SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION AND GLOBAL ISSUES: IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

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If social workers are to become more effectively involved in international organizations and global issues, the international dimension of social work education must be strengthened. Educational programs for social workers around the world give only limited attention to social issues that extend beyond national boundaries. Schools of social work have some international content but it is focused on cross-national policy and program comparisons rather than global issues and practice roles (Hokensstad & Kendall, 1995). This paper provides a perspective on social work education and global issues and explores the global issues facing social work practice in the 21st century and beyond. In addition, this paper explores the need for both education and exchange in social work practice.

Introduction

For the purpose of this paper, globalization is referred to as the increasing interaction and interdependence of world society (Giddens, 1993). In this decade, members of groups of color will be a majority in some states of the United States. Therefore, social work in culturally diverse societies will require an understanding of the cultural roots of the different ethnic groups. The growing poverty within nations and economic inequalities between them are a related global reality that affects social work. The decades of the 1980s and 1990s have witnessed a growing income gap, not simply because rich people are growing richer, but also because poor people are becoming poorer. Many developing countries, especially those in Africa and Asia, have been hit hard by this increasing disparity of wealth. There is a great gap in the quality of life among human beings around the world and that gap is widening. One billion, three hundred million people in the developing world live below the poverty level, and of these one billion have no access to basic services such as safe water and primary health care. Eight hundred million do not have enough food, and five million are chronically malnourished (United Nations (UN) Development Programme, 1996). Thus, the magnitude of the problem is global and has an impact on social work roles and responsibilities throughout the world (Hokensstad & Midgley, 1997).

These are key global concerns that challenge social work today and will continue to do so in the next century. Additional challenges that are similar in scope and comparable in importance are human rights violations, AIDS and other epidemics, and the deterioration of the physical environment. All of these are global in scope and must be addressed internationally as well as locally. Now that we are in this new millennium, it is no longer enough to think globally and act locally. Social work must now face these global problems which often require global interventions. Therefore, the scope of global poverty and the
intensity of ethnic conflict also require global interventions. Global issues require action on many levels by many actors. But these are problems that are directly related to social work’s commitment and expertise. Social workers at the local level are directly involved with the implications of international realities by working with refugees or helping displaced workers. At the national level in many countries, the profession is active in promoting economic and social justice policy. Although social work clearly has an important role in addressing global issues, it has major obstacles to overcome to become a more effective player. Thus, lack of status and resources affects social work in most countries and limits the profession’s capacity to respond to pressing human needs. Therefore, social workers must have an international perspective and understanding to be effective practitioners in today’s world (Hokenstad & Midgley, 1997).

If social workers are to become not only more involved but also more effectively involved in international organizations and global issues, the international dimension of social work education must be strengthened. Educational programs for social workers around the world give only limited attention to social issues that extend beyond national boundaries. Most students have little if any exposure to international roles for social workers. Although there is some international content in the curricula of a sizable number of schools of social work, most of it is focused on cross-national policy and program comparisons rather than global issues and practice roles (Hokenstad & Kendall, 1995).

### Literature Review

Recently interest in the global dimensions of social work practice has been renewed with a focus on the positive benefits of cross-national collaboration between social workers as well as the negative effect globalization processes can have on people’s health and welfare. (Phillips, 2004; Hokenstad & Midgley, 1997; Kondrat & Ramanathan, 1996 as cited in Findlay & McCormack, 2007). Some of the recent significant global welfare issues with which social work might be involved include the globalization of children’s rights, particularly child abuse and pornography. Some authors suggest that if social workers are to practice effectively in the twenty-first century then social work practice itself needs to be conceptualized beyond the confines of the nation-state, as those influences located outside this realm are increasingly being acknowledged as having some influence on local issues (Healy, 2001; Ife, 2000; Midgley, 2000; Hare, 2004; Abram, Slosar & Walls, 2005 as cited in Findlay & McCormack, 2007). Therefore, social work practitioners operating in local, national or international contexts should be fully trained to understand these interactive effects to be able to practice effectively and make a difference (Asamoah, Healy & Mayadas, 1997; Midgley, 2000 as cited in Findlay & McCormack, 2007).

Only three studies specifically on social workers’ practice perceptions of globalization were found in the literature, and only one of these specifically addressed education for practice in a comprehensive manner. One study surveyed twenty five social workers affiliated with the Interna-
tional Federation of Social Workers (IFSW). This qualitative study primarily explored what globalization meant to social workers and how they saw it affecting their practice. The respondents in this study suggested that social work needs to look beyond the traditional micro or macro dichotomy and work to address the negative impacts of globalization. Compared to this study where social workers were already well informed on international issues, the other two studies found that the social workers interviewed had a limited understanding of the implications of the relationship between local and global issues (Findlay & McCormack, 2007).

Dominelli’s (2001 as cited in Findlay & McCormack, 2007) study of 179 social workers in Britain via a mailed postal questionnaire, found that social workers had limited insight regarding the broader structural influences of globalization processes on social work practice at the local level. Dominelli argues that there can be some positives to globalization, such as the greater cross-cultural exposure of British social workers, and their enhanced understanding and skills to deal with international social problems. Similarly, Kondrat & Ramanathan’s (1996 as cited in Findlay & McCormack, 2007) study of 130 American social workers also found a strong interest in global matters among social workers and a desire to learn about it. But these authors state that more research on the topic is needed because their study was the first in the literature to empirically investigate social workers’ practice perceptions and educational needs in relation to globalization. These authors concluded that overall the majority of respondents in this exploratory study reported little awareness of how global issues impact domestic practice, and the authors suggested more training needs to be offered to workers in all fields of practice to increase their sensitivity to the link between local and global issues. Additionally, if understanding the local-global connection is necessary for effective social work practice, these results previously discussed suggest that additional education in this area may need to be reviewed in formal social work courses, and as part of ongoing professional development (Findlay & McCormack, 2007).

Rationale for Introducing International and Cross-Cultural Content into Social Work Education

As social workers we have a responsibility in social work education to provide a world view to our students and we neglect our responsibility to our profession and our government when we do not contribute to international service (Stein as cited in Healy, 1986, p. 135). Internationalization is necessary for four reasons: 1) the survival of the world, stressing global responsibility, especially towards poor and oppressed peoples; 2) the survival of the nation, stressing the necessity to adapt to an increasing interdependent world economy and labor market; 3) the survival of science which cannot thrive and develop if limited by national borders; and 4) the survival of the profession, meaning that social work depends on knowledge and influences gained from other societies. Lastly, there is a need to prepare some
social workers for careers in international social work practice. Such specialists should have the opportunity to develop special competence to work in diverse international settings, in international organizations, agencies and projects (Estes, 1992; Healy, 1992).

Although the social work literature is full of references to globalization, the profession has yet to develop a focused understanding of the transnational nature of migration and social problems. The corresponding scope of transnational migrants’ problems call for the development of an understanding of these populations that will inform culturally competent social work practice. Social work has an increasing responsibility to meet the needs of transnational populations as it is one of very few professions whose identity is based on restoring and enabling social justice for vulnerable populations (International Federation of Social Workers, 2006 as cited in Furman & Negi, 2007). In addition, Furman & Negi (2007) suggest that social workers need to utilize their considerable networking, community organizing and advocacy skills to develop specialized interventions with people whose families and allegiances span national borders.

**Challenges for Social Work Education**

There is some lack of agreement about what it means to internationalize social work education. There is no explicit differentiation made between internationalized social work education (social work education with international content and concerns) and education for international social work (training to become an international social worker). In the social work literature, there are a number of terms used to describe this phenomenon. These terms are international, cross-cultural, inter-cultural, comparative and global social work education. Writers have defined and used the term international social work in different ways along a continuum from narrow to broad. But in order to be able to handle the rapidly changing situation, with all of the complicated problems, the whole profession must have a broadened and enlightened vision, one that incorporates both a global consciousness and new types of knowledge and skills. As we approach the 21st century and beyond, the minimum requirement is that social workers be prepared to work locally in an increasingly multi-cultural society. As contacts among social workers worldwide increase (through travel, formal and informal exchanges, and enhanced communications through technology), the profession will deepen its understanding of global problems. The result will be an increasing mixture of social work knowledge, approaches and methods (Nagy & Falk, 2000).

Social work writers have also pointed out a number of factors that influence the functioning of educational organizations to incorporate international and cross-cultural content. These include: competing interests, requirements of accreditation bodies, demands of students and prospective employees and faculty members’ interests. With so many possible obstacles it may be difficult to introduce new content into the curriculum, no matter how
beneficial. Healy (1992, 1995) has also outlined various factors that may impede or stop the introduction of international content into the curriculum. These include lack of faculty or student interest, lack of background preparation on the part of both teacher and students, lack of resources, an established curriculum that has little room for including additional topics and competing educational priorities (Nagy & Falk, 2000).

Conclusions and Recommendations
The social work curriculum should incorporate a global perspective. Schools as well must incorporate in their foundation curriculum a discussion of international social work with a transnational, not merely cross-cultural focus. Social work educators need to acknowledge that we now reside in a period of huge upheavals and design curricular approaches that specifically relate to the contemporary world.

Healy (1993) has long argued that an international component imbedded in social work education will better socialize students to global interdependence and the internalization of economies. Healy also believes that the profession has obligations to contribute to solutions to global social problems by suggesting that curricular content contain the following: functions of social work in different countries, social welfare activities of the UN, cross-cultural interviewing skills in practice, overseas field placements, focus on ethics, impact of culture on behavior, and courses in non-Western study at the BSW level (1993, pp. 33-36). In addition, Johnson (1999) poses the internet to internationalize social work education. Through use of e-mail partnerships she engages students from different nations in direct communication with each other about social issues.

Also, field practicum provides an important area for substantial international learning. Surveys have shown that while many schools have placed small numbers of students in other countries, there have been few efforts to establish comprehensive and ongoing international placement programs (Healy, 1986). Obstacles to international placements have limited their development, including comparability of courses and expectations between countries, difficulties in securing field supervision, language expertise needed, and the time and effort required to identify and arrange placements and housing. When successful, however, educators tend to agree that an international placement can be a profoundly beneficial experience for the student. Consequently, Gammonley, Rotabi, and Gamble (2007) also suggest that successful study abroad programs increase student's understanding of the impact of globalization.

Furthermore, Healy (1986, 1995) also states that there are different models of incorporating international content in social work curricula. The two main models that she identifies are the elective courses model and the infusion model. In the first model, schools offer separate courses on international social work or international topics and in the second model they infuse content in two ways, either by planned infusion, when the instructor purposely
designs international content into a course, or by informal infusion, when an instructor introduces personal knowledge or experience into a course.

**Implications for Social Work Practice**

In order to be able to handle the rapidly changing situation, with all of the complicated problems, the whole profession must be imbued with a broadened and enlightened vision, one that incorporates both a global consciousness and new types of knowledge and skills. As we move into the 21st century and beyond, the minimum requirement is that social workers should be prepared to work locally in an increasingly multi-cultural society. This requires an international consciousness so that social workers are aware of the ways in which global events and forces affect the world’s people and how people find the strength to endure and grow. Beyond this minimum, some social workers need specialized education that will prepare them to work internationally. This will require the continuation and expansion of specialized programmes in international and cross-cultural social work. As contacts among social workers worldwide increase (through more travel, formal and informal exchanges, and enhanced communications through technology), the profession will deepen its understanding of global problems. It is vital to bring international perspectives and materials into social work practice classes as well as policy courses. Faculty members will need additional support. Although some curricular guides have been produced to assist faculty members in developing and teaching courses in international social work and social development (Healy, 1992; Estes, 1992), these are only an initial step. Similarly, the international dimension of social work education must also be strengthened if social workers are to become more effectively involved in international organizations and global issues.

Intensive training seminars taught by experienced faculty members would be a welcomed addition. International conferences can give educators a taste of the range of global social issues and social work activities. More opportunity for social work educators to participate in study tours focusing on social problems and social work activities in other countries would be helpful. Sanders and Pederson (1984) also suggest that one of the benefits of international education is its potential to foster collaboration between countries in social work education, practice and research. Now that many students have access to the Internet, it is possible to arrange for students from different parts of the world to communicate with each other directly and at almost no expense. For example, two faculty members in different parts of the world could link their classes and assign them to find out as much as possible about social problems and the social work profession in each other’s countries would be helpful. Finally, there needs to be more focus in the literature on how the how two’s would help, especially how to bring a global perspective into practice as well as policy classes. Especially valuable would be reports that are shared among social work practitioners, educators, researchers and students on the effectiveness of the methods used (Nagy & Falk, 2000).
References


