

## **Editorial for EJSW Special issue: Glocal Social Work**

Debates have been ongoing about what constitutes international or European social work, relative to social work as practised and understood in national contexts, for many years. More recently there has also been a shift to use of the term 'transnational' to describe social work carried out across national borders – which some might previously have included in international social work. The identification of social work as an activity carried out in many countries around the world dates from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and was formalised in the establishment of international organisations (and later the regional bodies associated with them), representing different aspects and interests of the social work community. However, international social work is not simply concerned with comparing social work in different countries but may involve aspects of social work within one's own country as well as activities which transcend national boundaries. Healy (2001) identified four aspects of international social work: internationally related domestic practice and advocacy; professional exchange; international policy development and advocacy and international practice.

A striking theme through all the papers in this volume is the constant interplay between global issues and their local relevance, and between transnational topics, technologies of practice and their local application. We suggest this might be more aptly described as glocal social work. The concept glocalisation (Swyngedouw, 1992) sets an agenda that does not seek to find commonality that can be transferred and applied across countries; rather it asks us to consider how social work can be practiced in a global context; including that of global institutions, systems and social divisions, politics, economies, ecologies, technologies and the mobilities between them. Each of the contributions in this volume speaks to this agenda in some way. With the exception of Flem et al (this volume) contributors do not use the term, but the shared objects of glocal social work are in evidence throughout including; migration and asylum seeking, environmental disaster and climate change, violence and abuse, mental distress and social exclusion.

### **The global context**

We begin with two papers that each emphasise the glocal in quite different ways. Healy makes a resounding argument for social work's role in taking forward the post-2015 sustainable development goals (SDGs). These goals speak to global challenges but Healy asks whether it is 'possible that there can be a synergy between global priorities, especially as translated nationally, and practice on the ground' (Healey, 2016, this volume). The subsequent papers not only speak to this possibility but also stress the necessity for social work's engagement both at the level of institutions and in local practices with the SDG's. Her account of the struggle to promote a human rights based approach demonstrates both the strength of social work's potential contribution but the weakness of its voice in global instruments and treaties. Healy's paper was written prior to adoption of the SDG's, which finally including a separate equalities goal, but still lacked a strong human rights framework. Despite this Healy maintains that local social work practice should employ the SDG's and its consequent agenda for action, engaging with related interventions directed at improving gender equality and social integration and reducing poverty and inequality. These goals will be relevant to social workers wherever they practise.

Lorenz picks up this theme with a focus on Europe 'in the throes of global trends'. The question of whether there is such a thing as 'European social work' is not specifically

addressed in this or other papers in this issue but there are certainly examples of papers that take the European context (and often more specifically the European Union) as the backdrop to the practice of social work, professional education and research projects. We can identify a number of issues which transcend national borders, as well as policies and regulations which apply transnationally and affect social work priorities throughout Europe: these include issues of poverty and migration, as identified by Lorenz. He argues that neo-liberal policies have promoted the 'privatisation of public services, the retrenchment of public welfare and restrictive measures such as workfare' constructing welfare as 'a burden'. This is at the same time as traditional institutions and informal support structures of late modernity have become eroded and individualisation has taken precedence. This sets up a challenge; 'The dilemma regarding degrees of personal liberty relative to state responsibilities for equality has become constitutive for social work in a dual sense since social work is called upon to constantly negotiate a compromise between both principles. Yet, at the same time social work is dependent on the manner in which structural (i.e. political and economic) conditions pre-cast solutions to this dilemma' (Lorenz, this volume). This dynamic is an enduring one for glocal social work.

Garrett and Bertotti pick up these themes in their account of austerity, which compares how political and economic measures are impacting on communities and social workers in Ireland and Italy: they similarly call for a more radical vision of how social work might be reshaped. They introduce the concept of the austerity social worker, which highlights how actors within the neo-liberal project become connected; the service user to the practitioner, the social worker to their employer and the agency to the state. Endorsing Lorenz's claim regarding the erosion of social solidarity and integration, they note social worker's precarious employment conditions suggesting this encourages a political docility in which rationing services becomes a paramount consideration. Samsonen and Turney similarly find social work caught in the middle of attempts to regulate professional judgement. Through a comparison of England and Norway, they question the balance between state imposed restrictions on judgement and professional autonomy. In a related vein, Cummins pursues Wacquant's (2009) analysis that the (expansion of) the penal state is an inevitable part of the neo-liberal project from which social work has been largely withdrawn. Increasing incarceration is a global issue that, Cummins argues, should be a pressing social work concern. Drawing on England and Wales as a case study and with reference to the USA, he shows how 'punitive managerialism' has all but eroded the contribution of social work. Yet an underlying premise is that the former has the effect of increasing incarceration whilst the latter, with its foundations in social justice would, help to reduce it.

Learning across national boundaries highlighted both some of the commonalities in social work, and some of the significant differences in education, roles and organisation - and even titles - of social workers within one region of the world, leading Otto and Lorenz, in the European context, to coin the term 'social professions' (Otto and Lorenz, 1998). Similar regional alliances and exchanges can be seen as operating elsewhere, for example, in the Australasia Pacific Region which arguably has even more diverse cultures and societies. However, as Lorenz has recently reiterated in this journal, the key word is 'social' (Lorenz, 2016, *EJSW*, 19(1) 4-17). This qualifies a range of issues, circumstances, and responses that can easily be undervalued in a globalised world dominated by economic and political concerns, where religious and cultural differences can be a source of dissent and conflict, within societies and between countries. Taking Europe as the context, Lorenz' paper in this issue brings the term, 'social solidarity' (back) into use and commends a wider political perspective and attention to 'relational citizenship' with an emphasis on rights rather than the social 'rescue' attempts, more commonly found in European social work. However, as Cheung

helpfully illustrates through an exploration of the concept of Guanxi in China, relational citizenship and inclusion are themselves culturally embedded and imbued with local meanings and power within their everyday practise.

### **Glocal social work practises**

Although the different forms which social work might take around the world have increasingly been recognised – and the rationale for such variations understood - one of the issues associated with notions of international social work is the extent to which the value base can be considered universal, as opposed to related to the cultural assumptions of western societies and Judeo-Christian traditions. An overt recognition of the varied needs of different societies and the wide range of activities carried out by 'social workers' has been signalled in the recent 'labelling' of joint international conferences as 'social work and social development' and there has been a growing discourse about indigenisation of social work education relative to earlier assumptions about the transferability of western ideas and practices which some saw as a negative characteristic of 'international social work' and a form of post-colonial intellectual imperialism. Complex histories, colonial and otherwise, play into the present context for social work wherever it is practiced.

The standpoint from which definitions are crafted have historically overlooked the dynamic nature of practise, never fixed and always at the boundary of what Rode (this volume) maintains is the interface between systems and the lifeworld. Social work needs to be responsive to local needs, advocating for policy change where vulnerable populations are adversely affected. And, in many countries, 'local populations' are no longer the homogeneous groups they once were (in a mythologised past?) and different groups often have ties across national as well as cultural boundaries. Countries experience the impact of multi-national corporations and regional and international economic policies and migration patterns differentially, suggesting that a focus exclusively on 'the national' is unsustainable in social work education and its practice.

Much can be learned from the comparative study of particular phenomena or the unpacking of concepts in common usage. Albuquerque, Santos and Almeida, consider the rhetoric and practice of 'empowerment'. In recognising, among other things, the power differentials inherent in the professional relationship and many facets of the life situation of people who use social services, they call for a more 'progressive and strategic' social work. Herath describes a collaborative project between students from Slovenia and Sri-Lanka with different disciplinary backgrounds (Sociology and Social Work) that emerged in response to the 2004 Tsunami, a poignant reminder of the relevance of climate change and the environment to social work. She directly addresses the place of social work within her country's neo-liberal agenda and offers one example. Scaling up from a small collaboration between students that applied the values enshrined in the global definition (IFSW, 2014) she develops a culturally sensitive, responsive and dynamic approach to needs. Kjørstad and Wolmesjö's starting point is the social constituted nature of human rights despite its status as a universal framework often understood as absolute rather than relative, but one which must be applied locally. Students took advantage of this learning context to examine economic and financial support issue of individuals and families, accessibility for disabled citizens and, what might be termed the 'wicked problems' (Rittel and Webber, 1973) of health and social policy such as drug misuse, abortion, sexuality and violence. Thematic analysis of the final assignments demonstrated the power of a human rights framework in helping to analyse global issues of injustice and human rights violation, forcing students to consider their own standpoint and agency within this context. Finally Ranz & Orit Nuttman-Shwartz bring the use of technology

in social work education to the fore with an account of student's adaptation in diverse cultural contexts and reflection on their individual identities.

This special edition of the EJSW thus aims to expand approaches to international social work to encourage critical analysis of the glocal wherever social work is practiced and to seek solidarity and solutions. We are all, as Healy reminds us, in *a* developing world.

## References

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