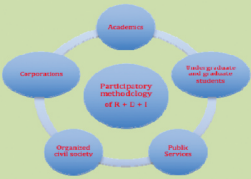
Problems	Value-added solution	Nucleus
<p>In spite of the multiple efforts that exist in Chilean universities, there is still a lack of connection between two levels in their practices: between careers within the university and between the university and phenomena of varying complexity in the country which require a medium-term system to deal with them and where different knowledge concurs.</p>	<p>To generate a pedagogical innovation that allows, beyond the forms of enunciation of the practices, a system that promotes a greater connectivity between careers, in connection with the most effective means which respond to important subjects on the country agenda. That is, mobilizing research, teaching and links with the environment in a joint initiative that is valued curricularly. We call this research, development and innovation nucleus.</p>	<p>It overcomes the coupling deficit and produces greater public impact.</p>
<p>We are still working with levels of fragmentation among academics, students, local professional teams, public and private institutions. This increases the risk of duplication, starting again from an imaginary zero point, both in public services, civil society organizations and companies.</p> <p>This fragmented logic also impacts on research and teaching at the university since only what has been done "by peers" is recognized. The possibility, therefore, of generating a joint impact is low, although paradoxically sometimes works are done in parallel, because as semantics indicates, these lines never cross.</p> <p>At the same time, in all of them, resources and work teams are used, initiatives are strengthened or discarded. The initiatives even have low magnitude; sometimes it is a teacher in charge of practice, with some students, in an institution and without a clear project of R+D+I.</p>	<p>The proposed solution is to work with a methodology that involves the major players in this phenomenon:</p> <div style="text-align: center;">  </div> <p>Putting a simple solution at the service of people. Research and intervention of excellence depend crucially on the ability to form persistent alliances, which go beyond the classic frontiers of knowledge and produce better solutions, from a logic that knows how to face, at the same time, the technical challenges and the socio-cultural complexity that they involve.</p>	<p>Create high-level connectivity in a transdisciplinary collaborative design</p>

Figure 1. Problems and solutions addressed by the nucleus.

'Donate your course': social work researchers network—online training

In 2015, social work researchers from diverse sectors created the Red de Investigadoras en Trabajo Social—Social Work Researchers Network (SWRN), an institution-independent and self-funded network which aims to promote the production of social work knowledge, improving communication between social work researchers and making social work research visible and influential in public debates (redinvestigaciontrabajosocial.cl). The network is formed by researchers who work in diverse academic fields related to social work, work in both public and/or private universities and research centers throughout the country. Since its creation, the SWRN has organized national conferences aimed at sharing research findings produced by social workers and has supported early career researchers, among other activities.

These initiatives have been positively valued by the academic community; however, one issue that has been recognized as priority has been the historical gap between academia and practitioners in terms of access to updated research, professional literature, and disciplinary debates. Also social work students -most of them currently experiencing disadvantages in terms of income, housing, and health- also experienced barriers to social work training during the political uprising of last year.

In response to the problems associated with the arrival of COVID 19 to Chile and the previous gaps in social work training as a result of the political protests that have taken place since October 2019, the SWRN designed an innovative program (ANID-Fondecyt N°1,190,257) that seeks to provide students and social workers with free access to social work courses donated by the network's members. Through the so-called campaign 'Donate your course', the SWRN invited academics from diverse universities to record a 30 minute video related to the courses they taught, including recommendations that included a bibliography and electronic resources that may help students and professionals to delve into the topics discussed. The videos donated were organized into three main areas: *i) disciplinary discussions on social work*, which includes lectures on social work history, social work theoretical approaches such as Marxist, Foucauldian, feminists and decolonial thought, and current debates in international social work; *ii) social work methodological issues*, which addresses the controversies involved in social work knowledge production and contributions from quantitative, qualitative and mixed research methods in social work; and *iii) Policy analysis approaches*, a section formed by debates on the nature of poverty policies and the social protection system currently in force in Chile, analyzing discourses underpinning such policies and implementation issues. The videos were edited and uploaded to the SWRN website in order to keep them available for social work students and practitioners from different parts of Chile (Red de Investigadoras en Trabajo Social, 2020). The platform was disseminated with the collaboration of the National Association of Social Workers and the Chilean Association of Schools of Social Work. The website has registered more than 1,920 visits and downloads since its launch three weeks ago, which exceed the expectations of the SWRN.

This initiative has contributed to improving the access to social work education in Chile in the current critical scenario by opening access to diverse social work students, academics and professionals to the courses taught at universities. This contribution is significant in the Chilean context as university education is highly privatized, segmented and unequally distributed (Saravia, 2015).

The contingency of Covid-19 has obligated, to some extent, to create new alternatives that enable not only students and professionals to access high-quality educational materials, but also to avoid duplication of tasks among social work academics, which is very important considering the levels of stress experienced by them in these times of remote teaching. On the other hand, this initiative has enabled a change of perspective regarding academic work, as it emerges underpinned by values related to collaboration and joint working, which counteract the ethos of competition and individualism underpinning neoliberal education policies. The very idea of ‘open-access’ courses challenges the nature of neoliberal education because education is no longer conceived as a market product to be bought and sold.

Concluding remarks

The political crisis experienced since last October and the current health crisis as a result of the spread of Covid-19 have exposed issues that social work has been observing for decades—overwhelming inequality, the fragility of democratic institutions, the commodification of all spheres of life, the oppression and injustice experienced by vast sectors of the population, the spread of neoliberal subjectivity, among many others. In these uncertain moments—the time of overlapping crises— the two initiatives presented here have sought alternative horizons in social work training, contributing to create a turn in traditional (competitive, isolated, commodified) ways of social work education. These experiences enable the identification of some lessons for social work education from a Chilean perspective. Remote teaching has shown that physical location is no longer a barrier for cooperation, and that greater collaboration between schools of social work, and between academics, professionals and students is not only possible but also necessary in the current context. The use of technology and the exploration of new resources to produce transdisciplinary encounters and articulations between research and practice are also innovations that can be encouraged after the pandemic.

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