

# Social Work, a name of its own

## Trabajo Social, un nombre propio

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Proper names are nouns or nominal groups explicitly created to designate and refer to unique beings, whether animate or inanimate (Real Academia Española [RAE], 2025). A proper name is a symbol of identity, ownership, and individuality. Naming Social Work with capital initials, as a proper noun, defines the profession as a subject and sets it apart from others, thereby eliminating ambiguity in its interpretation. However, why is this consideration necessary? This claim for recognition is, above all, political. It aims to symbolically reaffirm the ethical, epistemological, and methodological validity of our scientific discipline and profession.

According to Honneth's theory (1995), which builds on Hegelian philosophy, recognition means recognizing or being recognized, in the sense of identifying, distinguishing, or becoming aware of being something based on particular characteristics. Recognition is considered essential for human development, social justice, and individual and collective identity formation. Honneth argues that recognition operates across different dimensions: interpersonal recognition, which occurs in face-to-face relationships; legal recognition, associated with rights and legal status; and social recognition, referring to social esteem and prestige. These dimensions are fundamental to forming any professional identity, as social relations and the contexts in which professions operate validate and legitimize their existence. The way society names and represents a profession, and the recognition it gives it in these dimensions, strongly determine its status and visibility.

The recognition of Social Work remains an unresolved challenge in many countries. Although its identity as a profession has consolidated in much of the world, there is still a lack of understanding among the general public, other professionals, and, at times, even among

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ourselves. Despite achievements in research and regulation, the social representation of Social Work remains linked to vocation, charity, social assistance, and subordination to other professions such as psychology, medicine, sociology, or education. Garrett (2010) interprets this delegitimization as stemming from the devaluation of the populations served, who often face a systematic denial of their dignity and personal and cultural worth. This denial affects not only the service users but also the perception and recognition of the profession itself. As a result, Social Work receives less recognition than other professions, which also translates into a constant demand for "quality control" regarding social workers' competence, trustworthiness, and professional commitment. This situation manifests in professional invisibility, subalternity, and disqualification, encroachment upon its functions and areas of expertise, and widespread ignorance about its tasks, roles, and objectives.

In the research domain, social Work has traditionally been associated with the individual and the subjective, lacking generalization and quantification in its findings. This perspective has contributed to Social Work's limited epistemological-scientific status, leading to its perception as a "lesser" science than more established and recognized disciplines. It is erroneously viewed as a field without training or methodologies, dependent on external theories, and perceived as lacking regulation, consistency, legitimacy, and distinct identity. However, this narrow perspective does not reflect the whole reality of our research. The current scientific system –biased toward natural and biomedical sciences and favoring positive results– limits the publication and recognition of research that emerges from real-world issues and practical challenges. Since its inception, Social Work has conducted science in the streets through professional interventions that, though often undocumented in mainstream academic literature, result from rigorous and systematic analysis, design, implementation, and evaluation processes. This bias can distort understanding of social phenomena by prioritizing perspectives that often overlook everyday practice. Thus, the lack (or denial) of recognition can be understood as a manifestation of the misunderstanding of the inherent link between theory and practice, as articulated in the self-definition and regulatory framework of Social Work.

Therefore, following Houston (2016), recognition involves acknowledging the value and rigor of Social Work's practical methodologies in constructing scientific knowledge –knowledge that must adopt a critical stance, challenge social structures and the established order, and move away from positivist and pathologizing approaches. The science of Social Work must not succumb to so-called "objective" criteria to claim its place. The social status of this discipline must be legitimized and grounded in scientific knowledge validated through its praxis.

Ultimately, these limitations affect not only the public image of the profession but also the confidence and value of the academic and professional spheres. As a result, social workers struggle to attain value, legitimacy, and recognition to affirm and nurture their professional identity. In this regard, and drawing on Foucault (1972), language and discourse reflect reality and have the power to shape and configure it. Naming Social Work as a unique and legitimate



field of study and practice is not merely an act of resistance against the devaluation of the profession –it is also a declaration of its professional and scientific identity and autonomy. It establishes a framework for evaluating and valuing Social Work based on its theoretical and practical contributions. For this reason, I invite editors, researchers, and professionals from any field to refer to Social Work as a proper noun, with capital initials, to recognize and reaffirm its value and legitimacy as a profession grounded in practice and scientific discipline.

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