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Editorial

Contemporary Challenges in Social Work Practice in Multicultural Societies

The fundamental mission of social work interventions is to offer culturally adequate responses to satisfy the basic human needs. Such culturally sensitive responses are translated in a greater diversity of social interventions at multiple levels: individual, family, group, organization, community and society.

Poignantly, at the time of writing this editorial (December 2015), Europe is facing an unprecedented migration turmoil due to waves of Syrian and Middle East refugees that have been and continue arriving on Europe's shores recently. The phenomenon has unequivocally named – and will most likely go down in history as – a major refugees crises. It is affecting countries worldwide, beyond Europe and will undoubtedly change the political, demographic and cultural landscape of our world, as we know it.

Social workers around the globe are involved or will be involved with these individuals, families and children who are attempting to reach places where they can feel safe and start a new life for themselves and their children. Thus, the theme of this special issue „Contemporary Challenges in Social Work Practice in Multicultural Societies” is serendipitously timely. This focus aims to capture and critically analyse the challenges of social work practice in our increasingly multi-cultural societies around the globe – both from the perspective of professionals and of service users.

The International Federation of Social Workers (2015) defines social work as

[...] a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, *social cohesion*, and the *empowerment and liberation of people*. Principles of social justice, *human rights*, *collective responsibility* and *respect for diversities* are central to social work. (emphasis added)

This definition is highly relevant in the current context. It raises questions of how social workers apply those principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work in their work. Social workers need to respect the diversity of the societies in which they practice, taking into account individual, family, group and community differences. Social workers have a responsibility to challenge any discrimination, be it based on ability, age, culture, gender or sex, marital status, socio-economic status, political opinions, skin color, racial or other physical characteristics, sexual orientation or spiritual beliefs. Moreover, social workers have a duty of challenging unjust policies and practices.

Culturally competent social work practice

Historical events over the past decades have made a necessity for professionals to possess „cultural competence” in social work practice. Indeed, training programmes in the US made this a requirement in their curriculum. Cultural competence encompasses an understanding of the unique cultural, language, religious, and political backgrounds of people.

The growing number of new immigrants to Europe and beyond, brings the necessity for cultural competence acutely to the fore. And the need to acknowledge that, despite efforts, there is still a long way to go. History tends to repeat itself – says an old adagio – and unfortunately social work’s relative short history has been plagued by many such examples. When is a particular child rearing practice in an ethnic groups crossing the boundary from a culturally specific one into child neglect? When is a style of discipline falling into the child abuse reality? At which point a child’s contribution to the family economy through labour becomes child exploitation? And how can social workers challenge such practices and at the same time maintain a non-discriminatory and culturally sensitive stance? How do social workers respond to the cultural challenges they are faced with? And not least, how do social workers experience working with clients from diverse backgrounds, cultures and nationalities?

Professionals can achieve cultural competence through increased self-reflection leading to awareness, increased and diversified knowledge, and skills. Self-reflection will increase their awareness of their lived-in experiences in dealing with multi-cultural challenges, identify and correct their own stereotypes. Knowledge is vital in underpinning such reflections and the skills that will be honed in through practice. In the process their won professional and personal identities will be transformed.

Addressing diverse challenges in multi-cultural social work practice – an overview of the special issue :

This special issue benefits from contributions – both academic and practitioner informed – from different and, at times, opposing cultural contexts. It is hoped that this will provide the reader with a flavor of the breadth and scope of the challenges. They are by no means a final shortlist of cultural issue and challenges in social work practice, but they go some way to illustrate their variety. And authors are not afraid to grasp controversial issues such as cultural factors in child sexual exploitation in the UK and US, the whiter multiculturalism in social welfare in the UK, and the professional migration – or the brain drain – in social work from Eastern Europe to the UK.

A brief taster of the articles comprised in the special issue :

A core of three papers address specifically issues related to how multiculturalism has evolved and informs practice in the UK :

The paper „Comparing the Cultural Factors in the Sexual Exploitation of Young People in the UK and USA : Insights for Social Workers” argues that child sexual exploitation is above all a cultural phenomenon. This is a bold statement from the authors who skilfully go on to discuss the role of the individuals directly involved as well as the level of tolerance (or even cooperation) from those indirectly associated and from wider society. The authors’ conclusionshoped that the exploitation and trafficking discourses developed in the UK and

USA could be informative for other countries, such as those of Eastern Europe and stress the importance of sharing insights between countries and cultures.

The article „Wither multiculturalism? – an analysis of the impact on welfare practice and theory of policy responses to an increasingly multicultural society in the UK” outlines how the limitation of entitlement to welfare benefits not only amplifies already existing issues within the UK, but also creates new challenges for social welfare practitioners with migrant groups and argues that these policies reflects a subtle move in policy, away from multiculturalism towards assimilation, as illustrated in relation to the assimilation of ‘Britishness’ and ‘British values’ in daily life.

The paper „Filling the gap? Romanian social workers’ „migration” into the UK” puts under the magnifying glass the increased transnational mobility among internationally educated social workers recruited from abroad, mainly due to the staff shortages. How about the challenges for foreign social workers practicing social work in an ‘alien’ culture? Unfortunately the research on the topic is scarce, so the opinion piece aims to call for collaborative research.

Five further papers address topics from across the specter of social work practice and also bring together contributions from across cultures.

The paper „Ethics and Value Dilemmas in Social Work” aptly reviews the ethical dilemmas social workers face when confronted with limited resources to act in line with their values. Another paper reports the preliminary results of a qualitative study investigating the psycho-social experiences of cancer patients. The article about the assessment tools used by social work services employees revisits the ethical dilemmas ethics of social workers in their dual role as providers of social services and agents of public powers (in civil servant role). It draws attention to the deficits of the welfare system and the inevitable waste that occurs when social workers are not involved in decisions and public policy making centrally and locally.

Looking at a different service user group, the next article takes a theoretical approach to review importance of the direct involvement in supporting interventions with the elderly population and analyses the outcomes of different programmes implemented in a residential centre for the elderly. A further paper report in the result of a study of organizational citizenship behavior. This study examined the influence of perceived organizational justice and work locus of control on organizational citizenship behavior of civil servants in Nigeria.

The book review looks at the „Tribes. A pathology of the Romanian politics since the Revolution to Facebook Generation”. It draws attention to the impact of politics on social work practice, highlighting how the politics becomes communication and vice versa. The new technologies created opportunities for new types of communities, the on-line communities. These are arguably social networks rather than communities as they do not guarantee reciprocity.

There is an increasing need for social innovation in the social service sector in the actual international political, economic, demographic and technical context, in order to improve the quality, efficacy and availability of the existing services or to create new services to better meet clients’ needs.

It is hoped that the collection of papers in this issue will spark healthy debates and honest reflections by readers, social work professionals, academics and researchers and will ultimately lead to improved multi-cultural social work practice in keeping up with the increasingly multi-cultural make up of our societies.

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