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Transnational social work: a new paradigm with perspectives

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In the course of its professionalisation, social work seems to have got trapped in national social policy frames while our world is increasingly marked by transnational processes. Due to its structural location within nation states, therefore, social work generally has its hands tied to adequately respond to 'globalisation', particularly in the almost total absence of transnational or world social policy frames. Given this situation, what can the profession do? This chapter explores how social work could experience a professional renaissance by explicitly reflecting its role and activities from a transnational perspective. First is explored what a transnational social work perspective is, and what it is not. Second, the possible locations are identified as to where transnational social work could already be practiced. Third, key knowledge dimension are identified for the entire social work field to move forward in adopting a transnational perspective in training, research, service delivery systems and practice.

Social work (understood here to include social work and social pedagogy) is a young profession and owes its legitimacy, status and economic standing primarily to developments after World War 2. While previous pioneers of social work laboured hard to get the profession established, national social policy gave them little support at the time, be it in Europe, the US, or elsewhere. Social services did not enjoy a high priority then, since social policy's prime concern was to broadly establish social insurance systems and to better safeguard the population against the risks of capitalism. To the extent that these systems needed personnel for their administration, recruitment took place outside of social work. Social workers, if at all, were given official functions primarily in conjunction with health and welfare services. Even in the years immediately after World War 2, it must be recognised that social services did not rank high on the social policy priority list. Therefore, when we observe that social work became a legitimate profession after World War 2, this has primarily been so within the last 40 years of the 20th century. By then, the social insurance systems had been broadened so as to cover (in most cases) the entire population of Northern Europe and North America. At the same time also the coverage had become qualitatively better than ever before.

Granted, this path of social work development as a recognised profession is associated with the history of social policy development in ‘developed countries’ (DCs). It would be a leap of faith, however, to assume that social work in ‘less developed countries’ (LDCs) today is on a very different track. Though social work training has spread throughout the world, the volume and density of social work services in LDCs still remains rather low. More important, since LDCs typically have little developed social insurance and social services delivery systems, social work there still suffers from lack of official professional recognition and formal embedding. Social work still tends to take place ‘outside any welfare state’ structure. It mostly tends to operate within a ‘private’ NGO space. In addition, social work graduates often do not find jobs in the field for which they were trained. Social work has not (yet) become an integral part of a larger system of social problem management and remains a ‘marginal’ profession outside DCs.

Professionalised social services arrived, historically speaking, late in the development of the welfare state, both in volume and differentiation. In the 1970s volume and differentiation began to grow, however, at a very rapid pace so that some might even speak of a social services explosion. A look at employment and budget indicators would strongly reflect this observation, and the growth in social work education (measured by the number of schools and social work degrees awarded for a range of competences and responsibilities) points to this great expansion at the time. In part, social work functioned to directly complement various components of the social insurance system. But, depending on the country, important growth for social work services took place without being directly linked to the social insurance system in the ‘developed world’.

The above analysis suggests that social work obtained its acceptance within national – though different – social policy frames and that the early pioneers and advocates of social work as a (new) profession could not rely on national social policy frames to enhance what they were struggling for. Or, expressed in another way, as social work became an established (new) profession it was simultaneously straight jacketed by the respective national social policy frames. It had little reason to develop a horizon to transcend national perimeters in social analysis and professional action. This is not to say that there would not have been sufficient reason to develop social work perspectives transcending national boundaries. There definitely was, as can be illustrated by migration flows affecting both Europe and North America, and by such things as the North–South dialogues and the pre-occupation with ‘Third World’ social and economic development. The absence of national social policy frames confining social work in perspective and action, then, would explain why the pioneer advocates for professionalised social work in North America and Europe so strongly emphasised the importance of an international perspective. It was the international perspective that helped them at the time to understand certain social processes, problems and challenges facing the populations of their concern. Migration, imperialism and exploitation, and colonial and imperialist wars were major components to their international perspective. Their international perspective was framed by these components and debates around them, though it then differed from our ‘global perspective’ marked by decades of continued globalisation since.

Now that social work has become an established profession with steadily more individuals trained for it (in and outside universities), what should make us believe that social work would ever be in a position to transcend the national social policy frames confining it? What current and future developments might be so compelling as to necessitate social work to be reflected and daily practiced with an international perspective?

One answer to this question might be found in the rapid trend to integrate economic and social spaces beyond national perimeters although no new (transnational) social policy frames are created to substitute the old (national) ones. The European Union – and to a lesser extent the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) – would testify to this. Both are transnational processes to integrate social and economic spaces with one exception: social policy tends to remain subject to national authority. In so doing, they follow the subsidiarity principle.

Another part of the answer might be sought in a trend that has been named ‘globalisation’. Both the EU/NAFTA and the globalisation process would increasingly call for a perspective that transcends the hitherto common national focus in social work. Even though social work remains confined to national social policy frames, transnational processes will tend to impose an international perspective on them in general, and for social work in particular. Therefore, we may expect social work with an international perspective to become much more important in theory, research and practice.

Transnational, international and global social work

This chapter focuses on the ways in which social work could (or must) be conceived and practiced from more than a national perspective. ‘Transnational’ could be the term used for social work that transcends the now dominant national focus. ‘International’ could be used to designate social work with an orientation toward social process between two or more nations. International social work might be termed ‘global social work’ when the focus is on what has been called ‘world system’, implying that very many, if not all, nations are seen to be in an interactive process.

It is suggested here to use the term ‘transnational social work’. It seems to optimally capture what we mean by social work having a need to extend its perspective beyond national boundaries. Furthermore, ‘international’ or ‘global’ social work can be subsumed under it.

Based on these reflections, transnational social work is not:

1. a national juxtaposition of social work development and practice
2. a national comparison of social policy frames and the role social work plays in them
3. a comparison of social work curricula and training practices between nations or schools of social work from different countries
4. an international exchange of students, teachers and practitioners
5. an international cooperation in social work training or research
6. an international social work conference
7. social work in international NGOs unless certain requirements are met (see discussion below)
8. social work in national NGOs or government organisations active abroad unless certain requirements are met
9. multicultural social work unless certain requirements are met.

While it is true that the above may lead the national perspective to be extended, they do not in themselves constitute transnational social work. However, they may be vehicles to facilitate a transnational perspective. Only specific ways to conceive practice and reflect

social work can lead to it being transformed from one with a national to one with a transnational dimension and quality.

In this chapter, we understand the transnational perspective in social work as one that cuts across all areas of social work. This view significantly differs from what is generally discussed under 'global', 'international' or 'transnational' social work in the literature. Here, it is proposed that transnational social work be regarded like gender that, if systematically included as a variable, may drastically alter social work both in theory and practice. Likewise, given a problem relevant to social work, additional insights for social work theory and action may result when queried for transnational dimensions. Clearly, the national dimension would be transcended even when the response to a problem remains – or must remain – nationally (or even locally) anchored. 'The national' becomes transnational, as in gender studies 'the private' becomes political. As a result, social work would in theory and practice assume a radically different quality. It would undergo a change from the inside out, so to say.

For example, the response to unemployment or poverty may be anchored on the local or national level. With the transnational focus added, however, this response may qualitatively be very different and, thus, change social work practice and with it possibly also the social policy of which it is a part. Of course, it can always be argued that the better and more effective way would be to anchor the response to unemployment and poverty in a transnational or even global policy frame, since such a frame would by its very nature have to transcend any national focus. There is no reason to dispute such a claim, if the problem addressed can thus be dealt with in a more optimal way. Nonetheless, it remains true that a transnational perspective in social work enables social work practice to better cope with transnational processes, even in the absence of transnational or global policy frames. Thus, unemployment at home may be differently understood if seen as an element of transnational processes through which it may be caused. For instance, knowledge of what economists call 'structural adjustments in the global division of labour' may subsequently lead to different modes of intervention and social work practice.

New social work theory and practice due to a paradigmatic shift

If conceived as suggested here, how much would a transnational perspective change contemporary social work theory and practice? It is hard to say. However, given the ongoing transnational processes of today, and the cumulative outcomes generated by them in the recent past and the foreseeable future, it would be reasonable to assume that many segments of social work theory and practice would experience significant change.

Surprisingly, even in social work fields that are commonly thought of as being a response to a purely 'local' or even a micro social problem, like the family, might undergo change. What is deemed a purely local or national problem may indeed prove to be a 'false' perception – a limited and limiting focus on the micro level, or when social work intervention suffers from an ethnocentric 'national bias' structured into the national policy frame from within which social work delivers services. The unquestioned focus on the national dimension could even be labelled as 'chauvinist social work' given the trend towards transnational processes like migration and the need to recognise and accept in this context a multitude of family patterns 'uncommon' to a particular nation and its family policy frame.

How much would social work focusing on the needs of families change if transnational labour markets, migration and ethnicity were systematically included in analysis and intervention? How, then, would social work be differently practiced pertaining to issues in child rearing, divorce, recombined families, families separated by transnational distance, transnational extended family systems, etc? Again, it is likely that the transnational perspective would change – probably significantly – the ways in which social work in this field would be reflected and practiced.

Responses to alcohol abuse could be a case in point. How much of social work theory and practice in this area of intervention might change after having considered migration, ethnicity and cultural differences in drinking and alcohol abuse patterns? How much would change when internationalised lifestyle patterns are brought into the picture, and with them the international trade and advertising for alcoholic beverages by giant multinational conglomerates? By taking into account such transnational dimensions, it is reasonable to expect that theory and practice relating to alcohol abuse – its prevention, therapy and stabilisation – would undergo significant differentiation and change.

Social work renaissance through the transnational perspective

The above are just a few of many examples that serve to illustrate the powerful influence a transnational perspective – understood as a focus on transnational processes (the salient dimensions of interaction among nations) – would have on social work. Think how a transnational perspective might influence industrial social work, youth work, social work in the health and criminal justice system, community development, etc. There is little doubt that, if systematically applied, a transnational perspective would be of considerable significance to social work theory and practice – be it of the proactive or the reactive type. It could even lead to a professional renaissance associated with a new professional development cycle.

Given the magnitude of contemporary transnational processes, it might be objected that social work in most areas has long ago begun to reflect and practice from a transnational perspective. Not doing so – so is the claim – would have yielded unsatisfactory results for too long. Social work practice has by necessity been doing for some time what is here espoused as a renaissance project for social work. Youth work, community development, family work and other fields have, it may be asserted, for many years been confronted with transnational processes and globalisation. Therefore, the field had no other choice but to practice social work from a transnational perspective.

It would certainly be false and unwarranted to maintain that social work has nowhere been practised with a transnational perspective. Without any doubt, many stellar projects and intervention methods could be found to document the improvement a transnational perspective has brought and could bring to the field. However, how persistently and systematically has the transnational perspective been employed, including in the fields mentioned above that obviously are good ‘candidates’ for doing so? How systematically has research in social work proceeded to include a transnational perspective? And how many social work training sites are making the international perspectives an explicit part of the curriculum? Closer scrutiny seems to suggest that transnational perspectives have been employed rather sparsely, irregularly and, above all, not explicitly.

What can be observed for 'gender', recognised for many years as a salient variable to be systematically included in all areas of social work, should also hold for the 'transnational perspective'. While 'gender' may have become an explicit variable in some social work education, research and practice, the 'transnational perspective' lags far behind in comparison. Neither, however, has adequately become a dimension firmly embedded in social work theory and practice. Worse, in many cases where 'gender' has 'officially' become a part of reflecting on and practising social work, it may have remained lip service or ritualistic behaviour. That the 'transnational perspective' might to some extent also suffer the same fate is to be expected. However, both 'gender' and the 'transnational perspective' are too important as dimensions to be employed only ambivalently.

Transnational organisations, international social policy frames and transnational social work

Social work operating within a national social policy frame has been the focus so far. It was suggested that the nature of social work theory and practice would in all likelihood change considerably by including a transnational perspective. However, it may be asked, is there social work that already operates within some international social policy frame? If so, where would we be able to locate such international social policy frames in the absence of a world government? Three settings come to mind where social work might be practiced with a transnational perspective or be embedded in a transnational policy frame:

1. the United Nations and its NGOs
2. NGOs that are not part of the UN, but working in an international context
3. national government organisations working in international contexts.

To be sure, a vast number of social workers are employed within national social policy frames, not within international ones. Therefore, it seems to be more pressing to insist on the importance of a transnational perspective for social work still operating – and, given present world structures, probably for many years to come – within a national policy frame. This, however, does not preclude that social work services delivered through organisations such as are listed above do not exist or will not grow in volume in the near future.

At the same time, it must be asked to what extent internationally active NGOs are themselves subject to and subordinated to national social policy frames when active in a particular country or, for that matter, in 'a world of countries'. Since all NGOs (and organisations of foreign governments) are but guests to the country in which they work, they are by nature of this status, and at the risk of expulsion, subject to that country's rules. Therefore, it is not true that social work services offered through internationally operating NGOs is by necessity also 'transnational social work'. On the contrary, it is reasonable to believe that most internationally operating NGOs are 'in business' because they excel in offering solutions tailored to existing national social policy frames. Therefore, we are led back to the claim already made above that social work as a profession would undergo significant change if it managed to introduce a transnational perspective even when it is practised from within an internationally active NGO.

Are international NGOs, however, not in the advantageous position to practise social work with an international perspective? They are, indeed. The potential for international NGOs to practise international social work as understood here lies in the fact that, as

a corporate body, they may have accumulated significant knowledge of transnational processes. International NGOs also have significant knowledge about social policy frames that could be designed for dealing with problems related to transnational processes. Given this knowledge base, they possess a ready-made potential to be applied towards arriving at a transnational perspective in social work. This is only so, however, if the host country does not confine such NGOs to operate exclusively from a national perspective.

An example for the above could be found with NGOs that are active in community development and community organising. An NGO, for instance, may have acquired knowledge of migration patterns from a less developed country (LDC) to a developed one. It may know much about social problems related to migration in the country of origin, and it may equally know much about social problems which tend to be generated by migration upon arrival in the country of destination. Assuming that the same NGO is active in both the country of origin and that of destination, it may decide to coordinate its activities by employing a transnational perspective. This may, for instance, lead the NGO to simultaneously coordinate community development projects in the LDC with those for the same migrant group in the country of destination. In so doing, it may mitigate both problems related to emigration and problems related to immigration. Furthermore, it might decide to channel migrants' resources, such as remittances and knowledge, in such ways as to enhance the migrants' 'home' region development.

While various other examples of transnational social work practice within NGOs could certainly be found, we have little knowledge of the volume and nature of such practice. When and where do NGOs practice transnational social work? In which fields of social work do they tend to do so? How much of the total volume of NGO social work is guided by a transnational perspective as it is understood here? Do they do so on principle, or only when given the opportunity by the host country? Similar questions could equally be posed to UN agencies or to national government agencies working abroad.

We might too hastily conclude that UN organisations (such as UNESCO, UNICEF, FAO and others) deliver social work services anchored in a transnational perspective. First, as mentioned above, UN organisations, too, are guests to the countries in which they operate and, therefore, subject to national social policy frames. Second, even though UN organisations may strive to establish global standards in education, health, nutrition, income, fertility, human rights, etc., the social services may nevertheless be provided from a purely national perspective. Expecting a country to meet a given global standard – and to assist them in achieving it – does not imply that social work services (to the extent that they may be a part of this effort) will be designed from a transnational perspective.

The above reflections would lead to the conclusion that UN organisations may very well operate under an international policy frame, such as global standards for member countries. Following the UN, other international NGOs may also subscribe – where meaningful – to the same global standards, adopt their own version thereof or develop new international policy standards in addition. Such additional standards could pertain to gender, salaries and benefits, environment, transparency and accountability, etc.

In general, internationally active NGOs could be categorised as follows:

1. NGOs without global standards and without a transnational perspective underlying their social work services
2. NGOs with global standards in terms of internal functioning and project goals, but without a transnational perspective underlying their social work services

3. NGOs whose work is wholly or in part anchored in a transnational perspective regardless of whether or not there is adherence to international goals or standards.

It is only the last mentioned NGOs that are of interest here, since we refrain from categorically labelling social work services delivered through international NGOs as 'transnational social work'.

Educating for transnational social work – key knowledge dimensions

If transnational social work is based on a perspective that takes into account the effects of transnational processes between two or more nations, what could be understood under 'transnational processes'? Here, a very general concept shall be advanced. A 'transnational process' shall include three features:

1. An interaction and/or exchange pattern between two or more countries – possibly all countries. The nature of this exchange may be economic or not.
2. An interaction and/or exchange pattern persistent enough to produce recognisable and articulated, undesired 'external effects' for one or more of the exchange partners.
3. A spillover onto other countries. Positive and negative external effects of exchange may spill over and, thereby, affect third parties.

If transnational social work is an activity that deals with transnational processes, reflects upon them, and considers their effects when designing social services, what could be some of the knowledge dimensions salient to social work with an international perspective? Let us consider some:

1. Mobility. Exchange processes can consist of the mobility of capital, goods and services, labour power and information culture. All can have negative effects in terms of social problems, calling for social work services. Therefore, it may be important to know what causes migration, by what patterns does the working population migrate, what problems may be generated due to migration and which ones may be generated by labour immigration. The same questions could be asked pertaining to the flows of capital, goods, services and information. What problems arise in the country from which they flow and in the country to which they flow? Additionally, which social problems are generated by the environmental impact mobility in general has on nature and populations. Here, both the energy consumed by the mobility of goods, services and labour, and as a result of moving materials from one ecological system to another, must be taken into account.
2. Unequal exchange. The very quality of an exchange process can equally give rise to problems to which social work may be called upon to respond. Thus, exchange can be more or less equal. Accordingly, a transnational social work perspective would entail knowledge about unequal exchange processes alluded to by terms such as 'unequal exchange', 'fair and unfair trade', 'unequal development', 'underdevelopment', 'development of underdevelopment', 'transfer of value', 'exploitation', 'environmental destruction', etc.
3. Transnational conflicts. Transnational exchange patterns may lead to conflict-ridden interaction patterns. These in turn may lead to additional problems beyond those caused by 'exchange' in the more narrow sense. Thus, attempts to correct for exchange

relations deemed unacceptable by any party may spiral into a conflict pattern assuming, to some extent, a life of its own. The outcome of such conflicts might even be war. Therefore, a transnational social work perspective would incorporate knowledge about behaviour in conflict situations including knowledge about how conflicts can be escalated or de-escalated.

4. Internal national conflicts and national aggression. Internal national conflicts may spill over to affect other nations, in which case a problem becomes transnational. Refugee migration and other problems come to mind. Equally, in the case of aggression, problems may be imposed on other countries. Thus, the transnational social work perspective would be cognisant of such processes and incorporate knowledge pertaining to them.
5. Transnational cooperation in social policy. Given globalisation and the increased volume of transnational exchange and labour flows, national social policy frames are here and there beginning to be harmonised or even be opened up a bit or complemented by policy elements based on transnational social policy cooperation. Comparative knowledge about various national social policy frames and the transnational cooperation around them is increasingly important for social work with a transnational perspective.

The key knowledge dimensions suggested here are points of orientation for degree programs, continuing education, social work research, and for structuring service delivery systems. Making them an integral part of the field illustrates in more detail how transnational social work as a transversal perspective can be conceived. At the same time, it will begin to move the profession into a transformative process and renaissance to better respond and cope with the ongoing transnational processes and globalisation.

Conclusions

A glance at the history of social work suggests that the founding pioneers of social work were very concerned with transnational processes at the time. They looked beyond their immediate spheres of social work intervention. While social work then had a smaller spectrum of activity than today – it was very often situated in the context of international migration, poverty, education, social and cultural integration – it was accompanied by a ‘transnational perspective’. At the same time, this transnational perspective was politically articulated in various forms on national and international levels. With increased professionalisation and the emergence and development of the welfare state, however, the transnational perspective seemed to have lost ground. The more social workers were trained to be certified professional, the more the social work perspective became ‘nationalised’. National social policy frames, and social work to be done in them, took centre stage.

Social work as a profession became ‘hostage’ to the ‘welfare state’ as the main employer. As a result, social work today is almost exclusively practised with a national perspective, to the exclusion of a transnational one. At the same time, though, social work has been confronted with a phenomenal ‘globalisation wave’ and an immense qualitative and quantitative change in transnational exchange processes. Clearly, there is a significant dissonance between the social policy frame within which social work is mostly embedded and the challenges posed on many fronts by the sheer magnitude in recent transnational exchange processes. What can be done to mitigate this dissonance?

It is suggested here to infuse the predominant national focus with a transnational perspective in all of social work training, research and practice. This, so it is suggested, will strongly influence the way social work is being reflected, taught, researched and practised within national policy frames, and will lead to an opening toward transnational or global policy frames. Successfully introduced, the transnational perspective could bring social work and the entire field into a renaissance. To some extent, transnational NGOs might serve a useful role in this effort. At the same time, however, it is here concluded that transnational NGOs are guests in the countries in which they work and, therefore, confined to national policy more than is often surmised. In situations of serious social policy conflicts, NGOs could be curtailed or even expelled. Nevertheless, be it from within a transnational NGO or from within a national policy frame, the nature of practicing social work would significantly change once it has learned to adopt a transnational perspective.

Reference note

The above is meant to be a synthetic text written against the background of the literature cited in the bibliography. The cited literature is comprehensive for the English and German language areas. The bibliography, however, does not tend to include publications too removed from 'transnational social work' as understood here, and as delineated above.

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