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To cite this article: Antonio López Peláez, María Elena Aramendia-Muneta & Amaya Erro-Garcés (2023) Poverty, social work, and social intervention: decent work as a strategy to overcome poverty after the Covid-19, Journal of Social Work Practice, 37:2, 213-229, DOI: [10.1080/02650533.2023.2214309](https://doi.org/10.1080/02650533.2023.2214309)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02650533.2023.2214309>



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Published online: 01 Aug 2023.



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Poverty, social work, and social intervention: decent work as a strategy to overcome poverty after the Covid-19

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ABSTRACT

Social workers worldwide must be concerned about how to overcome poverty after the COVID-19. The 61st Session of United Nations Commission for Social Development has highlighted decent work as a priority for social workers and social welfare practitioners after de COVID-19. Decent work is a key strategy to overcome poverty in the post-pandemic time. A systematic review of the literature revealed 225 articles from 2020 on this topic. The descriptors were social work, decent work, good work, decent job, good job, decent employment, and good employment. The results obtained allow us to establish some recommendations to address poverty from the perspective of social work, designing intervention strategies to overcome inequalities.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 14 March 2023
Accepted 11 May 2023

KEYWORDS

Social work; poverty; decent work; good work; COVID-19; systematic review

Introduction

Since the beginning of Social Work as a profession and a scientific discipline, one of its basic objectives has been to address both the new forms of poverty that emerge in each context, as well as the old forms of poverty that continue to exist. Today, the phenomenon of poverty and social exclusion remains one of our main concerns (Stoeffler & Joseph, 2020). For social workers, poverty, following the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) classification: extreme poverty, moderate poverty or relative poverty, or social exclusion (Castel, 1995), understood as a dynamic process that ends up placing us in precariousness and poverty, are key issues in our professional activity (e.g. professional standards in England by the Social Work England; the Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) in England or the Knowledge and Skills Statement for Social Workers (KSS)).

After decades of austerity policies (López Peláez & Gómez Ciriano, 2019), dismantling of welfare systems (Murphy, 2023b), and after the COVID-19 (Fronek & Rotabi-Casares, 2022), poverty (economic, health, relational, technological) remains a priority for Social

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Work. New forms of poverty, such as those linked to digitalisation, unwanted loneliness, ageing, in-work poverty (Liu, 2022) and job insecurity, require a redefinition of social services, and call for greater training of social workers. At the same time, poverty also affects social workers, who in many contexts work with precarious contracts and low salaries (Ravalier et al., 2022).

The practice of social work, both from a psychodynamic and systemic perspective, must address the real experience of the users of social services, and of the social workers themselves (Austin & Donley, 2022). Employment, our type of work, and the labour market in which we are integrated have a direct influence on our life trajectory. Personal trajectories of users and social workers are conditioned by the type of employment they have, by the work relational model in which they develop their life trajectory (Macmillan & Shanahan, 2021). Part of the deep malaise that affects many users of social services, and social workers, is related to a precarious labour market (Karki et al., 2018). Research on stress, burnout (Yürür & Sarıkaya, 2012) and on the well-being of social workers are parallel in their results to the research carried out on the precariousness of work.

In this context, decent work has become a key issue in social policies. The United Nations (2015) highlighted the importance of decent work (SDG 8) for improving living standards and moving out of poverty. Since 1995, the Commission for Social Development (CSD) has been the key actor in this area. Indeed, the title of the 61st Session of the UN Commission for Social Development (CSocD61) – which took place between 6 and 15 February 2023 – is ‘Creating full and productive employment and decent work for all as a way to overcome inequalities to accelerate recovery from the COVID-19 and the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development’. The European Commission has outlined a strategy to promote decent work worldwide in its Communication on decent work in the world (European Commission, 2021, 2022). Similarly, the ILO, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the G7 and G20 countries have prioritised decent work in line with the 2030 Agenda. The ILO’s Decent Work Agenda defines ‘decent work’ as ‘Decent work sums up the aspirations of people in their working lives. It involves work opportunities that are productive and delivers a fair income, security in the workplace and social protection for all, better prospects for personal development and social integration, freedom for people to express their concerns, organise and participate in the decisions that affect their lives and equality of opportunity and treatment for all women and men’.

The fight against poverty goes hand in hand with the qualification to find better jobs, and the implementation of social and labour policies. The major social work organisations – the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW), and the International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW) – have stressed the crucial importance of what is being increasingly referred to as decent work. At the Co-Building a New Eco-Social World: Leaving No One Behind people’s summit (June/July 2022), one of the lines of action proposed was a commitment to decent work. The topic was discussed at the recent Joint World Conference on Social Work Education and Social Development 2022 (October 2022) in Seoul, along with digitalisation, social work, and social welfare (López Peláez et al., 2023).

Considering the above, from a social work approach, any analysis of poverty must consider employment and decent work as a collective objective for citizens and

organisations. The present study is a systematic review of how decent work has been addressed in the literature in the hope that it will contribute to a better understanding not only of decent work and the well-being of social workers and users, but also development, labour legislation, social protection, social intervention, and the design of public policy to foster decent work and overcome poverty. Moreover, fundamentally allows us to deepen the relational model that allows us to increase the well-being of workers, and of social workers, in the face of the current situation in which there is a widespread complaint about the precariousness, discomfort and intensification of the workload (Beer & Asthana, 2016). In this line, Murphy (2023a) highlights the role of social workers in the COVID-19 lockdowns, when they remained one of the few professional groups visiting vulnerable families at home.

The present study attempted to accomplish these goals by (a) identifying the articles that discuss decent work; (b) classifying them; (c) summarising each one based on its authors, field, study goal, sample, variables, and main results; and (d) providing a framework that might be used for a future social work research agenda. The study is timely given the international interest in poverty and its place in Agenda 2030 (SDG 8).

Methodology: inclusion and exclusion criteria and coding procedure

Systematic reviews are an effective way of describing previous research while identifying new topics and outlining the current state of the art (Govindan & Soleimani, 2017; Petticrew & Roberts, 2006). Academics from numerous domains have used this method recently (Hook et al., 2020; Pereira & Slade, 2019).

The present study is based on both performance and quality indicators and relational bibliometric indicators. Indicators of performance and quality are common metrics used in bibliometric reviews. The most frequently cited publications, indexed metrics, co-authorship analysis, visibility and impact indicators, and the number of citations were included.

The results of the mapping procedures are displayed graphically. Information was used to create scientific maps featuring clustering analysis. Specialised software (e.g. SciMAT and VOSViewer) allowed authors to generate spatial representations of the relationships across scientific specialities in the form of maps. This method made it easier to research partnerships between academic institutions, countries, and within countries.

The study's focus on both performance and quality indicators and relational bibliometric indicators is one of its main contributions to the literature. It was conducted in December 2022 and surveyed articles on decent work in the fields of social work, sociology, and other social sciences.

Two-hundred-and-twenty-five publications were selected from 1,488 papers published between 2020 and 2022 on Web of Science. To be considered for review, the studies had to satisfy certain criteria. The initial search aimed to find all articles that included in their abstracts, keywords, or titles the terms 'social work', 'poverty', 'decent work', 'good job', 'decent employment', or 'good employment'. The exclusion criteria were based on the assumption that if none of these terms appeared in any of the aforementioned sections, it was likely that the concept did not occupy a central position in the study, so the article could be excluded. The inclusion criteria were that the articles had to be written in English

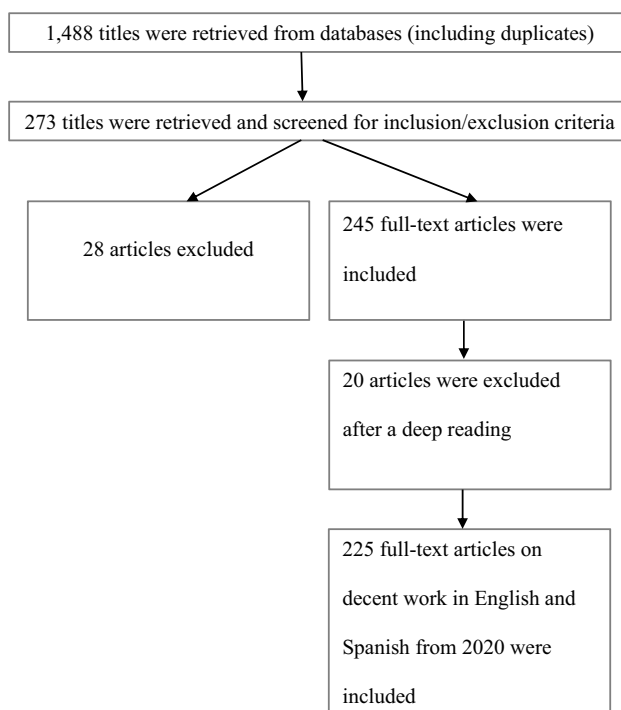


Figure 1. Search strategy and process.

Table 1. Articles published by type of research.

Type of research	Number	%
Quantitative	120	53%
Qualitative	95	42%
Mixed	10	5%
Total	225	100%

and Spanish, published between 2020 and 2022 and related to decent work. The search process followed the PRISMA flow diagram to ensure an unbiased selection of publications. The two present authors screened all articles for inclusion independently. After, the results were compared and found to have less than 10% differences, and discrepancies were discussed and resolved. A coding document was developed to identify and extract descriptors, abstracts, research methodology, year, country, and empirical implementations. Both authors independently coded all included articles. Results were found to be more than 90% in agreement, and all discrepancies were discussed and resolved. The Screening flow chart is presented in [Figure 1](#).

A manual search of articles published in the chosen journals from 2020 was carried out in December 2022. The ones selected were then coded using flow software. VOSviewer was used to analyse the connections between the publications.

The connected papers' research methodologies were similarly split into qualitative, quantitative (i.e. regression and descriptive analysis), and mixed research (i.e. case

studies, theoretical articles, experiments, and narrative summaries). Fifty-three percent of the selected papers were quantitative and 42% were qualitative (Table 1).

Bibliometric findings

Bibliometrics gave an idea of the quality of the selected articles, the reliability of the sources, and the countries where decent work appeared to be a significant issue (Alonso et al., 2009). The studies were analysed by year of publication, the country of the author or authors, the journal where they were published, and the journal's impact.

Publications across time

Decent work was found to be a salient research topic in the field during the period under review (Figure 2). Most of the papers retrieved were published in 2021 (42.25%; 95 papers); 25.3% of the sample (57 papers) in 2020; and 32% in 2022 (72 papers).

Table 2 shows the number and the corresponding percentage of articles published in each country. As can be seen, the United States published the largest number (nearly 19%), followed by India, the United Kingdom, China, and Italy (each of which contributed around 8% of the total). Significantly, the top five countries were in different continents (e.g. America, Europe, and Asia), which illustrates that decent work was considered a matter of global importance.

Articles by research area

Table 3 shows that almost 65% of the articles came from the field of business economics which highlights the significance of decent work for economies and, by extension,

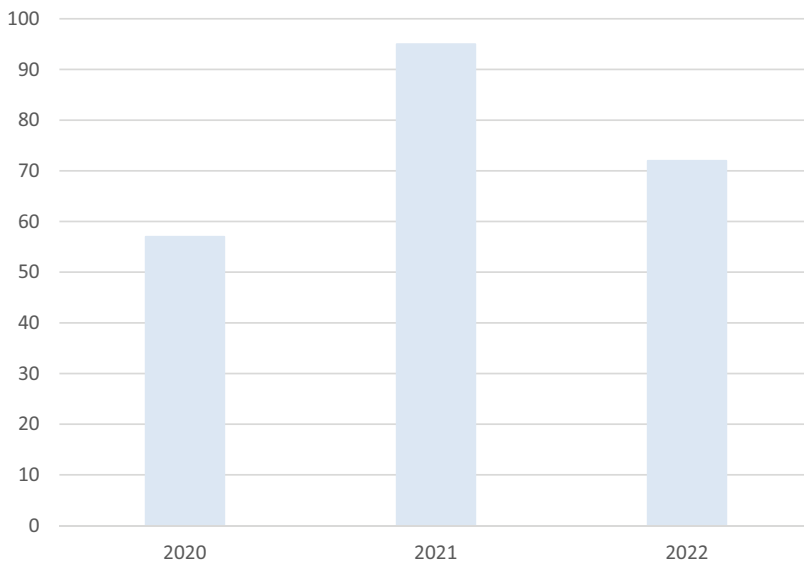


Figure 2. Articles published by year and number of articles.

Table 2. Articles published by country.

Country	Number	%
United States	42	18.7
India	20	8.9
United Kingdom	19	8.4
China	18	8.0
Italy	18	8.0
Australia	16	7.1
Germany	11	4.9
Switzerland	11	4.9
Spain	10	4.4
South Africa	8	3.6
South Korea	8	3.6
Colombia	7	3.1
Netherlands	7	3.1
Austria	6	2.7
Canada	5	2.2
France	5	2.2
Turkey	5	2.2
Ukraine	5	2.2
Other	4	1.8
Total	225	100%

Table 3. Articles by the top 10 research areas.

Research areas	Record count	%
Business economics	145	64.4
Psychology	82	36.4
Behavioural sciences	66	29.3
Social sciences (other topics)	24	10.7
Environmental and occupational health	8	3.6
Social work	7	3.1
Social issues	3	1.3
Women's studies	3	1.3
Public administration	2	0.9

societal well-being. Psychology and the behavioural sciences investigate how workers are affected not only physically but also psychologically by a deterioration in conditions, and this was reflected in their ranking (second and third, respectively).

Papers by author

Several authors co-authored more than one article on decent work between 2020 and 2022 (Figure 3). The most prolific were Allan (eight contributions), Autin (seven), Duffy (six), and Kim (five). The average number of citations was Allan (11.88), Autin (13.71), Duffy (13.5), and Kim (7.6).

The information in Figure 1 is tabulated in Table 4. As can be seen, Allan and Autin worked together four times and Allan and Duffy twice, and Duffy and Kim once.

Table 4 shows the linkages between authors, the articles they contributed, and the citations according to Google Scholar. Among the 65 articles, six were published in the *Journal of Career Assessment*, five in the *Journal of Vocational Behaviour*, and the remainder in *Career Development Quarterly* (two), *Journal of Career Development*, *Journal of Counselling Psychology*, and *The Counseling Psychologist*.

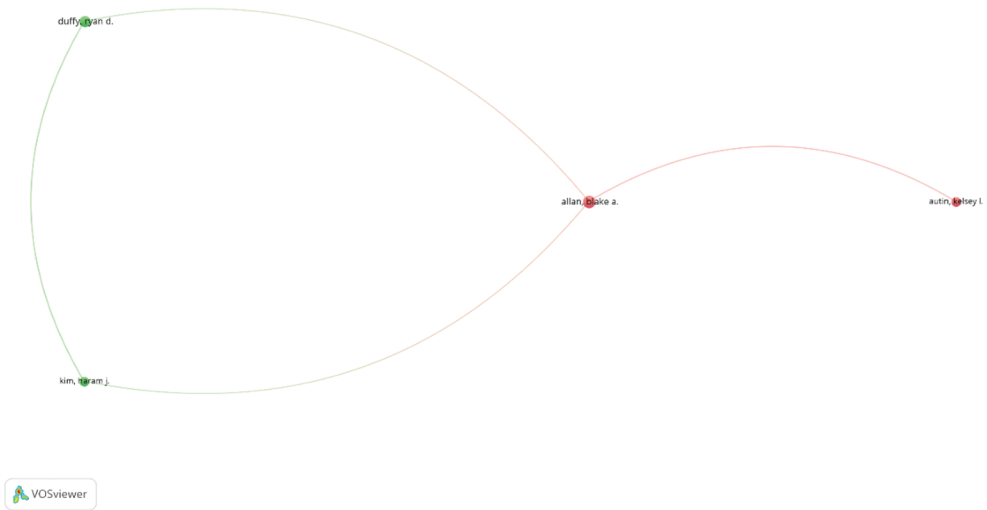


Figure 3. Co-authorship amongst the selected articles.

Table 4. Most prolific authors and citations.

Articles	Allan	Autin	Duffy	Kim	Citations
Allan et al. (2021)	X	X			54
Allan et al. (2022)	X	X			3
Autin et al. (2021)		X			4
Autin, Herdt, et al. (2022)	X	X			1
Autin, Williams, et al. (2022)	X	X			7
Buyukgoze-Kavas et al. (2021)	X				7
Duffy et al. (2020)	X		X	X	15
Duffy et al. (2021)			X	X	20
Duffy et al. (2022)	X		X	X	1
T. Kim and Allan (2021)	X				7
N. R. Kim et al. (2020)				X	5
H. J. Kim et al. (2022)			X	X	2
Ma et al. (2021)		X			23
Masdonati et al. (2022)			X		22
Smith et al. (2020)			X		21
Wei et al. (2022)		X			4

Cluster analysis

VOSviewer was used for the cluster analysis (Waltman et al., 2010). Figure 4 displays the results.

In the period in question, researchers focused mostly on the deterioration in working conditions. Cluster 1 relates to occupational fatigue; Cluster 3, changes in the real meaning of decent work (i.e. a crisis of values); Clusters 4, 5 (developing countries), and 7 (human rights), the effects of said deterioration on developing countries and the need for equality if all people are to be provided with decent work. Clusters 2 and 8 examine related psychological issues and minorities (women of colour in particular). Cluster 9 offers solutions, for example, the need for sustainable development and suggestions about how professionals may encourage the provision of decent work.

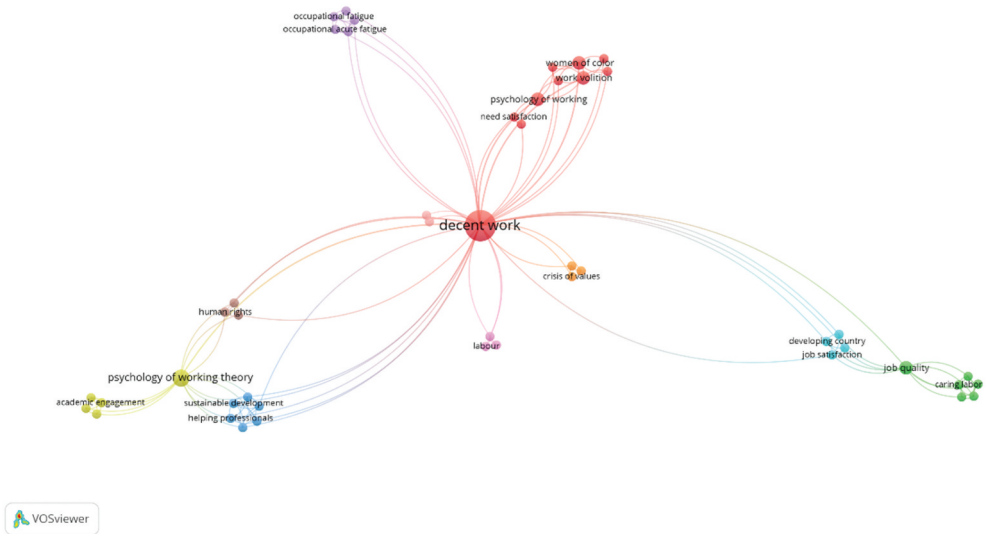


Figure 4. Vosviewer visualisation of the nine clusters.

The studies argue that the living conditions of workers are worsening and that those with low-quality jobs are clear candidates for social service use. It is important that these problems are debated in the public space and social workers and other welfare professionals need to be prepared to face the challenges arising from the proliferation of less decent or more fragile work.

Analysis

Our societies are based on paid work, and working conditions, the type of contract, pay, or paid leave have a direct influence on our personal well-being and social cohesion. One of the risks that social work runs is to become a poorly paid profession that takes care of people who are also poorly paid or directly poor. Improving working conditions, and pursuing decent work as a collective goal is one of the main priorities in a context in which in-work poverty expands (Liu, 2022), also in feminised professions such as social work. Another risk is to approach this problem from an individualistic point of view that does not face the negative effects of the lack of a decent work, such as isolation or lack of social support (Llosa et al., 2022). And, finally, decent work is not just a priority only for workers. It is also a priority for organisations, as it improves the work climate and performance. In this sense, decent work is an ethical priority, and demands both a redefinition of our legal labour framework and organisational culture (Blustein et al., 2023), including the organisations in which social workers work.

Decent work must therefore be analysed from the perspective of the individual, the organisation, and the context. Moreover, it has to take into consideration culture, values, organisational management, education, and citizens' rights. In this sense, we used Pouyaud's (2016) four dimensions to identify the main factors that might increase the availability of decent work and how the lessons learnt from the pandemic might help in this regard. Pouyaud proposed a framework based on

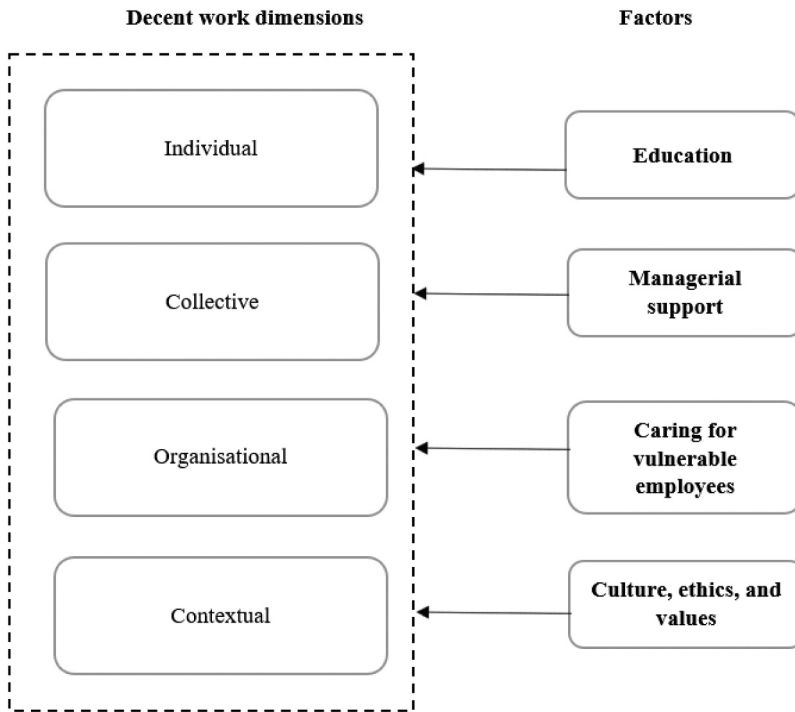


Figure 5. Main factors involved in the fostering of decent work and their relationship with Pouyaud’s four dimensions.

activity, trade, others, and society by differentiating between the individual (and how they might build an identity), the collective (i.e. supporting others to build their identity), the organisational (i.e. workplace activities), and the contextual (i.e. how decent work affects health and well-being at a societal level, and how it helps reduce poverty).

Minimum wages, legal regulations related to working conditions, health in the workplace, and social protection are some of the variables that influence decent work and reduce poverty. We identified the factors that might influence these variables and support the implementation of better working conditions (Figure 5).

Table 5. Publications by dimensions and factors.

The Four Dimensions	Number	Percentage
Individual	93	41%
Organisational	56	25%
Collective	47	21%
Contextual	53	24%
Factors		
Education	26	12%
Managerial support	59	26%
Caring for vulnerable employees	73	32%
Culture, ethics, and values	86	38%

Findings

The results presented below are a synthesis of the literature reviewed, using Pouyaud's four dimensions as a lens. Table 5 displays the percentage and number of articles from the selected sample that referred to each dimension and factor. It is important to point out that one article can include several dimensions and factors, so the percentages do not sum to 100%.

Most of the articles referred to the individual level, followed by the organisational, contextual, and collective. Meanwhile, culture, ethics, and values were the most cited factors in fostering decent work, followed by support for the most vulnerable employees.

The following subsections examine in more detail the factors that may help assist in the design of public policy related to decent work.

Education

Individual characteristics are linked to decent work. Di Fabio et al. (2021) argue that decent work explains incremental variance beyond personality traits, given the relationship between personality and occupational fatigue. However, decent work depends not just on innate individual characteristics but also on individual features that can be acquired, such as education.

According to Mackett (2020), education is associated with the degree of decency of jobs. Therefore, it can be used to prepare future employees to engage in high-value jobs. The higher occupational groups require a higher level of skill and, consequently, a higher investment in education. Studies have shown that education is one of the most important variables in determining labour market outcomes (McCord & Bhorat, 2001; Mlatsheni & Rospabé, 2002).

It has been suggested that positive future decent work perceptions may boost academic engagement amongst university students (Ma et al., 2021). Interventions aimed at improving students' academic satisfaction may help to increase the availability of decent jobs. There is also a relationship between entering into the workforce at an early age, lower levels of education and poorer working conditions. Higher levels of schooling and vocational training delay entry into the labour market but ensure future decent work (Pal et al., 2021).

Finally, digital transformation means that employees require higher levels of education (Nizami et al., 2022). The following section examines the relationship between digital transformation and its relationship with decent work.

Managerial support

Responsibility for human resources is an integral part of management systems. Advancement of careers, creating opportunities and functions related to training should be part of a manager's brief, also in non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and public agencies that hire social workers. Potts (2020) uses the term "virtuous managers" for those who support and sustain decent work, the individual good, and the common good of communities in which their organisations function.

Khalique et al. (2021) suggest expanding best practice and policy in line with SDG 8 and Ashta (2020) proposes the same in an international context. Scholz (2021) believes that decent work should be a determinant in the remuneration of board directors and Kolot et al. (2020) argue that the formulation of public policy must be linked with Work 4.0, Industry 4.0, because only then can sustainable economic growth be achieved.

Soundararajan et al. (2021) stress the need to implement decent work measures in supply chains through the humanisation of working conditions because they are most deficient in decent work (Nikulin & Szymczak, 2020). Similarly, Morris et al. (2021) call for the regulation of global supply chains to ensure both decent work and human rights. Unions will play a crucial role in this. Müller et al. (2022) state that one of the lessons learnt from the pandemic is that minimum standards for ‘good job retention schemes’ have to be implemented.

Finally, social enterprises can also contribute to decent work and SDG 8 (Arana-Landin, 2020; Fauziah, 2021; Kossen et al., 2021; Osiki, 2020).

Caring for vulnerable employees

In the present study, 73 publications (32%) referred to the need for programmes and policies that deal with vulnerability (e.g., Vargas Montero et al., 2020). Because vulnerable employees and the unemployed were disproportionately affected by the COVID-19, they will require more support (Choi et al., 2022; Svicher & Di Fabio, 2021).

According to H. J. Kim et al. (2022), ethnicity is also related to decent work because employees of colour are less likely to obtain good jobs. Gender inequality was also noted as a factor in decent work (or the lack thereof); women are often found to be doing inferior jobs with lower wages (Fabry et al., 2022).

The experience of vulnerability also affects social workers. Their well-being is affected by precarious working conditions, which impact on their health, well-being and burnout (Hollederer, 2022). The characteristics of a decent work model that emerge from the articles analysed (a model based on loyal relationships, continuous training and leadership based on respect for people’s rights) allow us to assess our real environment, illuminate the causes of our discomfort and improve our ability to cope with it.

Institutions, ethics, and values

Institutions play a significant role in defining public employment-orientated policies. The public agenda should be revised to include main lessons and current situation regarding the consequences of the pandemic, especially given that precarious work is positively associated with poor job quality. To that end, Figart (2021) revised the top ten elements that must be in place to foster decent work. The main recommendation was linked to health: “decouple health insurance from employment”, and extend health insurance to all citizens. Su et al. (2022) posit that social recognition has to be considered a feature of decent work. They recommend that social workers consider this when they are making efforts to improve well-being at the workplace.

Discussion

From both a psychodynamic and systemic perspective, it is important to analyse the characteristics of decent work, and the relational model it entails, to (a) establish adequate coping strategies, (b) work towards a decent work model that allows us to articulate our personal, group and community activity in better conditions. Results obtained in our systematic review highlight the importance of decent work for personal well-being and for the proper functioning of organisations. Decent work is an ethical and civic priority. It is also a priority for organisations that hire social workers. The role of institutions, managers, NGOs, public agencies and unions must be accounted for when attempts are being made to increase the prevalence of decent work. Previous studies have noted the importance of revising the public agenda to incorporate the lessons learnt from the COVID-19. It is hoped that the present findings will play a small part in achieving this objective. To design successful coping strategies for our users, to design our own organisations from the priority of decent work, and to support a decent work model globally, the results we have obtained highlight the importance of training, caring for the vulnerable, management and ethical principles.

The main characteristics of decent work include minimum wages, legal regulations regarding working conditions, workplace health, and social protection. In this sense, decent work should be a priority both for society in general but in social work organisations and social and community service sectors in particular, where low wages, feminisation, and unsecured working hours have been observed (Macdonald & Charlesworth, 2021). Poverty and low-wage jobs do not only affect users of social services. They also affect the social workers themselves, who perform their professional tasks under precarious contracts. Vulnerable groups, who were the most affected by the consequences of the global recession, should be given close consideration when decent work is being promoted. Social work must place poverty among its priorities, and design strategies to address situations of poverty and social exclusion from the perspective of employment, collaborating in the training of users of social services.

Conclusions

The present study has examined decent work as a strategy to overcome poverty by reviewing a sample of literature that was published on the subject between 2020 and 2022. The authors identified the main factors that foster decent work in terms of its individual, collective, organisational, and contextual levels. Education, management support, caring for vulnerable employees, culture, ethics, and values should all be incorporated into policies designed to address poverty.

From the results obtained, we can highlight the basic dimensions to promote decent work at the individual and collective level (education, organisation management, ethical principles), and three recommendations: (a) social workers must place on the public agenda the importance of decent work to fight poverty; (b) from professional practice, social workers must work with users of social services to strengthen their employment-related skills and competencies; (c) in the public agencies and NGOs that hire social workers, decent work must become the norm.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

The work was supported by the Ministerio de Ciencia e Innovación [PID2020-115018RB-C31].

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