

Editorial Journal

1/07

Using a Comparative Lens

Dear Reader

We know that social work, as practised around the globe, has many facets. Occasionally, these may be so disparate as to make us question wherein can be found the essence, the heart, the core of social work. Central to the idea of comparative social work is to promote greater understanding about that quintessential essence, by placing different examples of social work under a figurative microscope to better reveal the similarities and differences in professional practice.

The first two papers in this issue are strongly conceptually linked. In the first, Douglas Durst begins his analysis of Canadian social work education by exploring people's perceptions. He suggests that Canadians themselves experience a sense of self doubt in respect of their identity – often defining themselves by what they are not, Americans – rather than by a positive assertion of the essence of being Canadian. A key element of developing an understanding of social work in any nation state is to be able to locate the development of social work in an historical context, Durst does just this, but goes further providing a discussion of the comparative implications of government social and economic policy in several nation states. These understandings provide a backdrop for an exploration of key issues in Canadian social work education – an example of higher education.

In the second paper, through a broad and wide ranging discussion, Rolv Lynstad exposes some of the fundamental questions that are embedded within the notion of globalization; in the process addressing both the theoretical understanding of the notion and the practical implications. Globalisation, has become synonymous with the spread of a particular form of economic capitalism and cultural content – most usually associated with the 'American way of life'. Rolv Lynstad is in particular concerned with how the effects of globalisation impact upon higher education, and what has been termed the commodification of education. The paper concludes with a review of the impact of the Bologna process in Europe and how this can be understood as an example of globalisation.

One of the effects of globalisation has, in many previously predominantly agricultural parts of the world, been to promote a rapid urbanisation of the population. A consequence of this change has been the growth in the number of street children in many countries. Children are the major victims of any kind of social instability, be it war or be it rapid social change. It behoves social work practitioners, around the world, to promote the interests of children and to prevent them falling into the many dangers associated with street life. Toril Jenssen provides a comparative discussion of dominant discourses about street children found in Cuba and Russia with the intention of promoting a more informed understanding of the needs of street children.

The paper written by Ishara Poodun, a social work masters student when she wrote the paper, now a practitioner, exposes some of the very real moral challenges that confront social workers. Set in a South African context she explores the tensions that social workers might experience

who work in the criminal justice system; that is not to say that others who work in different contexts would not also experienced similar tensions – in particular the constraints of working in a particular system juxtaposed with the individualised needs of the service user or client. These tensions are especially sharply felt when working in the criminal justice system where the social workers latitude for creative practice is most severely constrained by the requirement of the system.

A second paper from a South Africa by Vishanthie Sewpaul comments upon a visit to Rwanda. This paper briefly mentions the criminal justice system also mentions the criminal justice system – its inability to cope following the genocide with the inevitable consequence that many who played a role in those terrible events have not been brought to justice. Inevitably, the genocide and its consequences have become a - if not the defining force then the lens through which the rest of the world observes Rwanda. In the paper Vishanthie Sewpaul, makes some surprising findings – at least surprising given the presumptions that the reader may have. She finds for example a stronger sense of law and order than in her own country.

I hope you agree that our ‘figurative microscope’, using a comparative lens, has revealed much about the essence of social work in different places around the globe. The editors would like to encourage contributions that directly respond to any of the issues covered by papers in the journal, in addition to welcoming original material on any theme within the scope of the journal.

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