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## Placing Irish Social Work in a Global Context: Assembling International Comparisons Through the Literature

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## Placing Irish Social Work in a Global Context: Assembling International Comparisons Through the Literature

### Cover Page Footnote

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## **Placing Irish Social Work in a Globalised Context: Assembling International Comparisons Through the Literature**

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### **Abstract**

There is an absence of literature that places social work practice in Ireland within a global context. This circumstance is obstructive to students and practitioners of social work in Ireland, who must increasingly demonstrate understanding of social work as an international endeavour. Ireland is also steadily more globalised and multi-cultural. In social work, related changes underway include increased transience of persons across national lines, and complex transnational social problems. In this context, social workers may broaden their understanding of Irish practice through drawing upon learning from elsewhere. To facilitate this, a theoretically informed critical commentary on the literature is presented in this article. The specific focus is on globalisation in the Republic of Ireland. The core argument of the paper is that variance in international socioeconomic wellbeing must be better understood by social work students and practitioners in Ireland, as a response to intensifying globalisation. In developing this argument, two lines of inquiry are pursued. Firstly, focused commentary on the literature on socioeconomic wellbeing and globalisation is presented. This operates around four emergent themes, which are respectively: poverty and economic inequality; life expectancy and health; quality of life and personal safety, and conflict and political strife. Secondly, a composite conceptual framework on the social construction of social work is presented, and applied, to inform discussion and analysis. In conclusion, global cognisance for social workers in Ireland would seem increasingly pertinent and compelled by processes of globalisation.

### **Key words**

social work, global, globalisation, international, literature

### **Introduction**

Existing literature that compares social work in Ireland to elsewhere is conspicuous by its absence. Yet global cognisance among social workers, and related proficiencies such as intercultural competency (CORU, 2013), are increasingly required of social workers in Ireland (Campbell & Christie, 2005). Such requirement has a complex genesis. Ireland has, according to some, become one of the world's most globalised countries. From here, complex migration patterns, transcontinental social problems and knowledge exchange, and multiculturalism are increasingly within the purview of Irish social work practice (Christie & Walsh, 2015). Recognising global interdependence is also an ethical imperative: social work arguably cannot espouse the traditional mission of social justice whilst disregarding injustice elsewhere. Nor can the profession refute the ripple effect of causal reaction where actions taken in Ireland impact in complex ways upon other locations (Harrison & Melville, 2010).

In this context, the core argument of this paper is that variance in international socioeconomic wellbeing must be better understood by social work students and practitioners in Ireland, as a

response to intensifying globalisation. In making this argument, the paper pursues two integrated lines of inquiry. Firstly, from a review-orientation, the relevance of varied international socioeconomic wellbeing, to globalisation, is established. This is achieved through theoretically informed critical commentary on the literature, operating around four broad themes. Secondly, from a response-orientation, the argument for better understanding of international socioeconomic diversity in Irish social work, as a reaction to intensifying globalisation, is developed. Here a composite conceptual framework, derived from Payne (2014), is presented and applied in concluding analysis. The intention, in doing so, is to offer learning moving forward for students and practitioners seeking to better respond to globalised practice milieu.

The article is necessary on a number of counts. Despite the ‘global turn’ in social sciences (Yeates, 2008), and in social work literature which appeals to global frames of reference for social work practice (Harrison & Melville 2010), analyses that foreground Ireland’s place in a globalised world are lacking. Additionally, strides toward universalism in social work are being made (Gray & Fook, 2004). A new global definition of social work has, for instance, been developed (International Federation of Social Workers, 2014; Ornellas, Spolander & Engelbrecht, 2018). Global qualifying standards for social work education are also now established (International Association of Schools of Social Work, 2002; Sewpaul & Jones, 2004). In this context, Irish indigenous social work may be imperilled if it fails to account for global changes underway. More specifically, despite the contested nature of the “*profession’s commitment to internationalising social work education and practice*” (Gray & Fook, 2004, p.625), Irish social work curricula, education and training must equip practitioners to gain awareness of social reality beyond Ireland’s sequestered boundaries.

Within this, however, Ireland’s position within internationalized social work must be addressed. As an analysis operating from Ireland outwards, a western euro-centric and even post-colonial lens is implied (Carroll, 2003). Therefore, the intention to remain cognisant, within this analysis, of hegemonic discourses and forces of western ideological domination, is explicitly declared from the outset (Harrison & Melville, 2010; Sewpaul, 2006). In this context, the term ‘professional imperialism’ was originally coined by Midgley (1981). It refers to the transference of global North social work theory, knowledge and ideology to the global South, where colonialism was historically characteristic of relations between both locations. Within this, however, Ireland’s position is complex. Irish social work is not just situated within internationalized social work, as a global North ideological power base: thereby contributing to professional imperialism in the global South (Midgely, 1981). Rather, historical relations, such as between Ireland and the neighbouring jurisdiction of England, may position Irish social work submissively in relation to more dominant social work positions elsewhere. This is perhaps most evident, from the traditional inclination of Irish social work to derive knowledge and practice strategies, from England (Skehill, 1999).

The paper proceeds in the following order. Firstly, key definitions and facts are established. Following this, the concept of globalisation is explained and introduced, and thereafter, focused commentary on the literature is presented around four emergent themes. These are respectively: poverty and economic inequality; life expectancy and health; quality of life and personal safety; and conflict and political strife. The selection of sub-themes is based upon the profession’s mandate to human rights and social justice that is frequently impeded in these areas (CORU, 2013, 2018; IFSW, 2014). Finally, analysis is achieved through the application of a composite conceptual framework, derived from Payne (2014). Within this, concluding discussion addresses lessons learned, and constructive strategies, moving forward.

## **Starting definitions and facts**

The specific focus of this article is on globalisation in the Republic of Ireland. Before considering this in more depth, some starting definitions and facts are required. Uptake of the term globalisation is wide ranging across such disparate disciplines as economics, political science and anthropology (Langran & Birk, 2016). According to Dominelli (2009, p.14), in this broad context the primary definition of globalisation has been, “the economic integration of national economies into one global market.” This definition later expanded to account for political, social and cultural spheres (Christie & Walsh, 2015; Dominelli, 2009). Notwithstanding this, drawing on her earlier work, Dominelli (2010a) furnishes further explanation of globalisation tailored for social work practice. This conceptualisation, which forms the basis of analysis to come, proceeds in the following way:

Globalization is a contested term, ranging in meaning from the economic integration of countries in one economic system, to one that considers the impact of economic global relations on social relationships from the metalevel of a social system to the interstices of everyday life practices (Dominelli, 2010a, p. 599).

As can be appreciated from this, globalisation is a complex and contested phenomenon (Payne & Askeland, 2008). To better understand it, therefore, some further exploration of theory and literature is beneficial. This includes consideration of the variegated effects on social work practice, and on the circumstances of social work service users, in the Republic of Ireland (Christie & Walsh, 2015).

## **Globalisation and social constructionism theory**

This article proposes that variance in international socioeconomic wellbeing must be better understood by social workers in Ireland in response to globalisation. Informed by social construction theory, the basis for this arguably lies, in the impact that globalisation has on social work practice.

As a starting point, it is clear that the effect of globalisation on social work is profound (Dominelli, 2010a, p.599). The implication is, that social workers in Ireland must adopt transnational practice (Christie & Walsh, 2015). Alteration of the labour process and service delivery of social work, development of localised forms of theory and practice, and new social problems such as environmental damage and people-trafficking are among pervasive effects (Dominelli, 2010a, p. 599). Social services must also respond to new kinds of family and community life moulded by migration, transnational mobility and technological advancement (Clarke, 2005). In this context, Christie and Walsh (2015) identify five key areas for social work in Ireland responding to globalisation. Firstly, an increase in mobility and regimes of differentiated migration, thereby raises concerns for issues such as the exploitation of low skilled workers and persons with precarious citizenship status. Here, increased requirement for intercultural competency in social work is prompted (Christie & Walsh, 2015; Dominelli, 2009; 2010b). Secondly, social work with refugees, asylum seekers and the undocumented is increasingly relevant. Within this, particular roles and statutory responsibilities must be upheld by social workers, alongside the need to respond to welfare concerns, for example, for those residing in poor quality direct provision accommodation. Thirdly, and fourthly, formal and unpaid caring work and the gender dimension of globalisation brings new complication for social equality in Ireland. Finally, there is hope in the development of international social work, armed with new forms of resistance, such as transnational theoretical responses (Christie & Walsh, 2015).

In this context, the opportunity for social work to respond adequately to globalisation can be illustrated and evidenced through social constructionism theory. This is fitting, as the postmodernist basis of social constructionism makes it suitable for the complexity and indeterminate nature of both globalisation, and social work (Burr, 2015; Payne & Askeland, 2016). Specifically, a social constructionist perspective on social work recognises that the nature of the profession is not resolute *per se* (Payne, 2014). Rather, social work is considered a dynamic, responsive and socially constructed entity (Burr, 2015; Payne, 2014). The utility of this theoretical perspective on social work, therefore, lies in its consistency with the view that social work can meaningfully change in response to globalisation (Payne & Askeland, 2016). Such a standpoint is not only accommodating to the present analysis, but also supported by existing literature (*see* Dominelli, 2010b; Payne & Askeland, 2016). Taken as a whole, the need for increased understanding of variance in international socioeconomic wellbeing, from a social constructionist perspective, includes the opportunity for social work to change positively in response to that knowledge. Most fundamentally, this opportunity lies in a founding tenet of social constructionism theory, namely, that “knowledge and social action go together” (Burr, 2015, p.5). With this established, later the detail of how practitioners may respond to globalisation, from a social constructionist standpoint, will be expanded upon through application of a conceptual framework derived from Payne (2014). For now, better understanding of international variance in socioeconomic wellbeing, is requisite.

### **Review of variance in socioeconomic wellbeing: international comparisons**

The core argument of this paper is that variance in international socioeconomic wellbeing must be better understood by social work students and practitioners in Ireland, as a response to intensifying globalisation. To develop this argument, the relevance of varied international socioeconomic wellbeing, to globalisation, must be first established. Thematic overview of literature is presented in the following, towards achieving this. Therein, international comparisons between Ireland, and elsewhere, operate illustratively.

Before examining themes, however, there are a number of points to address. Specifically, as outlined already, globalisation changes the nature of social work in Ireland (Christie et al., 2015). Within this, increased understanding of international contexts is required. The transience of populations across national lines, for instance, offers one example of the need for better international awareness (Christie et al., 2015; Dominelli, 2010b). In this way, globalisation increases the contact that social workers in Ireland will have with social problems and populations from abroad (Christie et al., 2015). This is relevant as there is variance in the social problems that social workers attend to within their practice between Ireland, and farther afield. Moreover, due to its ecological view of human functioning (Payne, 2014) social work is often described as operating at the intersection of person and environment (Thyer, Dulmus, & Sowers, 2012). Here Wilson et al. (2005) establish that “*the essential and distinctive characteristic of social work is its focus on the individual and the social*” (p. 5). Within this focus, the expressed mandate of social work from the global definition of social work is to empower and liberate clientele (IFSW, 2014). Yet, as social work is “contextually driven” (Ornellas, Spolander & Engelbrecht, 2018), if socially unjust conditions of disempowerment and constraint vary greatly, between Ireland and elsewhere, then so too must social work practices. In this context, one example has been the increased transience of people across national lines. More specifically, it is clear from this that Irish social workers need to better understand international contexts as a result of globalisation in Ireland (Christie et al., 2015).

Having established this, it is also necessary to gain a basic introduction to the nature of social work in Ireland. Here, a number of social problems are particularly relevant. Irish social workers, for example, deal in the internationally common currency of human rights, social justice, equality, inclusion and non-discrimination (IFSW, 2014). Thus far, however, the particular residuum of Ireland's exclusive history, and unique socio-cultural and material concerns that impede social work's capacity to operate here, remains opaque (Christie et al., 2015). In the literature several constraints for social justice in Ireland are perceptible. Economic turbulence of the 2008 recession and preceding Celtic Tiger economy has been internationally exceptional in its severity (Flynn, 2017b). Also of critical importance have been relentless incarnations of social exclusion for the Irish travelling community. Lethargic and as of yet incomplete de-institutionalisation of people with disabilities and mental health difficulties has been conspicuous in terms of social exclusion in Ireland (Redmond & Jennings, 2005; Watson, Kenny & McGinity, 2017). Vivid also in the context of religious, predominantly catholic and protestant discourses, is the reactionary progression of a rights based approach for women and children. The progression was regrettably, in part, spurred on by controversies such as a suite of clerical abuse scandals and the mass burial of infants at the Tuam mother and baby home (Garrett, 2013; 2017). Finally, concurrent to unique socio-historical adversaries for social justice in Ireland are general concerns, such as poverty, that all social workers across the globe, including Ireland, are concerned with (Staub-Bernasconi, 2014). Overall, continuities and differences in social work and social problems feature between Ireland, and farther afield. Thus far, the intention has been to grasp a basic introduction to the nature of specific social problems that social workers in Ireland traditionally have encountered, as a basis for comprehension of the international comparisons, to follow.

With this in mind, the paper proposes that variance in international socioeconomic wellbeing must be better understood by social work students and practitioners in Ireland, as a response to intensifying globalisation. Towards developing this, the relevance of varied international socioeconomic wellbeing, to globalisation, must be established. Here, four thematic areas are explored in more detail. These are respectively: poverty and economic inequality; life expectancy and health; quality of life and personal safety, and conflict and political strife.

#### *Poverty and economic inequality*

Poverty and economic inequality is a fundamental concern for social workers (Staub-Bernasconi, 2014). The proposition is, that there is significant variance in poverty and economic inequality between Ireland, and other international locations with which Ireland has significant links (Staunton, 2015). As a result of this, social workers who now practice in a globalised Ireland, need to be increasingly conscious of such variance.

Towards evidencing this, firstly, it is clear that globalisation increases the requirement for social workers to have international awareness of social conditions (Dominelli, 2010b). This includes but is not limited to, economic inequality and poverty. Complex transnational family forms, for example, are one consequence of globalisation, including the distribution of money across national lines (Christie & Walsh, 2015; Dominelli, 2010b). Moreover, the feminisation of migration patterns is a process referred to by Christie and Walsh (2015) whereby the profile of migration, whilst difficult to predict, appears to have responded to increased Irish women entering the workforce. As a result, progressively more migrant women are referred to for underpaid and prejudicially labelled 'women's work' such as cleaning, cooking and caring for children. Here similarities in stigmatized conceptualisations of women's roles between Ireland and elsewhere are problematic (Christie & Walsh, 2015). Within this, the necessity for international awareness of poverty and inequality, among social workers in a globalised Ireland, is further evident.

Notwithstanding this, the case must be made that significant variance in poverty and economic inequality actually features, between Ireland and other international locations with which Ireland is closely linked. To do this, the example of child poverty rates offers some utility. As social work “engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing” (IFSW, 2014), poverty and economic disadvantage becomes particularly pertinent for social work practice. In Ireland, it is the case of child poverty that is perhaps most troubling (Flynn, 2017b). This is because OECD figures demonstrate that Ireland is similar to 27 of the 35 other OECD countries due to having higher relative rates of poverty for children than for adults (OECD, 2019). In fact, globally, child poverty also exceeds that experienced by adults (UNICEF, 2016). Across the OECD the discrepancy is modest, notwithstanding this, some global locations espouse a child relative poverty rate significantly more pronounced than for adults, as is the case in Korea (OECD, 2019). For Ireland, relative poverty is concerning, and yet this is perhaps a privileged stance compared to other locations where the dire implications of extreme poverty are manifest. As a measure of paucity, extreme poverty entails the grave absence of the very necessities required to survive (UNICEF, 2016). Focussing on this measurement, throughout the world, it remains the case that children by a substantial margin are most impoverished where, “19.5 per cent of children in developing countries estimated to live on less than \$1.90 a day, compared to 9.2 per cent of adults” (UNICEF, 2016, p.3). Here, it is clear that variance between Ireland, and elsewhere, is both substantial, and often favourably inclined toward Irish children.

Notwithstanding this, towards further illustration of variance in poverty and economic inequality, between Ireland and elsewhere, is the broader case of economic disadvantage. Here an examination of overall population economic wellbeing, may offer further fodder to fuel comparison. World Bank (2015) figures establish that in 2015 approximately 10% of the world’s population overall lived on less than 1.90 dollars a day, and bringing this analysis closer to Ireland, the percentage for Europe and central Asia is 1.5%. For contemporary Ireland, 1 euro (Irish currency) equals approximately 1.0956 dollars according 2019 National Postal Office exchange rates (An Post, 2019). Considering this measure, the average weekly household expenditure in 2015-2016 in the Republic of Ireland was €845.12 for the year 2015-2016 according to the Central Statistics Office (2017). 66.9% of men and 56.7% of women also had paid jobs in Ireland in 2013 (OECD, 2015, p.7), with the average hourly earnings in 2018 (quarter 4) at 23.46euro, and weekly 761.65euro (CSO, 2019). As labour is often the sole asset of the poor (Fields, 2011), taking the consumption of \$1.25 a day as the poverty line, and acknowledging that half the world’s poor are concentrated in India and China and amount to a staggering 664 million people, quickly emergent is a picture of Ireland as a comparatively wealthy country in terms of global standards (Chen & Ravallion, 2010). Again, the premise illustrated has been that, significant variance in poverty and economic inequality between Ireland and other international locations with which it has close links, is evident.

Taken as a whole, this section has made the case that variance in international wellbeing, on the grounds on poverty and inequality, must be understood by social workers in Ireland. Whilst this is the case, despite Ireland’s often privileged international position, poverty also remains a substantial concern for social workers *within* Ireland (Flynn 2017b). In particular, this is a consequence of economic *inequality* that is endemic, with wealth highly concentrated at the top 20% who hold 72.7% of net wealth, as compared to the euro area average of 67.6% (Staunton, 2015). In this context, specific populations such as children with disabilities, also demonstrate elevated risk of poverty above the general population (Flynn, 2017a). Overall, it is clear that economic inequality remains a significant concern for social workers, despite Ireland’s enviable global status, as a comparatively wealthy country (Christie et al., 2015).



*Life expectancy and health*

Poverty and wealth distribution are not the only adversaries to social justice present in globalised Ireland. Social workers support marginalised and dispossessed clientele experiencing disadvantage due to abuse, social exclusion, lack of access to healthcare and education, discrimination and other detriments (Ambrosino, Heffernan, & Shuttlesworth, 2012; Davies, 2013). Here, similarities between Ireland and other international contexts is substantial. In the context of such diverse foci, however, for this section, life expectancy and health will be focused upon. The argument made, is that insight into variance in international wellbeing, on the grounds of life expectancy and health, is critical for professional social workers in Ireland.

Within this, one proposition is, that life expectancy is a key marker of the social prosperity of a country. In Europe, for example, the lowest life expectancy at birth, according to Eurostat (2018, p.29) figures in 2016, pertained to the north-western Bulgarian region of Severozapaden, at 73.3 years. Comparatively, according to OCED figures, average life expectancy for Ireland for 2013 was 81.1 (OECD, 2015, p.7). Relative similarity between Ireland and other European countries in life expectancy, is therefore evident. Returning to a global scale, however, life expectancy averages may plummet where factors such as militarised violence, lack of healthcare or political conflict feature. In this context, the World Health Organisation provides figures for 2015 on life expectancy and found that Sierra Leone had the lowest life expectancy at 50.1 years old, followed by Angola (52.4 years), Central African Republic (52.5 years), and Chad (53.1 years). It is evidently conclusive, therefore, that life expectancy as a marker of social prosperity in Ireland is comparatively high.

Notwithstanding this, ensuring access to health care services is also a core concern for social workers (Heyman & Congress, 2018) and this relates to some disparity in healthcare quality across social groups in Ireland (Kirwan & Jacob, 2016). In this context, diversity of social groups in Ireland has increased with globalisation (Christie & Walsh, 2015). Contemporary Ireland, for instance, arguably resembles more closely an ethnic mosaic, than a homogenous society (Fanning, 2002). Within this, access to healthcare is purportedly more difficult for certain populations, such as the Roma community (Kirwan & Jacob, 2016). Health inequality also operates across income and wealth differentials. A TASC report on health inequalities in Europe found Ireland problematic in terms of income inequality in healthcare for those earning too little to afford private health insurance, and too much to be granted a medical card from the government (Forster, Kentikelenis & Bambra, 2018). Overall, macro-structural determinants of population health on a global scale include variables such as income inequality, and are “*sensitive to social conditions*” (Beckfeild, Olafsdottir & Bakhtiari, 2013, p.1014). Here, some have even asserted that low social status, is in fact, a predominant cause of disease (Phelan & Link, 2005). It would appear that, for Ireland, these assertions remain highly relevant. Through international comparison, for instance, access to healthcare in Ireland was nominated 24<sup>th</sup> place out of 34 countries (where 34<sup>th</sup> is the most negative position) by the Euro Health Consumer Index largely due to persistent problems with waiting lists, among other factors (Bjornberg, 2017). Moreover, access to healthcare, due to globalisation presents a problem for many burgeoning communities in Ireland. Those who have been in direct provision, subject to people-trafficking, or undocumented minors are illustrative. More specifically, as a consequence of war or uncivil unrest in their home countries, for instance, migrants to Ireland may bring with them emotional trauma that increases urgency for healthcare. Meanwhile, factors such as poverty may undermine their capacity to access it (Christie & Walsh, 2015). Overall, the argument made, is that variance in international wellbeing, on the grounds of life expectancy and health, is critical knowledge for professional social workers in Ireland. The caveat is, that such knowledge is an increasing consequence, and requirement of, processes of globalisation.

### *Quality of life and personal safety*

The core argument of this paper is that variance in international socioeconomic wellbeing must be better understood by social work students and practitioners in Ireland, as a response to intensifying globalisation. Towards acquiring such understanding, so far, domains of poverty and inequality, and life expectancy and health, have been reviewed. Life expectancy should not, of course, be conflated with quality of life. Given that the latter is also a key marker of social prosperity, within the following comparisons will be made between quality of life and personal safety in Ireland, and elsewhere.

Practically, quality of life falls within the purview of social work, given its relationship to social cohesion and individual well-being (IFSW, 2014). Considering the OECD Better Life Index, Ireland is generally a good place to live compared to other countries. Here it ranks high in terms of such indicators as population health status, social connections, subjective wellbeing, environmental quality and personal security (OECD, 2017). Yet, whilst matters such as personal security may not present pressing urgency for contemporary Ireland, globally, social workers may struggle at the coalface of issues of militarised violence, war and social conflict. In the African Great Lakes, for instance, a modest social work presence plays “*an important role in peace-building and in the overall rebuilding and reconstruction of affected societies*” following “*several armed conflicts, widespread political crisis, and large-scale loss of human lives*” (Spitzer & Twikirize, 2014). Elsewhere, in England and the United States, terrorist attacks such as those at the New York World Trade Centre and London, conjure up dangerous inclinations of islamophobia and encroach grievously upon the public mind. Here Guru (2010) articulates that social workers must adapt and respond to the new wave of terrorism. Notwithstanding this, it also remains the case that social workers work with war-affected refugees and victims of terrorism outside the survivors’ country of origin (Denov & Shevell, 2018). Ireland is no exception, and here, processes of globalisation have increased transnational family forms and the influx of populations with unique emotional problems allied to war, militarised violence, and civil unrest in their home countries (Christie & Walsh 2015). Therefore, whilst overall quality of life and personal safety are not substantial concerns in Ireland, particular social groups may be disproportionately impeded in these areas, such as those living in direct provision, or members of the traveling community (Garrett, 2015). Here social workers may be challenged to promote, in the context of globalisation, quality of life and personal safety.

### *Conflict and political strife*

The final thematic area to be examined is conflict and political strife. The intention thus far, in reviewing themes, has been to furnish an understanding of variance in international socioeconomic wellbeing between Ireland and elsewhere. In doing so, the overall argument has been, that such understanding is increasingly required for social workers in the context of intensifying globalisation. Within the following, comparisons of conflict and political strife, between Ireland and elsewhere, are made. In drawing to a close, the proposition is, that a universalist approach to social work is ultimately limited (Gray & Fook, 2004). Rather, social work in Ireland must develop unique localised approaches, that nonetheless, account for the effects of broader globalisation.

As a starting point, conflict and political strife has been both an indigenous feature of Ireland and a relevant basis for emotional trauma of many migrants coming here. Ireland is only emergent from the worst transgressions of indigenous strife in the form of civil conflict (Smyth, 2017). As such conflict in Ireland settles, conditions of extreme warfare elsewhere raise the question of how social work as a global profession can really espouse universalism across such

variegated milieu, whilst still attending to such immensely dissimilar social conditions (Gray & Fook, 2004). Comparative research, conducted by Ibrahim (2016), is illustrative in this regard, and pertains to social work education in Palestine, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Yemen, Egypt, Libya, and Morocco. Therein, Ibrahim confirms Palestine's nature as one of the most troubled locations in the world due to political instability and conflict, with Yemen, Egypt, and Libya also experiencing poor conditions of living emanating from invasive political unrest. More specifically, from Ibrahim's (2016) analysis it is clear that such adversity may impact upon the operation of social work. In the case of Ireland, this can also be reaffirmed. Political unrest and civil conflict in Northern Ireland, dubbed "the troubles", imposed conditions of extreme adversity in affected areas of the country until the late 1990s (Smyth, 2017; Shulamit et al. 2006). According to research by Shulamit et al. (2006) the conflict wasn't inconsequential for social workers. They examine the impact of political conflict on social work looking specifically at three locations; Northern Ireland, Israel, and Palestine. In this context, Shulamit et al. (2006) assert that conflict not only adversely affected the service users that social workers worked with, but also subjected social workers to experiences of despondency. Beyond this, little research is available on Northern Ireland, and much of that which is indicates that the social work profession was ill-equipped to deal with the extremes of adversity that hostilities in the north confronted it with (Shulamit et al., 2006). In this context, the burden on those going through the worst effects of violence and political strife is often immeasurable (Shulamit et al., 2006; Smyth, 2017). The key point within this, is that due to intolerable conditions in their home countries, some displaced populations come to Ireland with unique social, psychological and practical problems (Christie & Walsh, 2015). Here, a tailored response to the particular needs of these populations, rather than a universalist 'one size fits all approach', would appear warranted.

Overall, circumstances of conflict constitute only one of the greatly varying social conditions across the globe that social work must respond to. Through globalisation, these social problems gain increased international mobility, as well as exposure within Ireland's boundaries (Christie & Walsh, 2015). In this context, Gray and Fook (2004) articulate a quest for universalism in social work that is problematic on several counts. Within this, lack of consensus, for instance, on what the nature of social work should be, surrounds allegiances to "*remedial, activist or developmental forms of practice*" (p.625) and is perhaps unsurprising in the context of the great diversity evident in global practice milieu. It would seem that, as a product of increased mobility of social problems arising from globalisation (Christie & Walsh, 2015), social work in Ireland must now develop unique, localised, and tailored responses. More specifically, this arises from the evident variance in socioeconomic wellbeing that features across national lines. The focus in this section has been on conflict and political strife, and here, the relevance of this variance, is reaffirmed.

## **Discussion**

The sustaining proposition of this paper has been that variance in international socioeconomic wellbeing must be better understood by social work students and practitioners in Ireland, as a response to intensifying globalisation. In drawing to a close, what remains outstanding is guidance for practitioners on specific actions moving forward. Towards achieving this, a composite conceptual framework derived from Payne (2014, p.17) on the social construction of social work, structuralises critical discussion and analysis to follow. The composite nature of the framework lies in its three foci. These are addressed sequentially, and are respectively: the political-social-ideological arena; the agency-professional arena; and the client-worker

agency arena. The directions provided, specifically, pertain to how social workers in Ireland may go about improving the overall response of their profession, to globalisation.

#### *Political-social-ideological arena*

As a starting point, the political-social-ideological arena, according to Payne (2014, p.17), is the arena “in which social and political debate forms the policy that guides agencies and the purposes that they are set or develop for themselves.” Here, a constructive first step regarding the impact of globalisation for social workers is consciousness-raising amongst the profession, and wider advocacy (Payne, 2014). The Irish Refugee and Migrant Coalition (IRMC), for example, is one of a number of bodies seeking to promote the welfare of migrants including those fleeing persecution (IRMC, 2017). Alternatively, Ruhama is an Irish organisation focussed upon prostitution, including international sex-trafficking of women (Ruhama, 2018). These organisations, and many others like them, can offer expertise, training and guidance including raising awareness among social workers, of issues associated with globalisation. According to Payne (2014), activist work and advocacy, such as that facilitated by these organisations, are some of the ways in which the nature of social work can be influenced in the political-social-ideological arena. Among other routes include use of professional associations, and the influence of social work agencies.

#### *Agency-professional arena*

The second domain in Payne’s (2014) typology is the agency-professional arena. As Payne (2014, p. 17) explains, this is the arena “in which employers and collective organisations of employees, such as Trade Unions and professional associations, engage in influencing each other about more specific elements of how social work will operate.” Here, among impacts of globalisation on social work in Ireland identified by Christie and Walsh (2015), include technological interconnectedness, and transnational flows of information and theoretical responses. Social workers concerned with responding better to globalisation can promote constructive interactions and knowledge exchange between their agencies and professional organisations, and those operating abroad. In this respect, the new Signs of Safety approach to child protection and welfare adopted in Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, is exemplary. This boasts shared learning from over 11 other countries, utilising technology such as Skype conferencing to distribute insights and collaborate effectively, and expediently, between social workers across the globe (Turnell, 2012).

#### *Client-worker-agency arena*

Lastly, there is the client-worker-agency arena. Here, social work becomes socially constructed partly through its interactions with clients (Payne, 2014). In this domain, the final opportunity for social workers to forge a collective and formidable response to globalisation lies in the very “interstices of everyday life practices” (Dominelli, 2010a, p. 599). Individual social workers, simply by way of increased consciousness of the effects of globalisation such as diversity and mobility in populations, can be better equipped to support clients, who to varying degrees may be affected.

### **Conclusion**

Through focusing on globalisation and variance in socioeconomic wellbeing between Ireland and elsewhere, the intention has been modest: to aid students, educators and practitioners in the context of an increased requirement for global awareness in social work curricula (Sherman, 2016). Moving forward, contestations and debates about the internationalism of social work,

westernisation, and universality of social work principles persevere (Gray & Fook, 2004; Midgley, 2001). Nonetheless, the proposition that a more globally cognisant and internationally-informed indigenous workforce is beneficial, is perhaps harder to dispute. Arguably, this is most likely the case, as processes of globalisation in Ireland intensify, and meld together otherwise disparate communities, bringing in tow new social problems and opportunities (Christie & Walsh, 2015). In drawing to a close, a glimpse of Irish social work in a global context has been conveyed. Acknowledging the limitations of what an analysis such as this can achieve, considerations for further reflection are varied, and articulated within existing literature. The risk of conflation of industrialised with un-industrialised developing countries, or of postcolonial with the un-colonised must continue to be acknowledged (Midgley, 1981). Forces of ‘professional imperialism’ where western social work may unduly encroach and impinge upon developing countries is also pertinent to remember when making international comparisons about social work (Gray & Fook, 2004, p.626; Midgley, 1981). Finally, it remains the case that the very nature of social work as a profession, wherever in the globe it may be operating, is still very much contested (Gray & Fook, 2004; Thompson, 2015). In this context, social work practitioners, educators, and students are encouraged, in their pursuit of global awareness, to remain both critical and cautious consumers of knowledge.

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