



Social Work

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Community as Relation: Social Work and the University as a Living Community

To speak of community is never merely to define a concept. It is to question how we relate to one another, how we inhabit places, how we care for people and territories, and how we imagine a shared future. In Social Work, this question is foundational. It has accompanied the discipline since its origins, not as an abstract concern, but as an ethical and practical challenge that emerges in every encounter, every territory and every lived experience that calls upon us to respond.

From this perspective, community is not understood as a neutral backdrop for action, nor as a homogeneous or stable entity. It is a relational process: a living fabric of bonds, tensions, solidarities and conflicts, continuously shaped by social, economic, cultural and political dynamics. Community is the place where life happens, unevenly, dynamically and often unpredictably. This understanding lies at the heart of Social Work's identity as an academic field and a profession committed to social justice and transformation, not as an abstract ideal but as a concrete orientation for action and knowledge production (International Federation of Social Workers, 2014).

Community as a relational process

Social Work does not view community as a technical object of intervention, nor as a space where predefined responses are applied. Rather, it recognises community as a space of meaning-making, agency and possibility. Community is constituted through relationships, between people, groups, institutions, public policies and environments, and these relationships are never neutral. They reflect power asymmetries,

exclusions and inequalities, but also resources, capacities and collective potential.

It is important to emphasise that communities are always plural. Within the same territory, multiple communities coexist, shaped by distinct histories, identities, vulnerabilities and aspirations. These communities may cooperate, coexist in tension or remain largely invisible to one another. The theme “Community. Communities.” captures precisely this plurality and complexity, widely discussed in contemporary community development literature (Westoby & Shevellar, 2018).

From a Social Work perspective, working with communities requires recognising not only what is visible, but also what is absent, silenced or marginalised. It involves listening to those who rarely participate in decision-making processes, despite often holding deep knowledge of the problems they face, and the resources needed to address them. Community thus becomes not only a space of belonging, but also a potential space for emancipation and change.

Producing knowledge with communities

This relational understanding of community profoundly shapes how Social Work is taught, learned and researched within the University. If community is not a static object, then knowledge about, or rather, with, communities cannot be produced at a distance.

In Social Work education, learning takes place at the intersection of theory, practice and lived experience. Community-based placements, applied research projects and sustained partnerships with social organisations are not peripheral components of the curriculum; they are central sites of knowledge production. Students learn when they develop participatory diagnoses, map local resources that no academic manual could anticipate, confront the limits of institutional responses, and recognise people and communities as legitimate epistemic interlocutors. Within this framework, communities cease to be mere recipients and become co-producers of knowledge. This is not rhetorical but reflects a significant epistemological shift that challenges the University to rethink its position of authority. It does not entail abandoning scientific rigour but situating it. Knowledge gains depth and relevance when it engages with the complexity of social life and integrates local, professional and experiential forms of knowledge, reinforcing the ethical commitment of social science to transformation (Boodram & Thomas, 2022).

The University as a living community

The University is not external to these processes. It is itself a community, or more precisely, a constellation of communities: academic, professional, territorial, civic and transnational. The University exists in, with, through and for the communities that surround it.

From a Social Work standpoint, the University's social responsibility goes beyond knowledge transfer. When the University engages meaningfully with communities, it does not merely disseminate knowledge; it also learns. It learns from situated knowledges, lived experiences and questions that are unlikely to emerge solely within the academy.

This relational model of the University aligns with the mission of *Transform4Europe* and its commitment to educating knowledge entrepreneurs: individuals capable of mobilising different forms of knowledge to address complex social challenges. Social Work contributes to this vision by educating professionals who can build bridges between systems, translate knowledge across contexts and facilitate collective processes without imposing external solutions.

Transformation in times of interconnected crises

Today, community-based Social Work cannot ignore the interdependence between social, environmental and digital transformation. Social injustice, environmental degradation and digital exclusion are not separate phenomena; they intersect and reinforce one another in the lived experience of communities.

Populations in situations of greater vulnerability are often those most exposed to environmental risks, least protected by digital systems and most affected by structural inequalities. A relational and community-based approach enables Social Work and the University to respond in integrated ways, strengthening collective capacities, promoting participation and supporting transformative processes rooted in local contexts (Dominelli, 2012).

Community as a verb

Community, then, is not a static noun. It is a verb, a continuous practice of relating, caring, negotiating and collectively constructing social life. In Social Work, this practice takes shape in everyday acts of listening, presence, accompaniment, organisation and advocacy. It is through these relational acts that knowledge, service and transformation converge.

By adopting “Community. Communities.” as the theme of the *Transform4Europe* Week 2026, the University affirms its aspiration to be a living community, open, dialogical and engaged with the realities that surround it. From the perspective of Social Work, this commitment is not an addition to the University’s mission; it is an expression of its deepest meaning.

Teaching, researching and intervening are, ultimately, ways of caring for the shared construction of common life, recognising that community is not inherited but built, and that this construction requires presence, commitment and shared responsibility.

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