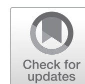

Joining Voices for Social Inclusion: Activism and Resilience of Professionals Working with People in Situations of Vulnerability

Ana Luísa Costa and Susana Coimbra

Abstract

Activism in educational, social, and community intervention is widespread in literature as an essential professional role in promoting inclusion and social justice for people in situations of vulnerability. Professionals who work with these populations are in a privileged position for informal and situated learning and engagement with professional activism. This contribution reflects upon the many obstacles that may hinder its more prominent expression, but also on its outcomes in terms of learning inclusion, resilience and the process of overcoming the challenges evident in (re)building of professional identities. This involves considering processes that can be decisive in the way people in situations of vulnerability are perceived, heard, supported, empowered, and included.

Keywords

Professional activism · People in situations of vulnerability · Resilience · Social inclusion · Social justice · Find a voice · Empathy · Situated learning

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1 Introduction

The increase of vulnerability in Europe, in particular for migrants, refugees, and other people at risk of poverty and social exclusion, combined with their low chance of civic and political participation, poses unprecedented challenges to professionals[1] who work with them through educational, social, and community intervention. It is noteworthy that a thoughtful and critical look at these professionals' ethical-political attention and commitments is within the scope of their work. It is assumed that it needs to be continually cogitated and invested in when working with people in situations of vulnerability. These claims are especially true in the challenging pandemic

[1] By 'professionals' we refer to practitioners from several areas, such as education, psychology, social work, health, law.

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context we have experienced and how this has accentuated inequalities and breaches of fundamental rights.

According to the UN report of 2021 [1], years, or even decades, of progress have been impaired or even reversed in important civilization milestones such as eradicating poverty, chronic hunger, or gender inequality. Societies struggled to guarantee access to the most basic needs for all. In fact, the pandemic exposed and intensified inequalities within and between societies. People who in (a) situation(s) of vulnerability, were/are not only at greater risk of becoming infected by the virus, but also of suffering from its gigantic social and economic repercussions that are as of yet to be fully grasped. Professionals who work with them play a key role in rebounding from this trajectory. They may decisively contribute to the (re)building of societies and communities, turning them into more fair, equitable, democratic and inclusive in different domains such as education, employment and health.

However, in order to contribute to more participative and resilient societies, professionals need to become engaged and resilient themselves. This does not happen without support or scaffolding. Nor does it happen solely based on their initial education and training, despite its importance of course. Actually, Clark et al. [2] observed, in a study with counsellors who work with people experiencing poverty, that training (formal and informal/experiential learning), knowledge (e.g. about intersectionality, privilege, oppression), skills (e.g. being alert/sensitive to and openly address the impact of poverty and social class), socio-political awareness and advocacy with or on behalf of the people they work with, are core interrelated dimensions for ethical and competent practice with people in situations of vulnerability. As underlined by the authors, these dimensions build on and reinforce each other, and so by advocating for people experiencing poverty, counsellors (continue to) gain training, knowledge, awareness, and skills to inform their practices and serve people on the micro, meso, and macro levels.

In turn, based on a study with (activist) educators working in schools, Stern and Brown [3] locate activism as a coping mechanism against hopelessness, anxiety, or trends of depression in their field of practice. Representing not only a mechanism for self-preservation, but also a response to these traumatic conditions, through mobilizing for action towards the social justice ideals for public education that they hold dear.

Thus, considering the relevance of these professionals' further involvement with the causes of the people they work with, and commitment to inclusion, participation, and social justice, we start our discussion by reflecting on the significance of professional activism, the political professional role within the work context and penciling out some of the obstacles imposed on it. Thereafter, we concentrate our concerns on the potential for pedagogical and resilience development, for professionals and for the people they work with. Finally, we seek to deconstruct some well-intentioned but counter-productive perspectives embedded in society, literature, and intervention and how they are reflected in expressions such as "vulnerable populations", "to give voice" and some narrow and misleading conceptions of 'resilience'.

Our contribution is offered in the scope of the European project *LIDA—Learning Inclusion in a Digital Age: to Belong and Find a Voice in a Changing Europe*. It aims to contribute to the project's goals; in particularly with regard to the analysis of practices that promote social inclusion and participation of adults in situations of social vulnerability, articulating different levels of interest including policy and society, the education sector and institutions, and professionals and people in situations of vulnerability with whom they work.

2 Being a Professional Activist: Significance and Barriers

In the face of vulnerability and social exclusion, it is crucial that professionals recognize that despite being empowering to share outrage with the people with whom they they work; to be truly transformational, they must frame their struggles in as founded upon an awareness of sociopolitical injustice [4, 5]. Thus, it is important that they commit themselves to social change through conscientization and a joint struggle against the oppressive

structures that generate and maintain it [6, 7]. Such an interventional/pedagogical approach implies assuming an ethical-political professional stance and praxis, that goes beyond the micro circle of palliative treatment, through the provision of basic services, to resolve everyday problems and needs of people in situations of vulnerability. It implies questioning, exposing, and struggling against the macro, globalized, and established forces that maintain injustice and promote exclusion.

The relevance of incorporating political reflection and action when working with vulnerability issues is widespread in literature from diverse fields of knowledge [8–14] and as well as with respect to professional/ethical guidelines (e.g., [15, 16]). Nevertheless, despite these recommendations, being political when facing vulnerability, social exclusion, and injustice, does not seem to be part of a generalized and conflict-free practice in educational, social and community intervention [5, 9, 17].

Gal and Weiss-Gal [18] identify a group of dimensions that help explain professionals' political (dis)engagement: 'opportunity' at the level of political institutions, 'facilitation' on the part of the organizations where professionals work, and personal 'motivation', that is internal (e.g., arising from individual interests/values) or external (e.g., professional training). Other studies also point out specific features as potential predictors of professional activism. Some of these are personal or social, such as age, interest in politics, lack of educational preparation or training in political practice, position in the profession, perception of political action as integral to their professional responsibility or a distinct valuation of social justice. However, others relate to the work context itself, such as organizational culture, support or discouragement of the opportunity to participate [10, 13, 19].

A recent qualitative study about professional activism, with a multidisciplinary and multiprofessional approach [17], presents a set of interrelated aspects that potentially contribute to professionals' disengagement. Namely, professionals' political alienation, accommodation and indifference, possibly related to a lack of critical thinking, and of political conscience and knowledge, that appears to be reinforced by an apolitical stance of the (non)governmental institutions in which they work. A conservative and low participatory tradition in the sector and dependence on funders agendas, may also contribute to curbing the critical autonomy of organizations and professionals who might refrain from supporting strongly expressed political perspectives. The non-political vision of work, often seen as a correlate of professionalism, can lead to mistrust, prejudice, and exclusion of non-conformist professionals, that frequently harm their careers or even put their jobs at risk, which already tend to be precarious. Finally, this is particularly harmful for women, who already have fewer opportunities, and who tend to report heavier workloads and higher vulnerability.

Actually, it is important to emphasize that all these obstacles affect women to an even greater degree, as a result of gender inequality whether in the family, the social, or (specially) the work context, which implies double time management responsibilities and greater effort and risk in engaging with professional activism.

Therefore, despite individual motivations and predispositions for political action, contextual, workplace and political conditions may be crucial in preventing or encouraging involvement in different aspects of policy practice [10, 19]. To be a professional activist implies jumping out of a private and safer work role, and to publicly expose and defend the adoption of a political position; one that usually implies controversy and risk. As pointed out by Grieger and Ponterotto [5], professionals need to 'rock the boat' to create change and this means rocking their own professional boat. In this respect, Greenslade et al. [9] draw attention to the negative impact of contemporary welfare ideologies on adopting a professional activist position. Favouring the dominance of technical practice models at the expense of activist approaches, based on a supposed neutrality or apolitical positioning, can lead to organisational–professional ethical conflicts and to the limitation or concealment of activist practices for fear of professional consequences.

As already mentioned, the financial instability and funding dependence of most organizations

also plays a fundamental role here. Concretely, it can encourage alignment with social and political agendas that set priorities that do not necessarily coincide with those of the teams and professionals working in the field. Furthermore, it implies a continual state applying for funding and the added bureaucratic and administrative burden that follows. All this ends up conditioning the culture of the organizations, and potentially workers' willingness or audacity for activist engagement.

Looking at this from a macro perspective, it is inevitable that this leads to work barriers and limitations reflecting a capitalist and neoliberal political and economic agenda. Structures that guarantee stability and career progression and the acceleration of dynamic work practices are weakened and this in turn leads to unpredictability, precariousness, and insecurity. As a result, relationships and the work organization as a collective is compromised hindering long-term commitments to professional activism that can combat exclusion and social injustice [20].

The fatigue and discouragement implied by these processes, adds to the personal and emotional effort and strain that working with people in situations of vulnerability and injustice entails. It certainly restricts the motivation and effort of professionals to resist these barriers. Nevertheless, knowing that this political professional role persists and is continuously valued, despite all the professional and ethical-political conflicts and risks inherent in adopting a professional activist position, drives us to consider further and reflect upon what makes a difference and lends support to resilience and resistance to these obstacles.

3 Professionals' Experience as a Trigger of Resilience

Working with people in situations of vulnerability may be very challenging, demanding, and stressful or even induce burnout and mental illness. However, it may also be a rich and very rewarding learning opportunity, bringing a sense of purpose and meaning, and the consciousness that it is possible to make a difference in people's lives. This is despite initial professional training tending to emphasise cognitive knowledge and technical skills, and neglecting the importance of strategies that foster professionals resilience [21] and prepare them for policy practice [10, 19].

Resilience is a complex and multi-faceted construct that is hard to define in a consensual agreed manner. Most of the common definitions highlight the ability to 'recover' or "bounce back" from adversity. Initial studies, in the 1970s and 1980s, focused on high-risk children who thrive against all odds. Those children tended to be perceived as having somewhat 'magical' invulnerable features. Nowadays, empirical evidence shows that it is not an innate, fixed, and rare ability. It may sound magical, but it is an *ordinary magic* that results from the action of common internal and external protection mechanisms that may (or may not) be available and activated in most people and contexts in order to change and adjust an expected risk trajectory [22, 23].

In a broad sense, resilience may be defined as "the capacity of a dynamic system to adapt successfully to disturbances that threaten system function, viability, or development" ([22], pp. 10). Resilience implies, then, the attainment of favourable results in terms of adjustment in spite of (or because of) a considerable exposition to risk, thanks to the action of protective mechanisms. To define how bad a risk is or how good is an adjustment is probably one of the most difficult challenges in resilience research. It may often lead to its discredit as a scientific construct, if one falls into one of the opposite sides: anything goes or nothing is good enough. Another common pitfall is to consider that any of these variables may be defined universally, for all the people, in all situations or contexts. Risk and adjustment are, necessarily, heterogeneous, unstable, and embedded in the social values of each group [24, 25]. Most of the valued adjustment outcomes of resilience research are largely influenced by the neoliberal paradigm, according to which it is important to succeed in all the normative tasks societies expect from individuals.

However, there are many ways to succeed that may be more important for the individual, including his/her ability for self-determined participation in public and private life, and well-being, among other things. This suggests that resilience is, therefore, a question of human rights, involving psychological, but also political and socio-economic dimensions [26].

Research on resilience in professional or occupational settings is still "in its infancy" [21]. This is despite it being increasingly viewed as a critical resource for the twenty-first century, in particular in complex, stressful, and emotionally challenging environments [27]. In fact, working toward the ideal of social transformation and justice, requires not only critical, ethical and political awareness, but also resilience, conviction and persistence. The literature shows that in the face of the obstacles posed to professional activism, particularly those resulting from professional-organizational conflict, professionals may respond by staying and 'coping', 'breaking down' and leaving, or staying and resisting. However, relatively little is known about the last, namely about why professionals choose to resist and what supports their resistance [9, 19].

We believe it is interesting and worthy of reflection, how the work context can also offer an answer to this challenge. Despite its potential to inhibit professional activism it also offers a privileged place for informal, situated, and holistic (activism) learning [28–30]; and it also creates fertile ground for resilience and keeping up to do date with ethical-professional purposes. Accordingly, professionals working with people in situations of vulnerability are in an advantageous position and also experience an emergent need to develop and learn about resilience. It is important to keep in mind that a learning by doing approach, has been understood in the literature righlty as going beyond the cognitive realm, integrating emotional, relational and affective learning outcomes [28, 29, 31–33].

Tacit knowledge comes with the experience and the wisdom that turns professionals into people who want and know how to make a difference in their work [34, 35]. We are refering specifically to processes of conscientization, such that the acquisition or strengthening of a sense of (in) justice, is related to inter-personal relational learning that offers experience of empathy, altruism, cultural competence and humility.

4 Antidotes for Professionals' Burnout and Activism Disengagement?

The experience of working with people in situations of vulnerability creates opportunities for conscientization, i.e., for the awareness of social injustice and oppressive structures, which perpetuate inequality, vulnerability and exclusion. Sensitized by the concerns and struggles of the people they work with and eventually inspired by other fellow activists [28, 29], professionals are prompted to reflect on their ethical-professional purposes and commitments. This gives rise to feelings of a duty to fairness. This sense of (in)justice, emerging or being enhanced through their work experience and socialization, has the potential to guide their intervention to the political sphere, committing them with causes of the people with whom they work [17, 31]. Hence, we highlight the role of work experiences and relationships, reinforced by emotion and affection, as rich contexts of shared, informal and situated learning and political engagement [28, 29, 36].

However, professionals working with people in situations of vulnerability are themselves particularly vulnerable to burnout. According to the classical definition of Maslach and Jackson [37] the burnout syndrome comprises emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, and reduced personal fulfilment. Burnout produces detrimental and progressive physical, psychological, and behavioural effects, such as feelings of fatigue, sleep disorders, headaches, lack of attention and concentration, feelings of alienation, irritability, aggressiveness, isolation, cynicism, depression, or even suicide ideation. Simionato and Simpson [38] found, in their systematic review among psychotherapists, that more than half of the professionals referred medium to high levels of burnout. According to their study, the most prominent risk factors were age (being young), having

little experience in the field, and being too involved in the problems of people they assist. Empathy among professionals who work with people in situations of vulnerability is activated or learned by work experience, providing better mutual understanding and appreciation. However, it may also be a double-edged sword.

Empathy may be defined as the ability to vicariously feel what another person feels [39], making it possible to fully apprehend and understand the emotional states of the other [40]. This is a multifaceted psychological construct composed of affective (empathic concern and personal distress) and cognitive (perspective taking and fantasy) components [40, 41]. According to the empathy-altruism hypothesis, empathy increases the probability of altruism. Altruistic behaviours are the ones which ultimate goal is to increase the well-being of others [42–44].

Empathy is usually regarded as a universally positive trait. However, results suggest that empathic feelings towards others, especially when combined with an intense desire of being accepted, loved, and to belong, may lead to the illusion that we are being helpful when in fact we are not [45]. This process tends to protect and reinforce a self-image as a good person. It also questions the actual meaning and usefulness of empathy, since empathy may turn us narrow-minded, and trigger parochial feelings towards our own which, in turn, lead to biased reasoning [45, 46]. Furthermore, one of the main obstacles that can arise to professionals who work with people in situations of vulnerability stems from the dosage and type of empathy involved in the relationships established with people they assist. In particular, high levels of personal distress more probably will paralyse than energise the implementation of successful intervention strategies.

Thus, if empathy is recognised for its mutual positive effects on the interaction with others, it can also have be potentially negative effects on those who empathise. If this emotional contagion is not regulated by the separation of perspectives, a complete fusion between the self and the other will occur, generating reactions of alarm, personal discomfort, and vicarious traumatisation [47, 48]. Instead, it would be important that these professionals activate compassion and genuine and effective altruism [44, 49], without drowning in the suffering of the people they work with. This way, professionals will probably make a more conscious and efficacious effort to understand another's perspective and culture, which may be very different from his or her own, even when they were born and they live in the same society.

In fact, professionals in this field of work are constantly dealing with diversity and therefore need to have a good repertoire of knowledge and skills [8]. Yet, knowledge and skills alone are not sufficient. It is also important to have intercultural competence that results from experiential learning [50]. Intercultural competence is a continuous and dynamic process and has an important affective component: experiencing positive emotions resulting from understanding and valuing cultural differences, i.e., the intercultural sensitivity [51]. It is not an innate human characteristic. On the contrary, it may, can, and should be stimulated. It represents a subjective developmental experience of progressive accommodation of cultural difference, from "ethnocentrism" (Denial, Defence and Minimisation) to "ethnorelativism" (Acceptance, Adaptation and Integration) [50].

The concept of cultural humility goes even further. Based upon the premise that culture is not static, but fluid and subjective, it underlines the importance to be continuously challenged to understand "others" and otherness, and to challenge institutional barriers that cause systemic power imbalances. It stresses the need for individual and institutional genuine accountability, in considering the perspective of other and otherness and not only in tolerating it. This cultural humility presupposes a commitment to critical self-reflection and continuous shared learning [52, 53].

We consider that all these features are essential (often implicit) knowledge when working with people in situations of vulnerability. Ultimately, they may be the antidotes for burnout and disengagement, and explain why some professionals still choose or manage to maintain, or

even reinforce, a political professional stance in their work (against all odds). Assuming that by fostering their sense of (in)justice and strengthening their relational skills, these professionals may become more resilient, which supports them in overcoming burnout and other obstacles identified and see their professional activist identity and practice reinforced.

5 Final Remarks: Questioning Commonplaces as a First Step for Change

In-depth reflection on the intervention with people in situations of vulnerability, reveals the need to maintain a watchful eye on some terminological and conceptual (uncritical) commonplaces in this field of work. They shape our minds as citizens, and particularly as professionals, often influenced as we are by social media, scientific literature and/or institutional guidelines; contribute to the oversimplification and depoliticization of realities and experiences that are, in fact, complex, challenging, and most of the times hard and unfair; and can be tokenistic, blaming and stigmatizing themselves. The first step for change, as mentioned before, is to question the innate, romanticized and acritical conception of resilience for both professionals and the people with whom they work.

First, resilience is not voluntary or a question of will, and it does not emerge from interventions exclusively focused on the person. It depends largely on the socioeconomic resources available. Understanding resilience from a critical and contextualized perspective defies the bias imposed by those who hold the power, acknowledging that the access to and the control over resources depend on many factors besides the intraindividual or motivational ones: cultural, social, economic, political, and even biological factors intervene, making it a product of structurally social inequalities [26].

The complexity attached to resilience research and intervention is worthwhile. In particular, if one takes into consideration all the potential beneficial outcomes and implications for change and improvement when the focus is shifted from the traditional and dominant deficit perspective that shows how people may fail and succumb to the one which tries to figure out how people thrive [25]. However, it is important to keep in mind that any intervention aimed at promoting resilience must avoid top-down approaches. These approaches tend to be deployed in the name of the ones who are in a more vulnerable position. What they try to do however, is to make them more neoliberally productive, and feeling responsible for what they achieve or not. So, they tend to benefit the ones who were already in a powerful position [54].

Thus, to be resilient is not equal to be successful. It implies a worthwhile adjustment in spite of and/or because of the presence of risk. To be exposed to risk is a good way of developing resilience, according to the inoculation model [22, 25]. However, as it happens with vaccination, people do not become properly inoculated if the exposition to the risk is too high, too soon, or too late. Exposition to risk does not guarantee, thus, that people become resilient. They need to get the right dosage at the right time and with adequate support from their immune system. Similarly, to becoming resilient, people need the development of adequate protective mechanisms within themselves and/or their context. People play an important role in the whole process, undoubtedly, but they are far from being the only ones who matter. In fact, when the risk is too high and the external resources are too scarce, resilience may be the least probable outcome. Above all, in these situations, people cannot be responsible for their own (lack of) resilience, it is not fair, they are not supposed to become resilient against all the odds.

Moreover, resilience is not synonymous with invulnerability: no one is invulnerable all the time, in all situations, towards all types of risk, no matter what. In fact, within a resilience framework, the vulnerable group is the one who is exposed to low levels of adversity, but despite that presents unexpected low levels of adjustment. Research suggests that it is a quite infrequent group. It is unusual to do poorly in life without any plausible explanation. If most people possess in themselves and in their environment

enough resources to adapt, it means that people in this group probably are exposed to an unknown, unmeasured, or hidden adversity [22]. It is not the case of the so-called “vulnerable people/populations”.

Then, to speak of ‘vulnerable people/populations’ also implies interrogation and scrutiny. It labels and reinforces otherness, and it becomes more and more important to critically question and denaturalize the oppression that is underlying this expression. UN DESA [55] recognises that defining vulnerability is difficult, since its determinants range from socioeconomic status and living conditions to the power structures that underpin social organization. Accordingly, it is near impossible to find a universal operationalization of vulnerability that is dynamic and heterogeneous. Vulnerability, as resilience, is embedded in cultural values in such a way that is not possible to find a universal way to identify it [56]. When we talk about “vulnerable people” or “vulnerable groups”, we are adopting a categorical approach according to each we classify them as being vulnerable rather than identifying and combating the situations of vulnerability in which they are put into by society. It is the case of social and/or economic vulnerability, and the undervaluation, discrimination, and stigmatization that come with it. When people exist in a situation of disadvantage including for example with respect to the distribution of income, housing, education and health, they are most of the time, less prone to behave in an autonomous or self-determined mannery [57] and have fewer opportunities for their voices to be heard and considered.

Expressions such as ‘to give voice’, are widespread in literature about intervention with people who are oppressed, excluded and underrepresented, and are also described as among the main aims of organizations/projects working with them. Being critical, political, and ethical, in intervention and research, implies questioning these kinds of expressions and scanning for inherent power issues, labelling, and patronizing approaches that are themselves discriminatory and exclusionary. Claims to “give voice” to women, children, people with a disability, victims of racism or LGBTphobia, or any other underrepresented, marginalized and oppressed group may look morally just and have been largely framed by good intentions. It represents a shift from working *on* to working *with* [58]. Of course, at first glance, the metaphor of “giving voice” is quite evocative of social change against privilege, providing the floor to those who are social or economically powerless. However, on adopting a perspective of giving voice to someone or some group, it is assumed that someone or some group does not have any, or is not using it loudly or well enough. So, one may assume, that it is our mission, as professionals and researchers, to amplify or translate these voices. It is worth noting though that during this process, these voices will be the object of transformation and (mis)interpretation, and this may actually reinforce the hierarchies of power that were supposed to combat [58–60].

Much of this terminology and conceptions of the problem are present in organizational guidelines, which guide both intervention and research in this field. This strengthens the relevance and pertinence of problematizing them as counterproductive, due to a stigmatizing and condescending attitude, often opposing the purposes claimed, namely the promotion of inclusion and civic and political participation. We do not give people a voice, they already have a voice. Namely, a voice as a comprehensive concept, that goes beyond the ability to communicate, by considering peoples’ knowledge, principles, values, positions, and their way of seeing the world and their place/role within it.

To listen to their voice is important, just as it is important to translate, mediate, amplify, speak out for the ones who are generally not heard because their position lacks power. Our job as professionals who work, through intervention and research, with people in situations of social vulnerability, aiming to promote inclusion and participation, is to learn with each other how to speak out together, to stand and work alongside them, not “representing” them but creating space for them to speak and guaranteeing they (and their claims) are heard. Letting and making everybody else listen, be aware, care, and fight

against the imbalance of power and injustice within our societies. To speak of participation implies that the struggles are carried out by/with the people and their concerns. Not in their name but by/with them. From their place of speech, recognizing and valuing their representativeness and self-determination. Ensuring as Freire put it, that “the presence of the oppressed in the struggle for liberation is what it should be: not a pseudo-participation, but a committed action” ([36], p.44).

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