

27

Global education for social work: old debates and future directions for international social work

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Social work is enmeshed in the context of globalisation, offering new opportunities as well as threats to the profession and its educational sector. As a result, interest in international social work has expanded, yet the area remains without a clear definition. This chapter explores three different directions for international social work: as a movement for increased universality in standards for practice and education; as a form of specialised practice; and as the profession's actions and impact on global policy, especially following the adoption of the Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development. The continuing debates over imperialism and indigenisation are acknowledged and the salience of these for each of the directions is discussed. Implications and recommendations for social work education are addressed.

'By 2020, the question of whether and how to internationalise social work curriculum will have vanished from professional discourse.' Instead there will be 'a long overdue recognition that all is global and that it is counterproductive to divide what is local from what is international' (Healy 2002, 179). It has been more than a decade since these words were published and they were identified as possible fantasy at the time. The idea behind the statement was that social work would come to fully recognise the importance and impact of the global environment, and therefore social work education would seamlessly incorporate relevant global content. With 2020 rapidly approaching, this chapter will assess current and quite diverse directions for international social work and relevant educational strategies. Major debates will be addressed as well as the fact that debates plaguing the field of social work remain the same after decades of scholarly work.

Many scholars recognise that social work practice is enmeshed in the context of globalisation, offering new opportunities as well as threats to the profession and its educational sector (Dominelli 2010; Payne & Askeland 2008; Healy 2008; Lyons 2006). Globalisation has continued to revitalise old debates about international social work, and raised new issues in the 21st century. Contemporary authors continue to discuss the optimal ways for social work and social work education to address the impacts of globalisation. Two issues that continue to shadow international social work are definitional confusion and concern about professional imperialism and accompanying arguments urging indigenisation. Debates continue on these issues and have different salience depending on how international

social work is understood. In this paper, three diverse definitions and directions for international social work are discussed, with reference to the recent literature. These are: international social work as a movement for universality in the profession and its standards; international or global social work as a form of practice; and international social work as the roles and impacts of the profession on the global stage and global issues. All address the book's theme of 'crossing borders and blurring boundaries'. However, they have very different implications for social work education and intersect the imperialism/indigenisation debates differently.

There are many definitions of globalisation and it is assumed that readers of this book will be familiar with at least some of these. Deepak, quoting from Gunewardena and Kingsolver, gives a comprehensive and non-judgmental definition of globalisation as 'a set of social and economic processes that entail intensified global interconnectedness via the mobility and flows of culture, capital, information, resistance, technologies, production, people, commodities, images and ideologies' (2012, 781). Embedded here are many elements germane to social work, beginning with the flow of people, and including culture, information, ideologies, resistance and information.

Intensification of the forces of globalisation has increased attention to international aspects of social work. Scholars and practitioners recognise that local manifestations of problems often have global roots. Alphonse, George and Moffatt (2008) write that current problems in India, such as farmer suicide, result from the impact of globalisation on local communities as global markets and control of intellectual property for essential seeds by multinational corporations disrupt the potential for livelihood. Despair also grows among former factory workers in industrialised countries, as outsourcing to distant factories leaves them among the long-term unemployed. Other negative manifestations of globalisation include pollution, new diseases, structural adjustment policies, migration caused by conflicts, climate change, or economic dislocation, and many more. More positively, there are opportunities for global exchange and networking, participation in global civil society movements, and rapid diffusion of helpful technologies including social work knowledge and interventions. In many ways, the 'distance' between the local and the global has been shrinking, resulting in recognition that we face problems that cannot be solved within the boundaries of a nation-state. Furthermore, communication technologies bring an onslaught of information on global conditions easily to our computers or other devices. Recognition of the impacts and opportunities of globalisation are partly responsible for a renewed interest in international aspects of social work.

History of development of the concept of international social work

Although the use of the term international social work can be traced back to the 1928 First International Conference of Social Welfare (Jebb 1929), it is within the past 15 years that scholarship in the field has burgeoned. Beginning with a text by Lyons in 1999, there is now a modest library of books titled 'International social work' or variations on the theme. These are supplemented by journal articles and numerous conference presentations. The expansion of interest and attention to the topic is illustrated by the publication of two major reference works on international social work by well-respected publishers in 2012 (Healy & Link; Lyons, Hokenstad, Pawar, Huegler & Hall). These developments signal a partial maturation of the area, but much remains to be elaborated and negotiated.

The definition and purpose of international social work is still somewhat vague. As recently as 2012, Huegler, Lyons and Pawar stated that international social work 'has a long genesis but unclear definition' (1). Numerous definitions have been proposed, including some that are value or goal based, some that emphasise professional functions or roles, and others that merge the two dimensions (Ahmadi 2003; Cox & Pawar 2006; Healy 2008; Hugman 2010). Hugman and colleagues defined the field as follows: 'international social work refers to education, practice, research, policy and exchanges concerned with the realities of global processes in human wellbeing' (Hugman et al. 2010, 634). They also introduce the idea of crossing borders into the definition, and note that this can be understood in various ways as 'transcending, transmitting, transforming or transgressing borders' (634). The idea of 'globalisation' is discussed as describing the impact of global forces on local realities and the impact of local developments on the global (633), a concept also explored by Lyons (2006). Of note is that definitions have been proposed, critiqued and debated in the professional literature for many decades.

Haug (2005) criticised the dominance of Western scholars in defining international social work. Others have identified the growing interest in international social work as a resurgence of imperialism or a form of neo-colonialism, in which professionals from the global North are drawn to practice or consult in the global South. A further critique is that this practice is sometimes or often irrelevant and perhaps harmful in effect as it imposes theories and modes of intervention that do not fit local circumstances. Briefly, I would point out that Haug's critique captures only a partial view of the field. The scholars she refers to built on the work of earlier experts from South Asia, transplanted to the US, but writing from the perspectives of their roots. We could also more broadly conceptualise the many African, Caribbean and Asian writings on indigenisation, especially those cast in juxtaposition to globalisation, as a part of the literature on international social work. The imperialism debate will be revisited later in the chapter.

To more adequately engage with relevant debates, I turn to examine three quite diverse ways of approaching the purpose and intent of international social work.

International social work as a move to universalise the profession

Cox and Pawar (2006) expanded upon Healy's (2001) functional definition of social work to add a fifth purpose: the promotion of social work and social work education globally. As they state it: 'International social work is the promotion of social work education and practice globally and locally, with the purpose of building a truly integrated international profession' to address significant global issues (20). Trygged (2010) notes the 'universalist tendency in international social work'; as such, 'international social work is a modernity project, since it is looking for a common understanding of social problems and is consequently more focused on sameness than on diversity' (647). He concludes that 'it is a modernity project in recognition of its striving towards universal principles and to overcome some of the contradictions between the universal and the local, as well as in its attempts to find a role for social work in the globalisation process' (653).

Along these lines, we can view the major documents agreed to by the International Association of Schools of Social Work and the International Federation of Social Workers since the beginning of this century as outputs of this modernity and universalism project. Beginning with a new global definition of social work in 2000, the organisations adopted a

statement of ethical principles and the first ever set of global standards for social work education in 2004. These documents and the homogenising and universalising implications of international social work have been the target of critiques viewing such efforts as imperialist at worst, or needing to be balanced by significant attention to indigenisation. The Global Standards for the Education and Training of the Social Work Profession in particular has drawn criticism as too Western in orientation (Yip 2004) and for privileging a universalist orientation (Williams and Sewpaul 2004); however, the document was welcomed by many newer programs in Asia and Africa for helping them negotiate with university administrators to strengthen social work. Alphonse et al. (2008), writing from India on the impact of globalisation on local conditions, offered: 'Professional training can no longer happen in isolation, insulated from international processes. Globalisation has necessitated a search for global standards in education and practice' (153).

Rankopo and Osie-Hwedie (2011) contradict this view, emphasising the importance of indigenisation as the development of culturally relevant interventions, recognising and privileging local contexts. They emphasise that social work cannot simply be transplanted, and that the distinguishing feature of social work – that it intervenes at the point where people intersect with their environment – necessitates an indigenous approach. They conclude that 'cultural explanations of social reality are more relevant than those that seek to transcend all cultures' (145). As catalogued by Gray, Coates and Yellow Bird (2008), Rankopo and Osie-Hwedie's article is one of many calling for indigenisation of social work, a theme that dates back to the beginning of the 1970s and has been addressed by authors from Africa, Asia, the Middle East, Europe and North America.

But there are other forces encouraging a more universal approach. Lyons (2006) addressed the growing mobility of social workers as another push factor for global standards. As social workers migrate internationally for employment opportunities, their readiness for the workforce in the new country becomes an issue. If social work training becomes more uniform, there will be less concern about adequacy of educational preparation for those who move from country to country to practice social work. The move to free labour mobility within Europe is noteworthy, but there is also significant recruitment of social workers by the UK, often from countries outside the EU, and migration of professionals from the Caribbean and other areas to the US and Canada. Global standards, now only voluntary, would support increased labour mobility. Therefore, it might be argued that global standards improve social workers' capacity to work abroad, but diminish their effectiveness at home according to those pushing more indigenisation.

The educational implications of the push for recognition of social work as universal would be to do further work to develop globally relevant curriculum. Issues of professional mobility would be taken into account in designing curricula. Further efforts to improve the Global Standards are needed, and we could also expect consideration of systems of accreditation of social work programs globally or at least more agreements for mutual recognition of degrees.

International social work as a practice

One dimension of crossing borders is global or international practice. A number of authors support the concept of an international social work practice (Cox & Pawar 2006; Healy 2008; Hugman 2010) and there are schools of social work in diverse countries, including

Canada, Denmark, Israel and the United States, offering specialisations in global or international practice. The term international social work or global social work has sometimes been used to refer to this, usually inferring that a practitioner from the global North is serving as a development specialist or consultant in the global South, whether working for an international organisation or directly contracted by a global South institution. Interestingly, 'global practice' does not seem to be used as a label for practitioners who may be recruited from the global south to staff social agencies in the UK or the US. If international practice is understood mainly as physically crossing borders, then all practitioners who migrate, whether from North to South or South to North, can be considered practicing international social work. More narrow definitions, however, reserve this label for those working with international organisations and/or on global problems.

Several questions emerge: the first is whether there is such a thing as 'international or global practice' and secondly, if so, whether this is a good idea or something that should be discouraged as inherently imperialistic. And, if there is an international or global practice, how would social work educational programs prepare students for these roles? Are current educational models adequate preparation?

Social work education prepares students to address people's issues in their interactions with their social environment or context. Educational models have long recognised the need for social workers to intervene with systems of varying sizes – indeed some programs claim to prepare students to intervene in systems of 'all sizes'. Rarely, however, is 'all sizes' conceptualised to fully accommodate the global environment and the impact of globalisation. In a 1962 article that apparently attracted little discussion, Goldman suggested international social work as a fourth practice level to address international social problems, complementing the traditional levels of individual, group, and community. Although not entirely a practical notion as stated, his idea could be further interrogated to discern what forms of social work intervention could address international problems effectively.

Webb (2003) contested the idea of international social work, arguing that social work practice requires deep knowledge of local environments, including institutions, culture, laws, and ways of relating. He continues that the very definition of social work—that it is the profession that intervenes at points where people intersect with their environments—means that 'global practice is a practical impossibility' (193). Others raise the concern over imperialism or neo-colonialism when Western professionals design development and relief programs and when staff trained in the global north work on the ground in developing countries. These efforts and interventions may be ineffective due to lack of fit with local realities, or damaging due to the attitudes of superiority and insensitivity of the foreign professionals. The efforts that 'rescue' child labourers without realising or recognising the conditions of their families living in poverty is an example of a well-intentioned, but often inadequate or harmful, approach to a complex problem (Deepak 2012).

Another example comes from the response of Western therapists, including some social workers, to 'rescue' victims of mass disasters, such as the Banda Aceh tsunami. As Bragin said, 'there have been all too many reported instances in which outsiders have been permitted to practice in situations of extreme gravity and do harm through importing external methods of coping while marginalising rather than strengthening indigenous systems' (2012, 514). But – is the answer to withdraw from the arena of international practice or to increase education on appropriate responses? In fact, much was learned from these unfortunate responses to disaster. A committee of representatives from both non-governmental humanitarian agencies and United Nations agencies developed and published the

Inter-Agency Standing Committee Guidelines on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergency Settings (IASC 2007). Social workers were among those representing NGOs that developed the new guidelines; social work educators can take up the responsibility of including these guidelines in its preparation of professionals, thereby improving practice and strengthening the role of the profession.

Education for international social work practice

Concern over imperialism may have led social work to largely cede the arena of international development practice to other professions less concerned about Western imposition. Yet, social workers may offer some real advantages in this work. Among them are that social work education includes content on appreciation of diversity and some level of cross-cultural skills, appreciation of the interplay between person and environment, a strong value base, and endorsement of the importance of participatory approaches to planning and development. Thus, social workers could be expected to be more respectful of local knowledge than professionals without this foundation. Through cross-national connections to local practitioners, social workers can tap into sources of knowledge at the grassroots, so crucially needed in development projects. Indeed, in advocating indigenisation, Rankopo and Osie-Hwedie (2011) remind us that 'Indigenisation does not negate collaboration with external partners and experts, and seeking resources for capacity-building' (141).

To respond, social work educators should acknowledge that global practice will remain a relatively specialised sub-area of the overall arena of international social work. But I argue that the profession should shed its ambivalence and encourage committed social workers from all parts of the world to pursue roles in international development and relief. It is up to educators to ensure that practitioners from social work programs are well prepared to be partners with local experts and communities and to challenge negative models. Leaving the arena to other professions will neither improve practice nor enhance the profession's contributions globally. Social work programs aiming to prepare students for international work must address a number of critical content areas. Practitioners need skills including planning, proposal development, training of trainers, and community engagement, plus a subject area of expertise such as HIV/AIDS, child welfare, or disaster mitigation and response. These should be blended with a solid foundation in human behaviour, cultural diversity, and social work ethics. International practice and educational preparation for it should demonstrate social work's capacity to respond appropriately and effectively, in education and practice terms, to the various global challenges 'that are having a significant impact on the wellbeing of large sections of the world's population' (Cox & Pawar 2006, 20).

International social work as a profession in global policymaking

Work at the policy level is another form of international or global social work. In a joint article, the leaders of IASSW, IFSW and ICSW declared that 'social work is well placed to play a key role in responding to the individual, community and global social problems facing the world' (Jones et al. 2008, 849). They announced a new era of increased collaboration among the three organisations to achieve 'enhanced global influence of the social

work profession' (Jones et al. 2008, 847). An important outcome of this collaboration was the launch in 2012 of the Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development.

The Global Agenda

The Global Agenda calls for the profession to engage more fully with the critical global social issues of the decade. It identifies an expansive range of action areas for social work engagement in four broad priority areas: social and economic inequalities within and between countries; dignity and worth of the person (including human rights); environmental sustainability; and the importance of human relationships (IASSW, ICSW, IFSW 2012). For each of these, there are commitments for social work organisations to work at the level of the United Nations and other global bodies, for social work practitioners at the community level, for the organisations themselves, and for social work education. They include some specific commitments, such as work to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), social work involvement in defining the post-2015 agenda, efforts to achieve universal ratification of key human rights treaties, addressing global inequalities through such initiatives as the Global Social Protection Floor, and increased engagement with climate and environmental issues.

These commitments identify an important third direction for international social work—that of influencing policy on global social problems and collaborating with other groups for global action. In explaining the Global Agenda, Jones and Truell (2012) discuss the profession's duty to 'inform policy development and priority-setting by engagement with global and regional political institutions' (465). They note that 'global visibility and engagement' are important for the stature of the profession, but can also make a difference in outcomes for people on the ground. They refer to and echo Mmatli (2008) who encouraged social workers in Africa to lobby for improved policies within the region; as Mmatli explained the multiple benefits of engagement, 'social work's contribution to social development will become more apparent; its presence and prominence among professions will be perceived; and social work clients will stand to benefit' (303).

There are opportunities to bring social work values and strengths into play in the profession's representation work at the United Nations and other global bodies. Currently, small teams of members represent IFSW and IASSW at several offices of the United Nations. In IASSW's work with the UN NGO Committee for Social Development, for example, representatives have been able to advocate for rights-based approaches and have participated in several projects to bring voices from the grassroots into UN deliberations. IASSW submitted an intervention on the importance of participatory approaches to poverty eradication to the 50th session of the UN Social Development Commission, and hosted a panel on participation at the meeting of the commission (IASSW 2012). ICSW has made numerous interventions and connections as part of the campaign for the Global Social Protection Floor. These initiatives and others showcased social work values and strategies to UN representatives and other globally active NGOs. Challenges are to expand these efforts and develop better ways to engage colleagues from diverse countries in these inputs.

Need for advocacy in global higher education

Another important arena for professional involvement is higher education policy at the global level. Growing trends risk further disadvantaging locally relevant knowledge and knowledge generation from new sources. More and more universities in both global North and South are relying on rankings and journal impact factors. This is an insidious way of re-introducing elements of professional imperialism. The highly ranked journals are those based in Western nations, with long-established universities and social work education. Global ranking of journals and programs will undermine the regional social work journals that are adding important knowledge building to professional understanding of problems and theory. Rankings based on citations also disadvantage newer and less popular topics, as fewer scholars work in these areas.

Accreditation and the potential incursion of foreign bodies of accreditation may exacerbate the domination of Western/Northern standards for higher education, and in worst cases, impose culturally irrelevant standards on programs in Africa and Asia. Midgley (2008) mentions a proposal that surfaced in 2002 that the US Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) consider accrediting programs in other countries; he labelled this a 'new imperialism' that results from the elevation of Western standards and educational systems. Schools of social work in the Global South may seek external accreditation as a way to bolster their academic standing and reputation. Midgley does comment that the 2002 proposal 'was fiercely resisted by members of the organisation's [CSWE's] Global Commission who explained that this would require educational programs in developing countries to conform to the curricular requirements prescribed for American schools', resulting in inappropriate education (41). The re-emergence of discussions of accreditation and increased emphasis on journal rankings makes engagement with the politics and policymaking of higher education on the regional and global scales essential to combat this new form of imperialism.

Educational implications: building global literacy as a goal for social work education

If taken seriously, the Global Agenda and the call for more social work impact on global issues puts huge responsibilities on the educational sector to prepare professionals with sufficient knowledge to engage. Social work education needs to prepare students with a minimum level of global literacy. This is essential to improve the practice of social workers in their local contexts that are increasingly affected by global forces, especially the influx of large migrant populations, and would enable professionals to fulfil their roles as informed participants in political systems at home. Global knowledge will also serve as a foundation for a smaller number of professionals who will focus their entire practice locally on work with international migrant populations, or go on to careers with a focus on international work where they can apply their professional values and skills in inter-disciplinary teams in development and disaster response. More importantly, global knowledge may inspire and prepare more social workers to engage actively in tackling global social problems on the policy level, whether on the national or inter-governmental level.

Although data are scarce, there are indications that social work education is currently failing miserably in globally relevant teaching. The results of newly conducted studies in East Africa on social workers' capacity to contribute to achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are discouraging. Among Kenyan social work students surveyed in 2012, a dozen years after adoption of the MDGs and only three years from the achieve-

ment target, only 14.4% said they knew the MDGs in detail (Wairire et al. forthcoming); 31% either were not aware or only slightly aware, meaning that they had heard of the term, but did not know what the goals constituted and therefore, of course, could not link their practice to these goals in any way. There were similar, in fact slightly worse, findings among practicing social workers, only 10.9% of whom knew the MDGs in detail (Wairire et al. forthcoming); findings in Uganda paralleled the Kenyan study (Twikirize et al. 2013). An in-class survey of MSW students in one US school in 2013 revealed that only 25% knew what MDGs stood for; more discouraging was that this was an elective course on international social work; attracting students with a strong interest in the content (Healy 2012). Scores on other items of basic global knowledge were similarly dismal.

Specific content and curriculum models can vary across countries, but practitioners in all countries need preparation for practice in environments increasingly affected by global influences. The preparation provided to students should also assist the profession to secure and enhance a role for social work in the global policy and action network addressing the issues in our profession's arena of concern and expertise.

Shifting the priority of international social work to global policy may alleviate some concerns about imperialism. As Kreitzer and Wilson describe it, in solidarity the profession can recognise that 'we are all in this together and that there are global problems that need to be addressed by all of us, for the benefit of all of us' (2010, 716). It fits with Ahmadi's call to refocus international social work on working for human rights, social justice, conflict prevention and peace and to emphasise partnership as the model of work (2003).

Revisiting the debates: imperialism and indigenisation

At the outset, I noted that debates over imperialism and indigenisation have been regular themes in the literature. Perhaps we should question our profession's tendency to revisit the same issues for decades, with little substantive change in the arguments put forth. More than four decades ago, the journal *International Social Work* published an editorial message that it would no longer accept articles that focused on the lack of fit of Western social work in developing countries because the editors concluded that the topic was 'threadbare' due to the many submissions on the topic (Irvine 1972). Yet, the theme persists in our literature. Gray, Coates and Yellow Bird (2008) catalogued dozens of articles on the need for indigenisation dating back to 1972 as well. If these are simply repetitive articles, then perhaps little harm is done. But, the messages of the dangers of imperialism may impede the profession's capacity to act and discourage North–South partnerships on issues of mutual concern. Perhaps it is time to relabel use of inappropriate models as just bad practice, and to recognise that there may be complex reasons why curricula haven't been fully indigenised after so much intellectual capital has been spent in calling for this to occur.

Deepak (2012), in calling for transforming the approach to international social work, human rights, and development by giving attention to global inequalities, power relationships and structural inequalities, recognised that there are many sources of oppression, including those imbedded in traditional power structures and indigenous practices. The strategy she identified as 'global scattered resistance' (788) fits well with the Global Agenda and with the recommendation made here to expand global impact. Deepak accepts that resistance can occur at multiple levels. Social workers can contribute to human rights and social justice within organisations such as the UN and World Bank where they can work to

publicise and educate on the impacts of globalisation on marginalised groups, while others can work from the outside in opposition to these organisations and their actions. Part of the responsibility of education for international social work is to address the global structures and policies that create gross inequalities, and help students see the linkages between global forces and the problems they can identify on the ground and to show them points of access to make change (Deepak 2012). For scholars and practitioners seeking to extend social work's influence on global issues, the need is to recognise that progress can be made in engagement with mainstream global bodies, in global and local movements of resistance and advocacy, and in local practice. Disparaging or privileging some of these over others has not been productive for the profession.

Conclusions

International social work is still a work in progress and an arena with diverse definitions, interpretations, and directions. Rather than continuing to debate definitions, this chapter has explored three current directions for international social work and their educational implications. It is possible that all three directions are appropriate for social work in the 21st century. Forces to universalise aspects of the profession—its definition, ethical principles, and education—are intensifying even as they remain controversial. Some educational programs in diverse countries are identifying global or international practice as an area of specialisation, while others question its very feasibility. The international professional organisations have committed social work to an ambitious agenda for addressing global challenges. It should be easiest to secure agreement that increasing the global knowledge of social workers will only strengthen the profession. Low global literacy is not desirable and puts our professionals at a disadvantage. Secondly, global knowledge is necessary if social work is to have an impact on global issues and fulfil the Global Agenda. Most, unless they hold their profession in very low esteem, would also agree that social work does have something to offer for efforts to address global social problems and strengthen respect for human rights.

Considerable work remains to be done. The specific content that would make up minimal global literacy needs to be identified, and this should be done as a partnership project with efforts to develop both universal concepts and content and locally specific elements. Language will present some obstacles to building global knowledge and will demand more effort to ensure translation of social work scholarship into diverse languages. Some relevant sources, especially those from the United Nations, are published in multiple languages, increasing their accessibility. The dominance of English language in publishing and professional conferences creates barriers for non-English speakers. In some ways, it also leads many scholars whose first language is English to narrow their search for alternative sources of knowledge. Thus, translations should also be encouraged both from and to English and other languages. Theory building is another, perhaps more challenging, project. Although Trygged notes that, since there is no single theoretical base for social work, 'it is hardly possible to achieve a common set of theories for international social work' (651), Healy (2012) writes that theory is beginning to emerge through the blending of social work methods and perspectives with globally relevant concepts of human rights, development, and social inclusion. This work remains in its infancy.

Finally, although it will likely be later than 2020, social work may come to recognise a more holistic perspective. The global and the local can no longer be easily divided. Globally aware, knowledgeable and active professionals are needed in every context and will eventually be identified simply as competent social workers in the 21st century.

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