Original article

Conceptions of undergraduate students regarding research training in Social Work in Chile

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Abstract

The work sought to reveal the configuration of the conceptions of the students around the stage of design of the research leading to the degree in social work. The study was conducted at a public university in southern Chile. Qualitative method was used, applying an open-ended questionnaire to 14 students. The results indicate that students' conceptions can be grouped into three categories: cognitive learning, procedural learning and attitudinal learning. In the cognitive the main weakness is the mastery of ontological and epistemic contents; in the procedural aspect there is tension in the application of contents by emotional aspects that affect the student's decisions; in the attitudinal the student exhibits heteronomous behaviors and requires the permanent presence of the teacher as a guide. In conclusion, the student remains anchored in classical research logics, with little epistemic, theoretical and technical domain. In the binomial theory-practice there is a tendency to emphasize in practice.

Keywords: Students; Teachers; Learning; Investigation; Social work.

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Concepciones de estudiantes de pregrado respecto de la formación en investigación en Trabajo Social en Chile

Resumen

El trabajo buscó develar la configuración de las concepciones de los y las estudiantes en torno a la etapa de diseño de la investigación conducente a la obtención del grado de licenciado en trabajo social. El estudio se realizó en una universidad pública del sur de Chile. Se utilizó método cualitativo, aplicando un cuestionario de preguntas abiertas a 14 estudiantes. Los resultados indican que las concepciones de los estudiantes se pueden agrupar en tres categorías: aprendizajes cognitivos, aprendizajes procedimentales y aprendizajes actitudinales. En lo cognitivo la principal debilidad es el dominio de contenidos ontológicos y epistémicos; en lo procedimental existe tensión en la aplicación de los contenidos por aspectos emocionales que afectan las decisiones del(la) estudiante; en lo actitudinal el estudiantado exhibe conductas heterónomas y requiere de la presencia permanente del profesor guía. Como conclusión, el estudiantado sigue anclado en lógicas clásicas de investigación, con escaso dominio epistémico, teórico y técnico. En el binomio teoría-práctica existe una tendencia a enfatizar en la práctica.

Palabras clave: Estudiantes; Docentes; Aprendizaje; Investigación; Trabajo Social.

Summary: 1. Introduction, 2. Methodology, 3. Findings, 3.1 Cognitive Learning, 3.2 Procedural Learning, 3.3 Attitudinal Learning, 4. Conclusions, 5. Bibliography references.

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1. Introduction

Teaching research in Higher Education is a topic of recent discussion. Indeed, research instruction was reserved for those pursuing postgraduate studies; however, teaching research is increasingly essential in undergraduate education. In this context, differences can still be observed in the emphasis universities place on research training, depending on the various professions or the integration of research into teaching, which varies between hard and soft disciplines (González-Ugalde *et al.*, 2016). Some authors recognize the culture of research as a challenge (Sánchez-Luján & Vásquez-Duberney, 2019) or as a relatively new issue in Higher Education (Rojas-Betancur & Méndez-Villamizar, 2013). On the other hand, teaching research is seen as a challenge, as universities are generally perceived as focusing on "professionalization" rather than research development (Benedetti-Padrón, 2019). Finally, there is criticism of research disconnected from stakeholders, often seen as irrelevant (Hinojosa-Luján & García-Hernández, 2019). Given all of the above, research training at the undergraduate level takes on significant importance in light of the new challenges presented by a more complex and fluid society (Genovesi, 2021; Guzmán-Cáceres, 2021).

Regarding Social Work at the global level, research is considered a central component of the profession (Muñoz-Arce & Rubilar-Donoso, 2020); indeed, the pioneers of Social Work held a scientific perspective strongly linked to medicine in an attempt to distance the profession from philanthropy and assistance-based approaches to achieve a professionalizing logic. However, in Latin America, the dominance of positivism gave rise to a pragmatic-technological paradigm that contributed to an epistemological void (Toledo-Nickels, 2004). This weakened theoretical frameworks within the profession as the amount of research produced from within Social Work diminished. Consequently, the profession took on a robust assistance-oriented approach, reinforcing a sense of clientelism alongside the neoliberal model. Social Work came to be labeled as a "helping" profession, contributing to an image associated with altruism, charity, and social Intervention.

As a form of resistance to the assistance-oriented image, Latin America began to emphasize the need to incorporate research with a transversally oriented perspective into the Social Work curriculum (Castro-Serrano & Flotts, 2018; Farías *et al.*, 2016; Gil-Ríos, 2019; Muñoz-Arce *et al.*, 2017). Additionally, there is a growing body of research developed from critical and decolonial perspectives (Gil-Ríos, 2019; Guzmán-Cáceres, 2021; Linardelli & Pessolano, 2019; Palumbo & Vacca, 2020; Valiente, 2020), which directly opposes positivism and neo-positivism and aims to offer an emancipatory and transformative reading of reality.

In Chile, research in Social Work has a controversial connotation (Muñoz-Arce & Rubilar-Donoso, 2020), as it is not included in the definition of the profession nor its code of ethics. This is evident in the curricula of Chilean universities, where research appears to be a minimally developed area within the study plan. Muñoz-Arce & Rubilar-Donoso (2020) assert that research

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in Social Work has experienced a pendular development, shifting from total exclusion to a "perverse inclusion"; in the latter case, the inclusion of research aligns with neoliberal logic. Considering the global, Latin American, and Chilean contexts, a need arises to examine research teaching at a public university in southern Chile.

In 2013, the School of Social Work at the University of Bío-Bío implemented a new Curriculum and Graduate Profile. By 2023, it has produced five cohorts of graduates. This curriculum recognizes social research training as a central area, comprising eight courses from the second to the fourth year. It begins with the subject Epistemology of Social Sciences, followed by courses in Methods and Designs, Techniques for qualitative and quantitative data production, Qualitative and Quantitative Data Analysis, and Research Seminars I and II. Specifically, the Seminar courses are essential for achieving the graduate profile. They are designed as a "training ground for reflective researchers" (Fish, 2015), where students must develop an empirical research project under the guidance of a faculty advisor.

Studying the process of research instruction in Social Work is significant because various theoretical-practical integration challenges emerge here, consistent with findings in the reviewed literature (Farías *et al.,* 2016). Thus, this study provides relevant insights for enhancing the student experience in research and will serve as a bridge between research and curricular action.

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In sum, this article aims to reveal the elements that shape students' conceptions of the research design stage required to achieve a bachelor's degree in Social Work.

The reviewed literature suggests that research methodology and its teaching in Social Work develop along three typologies: research training; readiness for learning; and the acquisition and retention of knowledge (Allen *et al.*, 2018; Blakemore & Howard, 2015; Farías *et al.*, 2016; Fish, 2015; Forsberg *et al.*, 2019; Genovesi, 2021; Gil-Ríos, 2019; Gredig & Bartelsen-Raemy, 2018; Horner *et al.*, 2016; Hudson & Richardson, 2016; Li *et al.*, 2020; Lorente-Molina & Gijón-Sánchez, 2020; Lu *et al.*, 2019; Negrea *et al.*, 2018; Sánchez-Mayers *et al.*, 2019; Secret *et al.*, 2017; Venema *et al.*, 2015).

Regarding research training, Fish (2015) identifies five recognizable training models in Social Work: (i) research-based teaching, which permeates the curriculum but achieves breadth rather than depth; (ii) the research consumer approach, which prepares students to locate relevant journals and review literature; (iii) the research-minded development model, which focuses on cultivating critical reflection and developing research processes based on professional values; (iv) the development of research capacity, which aims for students to formulate and defend a research thesis based on secondary data; and (v) the most challenging model, reflective researcher training, which seeks to teach students to become researchers through an empirical project involving social work users or professionals. In this case, the goal is to develop a knowledge producer rather than merely a knowledge consumer.

Mentorship plays a significant role in research training as a mechanism for transmitting active knowledge and modeling the "researcher identity" (Allen *et al.,* 2018; Gil-Ríos, 2019; Lu *et al.*, 2019). Unlike traditional research guidance, mentoring promotes self-regulated learning, which often implicitly promotes a hetero-regulated approach (Genovesi, 2021). Particularly in doctoral studies, mentorship has contributed to enhancing scientific writing skills and increasing article production; furthermore, involving doctoral students in undergraduate teaching has strengthened research competencies, both methodologically and ethically (Horner *et al.*, 2016; Li *et al.*, 2020; Lu *et al.*, 2019). In this context, Kolb's experiential learning theory is particularly relevant, proposing that learning improves when facilitated through a cycle of action, reflection, generalization, and testing, harnessing the synergy of being an educator, practitioner, and researcher simultaneously (Lu *et al.*, 2019). This cycle applies to both undergraduate and graduate training.

Regarding readiness for learning, European studies have shown very negative attitudes, with high levels of nervousness, stress, and anxiety toward research (Blakemore & Howard, 2015; Gredig & Bartelsen-Raemy, 2018; Lorente-Molina & Gijón-Sánchez, 2020; Negrea *et al.*, 2018), a trend also observed in Latin American research (Farías *et al.*, 2016). These forms of resistance influence learning and subsequent self-efficacy in other undergraduate training processes and professional practice. Authors agree that commitment to research is crucial in professional practice, mainly as it signifies Social Work's status as a scientific discipline.

To address the emotional-affective component, experiential learning-based teaching has shown positive results (Blakemore & Howard, 2015; Lorente-Molina & Gijón-Sánchez, 2020), as has the role of the teacher in the formative process. The teacher's guidance helps integrate knowledge, harmonize theory with practice, and manage the levels of anxiety and fear that can immobilize students (Gredig & Bartelsen-Raemy, 2018; Negrea *et al.*, 2018). The affective dimension can interfere with students' cognitive processes, leading them to close themselves off to new knowledge, especially when facing typical tensions in Social Work, such as the friction between theory and practice, resistance to the purely theoretical, and a strong preference for the "practical" as the opposite domain to theory (Farías *et al.*, 2016). In this regard, evidence suggests that providing authentic learning experiences with a clear emphasis on "doing research" can foster creative thinking skills, management abilities, understanding of intervening factors, and appreciation for the value and utility of research (Blakemore & Howard, 2015; Gredig & Bartelsen-Raemy, 2018).

Regarding the acquisition and retention of research knowledge, there is consensus that the affective component plays a significant role, although more studies are needed on this variable. The emotional-affective component is related to the teacher's role as a guide and mentor, the use of experiential learning (Hudson & Richardson, 2016; Secret *et al.*, 2017; Venema *et al.*, 2015), the introduction of some technological scaffolding for data management, and the opportunity to learn and practice research methods (Sánchez-Mayers *et al.*, 2019), all while intersecting with

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actual practice involving individuals or communities (Videmšek, 2017). Together, these elements contribute to knowledge acquisition and retention.

It is indisputable that undergraduate and graduate students must acquire research competencies to approach evidence-based practice. However, some limitations to achieving this objective include poor baseline behaviors in research courses, particularly low statistical knowledge, limited theoretical understanding, and specific ethical weaknesses in confronting the research process (Secret *et al.*, 2017). Additionally, evidence indicates that students require strong academic commitment regarding time and effort and an openness to the unknown (Venema *et al.*, 2015).

Finally, it is essential to emphasize Social Work as a scientific discipline and the necessary intersection between research and practice while addressing their ambivalence (Forsberg *et al.*, 2019).

2. Methodology

Based on the study's focus, a qualitative research approach was used to explore participants' conceptions of themselves as social actors, revealing key ideas regarding the research process in its design phase (Donoso *et al.*, 2016).

Epistemologically, we adhere to Gergen's Social Constructionism (Gergen, 1996; 2006; 2007; McNamee & Gergen, 1996), which posits that knowledge is constructed from sociocultural practices and resides within the sphere of social connection. Explanations are derived from human coordination of action; achieving intelligibility is participating in a recurring relational pattern in which the process dynamics play a central role (Gergen, 1996).

The participants were 14 Social Work students who took the Research Seminar I course during the first semester of 2020. Participation in this study was voluntary, and international scientific community ethical standards were upheld, particularly in protecting confidentiality and anonymity. Additionally, informed consent was obtained according to the sponsor institution's regulations.

The course is offered in the fourth year of study, leading to a Bachelor's degree in Social Work. Its main objective is to develop an empirical research process, resulting in a report covering the research design, fieldwork conducted, findings obtained, discussion of results, and study conclusions.

The decision to focus the study on students who completed this course was based on their status as critical informants for the research objectives (Mendieta-Izquierdo, 2015). Invitations were emailed to all students, emphasizing the voluntary nature of participation.

The instrument used was an open-ended questionnaire (García-Alcaraz *et al.*, 2006) that focused on research design. It included six questions aimed at exploring the following deductive categories: (1) research learning; (2) challenges in developing research; (3) coping with difficulties during the process; (4) the usefulness of prior courses in addressing the research process; (5) knowledge gaps in developing research; and (6) the role of the advisor in research development.

The instrument was developed with the consistency criterion between deductive categories and questions (Flick, 2015; Gibbs, 2012). This process was conducted in two stages: first, a team member designed the instrument; second, the rest of the research team reviewed the instrument and made suggestions to ensure consistency (triangulation of objectives, categories, and questions), as recommended by Rapley (2014). Each student emailed and self-administered the questionnaire between July and December 2020.

Data analysis was carried out using structural-semantic analysis, the most suitable technique for accessing participants' conceptions from their discourse, encompassing content, sources, and agents. Consequently, semantic structures are modeled based on axes of meaning and corresponding disjunctive codes housed within them. It is worth noting that disjunctive codes include evaluative indices (+/-) to capture the meaning expressed by the participants (Martinic-Valencia, 2006).

3. Findings

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The analyzed corpus reveals three semantic axes regarding the learning outcomes in the Research Seminar process: cognitive learning, procedural learning, and attitudinal learning.

3.1 Cognitive Learning

Cognitive learning involves understanding facts, principles, and concepts (Tapia-Sosa, 2022). In the context of the Research Seminar, this type of learning pertains to epistemic and methodological knowledge of a theoretical and conceptual nature, aiding in the question, "What knowledge should be used?" This axis of meaning is illustrated in the following semantic structure (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Semantic Structure. Axis of Signification: Cognitive Learning.
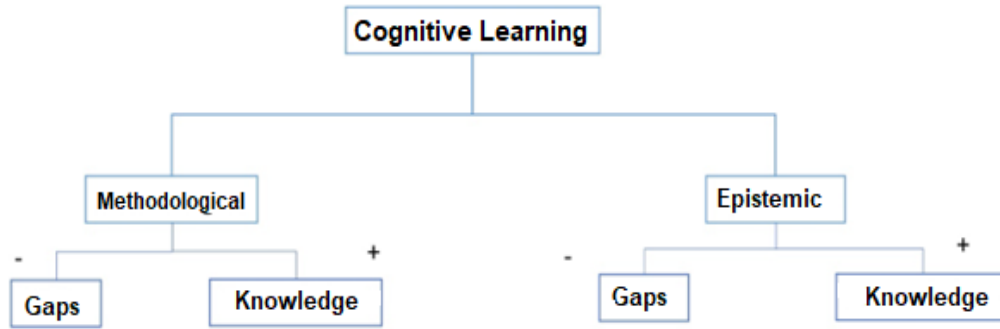
Source: Prepared by the authors

When focusing on methodological aspects, participants identified gaps in their knowledge as they entered the design phase of the Research Seminar. These gaps were tied to specific elements of the research process, such as recognized challenges in creating the conceptual framework, as Participant 13 noted:

> …what I recognized as a knowledge gap was in constructing the conceptual framework, as creating a strong framework is essential for ensuring consistency in our research. (Participant 13, personal communication, September 29, 2020)

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For Participant 12, the specific gap identified pertained to making decisions about which method to use and what research design to apply in the study:

> At first, we faced a knowledge gap regarding… research methods and designs… (Participant 12, personal communication, August 27, 2020)

Despite these initial knowledge gaps, participants also reported developing new knowledge due to formulating and carrying out the research. Participant 7's experience is illustrative, as they recognized starting the process without solid knowledge about:

> ...what research is, why it is conducted, what components it includes, and what structure it follows. (Participant 7, personal communication, August 27, 2020)

Later, when asked about what they learned during the Seminar, they affirmed:

> The main learning I have gained during the research process is an in-depth understanding of what research is, how it is structured, what it comprises, and the methodologies that can be incorporated… (Participant 7, personal communication, August 27, 2020)

Participant 7's experience was not unique. Other participants highlighted the value of understanding the components of a research proposal in a way that lends coherence to the overall research activity. This integration is achieved through a dual approach: first, by recognizing the relationships between proposal components (problem statement, objectives, and method), and second, by realizing that a research process consists of a series of phases. This is illustrated by participants 11, 8, and 6:

> I learned to carry out the initial phases of qualitative research, which involve the theoretical part of the research and how it directly connects with data collection and analysis, laying the foundation for an optimal process. (Participant 11, personal communication, September 10, 2020)
>
> It is a process, like most things, with a beginning, development, and an end. But in research, I would separate a phase that occurs well before the start. I would call this the understanding phase… (Participant 8, personal communication, October 20, 2020)
>
> In terms of the learning achieved so far, I would emphasize problem formulation, developing assumptions, and creating categories… (Participant 6, personal communication, September 28, 2020)

These narratives reveal nuances in participants' experiences. Participants 11 and 8 exhibit an integrated understanding of the various research components, emphasizing a process-oriented perspective. Participant 6, however, perceives their learning as compartmentalized, with knowledge recognized in a fragmented manner.

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Regarding epistemic aspects, reported knowledge gaps create feelings of insecurity and difficulty in applying prior knowledge during the research design phase. Consequently, participants may gravitate towards doubt about their resources and face uncertainties regarding the research process, reducing confidence in navigating other stages or making informed decisions. This is indicated by participants 9 and 10:

> I have to admit that what I have learned regarding epistemological foundations for research has mostly been through independent reading, which does not provide much confidence. (Participant 9, personal communication, September 14, 2020)
>
> … I think my biggest knowledge gap is in Social Sciences Epistemology… this has been the most challenging subject to apply in the seminar process. (Participant 10, personal communication, September 28, 2020)

In Participant 10's case, the knowledge gap refers to a topic covered in a second-year course. This reflects the classic theory-practice divide. When abstract theoretical content is introduced, specific cognitive or procedural competencies may not find adequate support or integration. This gap becomes evident when participants must decide to ensure epistemic coherence in their research proposal.

However, not all experiences involve gaps. Participants also demonstrated metacognitive knowledge, integration of prior knowledge, and consciousness of personal resources. Some achievements relate to the researcher's positioning within the research process and the internal coherence of the investigation. As participant 11 noted:

> We reviewed different epistemological approaches to position ourselves for knowledge production, which helped clarify our decision on the method to use and how it aligns with our chosen epistemological perspective. (Participant 11, personal communication, September 10, 2020)

The concept of triangulation also emerged, and it was recognized as a crucial action for consistently integrating various theoretical and methodological decisions. This is illustrated by participant 3, who stated:

> The main learning outcomes I have gained throughout this process include combining and triangulating the various theories our research encompasses, ensuring it provides a sound epistemological and methodological foundation. (Participant 3, personal communication, September 25, 2020)

In summary, participants value having prior knowledge and the opportunity to apply it in a course designed to train reflective researchers. Conversely, they view epistemic and methodological gaps negatively, reflecting previous deficiencies in their academic journey. These gaps become apparent when confronting a challenging task, such as constructing a research design. We can thus infer that, before engaging in research, students' cognitive systems operate according to implicit theories—cognitive regularities that tend to constrain scientific thinking (Genovesi, 2021).

Regarding cognitive learning, students show weaknesses in mastering ontological or epistemic concepts (Secret *et al.*, 2017) as an indication of limited theoretical proficiency and self-doubt about their prior knowledge. Similarly, research by Guzmán-Cáceres (2021) reports that acquired knowledge is often transient, fragile, and lacks significance when assessed on research methodology. This aligns with findings in the literature review, which indicates that Social Work students struggle more with research learning than students in comparable fields (Gil-Ríos, 2019; Secret *et al.*, 2017). They also report a greater sense of paralysis when facing the demands of scientific training (Hudson & Richardson, 2016). Additionally, the persistent theory/practice tension in social work training poses ongoing challenges for integrating these elements (Palumbo & Vacca, 2020; Secret *et al.*, 2017). Social work students often feel more comfortable performing practical actions (Whipple *et al.*, 2015) than managing high-level abstract knowledge, which they approach with limited interest and weak cognitive anchoring.

3.2 Procedural Learning

Procedural learning, or "know-how", refers to "the deployment of skills based on knowledge" (Pérez-Rocha, 2012, p. 13). Therefore, this type of learning is rooted in the practical dimension and is associated with skills that facilitate the operationalization of theoretical and conceptual knowledge. Procedural learning is essential because it addresses how to utilize such knowledge. This semantic axis is illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Semantic Structure. Axis of Significance: Procedural Learning.
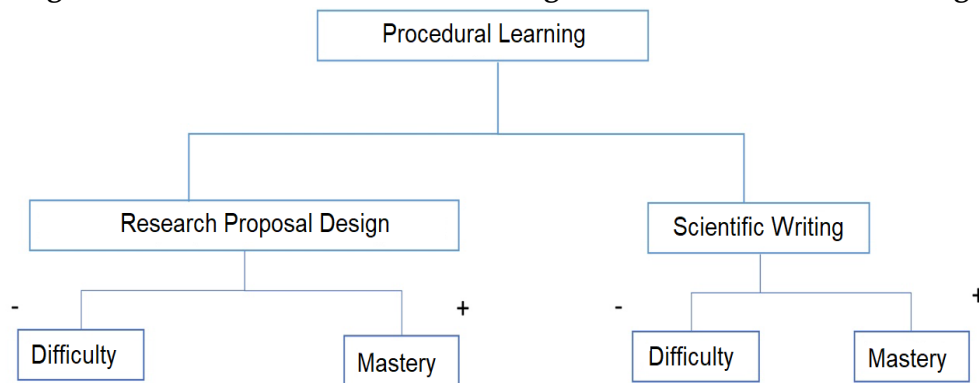
Source: prepared by the authors.

Regarding the design of the research proposal, as expressed in the structure, the disjunctive codes correspond to *difficulty* and *mastery*. Concerning difficulties, two main areas are identified: weaknesses attributed to the student and weaknesses attributed to the training provided by the institution. In this context, Subjects 9 and 11 mention procedural weaknesses related to writing, problematization, and constructing a theoretical framework. These elements are expressed in the following excerpts:

> Another difficulty we identified was drafting the problem statement, moving from the general to the specific. (Subject 9, personal communication, September 14, 2020)
> Building the theoretical framework has been another challenge, as each theory must be applied clearly, and this becomes difficult when there isn't enough material on some of these theories. (Subject 11, personal communication, September 10, 2020)

As shown in the preceding excerpt, the weaknesses recognized by the students are attributed to a lack of self-resources, contrasting with another area identified—weaknesses attributable to the training provided by the institution—where responsibility is assigned to external factors. In this regard, Subject 1 states:

> Perhaps a specific course on research, where they teach you how to conduct a thesis or research project. (Subject 1, personal communication, October 3, 2020)

Subject 1 highlights the need for an integrative course that would allow students to practice the research process before tackling an empirical study, as required in the analyzed course.

On the other hand, Subject 7 emphasizes that previous courses did not provide enough space for applying the content, expressing this in the theory-practice dichotomy previously discussed in the cognitive learning section.

> In some past courses, the content was there, but I feel there wasn't enough application to learn the knowledge properly, as they didn't put us in practical or real-life situations. (Subject 7, personal communication, August 27, 2020)

Moreover, Subject 4 emphasizes the need for a clear, detailed guidance rubric as a preparatory resource for addressing the seminar requirements.

> I think it's necessary to work with the seminar guidelines before carrying out the research. By this, I mean explaining the guidelines in detail to have a stronger foundation. (Subject 4, personal communication, August 27, 2020)

The excerpt from Subject 4 underscores an instrumental approach to the research proposal, showing a preference for structured guidance. In summary, the procedural difficulties expressed by the subjects reflect nuanced differences in how they perceive their own challenges. Resolving these difficulties involves viewing them as either personal responsibility or as something that should be addressed by someone else.

Two types of narratives emerge regarding the mastery of creating a research proposal. Some accounts acknowledge the research process as a linear sequence structured by distinct sections, as often outlined in commonly used manuals; on the other hand, narratives recognize various resources that can be activated to enrich each of these sections.

About the first type of narrative, the case of Subject 9 is illustrative:

> The main research learning I have acquired so far involves creating a preliminary project model, but also more concrete aspects, such as defining a topic, creating research objectives, categories, ethical criteria within which the research process will be framed, as well as the sequence of steps needed to complete them, among others. (Subject 9, personal communication, September 14, 2020)

As can be seen, Subject 9 constructs a narrative based on a list of concepts that function as components of a research proposal. The objectives, categories, and ethical criteria presented in the preceding excerpt are examples of this.

About the second set of narratives, Subject 14 states:

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The main research learnings from the Seminar I process relates to operationalizing what has been learned in all previously completed courses." (Subject 14, personal communication, September 25, 2020)

The resources identified by Subject 14 reference prior knowledge acquired in previous coursework, which are activated to inform and shape each section of a research proposal.

Another element within Semantic Structure 2 pertains to scientific writing and expresses the difficulty-mastery dichotomy. Here, difficulties are divided into two areas: the first relates to referencing procedures, including appropriate use of APA style; the second concerns constructing an original narrative that avoids unintentional plagiarism through improper paraphrasing.

Regarding the first difficulty, Subject 6 emphasizes limited proficiency with APA style for constructing a text that qualifies as scientific writing:

I consider the main difficulties encountered in the Seminar I course are related to scientific writing, citing in APA... (Subject 6, personal communication, September 28, 2020)

Similarly, Subject 14 highlights scientific writing, where proficiency in APA style serves as an instrumental tool:

Although the difficulties encountered have not drastically impeded the process, I believe the main one is related to scientific writing and the associated standards… (Subject 14, personal communication, September 25, 2020)

Regarding the second difficulty, Subject 5 explicitly highlights the challenge of effectively paraphrasing while maintaining originality and avoiding plagiarism:

The greatest difficulty I have faced is sometimes struggling to paraphrase an author without plagiarizing; it's something I've had to work on over time. (Subject 5, personal communication, September 3, 2020)

In summary, scientific writing emerges as an area of difficulty not only due to the specific demands of citation norms but also because it requires developing skills to produce original research-related texts, as opposed to writing on social Intervention.

As for mastery in scientific writing, two aspects can be noted: first, the search for scientific information and the identification of reliable sources, and second, a parsimonious writing style representative of scientific composition.

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The first aspect is illustrated by the narratives of Subjects 5 and 8:

I have learned to research better, to access sites with important, reliable information… (Subject 5, personal communication, September 3, 2020)

Another skill is document review, extracting information from reliable academic sources, discerning, filtering information that's useful from that which is not, and using bibliographic cards… (Subject 8, personal communication, October 20, 2020)

The students' procedural learning relates to using reliable sources and literature, involving the discernment of trustworthy databases and tools for processing this information. Mastery of this procedure enhances scientific writing by enabling the inclusion of more substantial elements in a scientific text.

The second aspect is reflected in Subject 4's narrative:

I learned that including much information isn't necessarily better for research. (Subject 4, personal communication, August 27, 2020)

This excerpt highlights the value of learning to use concise and precise language, avoiding excessive or irrelevant information.

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In summary, in terms of procedural learning, students appreciate prior knowledge imparted by the Study Plan, provided they can integrate it. This indicates a transition from a system of implicit representations to one of explicit scientific representations (Genovesi, 2021); in the latter, students employ skills of extension and versatility, allowing them to extrapolate previous knowledge.

Regarding the challenges in scientific writing, students' narratives reveal a need to incorporate scientific writing as a cross-curricular content throughout the Study Plan. This approach would not only require the use of specific referencing norms but, fundamentally, would support this requirement through the teacher-student relationship. Indeed, the pedagogical relationship is crucial for research training and should be built on more dialogic interactions that break from the traditional dynamics often seen between teachers and students (Gil-Ríos, 2019).

Regarding procedural learning, students demonstrate uncertainty when applying content from the six prior courses in the research area. While they show a greater tendency towards practical problem-solving, a confidence/distrust dichotomy becomes apparent when they face the challenges of empirical research or systematic reviews. The curriculum structure itself may hinder the integration of procedural learning due to the heavily compartmentalized arrangement of research courses. The lack of integrated and interconnected practices between subjects contributes to fragmentation and hinders metacognition in prior training. In summary, although

students view the research area as challenging, it does not successfully lead them to see themselves as knowledge producers on the path to becoming reflective researchers (Fish, 2015).

In procedural learning, scientific writing stands out as a significant challenge. Undoubtedly, academic reports are the primary means students demonstrate mastery of content and skills developed in their training (Tapia-Ladino & Burdiles-Fernández, 2012). Thus, for social work training, scientific writing instruction must be consistent and emphasized throughout the entire study program, not limited to a single course serving this purpose. Nowadays, it is essential for students to be proficient in sourcing reliable references, applying a citation standard like APA, constructing their discourse, and distinguishing it from others. Ultimately, an academic text serves as a communication tool within the university community, reflecting stabilized knowledge within professional training (Corcelles *et al.*, 2017; Tapia-Ladino & Burdiles-Fernández, 2012). Hence, it is essential to integrate this component more consistently into training, mainly due to its significance in an academic-level activity. This activity is recognized as an autonomous work of great importance in the formative process (Corcelles *et al.*, 2017). It is undertaken before the final phase, leading to a professional degree.

3.3 Attitudinal Learning

This type of learning is part of the student's behavioral dimension. It includes emotional readiness as a critical component in approaching the research process. It also encompasses interaction or bonding with others, values, and holistic education (Sánchez-Solis *et al.*, 2021). This axis of significance is depicted in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Semantic structure. Axis of significance: Attitudinal Learning.
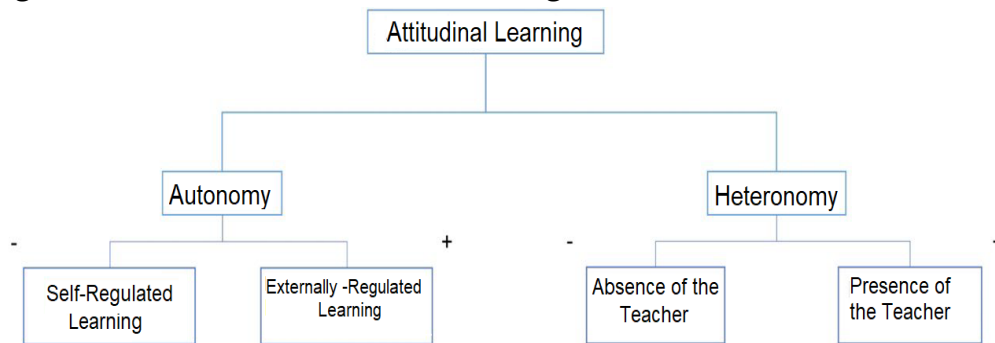
Source: prepared by the authors

Regarding attitudinal learning, the semantic structure reveals two areas: autonomy and heteronomy. Autonomy further differentiates into self-regulated and externally-regulated learning. Although autonomy is a less highly valued aspect among students, some narratives reveal a process of self-regulated learning. Sure, students display traces of self-regulation, perceiving it as a path or process, though not fully achieved. This is well illustrated by Subject 13:

We were initially very frustrated since it was a challenging and new process. We struggled to coordinate schedules and progress in our free time and as a group. Over the weeks, we got the hang of the course, organizing ourselves in pairs to provide feedback on the document and sharing reflections on our understanding of specific research articles. (Subject 13, personal communication, September 29, 2020)

Self-regulated learning involves cognitive, motivational, and behavioral components. The account from Subject 8 highlights cognitive adjustments that facilitate tackling the social research process:

In terms of how I can face challenges in my thesis process, I would say it's with much organization. For instance, I created a Gantt chart on my computer, setting goals to achieve in approximately a week. (Subject 8, personal communication, October 20, 2020)

Additionally, Subject 8's narrative includes valuable behavioral and motivational adjustments aimed at achieving better performance aligned with the research demands, as expressed below:

I've had to change various habits, like waking up early, reducing the number of TV shows, taking walks on my property, listening to relaxing music, and reading a lot… watching tutorials on YouTube has helped me grow as a person and understand the research process. (Subject 8, personal communication, October 20, 2020)

These reflections by Subject 8 are further echoed by Subject 12, who states:

… That's why being systematic and organized is essential to achieving the expected results. (Subject 12, personal communication, August 27, 2020)

Autonomy is a gradual process where students take responsibility for the decisions they must make as researchers at each stage of the research process. However, as mentioned earlier, students do not view autonomy positively, thus engaging in it with some resistance and primarily in response to specific demands. This suggests that autonomy, in this context, may be perceived as instrumental behavior.

Since autonomy requires "taking responsibility", its development reflects degrees of externally regulated behavior characterized by a high degree of external control. In this study, such regulation is anchored in the figure of the instructor, playing a central role in students' narratives as a prerequisite for action. This dependency is illustrated in Subject 3's narrative:

Maybe if we were taught more authors and theories, we would have more prior and solid knowledge when undertaking such an important process as Research Seminar I. (Subject 3, personal communication, September 25, 2020)

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Subject 3's expression reveals an externalization of responsibilities in the research process. The student expects another to lead or decide on the direction to follow. In this regard, the students view themselves as merely executing decisions made by the research advisor.

Another expression of external regulation is the significant role peers play in providing support for cognitive, procedural, and even behavioral aspects, as stated by Subjects 5 and 10:

> We have been able to handle it because we've supported each other throughout this process; no one does the work alone; it is always a group effort. (Subject 5, personal communication, September 25, 2020)
> Although there have been times when we have felt demotivated due to various factors, we've been able to address concerns and keep moving forward as best as possible. This has been possible through group communication and proposing new ways to work so everyone feels comfortable. (Subject 10, personal communication, September 28, 2020)

Subject 13 also reflects on the challenges brought about by the pandemic and the use of remote education. In this case, emotional aspects are addressed through external regulation with adequate support from the reference group:

> Although conducting research in this modality is very complex, my group and I have tried to find alternatives so each member feels more comfortable and can actively participate. There have been stressful moments, but the group's support helps prevent significant impacts on each member's mental health. (Subject 13, personal communication, September 29, 2020)

Consequently, autonomy is portrayed in two aspects, representing varying levels of responsibility in the learning process. When a student operates from self-regulation, they make their own decisions, progressing toward increasing autonomy. Conversely, a hetero-regulated student relies on the presence of another, who acts as a model, guide, or decision-maker regarding aspects of social research—typically the research advisor.

The second component of Semantic Structure 3 is heteronomy, which manifests in the duality of teacher absence-presence. Teacher absence is negatively perceived due to the student's external locus of control, as they seek constant guidance for decision-making and action. This absence conveys a sense of limited dedication from the advisor to provide guidance and support throughout the research process, as noted by Subject 4:

> Due to the current pandemic, it is challenging to develop a seminar that limits you in the actions of your research. Additionally, the limited time for making corrections with the advisor (1 hour per week) isn't enough to address questions, especially since they are external and work hourly, lacking the necessary availability to oversee a thesis. (Subject 4, personal communication, August 27, 2020)

This perspective illustrates a highly demanding student whose progress as a researcher is contingent upon the advisor's decisions. This viewpoint suggests that advancing the research process cannot occur without the advisor's endorsement. Consequently, the dynamic between an advisor with limited availability and a heteronomous student can slow research progress.

The advisor's presence, however, is highly valued by students. They appreciate the technical support provided by the advisor, underscoring their role as an expert consultant. The statements by Subjects 6 and 7 exemplify this:

Our advisor's role has been fundamental; she has been present throughout the process. She has supported and advised us through each difficulty. She is responsible and committed. (Subject 6, personal communication, September 28, 2020)
We have managed the challenges, particularly through dialogue with our advisor during scheduled meetings. He has guided us with our questions and suggested ways to address the gaps and uncertainties that have arisen. (Subject 7, personal communication, August 27, 2020)

Students recognize the consistency of advisory sessions, responsibility, commitment, and process monitoring. They implicitly value the advisor's technical proficiency in research.

From a different angle, some accounts not only acknowledge the technical expertise of the advisor but also highlight their emotional support, sense of humor, and soft skills, emphasizing a closer, more humanized connection. This is illustrated in the statements by Subjects 3 and 10:

Our advisor's role has been truly significant, not only academically in terms of the search and guidance in theories but also emotionally. He has advised us and helped alleviate our anxieties, especially given our national context, which makes data collection and information gathering extremely difficult. Despite this, he is always present and optimistic." "Thus, I greatly value his role with our Seminar I team. (Subject 3, personal communication, September 25, 2020)
... from the beginning, he has been very attentive to any questions. He has always been willing to have work meetings, brings new ideas on improving certain sections, has edited with us, and always provides feedback. What stands out the most is his patience with us and his thoughtful way of addressing our mistakes throughout the process, for which I am very grateful. (Subject 10, personal communication, September 28, 2020)

The emotional support provided by the advisor acts as a buffer against stress, anxiety, or frustration associated with the research process. Here, heteronomy includes the need for an emotional framework to confront learning challenges to become a researcher. Thus, emotional support is essential in combining cognitive, procedural, and attitudinal elements. Attitudinal aspects may be key to overcoming obstacles in such a complex endeavor as research.

In summary, regarding attitudinal learning, students value a process mediated by an external locus of control. This reliance manifests through the externalization of decision-making responsibilities in designing a research proposal. As illustrated in this section, emphasis is placed on the importance of heteronomy, with the advisor's presence and peer support acting as the driving force.

Regarding attitudinal learning, it is evident that the challenges students face in the research process are firmly rooted in the affective component (Li *et al.,* 2020; Teater *et al.,* 2017), manifesting as difficulties in adopting autonomous behaviors. This limitation is associated with the gradual and cumulative development of research skills within the curriculum. When students perceive gaps in their training, they often attribute these deficiencies to the instructor's approach rather than their own low engagement (Tight, 2020), reflecting their reliance on heteronomy. Consistent with findings from other studies, students demonstrate avoidant behaviors when faced with the time and effort required to become a researcher (Allen *et al.,* 2018; Lu *et al.,* 2019; Venema *et al.,* 2015). In this context, the pursuit of autonomy diminishes in the advisor's presence, as students frequently turn to them for help and quick solutions. This low level of engagement could be due to excessive anxiety about an academic demand they perceive as high (Blakemore & Howard, 2015) and to the tension between theoretical and practical knowledge, which reflects a noticeable lack of focus in Social Work on research methodology training (Teater *et al.*, 2017).

4. Conclusions

Research learning in Social Work takes place within a triad composed of subjects (students and teachers), structure (Curriculum; research-related courses), and actions (teaching and learning). According to Fish's (2015) classification, the course taken by students would be categorized as "Training Reflective Researchers"; however, findings from this study align it more closely with a "Research-Based Teaching" model. Thus, although the curriculum integrates research with eight courses, the depth of learning remains limited.

The findings suggest that cognitive, procedural, and attitudinal learning in research is marked by a disjunction between an emptiness/difficulty-knowledge/mastery duality, where the student's lack of confidence in navigating their training process acts as a hinge. This lack of confidence intensifies when learning remains compartmentalized. Conversely, increased confidence enables students to engage in metacognition, fostering the integration of prior knowledge. In this sense, we assert that the feeling of confidence is closely linked to self-regulated learning (Gaxiola-Romero *et al.,* 2020), which is essential for implementing cognitive, behavioral, emotional, and motivational strategies (Álvarez-Cruces *et al.*, 2020). These strategies are geared toward knowledge integration and allow students to autonomously take responsibility for the decisions and actions involved in their research.

Students highlight the teacher's role and disposition for technical expertise and as a figure who provides guidance and emotional support (Allen *et al.*, 2018; Horner *et al.*, 2016; Lu *et al.*, 2019). Academically, students rely on the instructor's structure to define what needs to be done, how, and when. This tension between heteronomy and autonomy becomes challenging when students perceive teachers as uninvolved or taking a laissez-faire approach. They value the exercise of authority when directed toward problem-solving, diverse scaffolding methods, and substantial expertise. Emotionally, students appreciate teachers' support, empathy, and understanding, especially when combined with technical backing, meeting their expectations for academic guidance and emotional support (Secret *et al.*, 2017).

The literature review confirms that research skills in Social Work are no longer optional but essential. As a discipline, social Work must respond to a growing demand to consolidate its own body of knowledge. Achieving this goal would prevent social workers from relying on externally produced knowledge. Undergraduate research training is fundamental to reaching this goal.

The training of reflective researchers requires a reassessment of the training model and a deconstruction of the role that research plays in the imagination of those entering classrooms to "become" social workers. Our study suggests synergy is necessary on two fronts: (i) to shape social workers as knowledge producers through a research-based teaching strategy and (ii) to ensure that research permeates the curriculum. Furthermore, it is essential to foster communication among courses based on a robust epistemic framework and a strong emphasis on theoretical-practical integration.

There is also an urgent need to reframe the importance and relevance of research as an effective means to understand and explain social phenomena, to collect dense, robust evidence for informed decision-making, and to develop professionals who identify as social worker-researchers. This cultural shift presents a performative challenge that calls for new ways of thinking, positioning oneself within the field, and reconnecting with the investigative perspective that has been part of the profession's foundation.

The dichotomy between theory and practice in Social Work must be overcome through a curriculum focused on integration, moving away from the compartmentalized structure of courses that have created isolated, rigid blocks of knowledge. Achieving this integration relies on the role of teachers as mentors and guides. Everything indicates that teachers should serve as role models, helping to shape autonomous students who make well-founded decisions, are intellectually curious, resilient in the face of research challenges, and are committed to becoming social workers grounded in two solid pillars: research and Intervention.

Students are still anchored to conventional approaches rooted in classic epistemologies, viewing research instrumentally and as a process centered on the knowing subject. This observation raises concerns about the potential challenges in encouraging students to engage

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with more critical research perspectives, such as those advocated by Latin American scholars, which emphasize decolonial and emancipatory approaches.

Limitations

A methodological limitation of the study lies in the sample size, as it restricts the transferability of the results. The data were collected at a small regional university during a temporary distance education modality due to the pandemic, which also hindered student participation in the research. Another limitation is the exclusive participation of students, excluding other relevant actors in the process, such as the faculty members who serve as advisors in the Research Seminar.

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The authors declare no conflict of interest in the writing or publication of this article.

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