

research snapshot

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Social Work Is a Form of Professional Imperialism Between the Global North and Global South

What is this research about?

International work opportunities are a growing trend in social work programs. But there is minimal demand for its students and faculty to think critically about their experiences abroad. Space plays a significant role in how people create an identity with communities and nations. This affects social workers who travel abroad and the local communities with whom they interact. Many of these encounters involve students from the global North travelling to do work in the global South. Their experiences reveal the way students and faculty identify themselves, as well as the identities they construct of “others”. The spaces which they travel to and from also affect how they understand themselves through their work.

What did the researcher do?

The researcher looked at the experiences of students and faculty in social work who travelled to a developing country. Within this group, she focused on faculty and students who were white and those who were minoritized (non-white.) The researcher completed interviews, as well as spoke to a focus group at one school. Those who were interviewed included 14 faculty members from ten schools of social work, and 18 students from six different schools in Canada. Within the students, eight were minoritized students.

What you need to know:

Students in the field of social work have the opportunity to gain international experience. However, their encounters with the global South can re-enforce global inequalities. While the intent is to support human rights, there are spatial differences between students and their local partners. Students from the global North come into their work with privilege, which affects how they see the spaces they enter and exit. This is an example of professional imperialism. For minoritized student in social work, this experience is more complicated. Even though they come into these spaces holding privilege from the global North, they are also marginalized because they do not meet the global image of Canada as being “white”.

What did the researcher find?

The researcher found that minoritized students working abroad were both marginalized and privileged in their settings. Many noticed upon starting their international work that white students were treated with an advantage. They felt they had to justify their citizenship from Canada. This was because the global image of Canada is a “white” identity. Also, these students struggled to find their own space in their placements, even if they shared the same heritage as the locals. They realized their

own privilege through their access to alternative spaces like living arrangements. However, they avoided re-creating inequalities in their work because it resonated with their own experiences in Canada.

Many white students also observed that privilege affected their experiences working abroad. For some, one space of privilege existed through their living arrangements. Other students questioned the amount of consumerism they had experienced coming from the global North. However, many white students also re-enforced ideas about their privilege. Some commented that they could not live like the locals, creating ideas around superior and inferior spaces. Many also failed to acknowledge the privilege they owned with being able to move in and out of these spaces as students working abroad. For the local communities they worked with, the living conditions were a reality that they did not have the luxury to leave. Finally, some students felt as if they had to apologize for being “white” and the privilege attached to that label. However, the researcher found that these comments were made without an understanding of the material circumstances that created global disparities. Nor did they address how sentiments against privilege were related to the kinds of privilege they owned.

Faculty in social work programs acknowledged and re-enforced their privilege. In their international work, many were seen as being experts in their field compared to local academics. Both white and minoritized faculty members struggled with the divisions between them and the locals.

How can you use this research?

This research could support training in programs like social work, especially those that offer international learning. It may also be useful for international work in the private or public sector. It offers important insights on how local and global partners interact in these projects. This research also brings forth issues on privilege, equity and collaboration in international work.

About the Researcher

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