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REFUGEE INTERVENTION: GAPS BETWEEN ACADEMIC
TRAINING AND PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

Auxiliadora González Portillo (a)*, Waldimeiry Correa da Silva (b), Luisa Melero Valdés (c)
*Corresponding author

(a) Universidad Pablo de Olavide, Ctra. Utrera, Km. 1, 41013, Sevilla, España, magonpor@upo.es

(b) Universidad Loyola Andalucía, c/ Energía Solar 1, 41014, Sevilla, España, wcorrea@uloyola.es

(c) Asociación Claver-SJM, Avda. Eduardo Dato 20B, 41018 Sevilla, España, luisa.melero.valdes@gmail.com

Abstract

Legal difficulties are only one of many areas illustrating the reality of refugees. Housing, school, health, employment, participation – these are all dimensions that anybody should have the right to enjoy to feel fully included in a society. Starting with the premise that working with refugees requires a comprehensive, multidisciplinary and specific approach, the following question arises: To what extent are professionals in the receiving countries prepared and qualified to intervene and guide this population towards full inclusion in the receiving countries? A European project that attempts to answer this question is the “*Teaching Partnership Addressed to Refugees’ Instances Strengthening – PARIS*”, funded by the Erasmus+ call for research projects in which three European countries participated (Italy, Spain and Romania). In this article, we present the results of the work conducted by the Spanish team during the first phase of the project. To understand the training needs in terms of intervention processes, 5 focus groups and 23 in-depth interviews were conducted with four population groups involved in training and intervention (target groups): university faculty, university students, social work professionals, and refugees. The lexical analysis of the body of text in this area, which was conducted using the Iramuteq software, and the analysis of previously created analytical categories enabled us to conclude that there is a considerable difference between the perception of the academic world and applied practice in the field. Both lines of thinking are therefore necessary for the design of efficient training aimed at refugee population interventions in our context.

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Keywords: Expert knowledge; popular knowledge, professional competencies, refugee population, training needs.



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1. Introduction and Theoretical Framework

Professional activity always awakens great analytical interest in light of the complexity of contemporary interventions in the social sphere (Warren, 1998; Ruiz, González, & Sánchez, 2012). It is a complexity that, for the refugee population, is explained by very diverse factors: unmet basic rights (education, housing, health, employment, participation, etc.), post-traumatic stress as a result of events in the country of origin and in the migration journey, uprooting experiences and multiple experiences of hardship that are exacerbated by the treatment received upon arrival, and the lack of living conditions that might enable refugees to successfully integrate into the host society (Achotegui 2000, 2004, 2009; Melero and Die, 2010).

Furthermore, social intervention is, in most cases, an activity explicitly directed by expert knowledge (Ruiz and González, 2006), which is based on fragmented and compartmentalized thinking (Habermas, 1981), with implications such as the authority of the specialist over the generalist, fragmented actions that lead to ineffective interventions and the difficulty of cooperation between subjects (Alguacil, 2000; Ruiz and González, 2006).

From this point of view and following traditional practice, academic training programmes as well as professionals in the field have both ignored the perspective of common knowledge, which in this case is the knowledge emerging from the perspective of the actual subjects of the intended intervention. Thus, the professionals adopt from the beginning the role of determining the needs and the ways to satisfy them, leaving the intervened subjects with little to do. This approach has yielded two planes of reality: the reality in which some people work (pass through) and the reality in which other people live (inhabit) (De Certau, 1990) and in the case of the refugee population it has a lot to do with the established border that Bauman (2016) proposes between "us" and "them", between "online" and "offline" world:

"In the offline world, I'm the one who is in control (I'm the one who is expected to submit, often forcibly, to the control of contingent and capricious circumstances - that is, to obey, to adjust, to negotiate my place, my role and even my balance of duties and rights - on pain - explicit or supposed - of exclusion and expulsion if I refuse to submit). In the online world, however, I'm the one in charge and in control (...) the person who sets the agenda, who rewards the obedient and punishes the rebels, who wields the imposing weapon of exile and exclusion" (pp. 93-94).

This dual view reveals the need for exchange, communication and the complementarity of both perspectives in all analyses intended to attain and improve effective social intervention (Rosa and Encina, 2004). The need for a rapprochement between both types of knowledge becomes more urgent when professionals have not been prepared for working with a specific group such as the refugee population (Di Liberto and La Rocca, 2017). Ultimately, we are proposing the need to transform the classic top-down forms of social intervention into more participatory models (Cornwall, Lall, Kennedy, & Owen, 2003; Eyben and Ladbury, 2000), which requires a rethinking of the roles played in the framework of social intervention, and which necessarily involves a rethinking and innovation in the training and qualification that the different professionals in social intervention receive throughout their careers, and which has to do not only with the contents, but also with the social skills they are taught and with the actors who provide this training (González, Melero, & Correa, 2018).

Within this discussion on the divergence between professional knowledge and common knowledge (Chambers, 1997; Purcell, 1998; Strober, 2005), we can include the first year of work of the European project “Teaching Partnership Addressed to Refugees’ Instances Strengthening – PARIS”, financed by the Erasmus+ call for research projects and managed in Europe by three countries (Italy, Spain and Romania). During eight months of field work, we probed and analysed the different discussions and perspectives of four groups of actors (target groups): university faculty, university students, social work professionals, and refugees, ex-refugees and forced migrants. Presented in this article are the results of the work conducted by the Spanish team.

2. Purpose of the study

The ultimate objective of the research is to update the training of future social work professionals performing interventions with refugee populations. To this end, a first phase was designed to learn about the discourse of the different target groups regarding current social interventions with refugee populations and determine the resulting training needs.

3. Research Methods

For this phase, we chose a qualitative methodology based on the formation of 5 focus groups and the execution of 23 in-depth interviews. This resulted in the 4 target groups described above (university faculty, university students, social work professionals, and refugees, asylum seekers and forced migrants) consisting of 60 participants (Table 01).

Table 01. Profiles of individuals participating in the research study. Source: Created by authors

Profile	No. of people	Description
University professors	18	Professors in the Departments of Communication and Education, Law, International Studies, Humanities and Philosophy, Psychology, Public International Law, International Relations and Public and Labour Law. Loyola University of Andalusia (<i>Universidad Loyola Andalucía</i>) (Seville), Pablo de Olavide University (<i>Universidad Pablo de Olavide</i>) (Seville) and the University of Huelva (<i>Universidad de Huelva</i>) (Seville).
Students	15	Second-year students from the Law and International Relations, International Relations, Communication and International Relations, and Business Administration and Management undergraduate degree programmes. Loyola University of Andalusia (Seville).
Social work professionals	18	Social workers, psychologists and NGO coordinators working with refugees, asylum seekers and forced migrants (Caritas, Acoge, Red Cross, Claver, CEPAIM, CEAR, etc.).
Refugees	9	Refugees, ex-refugees and forced migrants from Cameroon, Libya, Syria, Ivory Coast, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Cuba and Algeria.

The general structure of the discussion groups was the same for the different participant profiles, while each major subject area was subsequently tailored to the characteristics of each group (Table 02).

Table 02. Structure of the discussion groups. Source: Created by authors

SUBJECT AREAS	QUESTIONS BY PROFILE			
	University faculty	Students	NGO professionals	Refugees
PRESENTATION	Presentation of the research and of each participant (academic specialization, experience, etc.).	Presentation of the research and of each participant (course of study, motivations, etc.).	Presentation of the research and of each participant (profession, training, professional experience, etc.).	Presentation of the research and of each participant (country of origin, time in Spain, legal status, etc.).
PERCEPTION	Differences between migrants and refugees; do you think that there is a current humanitarian crisis; assessment of European policies in this regard; how do you address the issue in the classroom.	Conceptual differences (migrants, refugees, foreigners); do you think that there is a humanitarian crisis; why; assessment of European policies in this regard.	Differences between migrants and refugees; do you think that there is a current humanitarian crisis; assessment of European policies in this regard.	Means of entry; travel time; assessment of the reception and reception process; significant experiences.
ACTIVITIES AND NEEDS	Perspectives for addressing the issue; is there disinformation among students; what are you doing to eliminate misinformation. What format would you give to training in this area?	What courses have addressed this subject; assessment of how the subject is addressed in the university.	Daily activities that the NGO performs; what type of relationship does it have with refugee groups.	Entities that have helped in the arrival and reception process; in what activities have they participated (housing, legal advice, language, health care, etc.).
PROFESSIONAL ABILITIES	Main skills or competencies needed to work with this group.	Main skills or competencies needed to work with this group.	Main skills or competencies needed to work with this group.	How do you value the work of the professionals who have assisted you; what has helped and hindered them.
TRAINING-RELATED NEEDS	Suggested content of training for students to work in this field; faculty profile, theory-practice reaction.	Suggested content of training for students to work in this field; faculty profile, theory-practice reaction.	Main obstacles in daily work; how did your education help in your job; what was lacking in the training received.	What type of work do you do now; what would you like to do; what would you need to do this work.

All the information obtained through these discussion groups was analysed using the Iramuteq program, which specializes in the lexical analysis of a text corpus, allowing a multidimensional analysis of texts from different semantic worlds (Moreno and Ratinaud, 2015). Likewise, we conducted a second step analysing the analytical categories previously created for the development of discussion groups and the interviews.

4. Findings

The analysis of the transcribed texts yielded a total of 148,229 words (N occurrences), of which 5,665 were discrete words (number of V forms) and 2,542 were words used only once (Hapax V1). An initial analysis of the active word forms most frequently repeated within the corpus enabled the

identification of the main topics of the different target group discussions. Among the active word forms with high incidence in the text (considered main topics) were the following: the centrality of the refugee as a person; the need for training; specific work; and the role of the law. The following are the words that appear most frequently in the text, with the number of occurrences in parentheses: person (persona) (774), topic (tema) (702), create/believe (crear/creer) (596), refugee (refugiado) (456), training (formación) (353), work (trabajo) (326), law (derecho) (314), people (gente) (307), university (Universidad) (299), come (venir) (267), course (asignatura) (236), country (país) (224), situation (situación) (210), problem (problema) (202), political (político) (201), international (internacional) (176), crisis (crisis) (173), Spain (España) (158), humanitarian (humanitario) (147), immigrant (inmigrante) (141) and project (proyecto) (132).

As can be observed, the most frequently occurring term in the whole text is the word “person”, which provides interesting information about the common basic discourse. The refugee issue is addressed by focusing on the person first. This fact is closely related to the idea of dignity:

‘An immigrant is a person who does not have Spanish nationality and arrives in Spanish territory seeking to improve their socioeconomic conditions’ (Interviewee 2 – University professor).

Their role as migrants or refugees is not a priority. The central idea is that they are people, above and beyond their administrative situation or legal status. In fact, the word “immigrant” is one of the least repeated, and almost exclusively used by university professors. The refugee issue was differentiated from the immigrant category, while at the same time it is included as a subset of this broader category. This explains why many of the participants used the word “immigrant” just before saying the word “refugee”, to distinguish it from other immigration realities:

‘And that does not distinguish between an immigrant and a refugee, everything is put into the same bucket without realizing the difference’ (Interviewee 9 – University professor).

This is not the case of the NGO worker group. Most of the time, they only talk about refugees because they are working mostly with this profile:

‘We are helping the refugees who came to Spain ten years ago, and we work with them in the same way as those who have just arrived. The difference is that the needs of those who have just arrived, or who have arrived only recently, are not the same as the needs of those who have been here for so long’ (Interview 17 – NGO professionals).

Next to the term “person”, the second most used word is “topic”. Although on the surface it is a very generic word without specific content, it is significant that “asylum” is considered a “topic” and not a “problem”. As was seen with the word “person”, it reveals relevant information on how the different participants perceive and approach the question. In fact, the word “problem” (much less frequent in the concordance analysis), appears mainly among the student group:

‘They have had to open the doors and that has caused many problems for the European Union’ (Discussion group 11 – Students).

‘The solution belongs to everyone because, for example, I don’t know much about economics and I know that this is an economic problem’ (Discussion group 13 – Students).

The term “training” is found mostly in the discourse analysis of the NGO professionals, when they talk about continuous training and the different areas in which they need to be trained:

'Training is continuous and we have to keep on developing' (Interviewee 17 – NGO professionals).
'(We need) external, specialized training on subjects related to immigration and asylum, or in the protocols for detecting human trafficking' (Discussion group 20 – NGO professionals).

This would confirm that most of the specific training for professionals working with these groups is not provided by universities but is acquired in the workplace and in more specialized formats.

The group of university professors has a different way of understanding the word “training”. They use this word less frequently but suggest the possibility of more specialized training related to refugee population interventions within the university framework.

'In my opinion, it's absolutely essential for postgraduate training to have collaborative agreements with people working in this field and who really know where to resolve needs and problems' (Interviewee 2 – University professor).

A final word to be highlighted in this lexical analysis is the term “work” (and its variants) because it is one of the words most frequently spoken. In this regard, there is a large difference in how the university professors and NGO professionals use the word and how refugees/immigrants use it. The first two groups use the verb “work” referring to the work they do or have done on this issue:

'As we said before, we work across different programmes for the immigrant population in general' (Focus group 15 – NGO professionals).

'I have been working in the area of human rights on contemporary forms of slavery and the treatment of human beings' (Focus group 12 – University professors).

On the other hand, the refugee/forced migrant groups use the word “work” as a necessity:

'After two and a half years I wanted my papers, I needed to renew my papers, so when the time came, she said she wouldn't hire me because her husband wasn't working' (Discussion group 19 – Refugee/forced migrant group).

'I need work and a contract because I can't keep working like I do now. Now, to get papers you need a contract. So she said "Yes"' (Discussion group 19 – Refugee/forced migrant group).

Using the Reinert (1995) classification, 5 lexical groups can be extracted, each of which contains some repeated segments. This classification provides the percentages of the different narrative themes in the four target groups.

The aggregated results are as follows:

- Design of migrant reception (class 5, 727 CEU, 16.2%). This group compiles aspects of immigrant reception planning related to projects under development and related to the specific professional competencies of current or future professionals. These concerns and interests correspond to the NGO professionals. In fact, they are the ones who express their concerns much more than the other target groups.
- Daily actions (class 4, 1,290 CEU, 31.3%). This group collects terms associated with everyday activities. It summarizes the daily activities of refugees and asylum seekers living in shelters. In this group, verbs like “go”, “say”, “know” or “start” are very significant.
- Real needs (class 3, 880 CEU, 21.3%). This group clearly shows us the basic needs of refugee groups and are classified as: social, labour, services, skills training. In addition to establishing the

difficulties of refugee groups, this aggregation of needs, while prevalent among the social workers, is most widespread among the refugee groups.

- Students' words (class 2, 546 CEU, 13.2%). This group includes words related to the academic life of university students, such as "topic", "grade", "rights" or "humanism".
- Academic world (class 1, 692 CEU, 16.7%). This group includes words closely linked to the daily work of the university professors, such as "issue", "research", "address", and "university".

As a result of the analysis of the previous categories, presented below are the skills and competences currently in development as well as the perceived training needs. One can observe in these results two overarching perspectives for the four target groups: formal education and social intervention.

1) Formal education perspective (based on faculty and university student discourse):

- Approaches and training skills that are already being developed: national and international conferences and seminars, monographs in journals on refugee populations. The question of refugees is currently being addressed in research projects, not as the main subject but within broader frameworks of human rights protection.
- Training approaches and skills that should be encouraged: a more interdisciplinary approach to the topic; development of specific optional courses for different grades; better articulation of NGO practices when conducting postgraduate studies on this subject; presence of NGOs in specific classes that address this topic; a comparative view of countries in the research study; use of and training in empathy as well as values (vocation, respect for others); training for the society or community receiving these people (awareness campaigns, etc.); greater training in communication skills; more focus and training on cultural diversity; the task of dismantling myths is important because there is a lot of misinformation; more relevant extracurricular activities.

2) Direct intervention perspective (NGO professional and refugee discourse):

- Approaches and training skills that are already being developed: specific legal training for professionals; specific postgraduate courses on the subject; communication skills training (empathy, active listening); values training (respect for others, human dignity); participation of NGOs in university postgraduate training (master's degree, expert courses); continuous training for NGO professionals according to current demands (housing, human trafficking, employment, etc.); psychological first aid; training in English and French; good quality and warmth by NGOs towards the people they serve.
- Training approaches and skills that should be encouraged: training in languages of the countries of origin; living with refugees, living in their spaces; training in cultural diversity, knowledge of the cultures of origin and of the social and political situations of the countries of origin (cultural competence); critical training questioning current policies and institutional procedures; updates on the constant changes in European Community law; training alternatives for working professionals; police training for initial reception treatment ("they are not criminals"); institutional support during police reports; tools that guarantee quality treatment and promote personalized attention and a perspective of empowerment; avoiding falling into victimization as well as collective objectification; psychological tools for emotional management and self-care of professionals;

training for working in interdisciplinary teams; promotion of a training focus on competencies, considering not only content but skills and attitudes (especially mental openness).

5. Conclusion

The lexical analysis performed shows that the four target groups vary in their discourse in terms of understanding the reality of the refugee and forced migrant population. Different views which, as has been stated in the Theoretical Framework, are rarely shared, and the view of "some" (the interveners) becomes the hegemonic one as opposed to that of "others" (the refugee population). Nevertheless, there are interesting coincidences, such as a person-centric approach to refugees, or the use of the word topic instead of problem when talking about the refugee population. In the latter case, however, the student group stands out by choosing to more frequently use the word problem. This suggests the negative influence of the media where training is lacking and reinforces the hypothesis of needing university-level training to form a critical perspective that questions information received from different sources.

Regarding the prior category analysis, the results show that the discourse of the four target groups can be synthesized, in turn, into two large groups: the theoretical and applied perspectives, the perspective of the reality on which one works and the perspective of the reality that one inhabits (De Certeau, 1990). Both discourses have differentiated as well as complementary aspects, revealing a gap between expert and common knowledge. While the academic world focuses its contributions on everything that has to do with theory and training, the world more deeply rooted in social intervention focuses on much more concrete and practical contributions rooted in everyday life. This confirms the need, that was raised at the beginning of this article, to combine both perspectives to develop an adequate social intervention that guarantees an efficient and sensitive response to the demands of working with the refugee population in the current context. But this need to bring the two discursive and perceptual worlds closer together necessarily (and as already mentioned above) is due to innovation in the training programmes of social intervention professionals, introducing training in more participatory and less hierarchical intervention methodologies into the curricular itinerary, where roles are not so established and where perspectives and knowledge (theoretical and experiential) can be shared and, therefore, complemented.

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