

Exploring the potential of ethics of care for a transformative perspective of sustainability in social work education. Implications for supervision.

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Exploring the potential of ethics of care for a transformative perspective of sustainability in social work education: Implications for supervision.

As in other areas, sustainability has gained increasing attention in the field of social work education. Nevertheless, various voices consider that perspectives of sustainability are needed that are more radical than those inspired exclusively by the 2030 Agenda. In this context, the paper explores the specific potential and implications of ethics of care for adopting a transformative perspective of sustainability. To this end, the study first proposes an original framework, drawing on key ideas on the ethics of care, which can be useful in order to explore its implications in social work education. Second, it empirically explores the case of social work studies in the University of València (Spain). Specifically, the research addresses how ethics of care is or can be adopted in the supervision of the final end-of-degree projects or dissertations (*Trabajos Final de Grado*). This exploration draws on interviews with experts and managers from the University and on two discussion groups with teachers from the Social Work Department. The results show that the implications of adopting ethics of care in social work teaching may relate with very different aspects, from political commitment and the construction of identities to relations with peers, teachers, the community and the natural environment.

Keywords: social work education; ethics of care; sustainability; supervision; end-of-degree dissertations.

1. Introduction

The topic of sustainability has gained increasing attention in all areas of society, including education. The field of social work education is not an exception: an increasing corpus of literature demonstrates this interest in how to introduce sustainability into social work teaching (Jones, 2010; Gray et al., 2012; Drolet et al., 2015; Naranjo, 2020). It is considered that introducing sustainability in social work education will allow human and environmental rights and social and environmental justice to be connected and reinforced (Androff et al., 2017; Cámara Estrella, 2018).

The 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have been widely recognised as a universal framework that lays out a clear pathway on how to adopt sustainability while considering social, economic and environmental issues. This potential has also been recognised in discussions on social work practice (Authors anonymised, 2021; López-Carlassare & García, 2021; IASSW, ICSW & IFSW, 2018). In this sense, a wide range of institutions, from UNESCO (2017) to various international university networks, understand that the incorporation of the SDGs in higher education represents an opportunity to put sustainability at the centre of teaching practices. Nevertheless, a number of authors consider that the SDGs comprise a very limited perspective of sustainability. For critics, the SDGs reflect unequal global structures of power — which are not addressed in the 2030 Agenda (Koehler 2016; Martínez Osés & Martínez, 2016). Moreover, the SDGs do not question sustained growth, nor do they consider the deeply political nature of sustainability issues (Belda-Miquel et al., 2019).

For this reason, a number of voices have called for a more transformative perspective of sustainability in the implementation of policies in different domains (Fukuda-Parr & Hegstad, 2018; Engster, 2020) if more just societies are to be achieved. In this regard, several authors have defended the importance that ethics of care may have in exploring and advocating a stronger and more transformative perspective of sustainability. Thus, ethics of care has been used as a critical lens to explore sustainability issues in very different domains (Giraud, 2001; Beacham, 2018; Lee & Zhang, 2020). An example of this exploration is made by de los Reyes (2013), who states, given that “sustainable development is riddled with ambivalence (with the weak form or economic sustainability and the strong form or world sustainability) which renders its normative claim questionable”, it is possible to endorse an idea of “strong sustainability substantiated by the principle of care in eco-feminist ethics” (pp. 131).

Since Noddings (1984), a number of studies have explored the specific interest of ethics of care for a more transformative approach in education and, more recently, in higher education (Vázquez Verdera, 2019; Corbera et al., 2020). But few studies have specifically explored how ethics of care can be relevant in adopting a more transformative perspective of sustainability in this domain (Alves et al., 2011; Michelfelder & Jones 2016).

In the field of social work, ethics of care began to garner attention in the social work field from the mid 2000s (Bozalek, 2016). In fact, a number of works have explored its potential for addressing a more reflective, critical and transformative approach to the profession, from very different perspectives and domains (Parton, 2003; Meagher, 2004; Lloyd, 2006, Hermesen & Embregts, 2015; Bozalek, 2016; Shaw, 2019; Byers and Saphiro, 2020). Nevertheless, when we refer to reflections on how ethics of care can be of use in adopting a more transformative perspective of social work education, very few previous studies address this (Hermesen & Petri Embregts, 2015). Specifically, no research has explored the contribution that can be made by the adoption of ethics of care in the task of incorporating a more transformative perspective of sustainability in social work.

In view of the above, this paper explores how, in the current context of the pressing demand to incorporate sustainability as an approach in higher education, social work studies can draw on the ethics of care to adopt a transformative perspective of the issue of sustainability. To this end, the paper first proposes an original framework, drawing on the ideas of the debates on ethics of care, which can be useful in order to understand the implications of adopting this perspective in social work education. Second, the case of the adoption of ethics of care in social work studies in the University of València (Spain) is empirically explored. Specifically, addressing how ethics of care is already or can be adopted as a relevant approach in order to bring about a transformative perspective of sustainability in the supervision of the final end-of-degree projects or dissertations that all students have to carry out at the end of their four-year studies (the Trabajo Final de Grado — TFG, or Bachelor's Degree Final Dissertation). This exploration draws on interviews with managers and experts in ethics of care at the University (who are also supervisors of end-of-degree theses), and on the results of a discussion group with teachers from the Social Work Department.

We acknowledge that, for a full comprehension of the potential of ethics of care for a transformative perspective of sustainability in social work education, the voices of different stakeholders should be considered. As will be discussed later, the implications of ethics of care for social work teaching not only involve teachers and university managers, but also students, practitioners and the social environment. Nevertheless, only perspectives from university experts and teachers were considered in this study. We consider that this limitation does not invalidate our research, as it is only an initial step with the limited scope of addressing a first identification and exploration of relevant

aspects regarding the implications of ethics of care in social work teaching, and with the finite objectives of proposing and testing a framework for addressing an understudied issue.

We also recognise that this full comprehension of the potential of ethics of care should imply addressing other pedagogical spaces beyond the TFG. Nevertheless, we consider that the TFG is a subject of particular importance for a first exploration of the implications of adopting the ethics of care. It is a critical moment in students' educational trajectories in which critical thinking and the ability to develop proposals is essential, but it also involves relationships with teachers, peers and the environment. Moreover, changing the way supervision is carried out in TFG has been seen as a key strategy changing educational trajectories (Ferrer & García-Borés, 2012).

The next section explores the aforementioned topics and proposes the framework to be used. Section 3 explains the methodology, and Section 4 explores the empirical case mentioned by using the proposed the framework. Finally, Section 5 presents some final reflections and remarks.

2. Theoretical framework.

2.1 Ethics of care and social work

Ethics of care is not a single, unified field; it presents very different forms that connect with a diversity of perspectives, with an emphasis on feminist debates (Bozalek, 2016). In any case, the scope of the present study goes beyond the classification or the discussion of the different contributions in the field. In fact, the focus is, on the one hand, to draw on the common ground and on the essential ideas of this approach; and, on the other hand, to identify some specific ideas relevant for the aims of this study — exploring ethics of care as a way of asserting a transformative perspective of sustainability in social work teaching.

Since the late 1980s and early 1990s, ethics of care has increasingly gained influence (Bozalek, 2016). Considering the social work profession, it began to receive full attention from the mid 2000s, as way of rethinking managerial trends in social work and for advocating a more transformative and reflective approach (Hermesen & Petri Embregts, 2015). Following the foundational ideas of Gilligan (1982), it can be said that ethics of care places ideas of relationality, compassion and the partiality of perspectives

at the forefront. This contrasts with universalist justice perspectives, which emphasise equality, impartiality and rights (Bozalek, 2016; Hughes, 2017). Care theorists reject the primacy of universalism, rationalism and individualism, as well as the exclusive focus on abstract rights and obligations of individuals. In contrast, they build their theory around relationships and emphasise people's vulnerability and interdependence as social and physical beings (Nodding, 2010), in general, but specifically in the process of the vulneration of rights.

From this standpoint, responsibilities arise within particular relations, and personal autonomy is also produced by our relationships (Reamer, 2013 and 2016; Burnor and Raley, 2010; Banks, 1999). In this relation-building processes, emotions play a key role, as well as the recognition of the vulnerability of bodies and the centrality of reciprocity and cooperation as key values (Carrasco, Borderías & Torns, 2011). In consideration of this, ethics of care places the particular and the contextual at the centre. From this perspective, it seeks to support the specific needs and interests of vulnerable communities (Noddings, 1984).

For the aims of this study, these basic common ideas can be completed with the contribution of authors who emphasise the importance of environment in ethics of care. In this sense, Tronto (2010) considers that care “is not located specifically in families or dyadic relationships. Rather, care is portrayed as holistic and as a broad, public and political activity. This understanding is particularly useful in the higher education context” (Tronto, 2010, in Bozalek et al., 2014, pp. 449–450). In Tronto's terms, care is an “activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, ourselves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web” (Tronto, 1993, pp. 103). In any case, in order to be attentive to the needs of others and the environment, one must also be attentive to one's own needs (Tronto, 1993).

Other authors, such as Noddings (2012), Herrero (2013) and Bozalek & Winberg (2018), echo these ideas and consider that emphasising the importance of the environment in ethics of care allows a more holistic approach, a more complex understanding of social problems, and a more comprehensive attention to the entire community and to all its parts.

These considerations directly connect with our aim of considering ethics of care in order to adopt a transformative perspective of sustainability in social work teaching.

These general ideas can be summarised in some operational concepts which can be of assistance in exploring the implications of the ethics of care for social work teaching.

First, ethics of care advocates the centrality of care in life. In this sense, it considers *physical and emotional care as a lifelong human need which implies three interconnected spheres*: care of oneself; care of the other, on the bases of interdependence and connection with other's needs (Tronto, 2010); and care for the environment, including the natural environment and the community, which incorporates responsibility regarding our way of living, ecological consciousness and the practice of justice (Herrero, 2013).

Second, *reciprocity and cooperation* emerge as key values in these relations of care at the centre of life, in relationship-building processes and for the exercise of responsibility (Carrasco, Borderías & Torns, 2011).

Third, in order to exercise care, there is a need to recognise the vulnerability of our bodies (Carrasco, Borderías & Torns, 2011) and the fact that we are all part of a complex web (Tronto, 1993) in which power relations are permanently at play. This implies acknowledging the deeply political nature of relationships, as well as of our own bodies. For this, adopting ethics of care implies the *politicisation of bodies and relations*.

Fourth, the *construction of identities* is central for the ethics of care, as relations of care are processes in which identities are developed in the exercise of compassion and through the interaction of partial perspectives. This includes both personal and professional identities (Hermsen & Petri Embregts, 2015).

Fifth, as ethics of care places at the centre relationships with others and with the environment, it implies *personal, public and political commitment and engagement* (Tronto, 1993). In this sense, commitments to the natural environment and to the community are mutually reinforcing (Noddings, 2012; Herrero, 2013).

2.2 Ethics of care and education.

Since Noddings (1984), it has been posited that the virtue of care could be placed at the

centre of educational work. Noddings argues that such a reorientation would not undermine, but rather enhance, the quality and depth of teaching, learning and research. For Diller (1988), ethics of care opens up a number of possibilities for fresh thinking in order to establish a caring community within educational environments.

Subsequently, research has been carried out on the roles, importance and implications of ethics of care in schools (Bergmark & Alerby, 2006; Grant et al., 2010; Thomson, 2018). Nevertheless, only in the last few years has research begun to specifically explore the implications of adopting ethics of care in higher education, addressing both theoretical considerations and empirical cases: only “very recently has caring vocabulary been heard in university settings” (Vázquez Verdera, 2019, p. 87). This research suggests that adopting ethics of care in higher education should not imply adding new words to existing vocabulary, introducing superficial changes in the teaching approach, reframing values of effectiveness and competition (Vázquez Verdera, 2019) or legitimising new forms of control though reinforcing paternalistic relations (Cantini, 2017). On the contrary, authors agree in that it should be a way of resisting dominant managerial and neoliberal university cultures (Done, Murphy & Knowler, 2016; Collett et al., 2018), as well a way of building more reflective and critical future practitioners in the case of social work teaching (Hermsen & Embregts, 2015).

This research has shown that adopting ethics of care in higher education may involve profound changes in very different aspects of university operation, management, organisation or governance, encompassing teaching, research and relations with the environment (Bozalek & Winberg, 2018; Vázquez Verdera, 2019; Corbera et al., 2020). Specifically considering the learning experience, some of these key aspects may involve the redefinition of the goals and contents of teaching and the aspirations of students (Lolich & Lynch, 2016), introducing alternative methodologies to promote care and self-care (Sykes, 2018), or highlighting the relevance of relations of collaboration and care between both caregivers and care receivers (Bozalek et al., 2014). According to Shaw (2019), it is an established practice within social work that establishes caring for people as an integral part of the profession.

The limited research that specifically deals with the adoption of ethics of care in social work also refers to these aspects. Hermsen and Embregts (2015) empirically found how both professionals and teachers consider that adopting ethics of care in social work

teaching implies rethinking goals in order to connect with students' motivations, rethinking methodologies towards a more reflective and experiential teaching practice that is more connected with the professional environment, and putting relationships between different agents at the centre. Studies such as that by Hermsen & Embregts (2015) have shown that the moral development and identity of social work students are enhanced by care education. Important aspects of this education are training in reflective practice and learning a care-centred perspective.

These ideas resonate with the results on studies on the adoption of sustainability as a perspective in higher education, a number of which agree that an integral strategy is needed, which implies changes in very different aspects of teaching. The literature has explored aspects similar to those already stated: the need to rethink learning objectives — including socio-emotional objectives and others related with care (SDSN 2017; UNESCO, 2017); more active and experiential methods and strategies (Aparicio Chofre & de Paredes Gallardo, 2018; Giménez et al., 2019); and relations — encompassing relations between teachers and students (UNESCO-IESALC, 2020) and between students and the environment (SDSN, 2017).

2.3 Towards a model for addressing ethics of care in social work education.

The aforementioned discussions enable an original operational framework to be developed that identifies the implications of adopting ethics of care and the specific aspects of the teaching and learning experience to be focused on.

Regarding the key aspects of the ethics of care, the following five aspects are considered: the centrality of care in life — implying *physical and emotional care* in the *three interconnected spheres* of ourselves, others, and the environment and communities; the centrality of *reciprocity and cooperation*; the *politicisation of bodies and relationships*; the *construction of identities* — the personal, public and political; and *commitment and engagement*.

Considering these categories, it is possible to explore the implications in the various key aspects of social work teaching: the definition of learning objectives, issues and contents; pedagogical approaches, methodologies and teaching activities; and the relations between teachers, students and the academic, social and natural environment

As stated, this framework will allow an exploration of the perspectives of experts and university teachers in order to reveal more specific implications and the opportunities and limitations of adopting the ethics of care as a way to advance a transformative perspective of sustainability in university teaching.

3. Methodology

The methodology follows a purely qualitative strategy, consistent with the nature of the object of study and the objectives of the work. Given the exploratory nature of the research, the design does not seek to make generalisations but rather to identify and discuss relevant aspects of the potential the ethics of care may have in higher education in social work. A plural methodological design has been proposed that prioritises the deductive method whilst also contemplating the inductive method. Two techniques for obtaining information were combined: interviews with experts and discussion groups with social work teachers. **As was mentioned in the introduction, the researchers considered that this focus on the perspectives of experts and teachers was adequate for the exploratory aims of the study.**

The first phase consisted of the literature review, which resulted in the identification of dimensions and categories to construct the theoretical model proposed in the previous section. This model was used to design the instruments (semi-structured interviews and discussion group scripts), to carry out the deductive analysis of the data on the bases of the categories identified and to structure the discussion.

Regarding the design and application of instruments, semi-structured interviews were conducted with three experts which were also teaching managers. All are lecturers at the University of València, with teaching experience (including tutoring TFG) in the area of social intervention, with at least ten years' specific research experience in the field of care and feminism and with positions of responsibility in teaching management for at least 3 years. The interview enquired about the implications for the teaching of the TFG regarding the different key aspects of the ethics of care identified in the framework (centrality of care, centrality of reciprocity and cooperation, etc.). For each of these aspects, experts were asked about the potential implications for the different aspects of teaching also mentioned in the framework (definition of learning objectives, issues and contents, methodologies, etc.). The interviews lasted approximately sixty minutes.

Table 1. Experts interviewed. Source: prepared by the authors

Position of expert	Gender	Code
Associate professor at Faculty of Social Sciences Director of University of València research institute of gender studies	Female	E1
Associate professor at Faculty of Social Sciences Vice Dean of Faculty of Social Sciences	Female	E2
Associate professor at Faculty of Educational Sciences Leader of University Initiatives on Sustainability in Curricula	Female	E3

Two discussion groups were carried out, comprising of five and six people. These people were members of the current TFG teaching team of the Department of Social Work and with at least two years of experience tutoring TFGs. As recommended for this type of group (Pedraz et al., 2014), this homogeneity was combined with heterogeneity in terms of position and experience. The participants all held degrees in social work and were all social work teachers, but the groups included part-time lecturers, assistant professors and associate professors. The teachers had between two and thirty years of teaching practice. The following table presents the key characteristics of the members of this group.

Table 2. Discussion groups composition. Source: prepared by the authors

Position of member of group	Years teaching experience	Gender	Code
Discussion group 1			
Associate professor	29	Female	G.1.1
Assistant professor	2	Female	G.1.2
Assistant professor	4	Male	G.1.3
Assistant professor	2	Female	G.1.4
Part time lecturer	6	Female	G.1.5
Discussion group 2			
Associate professor	25	Male	G.2.1
Assistant professor	6	Female	G.2.2
Part time lecturer	2	Male	G.2.3
Part time lecturer	4	Female	G.2.4
Part time lecturer	4	Female	G.2.5
Part time lecturer	1	Male	G.2.6

The elements of the theoretical framework were also employed in the design of the discussion: the participants were first introduced to the aspects of the care approach to be discussed and their implications for teaching. The discussion was then structured around the five aspects of teaching that were included in the framework. The discussion time lasted ninety minutes. A feedback report was made to the participants, who provided their own feedback and expanded on some comments by email.

A content analysis of the interviews and discussion groups was conducted and transcribed. The material was coded using the categories inductively identified from the theoretical framework. The information was displayed in matrixes combining the categories on the key aspects of the ethics of care with the key aspects of teaching. In the analysis, new subcategories also emerged inductively for the different categories, which appear in the discussion below.

The study conforms to internationally accepted ethical guidelines and to relevant professional ethical prescriptions. Although there is no specific ethics committee at the author's institution that research with the characteristics of this study is required to address in order to receive approval, the study followed the general recommendations of its [name of committee] on the bases of its [name of code] and in accordance with the *European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity* — as is stipulated for any research within the institution.

4. Results and discussion

This section is organised by discussing the results in terms of the five key dimensions of the ethics of care identified in the framework, which are summarised in Table 3 at the end of the section. These aspects relate to the different teaching aspects identified.

(1) Centrality of care in different spheres.

Care is generally understood by the experts and in the groups as a central and transversal dimension in the tutoring and supervision process that takes place within the framework of the TFG, just as it is also perceived as a central element in the field of social work (Shaw, 2019).

Hence, all of the experts interviewed indicated that the ethics of care and attention to everyday care play a central role as a priority topic or object of study in the TFGs, whether for research or for the design of intervention proposals. The importance of focusing on care relationships, on those who care, on those who require care and on those who suffer the effects of social structures that generate inequality and vulnerability is highlighted. This point is identified by several members of the teaching staff in the discussion groups, who also recognise care as an intrinsic aspect of social work. Despite the diversity of interests of the TFGs presented by the students (specific problems, groups in situations of special vulnerability, or analysis of the profession itself), several teachers understand that care is present in all of them, it being, after all, part of the essence and approach of the discipline (Meagher, 2004; Shaw, 2019).

However, occasionally, this centrality of the ethics of care does not occupy a similar position in the teaching profession, but rather emerges when reflection on one's own practice takes place, as noted in the literature (Hermesen and Embregts, 2015) and manifested in the discussion group. This is why the importance of becoming aware of the centrality of the ethics of care is highlighted, as it can help to generate multiple perspectives, to develop a global approach to social reality, and because it constitutes an emancipatory, inclusive paradigm that recognises people's dignity.

All the experts interviewed highlight the importance that the ethics of care should have in transforming academic processes. For their part, the teaching team point out how the transversality of the ethics of care in teaching practices entails a reinterpretation and adaptation of the formal frameworks established in the university. As an example, they identify how the syllabus can limit the possibilities of establishing models based on the ethics of care, but it can also be a flexible instrument at the service of another model.

“It should not be a strict term but a guiding term, an orienting term in order to be able to move forward together.” (G.1.1)

Similarly, both the experts and the participants in the discussion group consider that incorporating the ethics of care specifically into the methodologies for tutoring and supervising the TFG calls for a series of keys:

Firstly, it entails the involvement of both the tutor and the student in the work. They become co-protagonists and share an interest in the task being carried out, which establishes a meaningful bond:

“It is your opportunity to work on and research a very important topic, because it is the one you have decided to do. It is important, because if it is important for you, it has to be important for me and for everyone else.” (G.1.2)

Secondly, it sets out a tutoring methodology, which must be based on a real knowledge of the student’s position and be adapted to it. Several participants point out that, either through an interview or another type of technique, they carry out an initial assessment of each student. Care is thus based on an in-depth knowledge of the situation, on the individualisation of the person in the learning process itself, on reflecting together on why they are there, on their personal objectives, their potential and their aspirations, and on the establishment of a work plan adapted to and based on the autonomy and requirements of the person:

“I need to know who they are, where they are going, what their interests are, and from there I try to develop a plan.” (G.2.3)

“I try to ensure that the students don’t feel ‘alone’, so that they can feel and express their needs and thus work on expressed needs, rather than inferred needs [...] To do this, you have to be highly available and not set limits on what you can give.” (E3)

Both the experts interviewed and the TFG teaching team understand that the ethics of care must accompany and, where appropriate, make the established criteria more flexible by respecting personal work rhythms, which are often determined by the living conditions of each student and tutor, as has become clear in the COVID-19 crisis. In this sense, helping students to learn self-care practices is also of relevance.

A third key, of a group nature, consciously seeks to reinforce the personal process based on co-learning; in other words, the use of methodologies that enable learning among peers, sharing achievements and discoveries, limitations and frustrations, which can be a major source of support in a subject as the TFG.

Another aspect highlighted is the link between a teaching methodology inspired by the ethics of care and the professional methodology of social work itself. Some

teachers who are also professionals comment that they inadvertently transfer their approach to professional practice, based on care, to the academic environment:

“I think it’s a really cool factor, this essence of transferring the professional aspect, but innately, in a way that you don’t realise it.” (G.2.2.)

(2) Centrality of reciprocity and cooperation

In the construction of bonds that enable the sustainability of their lives and mentoring, the experts consulted point out that it is necessary to be aware of their own vulnerability as well as that of the others who participate in the teaching-learning process within the framework of the TFG. This necessarily leads to the establishment of mutual complicity and reciprocity. For all the experts, this approach contrasts with the current university model, which prioritises competitiveness as the means of achieving excellence.

This position coincides with several opinions expressed in the discussion groups where it was emphasised that the centrality of care necessarily derives from reciprocity and horizontality. In this regard, although the existence of informal support networks was acknowledged, it was noted that there is a need to promote collaborative support networks that oppose managerial logic (Meagher, 2004) and mechanisms of differentiation based on hierarchy, along with the typical encouragement of competitive relationships present in the existing model of higher education:

“There are informal networks of support and collaboration between them, which undoubtedly follow other routes than those of the learning spaces of the university itself. Therefore, informal support networks exist, but we should consider whether the university can promote and foster collaborative networks between students.” (G.2.5)

The existence of this type of network does not in itself necessarily guarantee widespread practice. Therefore, the groups mentioned the value of methodologies, that seek to encourage interaction in collective spaces between teachers and students and between students. Several teachers highlighted the use of group supervision sessions in the mentoring and guiding the TFG. These allow mutual recognition, shared learning, support and empathy among students, as well as the facing of challenges and difficulties. They also favour a closer approach on the part of the teaching staff and the development of more horizontal and empathetic relationships.

“This group supervision space not only invites them to reflect and become aware of how they are progressing or of the obstacles they have, but also helps them to recognise each other and know what they are all working on.” (G.2.1).

This practice is also understood as a learning process for professional practice. In fact, two of the experts and several of those in the discussion groups stressed that the TFG is a “rite of passage” in the process of creating a professional identity, which is why it is so essential to encourage the acquisition of collaborative skills.

However, several individuals point out that reciprocity has to be understood from the point of view of the teacher-student pairing, and not just centred on the student. The figure of the teacher-tutor is paradigmatic since, while providing mentoring, they become a role model for the student in the action being undertaken:

“We are role models, we project an image and values [...] if we are able to do it in the most effective way, with professionalism, humility, humanity, empathy, communication... we create the conditions for this to be subsequently replicated.” (G.1.3)

Nevertheless, with regard to the reciprocity that exists in the relationships between students, the teaching staff also detect the growth of individualistic behaviour, marked by competition between peers, which hinders interaction and joint participation:

“When I proposed group sessions, they didn’t want to come. It was a struggle for them to come [...] I was surprised [...] Their lack of interest in knowing what the others were working on. There were individual video calls, and that was it. In other words: solve this for me and that’s it [...] I was struck by that. It was like they weren’t very interested in knowing what the others were doing. I did think that maybe we should work more on this exchange.” (G.2.5)

(3) The politicisation of the bodies and of relationships

In the opinion of the three experts interviewed, requires a critical review of the way in which people’s vulnerability is constructed and perceived in the social structure, produced by mechanisms of oppression and inequality. This involves denaturalising the positions of inequality that reproduce patriarchal relations. It entails a political revision of the positions of power in the social context. This critical review encompasses the inner

workings of the university structure, which, like any other social institution, reproduces a model of domination, assigning roles and positions in the academic space.

“[This is] a necessary element for a shift in which women, who are those who are most objectified, stop transmitting, stop passing on these patriarchal values that subordinate us, that subordinate us and cause us to suffer so much.” (E.1)

The teaching staff also stress the importance of raising awareness of this type of structural inequality among the students. Although some aspects are actively addressed in the media or on social networks, this is not always reflected in students’ knowledge:

“I have noticed a shortcoming when it comes to the ability to analyse the impact of gender differences [...] It was difficult for them to visualise how a gender-based approach affected people.” (G.2.5)

(4) The construction of identities.

In the opinion of the experts interviewed, this dimension could be characterised by three types of identity-related constructs that can be developed in the teaching process: the construction of an individual identity based on personal characteristics that enable a political-transformative stance; a professional construction, removed from the mere reproduction of pre-established models; and the construction of a relational identity, which incorporates the value of diversity.

In the discussion groups, the teaching team indicated a complementary direction in relation to identities: several people pointed out that the ethics of care can be used in the teaching of social work to emphasise that there is a multiplicity of views on social reality, which depend on identities and which must be articulated and contrasted based on mutual respect and recognition. However, the discussions in the groups also indicate that this desirable exchange of views clashes with the reality of complex and competitive relationships between teachers and students, as well as between peers, be they teachers or students. For this reason, the creation of welcoming and care-generating spaces where people can meet and become points of reference for each other is regarded as highly positive.

“I have encountered a lot of toxicity among the students [...] most of them are only there to get their marks. The relationship between peers is not looked after at all, and there is a situation, in my view, that is extremely complex.” (G.1.5).

In any case, experts and teachers insist in that building the right relationship between teacher and student can have transformative effects on students’ identities. Specifically, it may be a relationship in which the typical fears and insecurities the students have when tackling the TFG can be overcome. Horizontal relationships of closeness, recognition and empathy, where people can feel listened to and discuss their uncertainties, allow each student to develop their potential:

“[a student said] ‘I didn’t have such close relationships, where I could come, I mean like this I’m doing with you, being in a tutorial, talking calmly about my future, my worries, what I want to do.’ (G.1.2)

(5) The commitment and engagement with problems in the social environment

For all the experts interviewed, the ethics of care involves situating knowledge of reality and commitment to transforming the structures that determine individual, group and societal opportunities as a key element. This entails making a commitment to equality and social justice and implementing the actions required to care for people.

For their part, the teaching team identifies the existence of this type of motivation in students who, during the course of their TFGs, generate positive relationships and even commit themselves to actions in their environment that go beyond their academic responsibilities (for example, after having worked with organisations or projects that are connected with their TFG). Nevertheless, the need to improve relations between students and the context in which they are immersed in the teaching-learning process is identified in at least two senses: the need to improve the transfer of acquired knowledge, as a way of recognising what the environment itself has offered each student, is highlighted:

“It is a way of recognising, of making the students themselves recognise what the environment is giving them, what it is providing them with. They have to come into direct contact with that environment, to get to know it, to feel it, to live it. (G.1.1)

And, on the other hand, the need to build two-way relationships between the environment and the academic sphere is stressed, as is also indicated in the literature

(Vega, 2014) — relationships in which people and the reality of the context also participate in supporting students, weaving complex networks that offer a greater opportunity for learning and actively incorporating themselves into the teaching and research processes. The way in which such reciprocation and relationships are produced, how people and institutions are incorporated into the learning process by the students, would in itself construct an applied model of an ethics of care.

All these implications mentioned in the different aspects are summarized in the following table. This shows the wide, multidimensional and interlinked implication of applying ethics of care in the supervision of end-of-degree dissertations in social work education.

Table 3. Implications of ethics of care for supervision of TFG in social work. Source: prepared by the authors

Dimension	Implications for teaching and learning in TFG in social work: Aspects and sub-dimensions emerging.
Centrality of care in different spheres.	- Considering care as an object of study of the TFG (care-receivers, care-givers and relations of care). - Adopting care as an alternative approach to a positivist paradigm. - Using care as a way of reinterpreting the syllabus and university procedures. - Sharing and engaging together (student and teacher) in the object of study of the TFG. - Promoting students' self-care during the TFG process. - Making the most of peer-learning. - Recognising and adapting the position, needs and aspirations of TFG students.
Centrality of reciprocity and cooperation.	- Recognising vulnerability in teaching and learning. - Building complicity and reciprocity in the supervision process, based on this recognition. - Building collective processes and spaces for supervision. - Considering that teachers' attitudes to supervision can be an example and a reference point for adopting a care approach. - Confronting individualist attitudes fostered by the university.
The politicisation of the bodies and of relationships.	- Unveiling and denaturalising inequalities created by the patriarchy in TFG production. - Unveiling and denaturalising inequalities created by the patriarchy in the university context.

- The construction of identities.
- Building an individual identity as a departing point for transformative action, during TFG elaboration.
 - Building a transformative professional identity.
 - Building shared and relational identities, on the basis of diversity.
 - Learning to understand and respect diversity of visions and identities.
 - Establishing safe care spaces in university for building identities, during supervision.
 - Supporting students in order to manage fears and uncertainties and to build on potentialities.

5. Final remarks

This research has sought to identify possibilities for introducing changes in teaching-learning models in higher education that favour the sustainability of life. The work has illustrated that the ethics of care provides an opportunity to establish a frame of reference in this respect. It allows dimensions such as the centrality of care, reciprocity and cooperation, the politicisation of the body and relationships, the construction of identities and commitment to the environment to be taken into account. All these aspects have specific and interlinked implications for teaching.

The study reveals that there are already existing practices related with supervising TFG in the field of social work regarding these dimensions, from collective tutorials to active listening students. It also reveals how there are also contextual elements that hinder these existing or desired practices, such as the logic of a model based on individualism and competitiveness. However, it also demonstrates that it is necessary to make these practices visible, understand them and share them among the teaching teams.

The various debates that have emerged in the paper highlight the importance of the interaction between people and their interdependence in and around the university environment. Therefore, it demonstrates that it is essential to focus on the way in which relationships are established throughout the entire teaching-learning process. In this regard, interaction is seen as the core issue in higher education, just as it is in the field of social work itself. This perspective of interaction encompasses the learner, the teacher and the environment. In this sense, the research has also shown that a context such as the supervision of the TFG represents an exceptional space for cultivating caring relationships in these interactions.

The results also reveal the limitations inherent to an exploratory study that deals with a complex and largely unaddressed phenomenon. For example, it has not been possible to examine in depth some key aspects that have emerged and which may be the subject of future studies, such as the complex dynamics of identity construction from interactions, or the importance of collective processes in supervision. The complexity of these aspects may be addressed in future research by considering the perspectives of other relevant stakeholders — especially those of students. As said, this exploratory study empirically draws on the perspectives of experts and University staff. Nevertheless, considering the perspectives of students, practitioners and the community may allow the theoretical dimensions identified to be discussed further, to examine some empirical implications in more depth and also identify new ones.

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