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Reciprocal Relationship Between Resilience and Professional Skills: A Longitudinal Study With Social Work Students

María de las Olas Palma-García , Luis Gómez Jacinto , and Isabel Hombrados-Mendieta 

ABSTRACT

This study analyzed the relationship between the resilience developed by social work students and the professional skills acquired during their university degree program. A longitudinal study was conducted over 4 academic years. Participants were 73 social work students at the University of Malaga (Spain). The results show a gradual increase in the development of resilience and in the acquisition of professional skills among the students during the 4-year period. Panel model analysis shows that the two processes were stable and reciprocal throughout the social work training process. The results suggest that resilience had a stronger effect on professional skills than the latter had on resilience. In conclusion, resilience is a relevant component of university training of future social workers.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Accepted: August 2017

Resilience has been defined as a process of successful adaptation to adversity (Zautra, Hall, & Murray, 2008). The term originated in physics but has become a construct in social science that describes the ability of people to develop and become psychologically healthy and successful, despite being exposed to adverse situations that threaten their integrity (Rutter, 1993). The development of resilience is a dynamic, constructive, interactive, and sociocultural process that optimizes human resources and makes it possible to overcome adverse situations (Kotliarenco & Cáceres, 2011). As a capacity that is modifiable rather than static, resilience depends on the interaction of the individual with his or her immediate environment (Luthar & Zelazo, 2003). Understood in this sense, this process is not dissimilar to the processes designed to develop skills in higher education.

University education confronts students with many demands and challenges that can lead to feelings of vulnerability and affect their adjustment to university life and academic success. These challenges and opportunities enable students to identify and put into action not only their own academic skills but also psychosocial ones. Resilience has a fundamental role among these skills, yet it has been little studied in the specific setting of higher education or in educational institutions in general (Haz & Castillo, 2003).

Until now, research on resilience in the university setting has mainly focused on the study of this capacity in students and its relationship with other social and demographic variables, such as age, socioeconomic status, and gender (Nota, Soresi, & Zimmerman, 2004; Wasonga, Christman, & Kilmer, 2003). In general, these studies have found no differences associated with age or socioeconomic levels in the processes of resilience shown by students (Prado & Del Águila, 2003; Saavedra & Villalta, 2008). Regarding gender, the results are contradictory. Zapata (2013) reported that some studies found that women had higher levels of resilience than men, whereas other studies found no differences between genders. Adjustment to university life and academic success in a university requires high levels of resilience (Miller, 2002; Munro & Pooley, 2009), and the levels of resilience reached vary according to the degree studied. A study conducted by Díaz, Salazar, and Zamora (2013) on degrees in education suggested that resilience was more developed in students who attended more holistic courses than in those whose courses were more specialized.

These results suggest that universities may provide a space in which resilience can be developed. During the university period, students develop the professional skills that determine their potential for employment (Camacho & Medina, 2012) along with many other capacities, such as resilience, which assist them in the successful completion of their degree.

A university degree program in social work enables students to work in this field and provides them with the skills needed to assess, plan, and intervene in the needs and situations of individuals and the groups and communities they belong to (Vázquez, 2005). These skills are related to the development of resilience strategies in students, whose capacity for resilience has been demonstrated to gradually increase as they acquire the specific skills associated with their degree (Palma-García & Hombrados-Mendieta, 2014). Several authors have attempted to understand the relationship among resilience, the improvement of personal well-being, and the professional future of social work students (Collins, Coffey, & Morris, 2010; Grant & Kinman, 2012; Morrison, 2007). However, the strategies and mechanisms by which universities, and specifically the curricula, contribute to these aspects remain relatively unexplored (Grant, Kinman, & Baker, 2014; Rajan-Rankin, 2013). Although progress has been made in confirming that this relationship exists, the strategies that lead to this relationship and how they function remain unexplained.

Commitment to training these students as professional social workers is a necessity given the complexities of social intervention. Social workers have to be agents of transformation in the service of individuals and the communities where they work so that the adverse situations that need to be addressed are approached not only as obstacles to be overcome but as opportunities that enable clients to improve their lives. Such opportunities would not arise in the absence of these obstacles (Guénard, 2010). In this sense, commitment to training is enhanced by the focus on resilience, which contributes to the identification of these opportunities that arise from social complexity, which itself is an excellent source of innovation, creativity, and the discovery of new perspectives (Folke et al., 2010; Manciaux, 2003). Despite such progress, studies remain scarce on the relationship between resilience and social work and the mechanisms that facilitate this relationship. The aim of this study was to identify and analyze the relationships between the capacity for resilience developed by social work students and their professional skills so university training can be better adapted to the challenges of social intervention.

Method

Participants

The participants were 73 social work students at the University of Malaga (Spain), who had been repeatedly measured over the 4 academic years of their training. In the first academic year of their course (2010–2011), 100 social work students were invited to participate in the study. Their personal data were coded, confidentiality was guaranteed, and their commitment to the remaining courses was confirmed. In the following years (2011–2012, 2012–2013, and 2013–2014), 73% of the participants remained in the study, which, as Redmond, Guerin, and Devitt (2008) have suggested, is typical of the percentage retained in longitudinal studies. The students who did not complete the study did so because of circumstances such as changing universities or changing or abandoning their course. The 73 participants were measured at the end of each academic year.

Instruments

Resilience

An instrument comprising three subscales was used to measure resilience. The first two subscales were taken from the Resilience Scale (Wagnild & Young, 1993). The first subscale was personal competence (17 items) and the second was acceptance of self and life (8 items). The third subscale was social support (5 items), which was taken from an instrument specifically constructed for a previous study (Dash, Dayal, & Lakshminarayana, 2006). Thus, the final instrument contained 30 items that were used to measure the

level of the students' agreement or disagreement with the dimensions evaluated on a 7-point Likert scale (1=*strongly disagree*, 7=*strongly agree*). In this study, Cronbach's alpha was .86, .89, and .77 for the personal competence, acceptance of self and life, and social support subscales, respectively.

Professional competence

Professional competence was measured using an instrument that was specifically constructed for this study. The instrument measures the self-reported degree of acquisition of skills recognized in the university degree (Agencia Nacional de Evaluación de la Calidad y Acreditación, 2004). This instrument consists of 25 items that are rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1=*not able to*, 5=*very capable of*), which are grouped into the following six dimensions: ability to work with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities and jointly assess their needs and circumstances (e.g., "Assess the needs and possible options to guide an intervention strategy"); ability to plan, implement, review, and assess social work practice with individuals, families, groups, organizations, communities, and other professionals (e.g., "Respond to crisis situations by assessing their urgency, planning and developing actions to address them, and reviewing their results"); ability to support people to be able to express their needs, views, and circumstances (e.g., "Defend individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities and act on their behalf if required by the situation"); ability to resolve risk situations with individuals, as well as by themselves and with professional colleagues (e.g., "Establish, minimize, and manage risk to self and colleagues through planning, reviewing, and monitoring actions to limit stress and risk"); ability to manage and be responsible for actual practice in the organization with supervision and support (e.g., "Manage and be responsible for their own work by assigning priorities, fulfilling professional obligations, and assessing the effectiveness of the work program itself"); and ability to demonstrate professional competence in the practice of social work (e.g., "Managing conflicts, dilemmas, and complex ethical problems by identifying them, designing coping strategies, and reflecting on their results"). Cronbach's alpha was .77, .93, .81, .87, .87, and .88 for each dimension, respectively.

Design

A longitudinal design was followed in which the participants were assessed on four measurement occasions. In addition to the descriptive analysis of the variables under study and the differences among them according to academic year, a correlation analysis was used to investigate the relationship among these variables. A panel model with synchronous effects was used to obtain a more holistic view of students' progress over time.

Results

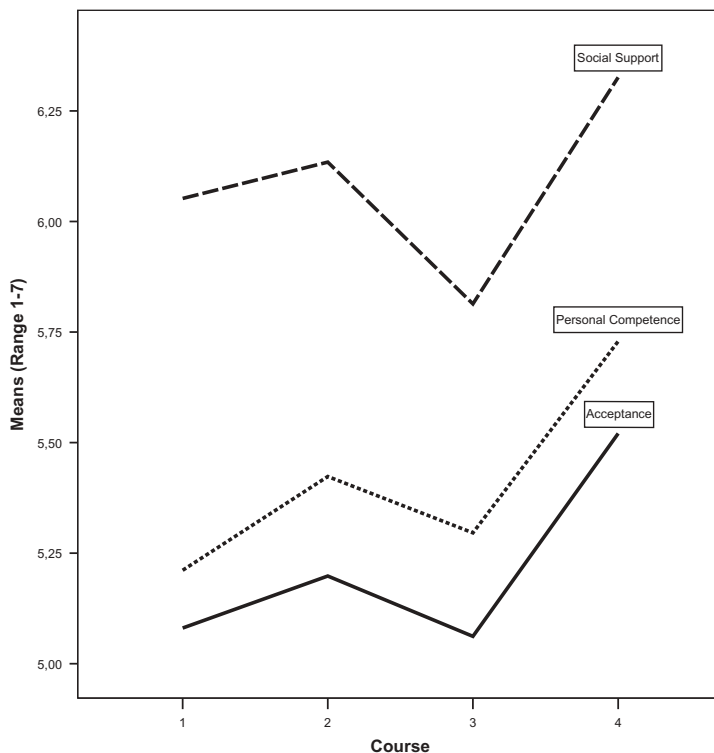
First, a 4×3 analysis of variance for repeated measures was performed, with the year (first, second, third, and fourth) and resilience (personal competence, acceptance, and support) as intrasubject factors. Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics obtained, and Figure 1 shows the temporal effects in each of the dimensions of resilience.

The multivariate Pillai trace test showed statistically significant differences in the temporal variable year, Pillai trace=0.62, $F(3, 70)=34.45$, $p=0.0001$, $\eta^2=0.62$. Bonferroni multiple comparisons test showed there were temporal differences in each of the first 3 years (first year, $M=5.45$; second year, $M=5.58$; third year, $M=5.39$) and the fourth year ($M=5.86$) using a p value of $<.01$ as a cutoff for statistical significance. There was an increase of 0.137 points ($p=0.27$) between the first and second years, a decrease of 0.195 points ($p=0.11$) between the second and third years, and an increase of 0.47 points ($p=0.001$) between the third and fourth years.

The effect because of the variable resilience was greater than that of the variable year, Pillai trace=0.74, $F(2, 71)=100.88$, $p=0.0001$, $\eta^2=0.74$. In this case, multiple comparisons showed differences in all three dimensions of resilience ($p<.001$). Social support had the highest average ($M=6.08$), followed by personal competence ($M=5.4$), and acceptance ($M=5.21$).

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of the three dimensions of resilience during the 4 years of the social work degree program.

Year	Resilience	M	SD
1	Personal competence	5.21	.69
1	Acceptance	5.08	.79
1	Social support	6.05	.91
2	Personal competence	5.42	.52
2	Acceptance	5.19	.59
2	Social support	6.13	.78
3	Personal competence	5.29	.58
3	Acceptance	5.06	.68
3	Social support	5.81	.86
4	Personal competence	5.72	.56
4	Acceptance	5.52	.62
4	Social support	6.32	.70

**Figure 1.** Evolution of the dimensions of resilience during the social work degree program.

The magnitude of the interaction was lower than that of the previous analysis, Pillai trace=0.16, $F(6, 67)=2.11$, $p=0.06$, $\eta^2=0.16$. Figure 1 shows that the three dimensions of resilience followed a similar pattern over the years. There was a slight increase in the second year, a decrease in the third, and an increase in the final year.

The type of analysis described here was also applied to the six dimensions of professional competence. A 4×6 analysis of variance for repeated measures was conducted, with the year (first, second, third, and fourth) and professional competence (six dimensions of competence) as intrasubject factors. Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics obtained, and Figure 2 shows the temporal effects in each of the six dimensions of competence.

The Pillai trace test showed statistically significant differences in the time variable year, Pillai trace=0.54, $F(3, 69)=27.81$, $p=0.0001$, $\eta^2=0.55$. The Bonferroni multiple comparison test showed

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of the six dimensions of professional competence during the 4 years of the social work program.

Year	Professional Skills	M	SD
1	Ability to work with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities and jointly assess their needs and circumstances	3.38	.76
1	Ability to plan, implement, review, and assess social work practice with individuals, families, groups, organizations, communities, and other professionals	3.30	.75
1	Ability to support people to be able to express their needs, views, and circumstances	3.56	.85
1	Ability to resolve risk situations with individuals, as well as by themselves and with professional colleagues	3.25	.85
1	Ability to manage and be responsible for practice itself within the organization with supervision and support	3.27	.76
1	Ability to demonstrate professional competence in the practice of social work	3.13	.86
2	Ability to work with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities and jointly assess their needs and circumstances	3.46	.80
2	Ability to plan, implement, review, and assess social work practice with individuals, families, groups, organizations, communities, and other professionals	3.24	.81
2	Ability to support people to be able to express their needs, views, and circumstances	3.41	.98
2	Ability to resolve risk situations with individuals, as well as by themselves and with professional colleagues	3.13	.93
2	Ability to manage and be responsible for practice itself within the organization with supervision and support	3.21	.92
2	Ability to demonstrate professional competence in the practice of social work	3.23	.99
3	Ability to work with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities and jointly assess their needs and circumstances	3.54	.67
3	Ability to plan, implement, review, and assess social work practice with individuals, families, groups, organizations, communities, and other professionals	3.40	.63
3	Ability to support people to be able to express their needs, views, and circumstances	3.53	.76
3	Ability to resolve risk situations with individuals, as well as by themselves and with professional colleagues	3.28	.73
3	Ability to manage and be responsible for practice itself within the organization with supervision and support	3.39	.72
3	Ability to demonstrate professional competence in the practice of social work	3.33	.79
4	Ability to work with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities and jointly assess their needs and circumstances	4.01	.58
4	Ability to plan, implement, review, and assess social work practice with individuals, families, groups, organizations, communities, and other professionals	3.91	.56
4	Ability to support people to be able to express their needs, views, and circumstances	4.12	.65
4	Ability to resolve risk situations with individuals, as well as by themselves and with professional colleagues	3.85	.67
4	Ability to manage and be responsible for practice itself within the organization with supervision and support	3.97	.58
4	Ability to demonstrate professional competence in the practice of social work	3.98	.62

there were temporal differences between each of the first 3 years (first year, $M=3.32$; second year, $M=3.28$; third year, $M=3.41$) and the fourth year ($M=3.97$) using a p value of $<.01$ as a cutoff for statistical significance. There was a slight decrease of 0.036 points ($p=0.73$) between the first and second years, an increase of 0.13 points ($p=0.18$) between the second and third years, and an increase of 0.56 points ($p=0.001$) between the third and fourth years.

There were also differences among the six dimensions of professional competence, Pillai trace=0.44, $F(5, 67)=10.70$, $p=0.0001$, $\eta^2=0.44$). Dimension 1 and Dimension 3 had the highest means, and Dimension 4 had the lowest. The effects of the interaction between the two independent variables were very small and did not reach statistical significance, Pillai trace=0.30, $F(15, 57)=1.55$, $p=0.12$, $\eta^2=0.30$). Figure 2 shows that the six dimensions of professional competence displayed a growth pattern over the 4 years, although there was a slight decrease in all six dimensions during the second year except in Dimension 1 (ability to work with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities and jointly assess their needs and circumstances) and Dimension 6 (ability to demonstrate professional competence in social work practice).

Second, a correlation analysis was performed to analyze the relationships between the components of resilience and the professional skills developed during the course, taking into account the differences between the results of the first and fourth years.

Table 3 shows the Pearson correlations between the components of resilience (personal competence, acceptance, and social support) and the six dimensions of professional competence. The first four of the six dimensions were associated with increased personal competence, $r=0.33$, $p=.004$; $r=0.26$, $p=.02$; $r=0.23$, $p=.04$ and $r=0.29$, $p=.01$, respectively, and increased acceptance of self and life, $r=0.37$, $p=.001$; $r=0.37$, $p=.001$; $r=0.25$, $p=.03$ and $r=0.29$, $p=.01$. Dimension 5 and Dimension 6 were associated with increased

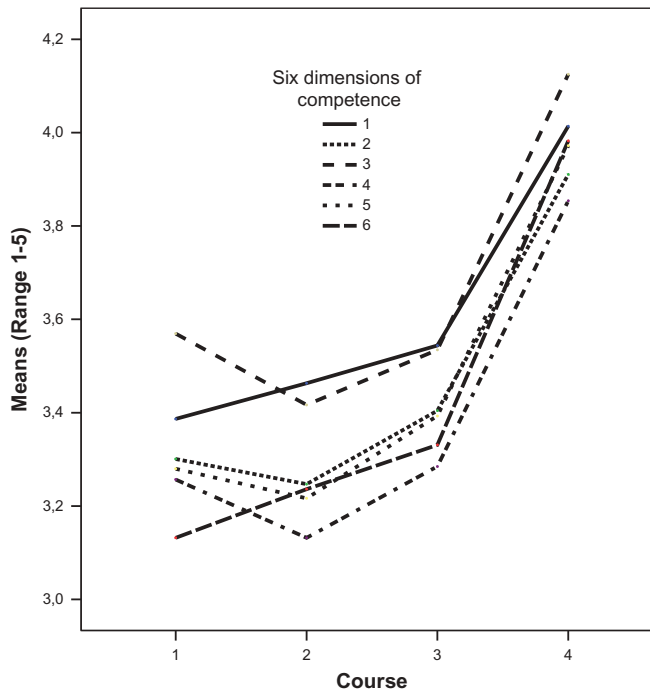


Figure 2. Evolution of the six dimensions of professional competence during the 4 years of the social work degree program.

Note. 1=ability to work with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities and jointly assess their needs and circumstances; 2=ability to plan, implement, review and assess social work practice with individuals, families, groups, organizations, communities, and other professionals; 3=ability to support people to be able to express their needs, views, and circumstances; 4=ability to resolve risk situations with individuals, as well as by themselves and with colleagues; 5=ability to manage and be responsible for practice itself within the organization with supervision and support; 6=ability to demonstrate professional competence in social work practice.

Table 3. Matrix correlations between the three dimensions of resilience and the six dimensions of professional competence of the social work program.

Professional Competence	Personal Competence	Social Support	Acceptance
Dimension 1: Ability to work with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities and jointly assess their needs and circumstances	.33 (.004)	.18 (.126)	.37 (.001)
Dimension 2: Ability to plan, implement, review, and assess social work practice with individuals, families, groups, organizations, communities, and other professionals	.26 (.024)	.13 (.254)	.37 (.001)
Dimension 3: Ability to support people to be able to express their needs, views, and circumstances	.23 (.045)	.13 (.248)	.25 (.032)
Dimension 4: Ability to resolve risk situations with individuals, as well as by themselves and with professional colleagues	.29 (.011)	.12 (.282)	.29 (.014)
Dimension 5: Ability to manage and be responsible for practice itself within the organization with supervision and support	.17 (.146)	.09 (.406)	.29 (.013)
Dimension 6: Ability to demonstrate professional competence in the practice of social work	.22 (.057)	.01 (.932)	.26 (.025)

Note. Exact probabilities are in parentheses.

acceptance of self and life, $r=0.29$, $p=.01$ and $r=0.26$, $p=.02$ respectively). Overall, an association was found between the professional skills developed during the students' education and an increased acceptance of self and life and personal competence, but no association was found with perceived social support.

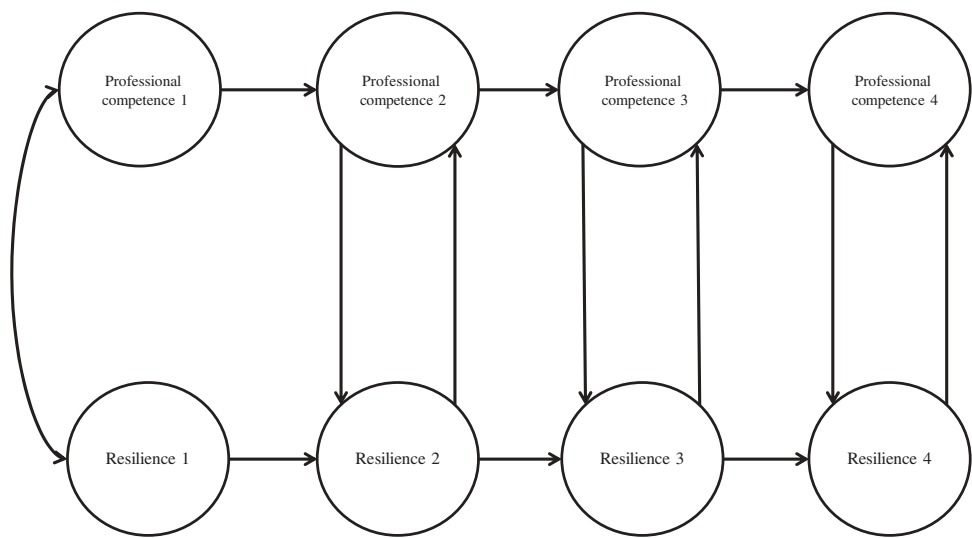


Figure 3. Path diagram for a panel model in four batches with synchronous effects.

Finally, a panel model (four batches) was constructed to obtain a more holistic view of the evolution of the variables during the 4 years of the course. Figure 3 shows a path diagram for a panel model with synchronous effects (Finkel, 1995), in which the variables are simplified. Global scores for resilience and professional competence were calculated by summing the scores of the three components and the scores of the six dimensions, respectively, for each of the 4 years.

The psychometric justification for the reduction in the number of variables is demonstrated in Tables 4 and 5, which show the results of principal component and reliability analysis of each of the two main variables assessed over the 4 years. The results of the principal component analysis and internal consistency index justify the reduction in the number of variables to a global resilience score by year. The same justification applies to the case of the four professional skills scores.

The parameters of this model were estimated by maximum likelihood estimation, using LISREL (Version No. 8,80) statistical software (Jöreskog, Olsson, & Wallentin, 2016). The best fit index indicated a good fit, $\chi^2=20.85$, $p>.05$. The standardized root mean square residual (0.08), the goodness-of-fit index (0.93), the parsimonious root mean square error of approximation (0.07), and the incremental comparative fit index (0.96) indicated a good fit.

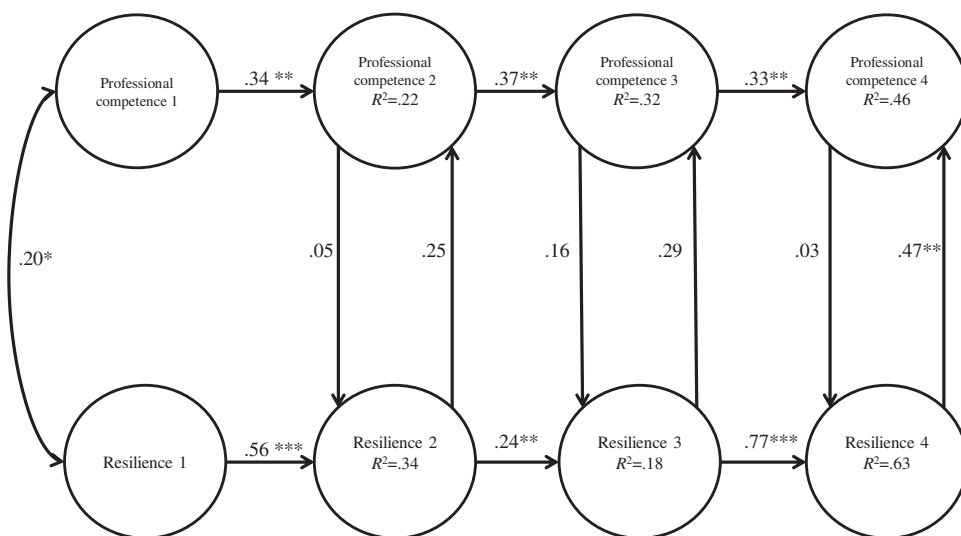
Figure 4 shows the standardized coefficients of the model. Professional competence in the first year significantly influenced professional competence in the second year, and so on for the successive years. However, although resilience in the first year had a strong influence on resilience in the second year, its influence decreased between the second and third year, but strongly increased between the third and fourth year. There was also a nonsignificant reciprocal relationship between professional competence and resilience that was maintained over the 4 years. However, resilience was found to have a statistically

Table 4. Factor loadings for the personal competence, acceptance, and social support components of resilience, the percentage of explained variance, and the internal consistency index of the three variables for each of the 4 years.

Resilience	First Year	Second Year	Third Year	Fourth Year
Personal competence	.87	.85	.87	.86
Acceptance	.90	.87	.90	.90
Social support	.79	.69	.80	.80
Variance (%)	73.60	65.91	74.46	73.92
Cronbach's alpha	.80	.70	.80	.81

Table 5. Factor loadings for the six dimensions of professional competence, the percentage of explained variance, and the internal consistency index of the six variables for each of the 4 years.

Six Dimensions of Professional Competence	First Year	Second Year	Third Year	Fourth Year
1. Ability to work with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities and jointly assess their needs and circumstances	.80	.75	.72	.83
2. Ability to plan, implement, review, and assess social work practice with individuals, families, groups, organizations, communities, and other professionals	.93	.95	.92	.93
3. Ability to support people to be able to express their needs, views, and circumstances	.88	.85	.83	.69
4. Ability to resolve risk situations with individuals, as well as by themselves and with professional colleagues	.88	.90	.91	.82
5 Capacity to manage and be responsible for practice within the organization with supervision and support	.87	.92	.91	.81
6. Ability to demonstrate professional competence in the practice of social work	.90	.92	.87	.86
Variance (%)	77.99	79.24	75.06	68.98
Cronbach's alpha	.94	.94	.93	.90

**Figure 4.** Coefficients of the panel model in four batches with synchronous effects. * $p < .10$. ** $p < .05$. *** $p < .01$.

significant influence on professional competence in the fourth year. The influence of professional competence on resilience was also statistically significant between the second and third years.

Discussion

The main contribution of this study is the finding of a stable reciprocal relationship between the development of resilience in social work students and specific training in professional skills during their university course. This result confirms the relevance of resilience during university education and its specific relationship with the social work degree. The development of resilience has been shown to be a relevant component of the university training of future social workers.

Studies on resilience in social work students have demonstrated the development of this capacity during university education (Author) Please replace (Author) with author-date citation and add source to reference list and its relationship with the professional future of such students (Grant & Kinman, 2012); however, there is little information on the process of establishing this

relationship. The longitudinal approach used in this study allowed us to observe and understand how this process develops over time.

Although there was a decrease in resilience scores during the second and third years, the results confirmed that over the 4 years of their courses, the students gradually developed resilience, which they may draw on in their future practice as social workers. The results also showed a gradual increase in professional competence, although a slight decrease was observed in the second and third years. This result is in line with that of other studies, which have suggested that students adjust their goals and expectations as the course progresses and as the practical training workload increases in the final years of the program (López & Rosa, 2014; Peralta, Ramírez, & Castaño, 2006). Of the six dimensions of professional competence analyzed, the dimension related to the ability to work with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities and jointly evaluate their needs and circumstances reached the highest mean values and maintained a continuous pattern of growth over the 4 years of the social work program. These results confirm the relevance of social work students being in contact with the reality of individuals and of students working with these individuals from the beginning of their university education (Frost, Höjer, & Campanini, 2013; Furman, Enterline, Lamphear, & Shukraft, 2014).

The correlation and panel model analyses demonstrated the relationship between the components of resilience and the professional skills students are trained in during their courses. Social support was the only component of resilience that was not associated with professional skills. This result represents a challenge to universities because to develop quality and efficiency in this profession, social workers need to feel satisfied with their work and be able to count on social support (Barranco, 2004; Hombrados-Mendieta & Cosano, 2013; Kim & Stoner, 2008; Um & Harrison, 1998).

The results of the panel model analysis show that the relationship between resilience and professional competence in the university setting is stable and reciprocal throughout the degree program. The fact that resilience has such a strong influence in this relationship illustrates its protective role in working life because it provides students with reflective ability, aspects of empathy, social confidence, or flexible coping styles (Grant & Kinman, 2012).

During their degree program, the resilience developed by students has a strong influence on the professional skills they acquire, which confirms the relevance of resilience as an enabling factor for training in social work. These results clarify how a social work course contributes to the development of resilience and consequently favors the development of professional competence in the discipline. According to Saleebey (1996), growing awareness of the relevance of resilience has led to profound changes in conventional social work practice and has assisted in the move toward intervention models based on strengths and not simply on deficits. In summary, this study has shown that there is a reciprocal relationship between the development of resilience and professional competence, which supports the revaluation of the professional social worker as an agent able to construct social transformation experiences based on current adversities (Guénard, 2010). This evidence underscores the importance of and commitment to the planned incorporation of resilience as a focus in social work studies.

The results have encouraged us to maintain our focus on resilience and its contribution to social intervention and to social work education. A possible limitation of this study is that it only addressed how students perceive their professional training. Future studies could also include teachers as well as addressing the issue of the transfer of learned skills, including the capacity for resilience, to more diverse and complex professional settings. To this end, it would be particularly useful to assess resilience in students at the beginning of their university courses. This baseline measurement could then be used to investigate with greater accuracy how resilience develops over the course of their studies; although this was not done in the present study, future studies should take this into account. It would also be of interest to conduct this line of research in other professions and countries.

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