Some Considerations on the Potential Contributions of Intercultural Social Work

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Social work at global levels, and across international and intercultural divides, is probably more important now than ever before in our history. It may be that the very form our ideas about intercultural work take need to be re-examined in the light of recent global changes and uncertainties.

In this short position paper I wish to offer some considerations about how we might approach the field of intercultural social work in order to gain new insights about how we practise at both local and global levels. For me, much of the promise of an intercultural social work (and for the purposes of this paper I see aspects of international social work in much the same light) lies in its focus on the way we categorise ourselves, our ideas and experiences in relation to others. The very notion of intercultural or international social work is based on assumptions about boundaries, differences, ways of differentiating and defining sets of experiences. Whether these are deemed "cultural" or "national" is of less importance. Once we are forced to examine these assumptions, about how and why we categorise ourselves in relation to other people in particular ways, the way is opened up for us to be much more critical about the bases of our own, often very deep-seated, thinking. This understanding, about how and why notions of "difference" operate in the way they do, can potentially open our understanding to all the other ways, besides cultural or national labelling, in which we categorise and create differences between ourselves and others. Intercultural social work, taken as a potential site for understanding the creation of difference then, has the potential to help us critically examine the bases of much of our practice in any setting, since most practice involves some kind of categorisation of phenomena.

What I am arguing for, might be put in other terms as the reflexive potential that intercultural social work offers. In much of my work now, I argue that an ability to be reflexive is crucial to good social work practice, in conjunction with an inherent predisposition to critically reflect (eg. Fook, 2002, ch.s 3 & 7). In my version of critical reflection, I include both a reflective ability (the ability to be aware of one's own assumptions embedded in one's practice) and a reflexive ability (the ability to recognise how one's own self affects the situation at hand) (Fook, forthcoming). These combined abilities lead to awareness of how unexamined thinking may inadvertently lead a professional practitioner to create unwanted or unintentional outcomes. In addition, sometimes our underlying assumptions remain unexamined because of something about ourselves – our own needs, our own social positions, our own backgrounds. For example, if we critically reflect on our practice of creating cultural categories, we may find that it is based on subjective assumptions about the need for order, or perhaps assumptions about the need to define "belongingness", rather than perhaps on indisputable empirical characteristics of different population groups. And of course the

problem with categorising based on our own subjective needs is that this may work against our stated values of social justice, or collaboration across different groups. Critical reflection, in intercultural or international social work, can help us examine the appropriateness of these assumptions, and help us develop systems of categorising which are more appropriate to our value systems, and more encouraging of mutual dialogue and understanding. For instance, if we do recognise that we may use cultural categories as a way of ordering our world and making ourselves comfortable by defining our own place in it, this leads us to examine whether or not we should be attributing "difference" to other people, or whether in fact we would be better to focus on how we work together. In the field of inter-cultural social work, this might mean that rather than focusing on the differences/similarities between countries, we might be better off asking what can be learnt from the experiences in each country. So posing critical reflective questions of our practices provides the basis for other ways of working. Recognising where our deep-seated assumptions come from, and how and whether they fit our professional purposes, is mandatory to a sound and critical social work practice. I believe that the field of intercultural social work provides the obvious site to cultivate such a critical reflective stance.

In the remainder of the paper I will flesh out some specific, more deep-seated assumptions which unavoidably shape our practice, and which intercultural work so easily draws our attention to.

Most obviously, as I have mentioned, there are assumptions about what constitutes "difference". Clearly it is most often easiest to assume that difference comes about through more obvious markers like physical appearance, cultural practices, geographic distance or shared traditions. I live and work in Australia, and I am Australian by birth and nationality. I often travel to different parts of the world to conduct training workshops in critical reflection. I am always struck by how, when my colleagues and I discuss some aspect of the workshops, we are both quick to identify potentially problematic issues in learning, and are also quick to attribute these to national differences. For instance, one issue which is raised about critical reflection is the need for directness, openness and trust, for risk-taking. My international groups often conclude that this must be acceptable in Australia, but is not something which is part of their national culture. I do not argue with this, as I assume they know their own culture better than I do. But what I don't always tell them, is that nearly every group I run, whether in Melbourne city, rural Australia, Darwin, Oslo or Ulaan Baatar, raises this issue as problematic. Yes it is an issue of cultural difference, but not necessarily of national difference. It is an issue of cultural values around disclosure. These are not exclusive to national differences, but are also to do with a more complex set of sub-cultural values, often differing according to gender, social class and professional background. Yet it is almost as if, when I am overseas, the assumption is that any differences should be attributed first and foremost to national ones, since this is clearly the most obvious difference between us. It is as if, in international context, the geographic/national context "rules" and all other differences become muted.

It is worth examining this type of "hierarchy of differences" in order to understand what our assumptions are about categorising. It may be that the more obvious and longer entrenched categories are those we seek first as a way of defining difference. So place (as in national boundary), and culture (as in long term shared history and traditions) may be more important, and perhaps cut across by other differences like gender or age. It is worth asking why we are so quick to jump to the more obvious, perhaps easier differences as explanations. In fact, why are we so quick to attribute difference? What functions does categorising serve for us?

As social workers, we also need to examine the labels we use in our professional and academic lives to categorise our colleagues and those we work with. Certainly in professional circles we have clear debates about the relative merits of different paradigms, methods, value systems and perspectives on practice and research (e.g. Haworth, 1994). Again it is worth asking how and why we feel these categories are so important? I am not necessarily saying they are not important, but that it is useful to understand what underlies our dependence on such categorisations. How much do we really need categorisation to do our work more sensitively and effectively?

Some research on the nature of professional expertise indicates that the need to depend on formal categories of theory is a mark of the novice practitioner. Presumably new practitioners must rely on predetermined categories in order to make meaning of a new situation. On the other hand expert professionals tend to create their own theory according to the situation at hand. (Fook et al, 2000) This ability to adapt categorisations of thinking according to context, or what might be termed a contextual ability is something practitioners develop through time and experience (Fook et al, 2000, ch. 9). The need to categorise may therefore only serve preliminary functions, and may in fact not be a useful way to view phenomena for the purposes of taking complex or sophisticated actions. Perhaps our assumptions about some categories of difference are based on our need to order or impose our meaning on the elements of a situation, rather than our intention to understand the situation in the terms of those actors within it. This may of course involve a diversity of conflicting views and perspectives. Related to these ideas are the assumptions we make about uniformity and consensus. The field of intercultural social work of course sensitises us to the idea that situations are complex. There may be many mixed, changing and varied cultural perspectives on any one situation.

This leads to the next set of assumptions which an involvement in intercultural social work can sensitise us to –our assumptions about legitimate knowledge and how it is produced. Questions about legitimate knowledge and legitimate knowledge production are of course at the heart of debates about paradigmatic differences in the research field, but can also be identified with different cultural systems or national boundaries (Padgett, 2003). But they also lead us to think about political questions as well. Whose knowledge and ways of producing knowledge is regarded as legitimate? This type of question can apply from very broad, to very particular, fields of inquiry. It may apply to questions of research design, and it may also apply to assessments made of information in an individual case history. Nevertheless, when we ask questions about whose knowledge is represented or valued, we are often asking questions about which culture predominates and whose power is at issue. These are clearly central questions in any social work activity. And it is when assumptions about the dominant perspective are hidden or denied, that these questions become even more vital.

The field of international social work opens these questions up very nicely for scrutiny. This is especially evident in the debates regarding indigenisation and localism.

A reflexive stance in intercultural social work can thus open the way for us to understand a lot more about what is central in social work. An intercultural awareness can be attained by asking the following kinds of questions: how does our physical, socio-cultural and historical environment influence the way we categorise? What assumptions about relative power and knowledge are involved? How can we use this understanding of the underpinnings of our practice to help us improve services and relations? How can we move beyond a need to categorise in simple terms (cultural, national, paradigmatic) to more complex frames which

might allow for more inclusive frameworks? And by asking ourselves these questions, we might hope to begin to develop our ideas about how social work might be more inclusive of a variety of differences. By being willing to investigate the bases of our intercultural understandings, we might hope to build practices, and approaches, which can respond to new and changing contexts.

References

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