# International social work education at the crossroads

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## Introduction

Social work has been a player in the international arena since 1928 when the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) was founded alongside its sister organisations, the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and the International Council for Social Welfare (ICSW). These divided their remit into education, practice and policy respectively. Their development has been an interesting one, but the details of it need not detain us here. I only want to lay aside the argument that having an interest in the international domain is a new phenomenon in social work. At the same time, I want to emphasise how impressive it is that a profession that has been so tied into modernity, linked to the modern nation-state (Lorenz, 1994) and rooted in local legislation and traditions has such a long-standing history of involvements that have crossed borders to promote understanding and knowledge-building. In these encounters, social work educators and practitioners have engaged with others who were different from them while struggling to make their interactions egalitarian and respectful ones.

This aim has been thwarted by a range of factors that those acting in this domain had to address, namely, the contradictory position of the profession in negotiating its idealistic ambitions within the realities of the messy politics of practice as altruistic motives clashed with proselytising values and imperialistic adventures. For in the world of national aggrandisement embedded in the belief in the superiority of one particular people or 'race' and its culture excluding those outside its boundaries and 'doing good' to them were unquestioned assumptions that created great wrongs as languages, peoples and cultures disappeared under messianic and imperialistic rule. Consequently, some of social work's international initiatives have been successful in promoting egalitarian relations, others have not.

In this paper, I will consider some of the issues that those promoting international social work today have to address if their efforts are not to become another means of propagating inegalitarian or neo-imperialist relations between educators and practitioners in high-income countries and those in low-income ones.

## (Re-)Defining International Social Work

The term international social work has a variety of meanings. The most common one is that of social work professionals crossing borders. So, a professional going from the UK to work in France with children and families in exactly the same way as in Britain is deemed to be doing international social work. Many of the early texts in international social work took this view. I have challenged this understanding of it to argue that the international is 'here', i.e., located within the nation-state as well as 'out there' in other countries. I have gone on to

conceptualise international social work as globalising the local or involving activities that situate local action within the global arena and localising the global by making connections between the local sphere and the global one (Dominelli, 1998, 2004). This means seeing the local and the global as interconnected and in a dialogical relationship with each other. In a context of internationalising social problems and the mass movement of people, defining what is meant by the term international social work is important even if these definitions are contested.

Healy (2001) has formulated her view of it to encompass those elements of social work requiring international knowledge for competent practice. Her definition emphasises the following: competence in addressing international elements that are relevant to local practice; advocacy on aspects of social policy that affect people in other countries; exchanging social work information with people in other countries; adopting positions on global issues; and consultancies in international development work (Healy, 2001). It provides a helpful starting point for rethinking its theoretical and practice base. But I think it needs further development in terms of the interconnectedness of the local and the global dimensions of practice and the recognition of subjectivity and agency on the part of all stakeholders involved in international social work.

**W(h)ither international social work?**

That social work educators and practitioners become involved in international social work because they are and remain interested in egalitarian relationships does not mean that this has been achieved in practice either within the nation-state or internationally. Nor does the history of activity in the international domain suggest that national policymakers and governments have not set other objectives for such endeavours, independent of educators and practitioners. Indeed, a crucial myth of state nationalism is that there is only one voice, the hegemonic one that represents the nation, and social work as its handmaiden has been expected to comply with that. Those challenging this discourse have had to struggle to be heard above its cacophonous din. The view that there is one hegemonic version of truth can be sustained only at the expense of ignoring other voices, particularly those that are suppressed or considered inferior or irrelevant. In these constructs, the dominant discourse does not have to be specified as dominant, it is assumed to be so through its normalisation, i.e., being treated as 'normal' or 'natural' and therefore beyond question. Thus, for example, in racist discourses on skin colour in the West, 'white' is the colour of privilege and so does not have to be referred to as such in referring to white people, only 'black' is explicitly seen and treated as a colour in reference to people (1) and an inferior one at that (Dominelli, 2002, 2004a).

The global hegemony of particular nation states in 1928 as now has drawn strength from the (mis)use of education, its theoretical concepts, knowledge and experiences to promote the notion that some ideas are superior to others, and that those that are developed by Westerners are best of all. Sewpaul (2003) outlines the pernicious effects of such approaches to other people and provides a moving account of how people in South Africa have resisted this blatant breach of their agency. Resistance against these colonising practices has given rise to the theoretical constructs of 'subjugated knowledges' and 'dominating knowledges' (Foucault, 1980). The framing of knowledge in these terms supports dichotomous thinking that other or exclude and treat as inferior those who are socially constructed as having 'subjugated knowledges'. Dichotomous conceptualisations of reality promote either/or thinking and constitute the dominant paradigm used to define, explain and change (or not) the

world. Dichotomous thought can be found within social work and the geographical locales in which it is practised, between nation-states at national level and within regions and the broader world in which they are situated. This dualistic construction of knowledge establishes hierarchies of knowing in the international arena that privilege the voices of 'experts', usually Western ones, over those of service users and lay people locally and internationally. In the process, marginalised discourses exist outside the mainstream, a feature that can be found in both the West and other countries. Razak (2003) provides an interesting example of how 'black' people from the South who have lived and trained in the North can return to the South and be marginalised as local people defer to white Westerners and their experiences and knowledges. Thus, the issues embedded within international social work are extremely complicated and require a more sophisticated level of analysis than is currently evident in much of the literature.

Discourses become signifiers of how particular individuals or groups view the world and theirs and other peoples' place(s) in it. From their location within the nation-state, individual social workers have both reproduced hegemonic ways of viewing the world and at times challenged them, depending on their own personal and political values and what it was that they were trying to achieve through their work. As a profession with Western origins (2), social work has been allied to the discourses of liberal democracy where helping the underdog occurs under contradictory conditions aimed at supporting those in need, but in terms associated with the punitive welfarism of the New Poor Law which blames those in need for their plight. At the same time, social work within the nation-state, particularly that part of it linked to the welfare-state, has also existed as a profession that has operated both within and outside the mainstream. In these conditions, its outsider status has been particularly important in challenging dominant discourses that have denied vulnerable people assistance and social justice. In this sense, social work has played a key role in initiating alternative discourses that stand in opposition to those that dominate a particular society, despite the pressure to conform to the hegemonic ones as signified in the discourses that prevail in what Davies (1985) called the 'maintenance' school of social work.

In Britain, those associated with anti-oppressive practice exemplify oppositional discourses. These have challenged the absence of issues relating to equality and social justice in traditional paradigms for practice. Over time, elements of anti-oppressive practice have been incorporated by being partially mainstreamed although there is considerable suspicion of their capacity to reshape practice is evident amongst its opponents. In other words, alternative discourses can also generate resistance to them from those endorsing dominant discourses. International social work has to decide whether it will support the further privileging of those with power and resources or ally itself with those who have been excluded from participation in the social, political and economic development whether in the country in which they live or more broadly. The answer to the direction it takes or where (whither) it will go in the long-run will determine whether international social work withers or flourishes. In the fluid world of globalisation, support for colonising other people's minds or their practices is diminishing and in the struggle to ensure people's well-being throughout the world, it is important that international social work allies itself to the emancipatory projects produced by those holding 'subjugated knowledges'.

Making this a reality will be a considerable challenge for social work educators and practitioners, particularly those who fail to see the relevance of becoming involved in international issues. Additionally, there is a legacy of opportunistic and shameful experiences in the international domain that the profession has to acknowledge, rectify and move beyond. Social work has been both a propagator of imperialist discourses and a dismantler of them. For example, the former took place through the use of Western clinical models of social work

in South Africa when what was needed was a social development approach that dealt with poverty and other structural inequalities (Bozalek, 2004; Sewpaul, 2003). Other negative instances involved the destruction of the caring and cultural heritages of indigenous peoples as occurred in countries such as Canada, Australia and New Zealand (Bruyere, 2001; Rolleston-Tait and Pehi-Barlow, 2001; Dominelli 2004).
However, the appropriation and negation of these knowledges has begun to shift in favour of their retention. Moreover, indigenous knowledge is penetrating the structures of Western social work thinking and doing and is contributing towards reshaping practice in the West. The example of the Family Group Conference (FGC) model which was developed by the Maori peoples in New Zealand to give them a greater say in the welfare of Maori children has been adopted in countries as diverse as England, Canada and Sweden with their different histories and traditions, but facing a common problem in how to best support children and families when things go wrong.

Movements to indigenise the social work curriculum testify to the continued controversy about what international social work is and what it stands for. Thus, international social work has to address several competing ontological and epistemological claims in establishing the validity of particular local knowledges while remaining cognisant of the contested terrain of practice at the local, national and international levels. Although there may be a dominant or mainstreamed 'expert' knowledge which is accepted without challenge within a particular nation-state, this may not necessarily follow through at the local level. Here, people's life experiences may encourage them to question 'expert' opinion. This has been the case in the redevelopment of First Nations forms of practice at the local level in Canada, for example. These have challenged the dominant Anglocentric models that provide the dominant paradigms for social work at the national level, and by changing local discourses, First Nations' initiatives have led to changes in national discourses (Hill, 2000).
Additionally, layered within these local and national knowledges are the discourses which occur in the international domain. These are primarily taken to be those emanating from the West, particularly the English-speaking world located primarily in the United States and the United Kingdom (Razak, 2003). Resistance to their continued dominance has facilitated the indigenisation of social work in various regions of the world, e.g., South East Asia, where the Asia Pacific Journal of Social Work has highlighted this matter as of key concern for the whole region.
However, this West-non-West approach to the local-global issue continues the dualistic thinking that is an essential feature of discourses of dominance (Dominelli, 2002) and casts those owning 'subjugated knowledges' as passive consumers of knowledge that has been appropriated by or is described as belonging to the dominant group, rather than featuring them as creators of knowledge who both shape and are shaped by hegemonic forms of knowledge. Additionally, a dualistic framing of the matter underplays the interactive nature of these encounters and the ways in which 'subjugated knowledges' already engage with dominant knowledges to challenge and reshape them even in the international domain. People do not just passively sit on the floor of knowledge waiting to have their thinking taken over by others. They engage with them in and have a range of options with which to respond – acceptance, accommodation and resistance. These can lead to the formation of new knowledge paradigms and shifts in ways of knowing which can be owned by all those involved (Dominelli, 2002, 2004).

The interactive nature of the knowledge acquisition, creation and recreation processes is evident in struggles against colonialism. And, it is evidenced in the way that migrants have

already been 'Westernised' to a significant degree before leaving their country of origins by having already participated in Western systems of education, language, culture and expectations prior to departure. Tasse (2004) carefully plots this trend in his analysis of Ethiopian migrants living in the United States and France. Moreover, the interpermeability of these domains is being intensified as globalisation brings different parts of the world closer together and promotes faster and deeper levels of interaction between them in exchanges to which all the participants contribute, albeit in different ways and from different positions.

Yet, we cannot ignore the continued importance of the nation-state. It does not seem to be disappearing. Indeed, in some areas, new nation-states are coming into being, for example, in parts of the former Soviet Union. Besides, the nation-state provides the locale within which most people live and it regulates most of their day-to-day lives and routines. Additionally, some nation-states are only just beginning to assert their power. China is a case in point. Containing one-sixth of the world's population, its increasing economic power can bring it to the stage where it begins to dominate what happens in other economies. Its political role in the international arena, particularly in the United Nations cannot be ignored either. This may develop in new directions once it secures a strong economic position.

**Reorienting the Development of International Social Work**

The further development of International social work is currently at the crossroads and needs to consider its future growth in terms of the directions in which it wishes to proceed. Those interested in promoting international social work will have to decide whether they will follow the international definition of social work which has been adopted by IASSW and IFSW. The full version of this definition is available from the IASSW website, but the key part is:

> The social work profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Utilising theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work (http://www.iassw.soton.ac.uk).

This affirms social work's commitment to human rights and social justice, but their pursuit may place the profession at odds with national governments that are not committed to these principles including the rejection of the idea of the redistribution of the earth's resources in ways that ensure the well-being of all its inhabitants. If international social work is to endorse upholding human rights, citizenship and social justice, it will have to take a stand against the use of education as a neo-liberal arm of imperialist ventures. And, it has to enhance principled development within its own theoretical and practice frameworks. As this growth will occur within the context of globalisation, the profession has a number of difficult challenges to address. These are:

* (re)theorising social work in an interdependent world;
* retaining diversity and richness in human encounters;
* acting collectively within the international domain to advocate for the profession's desire to promote human well-being within a human rights and social justice framework and gain support for policies and practices that further these aims; and
* changing the social work curricula in the academy and the field to address the international dimensions of social problems.

These four points are inter-related, but I will consider each one in turn.

Social work has tended to be thought about and theorised primarily within the context of modernity and the nation-state. Even the majority of texts on international social work perpetrate the myth that international social work merely involves the crossing of borders. The journal, International Social Work, is also dominated by articles that cover discrete countries and there is little truly comparative work evident within its pages. Social work educators and practitioners need to retheorise social work in ways that situate practice in a locality within the global context within which it is embedded and begin to unpack the connections that exist between different levels of activity.

Retheorsing international social work also requires those involved in thinking how the diversity and richness of human encounters can be retained to reveal what we hold in common as well as what is different between us. This will not be easy given the significant number of different factors that interact with each other and that have to be taken into account. Given the links between the social and physical environment of which we are becoming increasingly aware, as is evident for instance in the case of pollution and global warming, social workers' retheorisation of the profession has to include both these two dimensions of people's reality alongside that of the spiritual domain which has already been highlighted by several forms of indigenous knowledge (Bruyere, 2001, Dominelli, 2002).

Acting collectively within the international domain will continue to be a major challenge in a profession that is marked by division and fragmentation even within the confines of the nation-state. The profession has to develop a strong and coherent voice in which different players can make significant contributions to the overall effort. IASSW, IFSW and ICSW have been active in international fora such as the United Nations. IASSW has been involved at this level since 1948. However, their capacities and resources for such activities are limited. Consequently, so is their influence. Ways of expanding these in more egalitarian and inclusive directions must be found if the reorientation of the profession beyond its Western origins to reflect the whole of humanity is to be realised.

Although these organisations also have a tradition of working together, their achievements in this endeavour have been modest, as the initiatives described below demonstrate. The question of what values or principles social workers hold in common across the globe and how far these can enhance intercollegial solidarity and joint actions is one that remains to be answered. The relationship between individual and collective or group rights is a further contentious issue. And there are other key concerns that have to be addressed. Amongst these are: What is it that holds the profession together in the international domain? Is there even a global profession? How can this be developed and by whom?

IASSW and IFSW began a recent round of work on this never ending project in the late 1990s and have developed a Joint Collaboration Committee to assist them in this process. In June 2001, these two organisations declared the definition of social work that they had both worked on over the previous four years with IFSW taking the lead as a joint one for the first time in their history as 'sister organisations'. These two bodies are currently working on a joint Code of Ethics (under the leadership of IFSW) and Global Qualifying Standards (under the leadership of IASSW). Meanwhile, they are both working in defence of human rights through a Joint Human Rights Commission in which there is a Chair and Co-Chair from each institution. The Chair is intended to rotate between the two bodies, and IFSW has taken this role to begin with. Discussions amongst IASSW, IFSW and ICSW have been less structured

than those between IASSW and IFSW, but discussions around the journal, International Social Work, which is jointly owned by these three organisations are promising.

Looking at the failure of social workers to deal effectively with many internationalising social problems including the sex trade in children or trafficking in people, asylum seekers and refugees, HIV/AIDS, and armed conflict, current approaches to and definitions of international social work seem to offer limited hope of producing the innovations necessary for effective practice in this regard. Even in more established international endeavours such as international adoptions, the regulatory frameworks controlling the movement of adopted children remain problematic and many poor parents lose their children to richer ones where the children's identity and cultural heritage can be easily ignored and/or obliterated. The rise in global poverty and the failure of international initiatives to contribute effectively to its elimination also call for a rethinking of how theory and practice in this area come together to change people's lives for the better. The profession has to acquire a prominent voice in this endeavour.

Looking at the international dimensions of social problems highlights how poorly the modernist project in which social work has been embedded has served those in need when even basic commodities such as food, shelter and water remain denied to them. Social workers, acting through the organisations of civil society have been unable to make significant inroads upon the elimination of poverty and other forms of structural inequalities (Deacon et al., 1999) despite a number of attempts at doing so. The reasons for this failure require examination and the lessons for the future learnt. These are likely to reveal the importance of forming partnerships that encompass all stakeholders ranging from policymakers to service users but also expose the importance of different ways of involving people in making decisions that affect their lives. In other words, inputs, processes and outcomes will have to be considered as an integrated whole to change governance structures and forms of participation in more empowering directions. At the same time, the power of civil society organisations has grown so that some of the larger ones have more financial resources at their disposal than many of the low-income countries that they seek to serve. This gives them enormous political leverage and the potential to abuse their powers as they are not held accountable by any particular constituency.

Ultimately, developments in the theoretical and practice domains have to be carried through to what is taught in the classroom, what happens in practice, what policies are promulgated and what is done in and through research. This will mean reformulating the social work curriculum and making it more relevant to practising in a world in which many social problems have become internationalised and the crossing of borders is an integral part of both the problem and what needs to be done to resolve it locally, nationally or internationally, rather than treating its international dimension as a tangential add-on or afterthought. Fortunately for those committed to this endeavour, there are a few texts that have attempted the retheorisation of international social work in new directions, Lyons (1999) and Healy (2001) providing two of these texts.

There is much work to be done in responding to the agenda of developing international social work within a globalising world, and because knowledge is contested, there will be many disagreements as the profession progresses on this journey – assuming that it sees this endeavour as an important one to pursue. Moreover, the process is a constantly changing one

because just as we alter one element in a particular situation, the others are re-arranged or transformed and so the process begins anew.

## Conclusion

Social work has a history of operating at the international level. This has been an interesting mix of Westerners supporting the development of professional social work within nation-states that did not have it alongside those of their learning from these exchanges and changing practice back in the West. However, the traffic to date has been more one-way than mutual, and it is imperative that international social work moves away from types of relationships that prioritise the interests of the West to endorse equality and reciprocity. By promoting these values through exchanges permeated with mutuality (Dominelli and Thomas Bernard, 2003), international social work can gain and draw strength from the differences that exist in social work practice at the local level and develop the new forms of practice necessary for working in an interdependent globalising world.

## Notes:

(1) The term 'black' people is being used to refer to people at the receiving end of racism, regardless of their skin colour, although in Britain, this tends to mean primarily people of African and Asian descent. The problematic nature of such phrases in collapsing differences in language, culture, religion, ethnicity and traditions is acknowledged whether for 'black' people or 'white' people. Neither is a homogeneous grouping.

(2) Social work as the activity of helping others in need has existed before professional social work came into being and exists in all countries regardless of whether they also have professional social work or not. But, this kind of social work is different from professional practice which originated in Western Europe (Kendall, 2000).

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