

Social workers use social networks in their practice in community social work

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Abstract

Social workers use a range of theoretical and methodological references in order to understand a situation as a whole, starting with the natural and communal systems of individuals, families and communities of interventions in community social work. This article presents the results of a study of the intervention of social workers from the perspective of social networks in community social work at the local level. The aim is to systematise the knowledge of their professional practices in relation to their intervention in social networks, based on the results of semi-structured interviews with social workers who provide services in municipalities of over 100,000 inhabitants in the Community of Madrid (Spain). The results contribute to a greater understanding of the interventions in social networks in areas such as identifying the social network, the techniques most commonly used in this intervention, the concept of empowerment, social workers' functions, and the fundamentals of their professional intervention in social networks. The conclusions consider the implications for research in social work based on the consideration of the analysis of social networks as a useful resource for professional practice, and also highlight the need to continue research into the use of social networks in community practice.

Keywords

Social networks; community social work; local level; professional intervention

Introduction

Social workers use different theoretical and methodological references to gain a professional understanding and interpretation of a situation as a whole. Intervention models are a fundamental scheme of reference in the exercise of their professional practice. The literature on social work contains a variety of practice models (case management, systemic approach, crisis intervention, ecological perspective, life model, generalist, empirically-based and eclectic practice, among many others). Our aim is not to discuss

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the characteristics of all the various models of social work practice or their similarities and differences. Community social work tends to operate through individuals and groups for the wider benefit of the community, and we agree with Stepney & Popple (2008) that it should take a functionalist approach or set of approaches focused on addressing issues to do with service provision at the local level. «Community social work has always meant working with and within communities to assist them to realize greater benefits from the welfare state, and it is to these roles of advocacy and development that social work must return» (Oliver, Sapey & Thomas, 2012: 165).

However the practice of community social work is known by a variety of names that denote differences in emphasis, connotation, purpose, conceptualisation and history. A number of authors have coined terms to refer to intervention with the community such as «community development» (Gilchrist, 2009; Spergel, 1997) and «community work» (Germai & Gitterman, 1995). Community development can be considered as referring to the acquisition and redistribution of resources and to increasing the social and political awareness of the causes of problems. «The purpose of community development is to maintain and renew 'community' as a foundation for the emergence of diverse initiatives that are independent of both the public and private sectors» (Gilchrist, 2009:21). For Spergel (1987), community development is an essential ingredient in the success of democratic societies. An essential component of the social work role is to promote the participation of individuals, families and communities. Germain & Gitterman (1995) define community work as a broader concept encompassing all levels of practice in the community. They see promoting informal community support systems, including natural helping networks and self-help and mutual aid groups, as an important means of empowering communities. Community social work is unquestionably oriented to improving the community's capacity to respond to different collective challenges, for which it is necessary to use both formal and informal networks to support people. «Today two models of communities can exist in the social space: the virtual communities defined by digital networks, and the territorial communities delimited by social networks (professional), in addition to a mixed model that offers great potential for contemporary social services» (Rodríguez & Ferreira, 2018: 872).

At this point in our research we want to underline that the present research does not deal with computer-based networks, but refers of the importance today of intervening in social networks in the persons for community social work in the local context. It is therefore necessary to analyse the sweeping changes taking place in our social reality. These changes have consequences which pose new challenges for community social work and for intervention in the social networks, as they are common problems that demand action from a collective approach. «It is important to note that local intervention by social workers in a context of proximity provides important knowledge of the social reality and the territory, and is a cornerstone of an intervention focused on social inclusion» (Cardoso, 2012:183). The personal social network has a constantly

changing configuration in both its historical evolution and throughout the life span of the individuals; the changes taking place in society and their consequences for social work suggest that current challenges may not be adequately addressed from an individual perspective, and that «relationships are also the basis of social networks» (Ennis & West, 2010: 408).

In recent years there have been significant changes in social organisation and in the processes of socialisation, which have produced a transformation in social work practices. Some examples include the ephemeral relationships that lead to weakened links with community inclusion (Bonet, 2006; Pérez, 2008), the processes of individualisation (Bauman, 2011), situations of poverty and social exclusion (De Robertis, 2000), and issues relating to gender, migration and aging (Giddens, 2007).

The changes taking place in the realm of poverty have led to an increase in situations of social exclusion (De Robertis, 2000; Pastor, 2015; Giddens, 2009). According to De Robertis (2000), exclusion is defined as both a state and a process. When viewed as a state it can be said to be caused on the macro-social level by a lack of global social cohesion, while at the individual micro-social level it is the result of a lack of social insertion or integration. Defined as a process, exclusion is a set of mechanisms of rupture in the symbolic sphere (negative attributes, undervalued image and so on) and in the sphere of social relations: the dissolution of links or bonds with the primary and secondary groups of belonging. «This notion of process means understanding that no one is born excluded and that exclusion does not appear suddenly, but is the consequence of a series of negative experiences that lead to isolation and a relational vacuum» (De Robertis, 2000: 19).

According to Pastor (2015), over three million jobs have been lost since the onset of the economic crisis in Spain, and the youth unemployment rate now stands at over 55%. There are almost two million families in which all the members are unemployed and 636,000 homes have no income at all –all situations involving a huge risk of social exclusion. It is important to note that «the main risk facing citizens in a changing economic environment is the loss of employment» (Daguerre, 2010: 175). Giddens (2009) considers that poverty today is no longer concentrated in the former working class, but in certain individuals who are on the periphery of the new service economy, particularly in junk and menial jobs in this new economy. The change in the pattern of the relationship with inequality and poverty is therefore largely due to internal changes, and one of the main problems of poverty today lies in this crossing back and forth across the poverty threshold. The excluded are individuals who are «outside the system, insofar as the essential mechanism for social integration is employment. Its absence leads to exclusion not only from the workplace but from society» (Sanchis, 2010: 134-135).

It is important to note that the purpose of social work is the fight against social exclusion, and much of the exclusion today is linked to the vulnerability of the relations in the personal social networks, support systems, and to the dearth of links. Community

links require social workers to have the necessary skills to understand a complex reality with multiple interactions, and have knowledge of a wide range of issues to enable them to recognize the strengths, problems and needs of the communities in which they are involved, and the utilization of resources. Del Pino (2000) described these resources as being personal (an ability to react and confront problems), environmental (the ability to contact and use natural support systems and social support networks), and social (institutional resources organized in services, programmes and benefits). In this context there is no doubt that networking approaches place greater emphasis on the formation of socially just partnerships as community-building mechanisms, and «the networking approach to community development opens up access and communication routes across the social landscape by making use of personal habits, local conventions and institutional power in order to improve the quality of life for communities, and create mechanisms for collective empowerment» (Gilchrist, 2009:174). We can conceptualize Community Social Work «according to the values and ethical principles that lie at its heart, its objective at the present time to create and restore social citizenship by Placing the person at the heart of the social action in the community context, forging an important link with empowerment, whose characteristics are acquiring new knowledge and developing new skills and Fostering processes of personal development and growth» (Rodríguez, 2015: 24) and we can conclude by highlighting that «social work therefore needs to rediscover its historical commitment to quality of relationships as the basis of its activities, as well as its group and community focus. In this way, it could become the cutting edge of a transformed policy of well-being, rather than a front line in a return to authoritarian methods» (Jordan & Drakeford, 2012:129). We highlight the importance of ensuring the quality of the social work intervention, and the commitment to maintaining alive the essential values of the profession such as respect for people's dignity, autonomy and self-determination, and giving them the ethical responsibility for the decisions that are made, accepting their particular characteristics and diversity, and reaffirming the fundamental principle of respect towards people in general. «The change comes about when the subject develops new perceptions and acquires new skills to manage him or herself and the social environment in which he/she lives». (Ferreira, 2011 264).

Social services in Spain can be considered as the material instrument of the welfare state for the purpose of satisfying the needs of its citizens. This instrument of the social welfare system is aimed at reducing the effects of poverty and social vulnerability, and is the competence of an array of bodies: the state, the autonomous communities, local government and civil society organizations. Local governments –as the public organizations that are closest to the citizens– play a potentially important role in preventing and combating social exclusion, and should be given similar importance in terms of legal functions and powers, local strategies and operational resources. Article 2 of Law 11/2003 of 27 March on the current regulatory framework for the social services in the Community of Madrid states the purpose of social services as follows:

- Social services must seek to promote the welfare of the population, prevent risk, and offset deficits in social support, with particular focus on vulnerability and dependence, and natural or intervening causes that may occur at each stage of life and derive in personal problems;
- The aim of social services is to ensure people's right to live in dignity at all stages of their life, with their social needs covered;
- For the purposes of the regulations in this Act, social needs are understood as arising from the rights of the person in the interrelational, social, interpersonal and family sphere, and within the scope of the relationship between individuals and their social environment.

Creative and fruitful innovation in a profession requires its practitioners to push the boundaries of traditional practice in a constructive effort to create, implement, and evaluate new and effective ways of helping people. Theories help us understand human behaviour, and are particularly important for social workers who must apply their knowledge of human behaviour and the social environment throughout the human life span. Research practices influence the contributions made by all disciplines to society, and at the same time constitute the very nature of the discipline. The continued scientific use of theories and models of intervention certainly contributes to increasing the knowledge and professionalism of social workers when solving current social problems. In their professional practice, social workers use systematic and structured elements of the intervention process method, such as study, diagnosis, work plan, evaluation and systematisation and/or research (Vélez, 2003; De Robertis, 2003). However, networks require the acquisition of new interpretation skills and instrumental responses, and demand a methodology and a process of their own. The method should contribute to enhancing the relational capital of individuals and restoring social ties (the links between the individual and society, and between the community and the different tiers of society) to activate, replace and complement people's social networks (Bonet 2006; De Robertis & Pascal, 2007). We highlight the importance of ensuring the quality of the social work intervention, and the commitment to maintaining alive the essential values of the profession such as respect for people's dignity, autonomy and self-determination, and giving them the ethical responsibility for the decisions that are made, accepting their particular characteristics and diversity, and reaffirming the fundamental principle of respect towards people in general. «The change comes about when the subject develops new perceptions and acquires new skills to manage him or herself and the social environment in which he/she lives». (Ferreira, 2011 264).

The scientific and continued use of theories and models of intervention unquestionably contributes to the growth of knowledge and the increased professionalism of social workers when solving today's social problems. «Social work's remarkable strength as a profession is in large part the result of impressive and creative advances in its models and methods of intervention» (Reamer, 2013:171). There is no doubt that «social network

analysis has the potential to embed a more explicit external-looking focus to the model, both in practice and in research, by shedding light on the relationships or links between community members, community groups, and broader social structures» (Ennis & West, 2010: 408). Below we analyse the elements that allow the systematization of social workers' conceptual and operational practice in their interventions in the social networks in community social work.

Intervention with individuals / families

Social networks are a central concept in the literature on social capital, and are generally considered to be the "structure" within which social capital can exist (Bourdieu, 1986; Putnam, 2000). Within social network theory, social structure can be conceptualised as a network of social ties or relationships. A social network is a social structure consisting of two elements; these are generally known as actors (or nodes or points) and ties (sometimes referred to as linkages or relationships). The network approach to community development focuses on relationships as linkages, and draws on concepts from social network theory and social capital theory.

In social network theory, Granovetter's (1973) 'strength of weak ties' thesis has been influential in understanding the value of acquaintances and 'friends of friends' for accessing information and resources within networks that are wider than our own social circles. The idea that we have 'strong' and 'weak' ties is also highlighted in social capital theory, where the concepts are translated as 'bonding' and 'bridging' ties (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000). Putnam (2000) himself discusses two dimensions of social capital: «bridging» and «bonding», where «[o]f all the dimensions along which forms of social capital vary», «bridging» and «bonding» are the two most important. It is also necessary to underline the importance of trust as the level of involvement that is expressed in the relations, as trust is commonly viewed as a proxy indicator of social capital, and a high level of trust is considered a factor that can enhance economic growth and social well-being. Indicators of trust inform about the quality of people's interactions with others, hence on their assessment of the extent to which other people in the community are perceived as potential partners rather than as rivals. Linking ties have been the subject of far less discussion and research, yet are arguably a powerful factor in community work. «The linkages between people and organisations are a vital part of a community's capacity to act collectively and engage with public decision-making bodies» (Gilchrist, 2009:123).

The networking approach to community work was first clearly articulated by Trevillion (1992), who provided an in-depth consideration of networking in neighbourhood and inter-agency work, case management, community care and community assessment. Gilchrist (2009) developed the idea of the 'well-connected community', and proposed that 'the purpose of community development is simply to support and shape formal

and informal networking in order to facilitate the emergence of effective and empowering collective action' (Gilchrist, 2009: 95). According to Seed (2002), the analysis of social networks emphasises the «social» dimension of the intervention, and –when applied to social work– develops in three dimensions: the configuration of the networks, the type of network, and the relational content (the quality of the relationships); whereas for Sluzki (1996) the network can be assessed in terms of its structural characteristics (properties of the network as a whole), the functions of the links (the type of interpersonal exchange characteristic of a specific link), and the attributes of each link (the specific properties of each relationship). We need to analyse the users' previous social networks before enquiring how we can help them extend the social networks they have at the current time

The application of social networks (Nowak, 2001) is a useful tool to effectively analyse people's social relations and explore opportunities to mobilize the various resources and people in the network. For Villalba (1995), this requires differentiating three phases: those of identifying, analysing, and intervening in the network. Social networks comprise both individuals and families, so the first phase requires the identification of all the social networks: personal, social and institutional; and primary, secondary and/or tertiary. «Social work practitioners require skills in assessing and establishing or re-establishing primary and secondary social support networks, as most help will come from these types of networks» (Hardcastle, Powers & Wenocur, 2004: 312). We share this view as we believe the relationship should be based on assessing personal skills in order to gain autonomy and full citizenship. There is no doubt today that the intervention in networks should be a means of generating social capital through the commitment of community social work to improving people's capacities and skills; and that today the generation of the intangible wealth known as social capital is essential for our society, and should be a target of community social work. Furthermore, «processes, tasks and practices for the empowerment of communities allow people to take collective responsibility for their own development» (Kenny, 2006: 10)

Social support networks, like most organizations, may be primary, secondary, or tertiary. Nowak (2001) identifies three types of network in contemporary society: the primary networks are the family and the people with whom we maintain close relationships in our daily lives; the secondary –or macro-social– network refers to a series of services, community resources and social services that interact with citizens in resolving the various problems they encounter; and the tertiary social networks are the specialised services that occur as part of the commitments between the city, state, and the public and private social services. Sluzki (1996) considers that the types of functions assumed by the social network can be classified according to its structural characteristics (size, composition, density, dispersion, degrees of homogeneity and heterogeneity) and emotional/social functions including the following: emotional support, social companionship, cognitive guidance and advice, social regulation, material support and services: and connection with other links/nets, *Identifying the social network* for social workers (Rodríguez, 2014b)

consists of recognising the people in the community who can provide help; the person's capacity for self-care and care from members of the network; the help of professionals; and people's ability to maintain their own network.

Professional intervention

At this point in our research we should point out that the intervention in social networks requires new instrumental responses. Social workers use different techniques to ensure a holistic approach in their intervention in terms of people and their communities. The creation, selection, and subsequent practice of these techniques must always be done with the necessary competences. Networks can constitute an element for reading the situation and/or may represent a product of social work, conducted through a series of ideal intervention instruments. It is therefore essential for social workers to have the correct tools and techniques to be able to systematise their practice. Social workers can use different techniques to intervene in the social networks (Rodríguez, 2014b), at the stage of social study and diagnosis (social network map, personal attention, telephone contact, home visits, interviews, observation, documentary techniques, meetings); techniques for the social intervention itself (social report, meetings, mediation between individuals/family and the community, reinsertion programs, design of the professional network, intervention in the community network, assembly); and techniques for assessing the set targets, monitoring any changes, and then possibly modifying these targets (interview, network map prior to the intervention vs. the current network map). Importantly, social network maps can also reveal who is *not* linked to whom; in other words, which people, groups, communities or organizations are isolated from others.

It should be noted that social work today has moved from the «paradigm of insufficiency» focused on «incapacities, shortcomings and gaps, to a paradigm that places greater emphasis on awakening skills, dynamism and resources» (De Robertis, 2003:151). This author sees this as representing a major shift, as all social diagnosis is henceforth based on the person's own resources, on their immediate surroundings and on their social environment. Today, social work views people in terms of their capabilities, and always considers the person as the active subject of his or her own process. What we call the empowerment perspective may refer to both a theoretical concept and to a practical approach (in the current process of development), and steers our analysis towards the person's abilities and strengths and when these subjects reach a point where they feel they can decide on the answers or create them from a common reflection, this «generates or further reinforces empowerment, understood as the feeling of having the power to act, of having the possibility of acting with the necessary 'power' in resolving the problem» (Folgheraiter, 2011: 579). According to Frans (1993), the term «empowerment» is a unitary concept that describes both the process and the goal,

towards which the efforts for correcting this lack of power should be directed and the social workers rated as very important all the statements regarding the concept of the empowerment of the individuals / families / communities they work with, especially «new knowledge is gained and new skills are developed» and «drives people's processes of development and growth». The empowerment approach involves capitalising subjects in their individual and collective pathways where they may be weakened. Tesoriero (2010) notes that empowerment is a central concept in the formulation of social justice and human rights.

The concept of empowerment involves different dimensions with the following characteristics (Rodríguez, 2014:a) it helps understand the networks that foster citizen participation and build civil society; it generates creative solutions to problems using existing resources; it promotes people's processes of development and growth; it provides new knowledge and develops new skills; and gives the subject more and stronger links and more access to resources. «Clients should develop and use their strengths and the strengths of their families and communities for empowerment». (Hardcastle, Powers & Wenocur, 2004: 312).

So far we have analysed the different elements that allow us to systematise the practice of social workers in their interventions in the social networks in community social work. We now supplement this analysis with the results of the survey conducted with social workers in order to meet the objective of this research, namely to systematise and increase the knowledge of their professional practices.

Methodology

The results presented here are part of the doctoral thesis entitled (Rodríguez, 2014b), and this research integrates a variety of theoretical, technical and methodological procedures. The methodological procedures consist of analysing the themes covered by the different authors in the documentary analysis, a survey conducted with social workers, and content analysis, all organised in categories which articulate both theoretical and empirical elements. This article presents the answers of social workers with regard to their intervention in social networks. Information was collected through a questionnaire sent to with social workers with over ten years' experience in municipalities with over 100,000 inhabitants in the Community of Madrid in Spain. In 2011 these municipalities had a total population of 1,685,302, representing 23.06% of the total population of the Community of Madrid (INE, 2011). All of them have different demographic characteristics and all are located in periphery of the Community of Madrid. These observation units were chosen based on criteria such as homogeneity, as they all have the same regulatory framework and performance; they represent experiences consolidated over time, and provide a sufficient, similar and representative sample. The variables in the study

were selected based on the questionnaire used by Ferreira (2011), which systematised social workers' professional practice in the area of protection of the family and infancy in Portugal; and on the contributions within the theoretical framework of the present research. The questionnaire or measuring instrument sent to the social workers has five questions with two variables (variable 1: intervention with individuals/families, and Variable 2: professional social work intervention in the field of social networks), with several possible answers on a scale of importance (not important, somewhat important, fairly important, and very important) in which respondents were asked to mark their level of agreement with the different options, or with none of the options, and to complete a section included in all the questions entitled «Other», which allowed them to provide detailed information about their responses, or add any other different responses they considered necessary. Regarding the question «explain which professional intervention is based on individuals / families in the area of social networks», it is important to note that the respondents could give different responses or include different responses in the «Other» section.

We selected a sample from which information could be extrapolated to all the social workers in local governments. We considered it important for the professionals to have experience in the field of primary care, since «the opinions are supported by the professionals' extensive knowledge and their ability to detect weaknesses, threats, strengths and opportunities in the system» (Subirats, 2007: 60). We also included the specific characteristics of different municipalities, as services that use a community approach are able to recognize the diversity of the people and the territory in which new inequalities and risks of vulnerability may arise. The specificity of each social and territorial space is a determining factor for the development of social interventions, and is an issue of interest in our research.

The number of social workers answered in the questionari was thirty. The choice of this data collection method allows us to verify the information collected in the theoretical framework in the empirical field, and at the same time to search the interviewees' discourse for new information on other aspects that may not have been considered in the documentary analysis. The study has followed established ethical standards such as informed consent and anonymizing information about individuals.

The questionnaires were approached through telephone contact with the technical managers in social services in the nine city councils, who provided us with the e-mail addresses of social workers with over ten years of professional experience in various municipalities. They were then directly sent a questionnaire, with a brief heading describing the research and giving instructions on how to fill in the questionnaire, the contact e-mail address to resolve any possible queries and return the completed questionnaire. All the interviewees were asked to provide their written approval, which was granted in all cases.

On the first page of the questionnaire it was noted that all the information provided in the questionnaire was confidential. SPSS software was used for the quantitative analysis

of the questionnaires. The results are shown below. The data are expressed in the form of texts, and reveal the participants' own understanding of the processes and situations in the contexts in the study.

Findings

In the phase of identifying the social network, the social workers considered it necessary to know all the above aspects, and particularly «*the existence of people in the community to help them*» (very important for 69.2% and fairly important for 26.9%), «*self-care abilities of the person or family of reference and members of the relevant network*» (very important for 64.3% and fairly important for 35.7%), «*the professionals that are helping them from the formal system and who have established a relationship of support and trust*» (very important for 58.63% and fairly important for 41.4%) and «*the ability of people to care for and maintain their own network and to enhance or modify it*» (very important for 53.6% and fairly important for 42.9%). Social networks help extend the limits of social action. Community social work requires the detection, identification and study of a wide variety of factors that are involved in a given situation.

Social workers can use different techniques in their intervention in the social networks, but it should be noted that «techniques are always pretexts, instruments and mediations, as the essence of the transaction is the relationship that is established through them» (Aballéa, Ridder & Gadéa, 2003:211). The techniques used in their intervention in the social network at the individual / family level are: «*social report*», «*personal attention*», «*meetings*» and «*mediation individual / family and community*». There is a significant difference between «*community network intervention*», cited only by 36.7% of professionals, and «*personal care*» with 86, 7 %, revealing that they use more individual- type procedures as opposed to a global approach. However it is important to note that «community intervention is characterised –among other aspects– by incorporating the natural resources of people, families and groups in the community in the processes of resolving and preventing social problems» (Rodríguez, 2014b:193).

Social workers consider all the above functions to be important, but particularly «*identifying the relational fabric and meeting existing resources in the community*» (72.4%) and «*talking with the person / family about the support networks they can access*» (71.4%). The analysis shows that the functions of the social worker in the field of social networks are related to networks, but not to the techniques listed in the above chart.

The social workers gear their professional intervention in social networks with individuals / families to «*working with the skills and competencies of individuals / families*» (98%). We share this view, as we consider that the support relationship should involve assessing the individual's personal skills as a means of gaining autonomy and full citizenship. Client autonomy is a central value that essentially informs all practice in social work.

Discussion

Throughout this work we have systematised the information that allows us to improve the conditions of intervention in the social networks at the local level, for the practical integration of the conceptual and operational dimensions of the intervention in social networks in community social work and contribute to a greater understanding of the interventions in social networks in areas such as identifying the social network, the techniques most commonly used in this intervention, the concept of empowerment, social workers' functions, and the fundamentals of their professional intervention in social networks. «The intervention in social networks represents a shift in theoretical paradigms that requires a joint effort by social work professionals and generates a change in roles, horizontality in action, changes in the decision-making process, sharing knowledge and leadership—in short, recognising the capabilities of all the other agents involved» (Rodríguez, 2014b: 257).

In this article we have indicated that the aim of using social networks for community development is to focus on relationships as links, which—in the light of the results obtained—can be said to be the «structure in which social capital can exist». The networks that connect individuals and different sectors of the local community can therefore be considered to be an invaluable resource that functions as organizations- mechanisms and communication systems. It is essential to establish and maintain these networks for effective community development. The social network model in community social work encourages citizen participation and the construction of a civil society.

This study explores the importance of generating new knowledge and new practices based on research. Social work builds knowledge through the systematisation and analysis of the practice of social intervention, which highlights the need for research in social work in order to advance in the profession and improve the quality of its services. It is through these empirically established models and theories of treatment that a social worker can really help the client. «However, research, in all its forms, provides practitioners with a key and often underutilised support in undertaking a difficult and demanding task while navigating the realities of everyday practice» (McLaughlin, 2009: 155)

This exploratory study suggests certain future lines of research. «The realization of the idea of research-based practice requires practitioners who are well-developed in research-based ways of thinking and are capable of creatively applying scientific theories and research methods in practice» (Hämäläinen, 2011: 483). The relationship between community social work and social network intervention certainly also has potential for research and debate in the public arena to improve intervention in contemporary society.

«By understanding how social networks can be used to improve learning, performance, and organizational outcomes, we can use the power of human interaction to improve the human condition» (Valente, 2012:53).

Network analysis is proposed as a useful resource for practice and research by various authors writing on social work and community development (for example, Seed, 2002; Gilchrist, 2009; Hardcastle, Powers & Wenocur,, 2004). Social work today has a key role as a «global player that deserves to be recognised and heard by everyone who is committed to advancing the well-being of people and the environment in contemporary societies within a framework of human rights and social justice» (Dominelli & Hackett, 2012: 450). Nor should it be forgotten that, in the words of Subirats: «the social inclusion of any person or social group involves connection and the solidity of the networks» (Subirats, 2013: 276). It «implies being part of society in general and also being empowered; exclusion suggests remaining on the margins of society and at a situation of disadvantage» (Dominelli, 2005: 15); their value is the capacity to generate social change and improvements, and thus to become an element for building social citizenship

However, little research has been conducted on its use in community practice. Research evidence must be relevant to social work practice and social work practitioners should have adequate time and financial resources. Such a new approach toward social work practice deserves further research. It should be noted that «the integration of social network analysis as a tool for assisting network thinking provides a strong link between practice and research, so that workers and community members can better understand the impacts of their efforts» (Ennis & West, 2013: 55). As Lorenz (1994) noted, «going beyond the national level cannot be the personal hobby of a few specialists who are dealing with migrant and refugee groups or with ethnic minorities or a few idealists who want to promote international exchanges to widen their horizons and to learn more about methods and practices in other countries. On the contrary, all social work is enmeshed in global processes of change» (Lorenz, 1994:167-168).

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