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Facilitating the development of social work in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan

A collaboration between Jordan and the UK

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Collaborative work in social work education at an international level is often portrayed as a contested and problematic arena. In particular, concerns that this type of work risks the host country being subjected to post-colonial assumptions and oppression are commonly expressed in the literature (Doel and Penn, 2007). This article reflects on the process of collaboration between academics in Jordan and the UK who engaged in a project to develop social work in Jordan. An initial exploration of the emergence of social work in the country and recent pressures on service provision identify the key issues which became the focus of the project. A brief review of the literature recognizes the potential problems in collaborative developmental work between countries and cultures. The article then reflects briefly on the practical outcomes of the collaboration, before turning to consider important issues in the establishment of effective, positive relationships through critical dialogue based on human dignity and recognition of commonalities as well as differences.

Social work in Jordan

Social work has been recognized as a formal activity in the Royal Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan since the beginning of the 20th century,

when charitable organizations emerged as a response to a growing need for social support in communities (Olimat, 2002). Before this the welfare of disadvantaged members of society was attended to within the complex and sophisticated tribal systems evident in rural communities across the Middle East (Pappe, 2005). Religious organizations have also provided, and continue to provide, support and guidance to those in need of social assistance (Olimat, 2002). However, throughout the 20th century the changes in political organization across the region, combined with the growth of cities, such as the expansion of Amman in the past 50 years (DOS, 2008) through urbanization and capitalist enterprise (Pappe, 2005), challenged and stretched the capacity of previous systems of support. The responsibility for social care has subsequently been met by a mixture of government ministries, religious groups and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), both national and international.

While exploration of the international literature reveals common themes, such as the impact of industrialization (Yan and Tsui, 2007), urbanization (Dai, 2008) and globalization (Lyons et al., 2006) on specific cultures and the subsequent impact on the historical trajectories that social work has followed in a number of countries and settings, the historical development of Jordanian social work is yet to be fully documented. However, it is interesting to see how the nature of support within the tribal community has transferred to modern social work practices with the use of methods involving fictive kinship, where the social worker assumes the role of a family member, as a tool in gaining access to families in need of services (Al-Makhamreh, 2005). There is also increasing recognition among practitioners in Jordan of the need to consider culture, religion and language in order better to understand their relevance to the role, practice and interaction of social workers with colleagues and service users in the Arab context (Al-Krenawi and Graham, 2000; Furman et al., 2004).

The first formal programme of social work education in Jordan was offered by Al Balqa' Applied University in 1965, which initially offered a diploma in social work. This was superseded in 2006 by a new bachelor's degree in social work. In addition to this there are currently two other social work courses available in the country: an MSc qualifying programme at the University of Jordan, and a diploma in social work launched at Hashemite University in October 2008. This change in the provision of social work education reflects the recognition among social work educators that there is a national lack of qualified social workers in the kingdom (Al-Makhamreh, 2005; Olimat, 2002).

By the spring of 2006 Jordan had witnessed a substantial demographic growth and change due to the influx of refugees from wartorn countries

in the Levant (UN, 2008a, 2008b). The population in 2007 stood at just under 6 million (DOS, 2008). Particularly challenging, however, has been the influx of Iraqi refugees in 1991 during the first Gulf war and more recently since the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Those seeking refuge bring with them a wide range of unique and pressing needs caused by the traumas and losses of warfare. This was putting increasing pressure on the infrastructure within Jordan, and in particular the provision of consistent good-quality social work services, which would not only meet national social need but also reflect a national standard. It became clear to a number of organizations that social work needed to review its purpose and develop a clear programme of development.

Jordan has been a constitutional monarchy with a representative government since the reign of King Hussein which began in 1921. Its present king, King Abdullah bin Al-Hussein, inherited the throne from his father King Hussein bin Talal in 1999. As a nation Jordan has a history of active engagement and cooperation with nation states outside the Arab region. This has provided it with much needed support, both economic and political, which has protected its borders and the country from becoming more directly embroiled in the troubles of the region (Pappe, 2005). Within this context of international collaboration, those in Jordan who were keen to develop social work as a profession considered it reasonable to seek assistance from outside their own borders.

As concern grew in relation to the development of social work, the British Council in Amman, supported by the Jordan River Foundation, coordinated an invitation to selected British universities to formulate a proposed programme of work which would address the key outstanding concerns which had been identified by the Jordanian partner universities. First, there was recognition that social work as a profession needed to achieve national status and recognition, although there was uncertainty at the outset about how best to accomplish this. The second concern was how to develop the current curriculum for social work education in such a way that the needs of employers and the future workforce would be met. The final concern lay with the consistency of the quality of practical learning that students were receiving on placement. While there were some outstanding examples of practice education on placements, this was not the universal experience of all students.

The University of Reading and Brunel University were invited to submit a proposal for work which was accepted in the summer of 2006. It was at this stage that the two Jordanian universities, Al Balqa' Applied University and Hashemite University, formally recognized their role in the projected work by signing a memorandum of agreement. The programme of proposed work comprised three key phases:

consultancy, training and evaluation. While the proposal identified work to be carried out by the UK collaborators, a central characteristic of the plan was that it was dependent on and complemented a plan of work that the Jordanian team were engaged in.

There were two main foci of the work: first, establishing a national body of social workers; and second, the development of social work education combined with the promotion of practice learning opportunities for students of social work. First, it was recognized that for social work in Jordan to gain recognition as a profession it needed to develop a national identity through an organized body. As with the identity of social work at an international level, this is simultaneously multi-layered, complex, dynamic and contested (Lyons et al., 2006). The views held across the range of agencies, government ministries, social work educators and NGOs were varied, thus presenting a challenge in reaching a universal definition of social work within Jordan.

The second focus on social work education related to the delivery of formal teaching in the classroom and in the development of practice placements. Pedagogically there were some very specific challenges which in many ways linked to the need to have a universal agreement about what social work is, how it is shaped by shared values and ethics, what skills and knowledge are needed to complete the social work task and how those can be transmitted to students. Outside the formal classroom there were concerns about practice learning; how it can be introduced, how to blend theory and practice, how to support, educate and assess a student when out on placement. This in turn linked to issues of the employability of students on completion of the social work training.

International collaboration

Collaboration between schools of social work across international borders is not a new phenomenon; however, for those involved in the project it was a new experience. The initial excitement experienced by the UK team at being invited to bid and subsequently to work on this project soon paled as concern relating to cultural hegemony and post-colonialism arose (Askeland and Payne, 2006). When reflecting on the project outline and the literature relating to the globalization of social work, a key question arose of how we were going to establish a working relationship with our partners which would not succumb to assumptions relating to occidental superiority of knowledge, experience and technology that are so vigorously debated and critiqued in international social work development (Askeland and Payne, 2006; Dai, 2008; Yan and Tsui, 2007).

There is much concern in the international social work literature concerning the impact of post-colonial practices on the development

and process of indigenization of social work practice. Central to this argument is the risk that personnel from dominant Western countries adopt a powerful role based on a sense of superiority related to a particular knowledge and language (Askeland and Payne, 2006). There is an assumption that in collaborative relationships such as these, those from the more developed – and certainly richer – countries hold a powerful role, similar to that of a colonizer whose knowledge, language and confidence overpowers the host country (Askeland and Payne, 2006; Healy, 2007). Coupled to this is a concern about the existence of, appropriateness of, or need for a universal definition or standard of social work (Mohan, 2008).

Another concern that emerged as we progressed related to the difference between social work in Jordan and the UK. In Jordan much of the work of social workers relates to community development and family support, which is embedded in the nation's cultural fabric. The role of social workers in arenas such as child protection and domestic violence, while emergent in practice and legislation, seems to reflect similar cultural norms. This differs from social work in the UK which more recently has become focused on statutory work, where community-based work has become the domain of the voluntary and private sector, employing non-social work staff.

Identifiable outcomes of the project

The identifiable and intended outcomes of the project fall into three main areas. First, the team in Jordan are completing their proposal for a national association following their first national social work conference held in October 2008. The proposal will include a definition of social work, developed by Jordanian academics and practitioners, which is based on the unique nature and context of social work in Jordan. It will also reflect the societal and professional morals, values and ethics as they exist in Jordan, which will shape and underpin the profession.

Second, social work education in Jordan has progressed significantly. The curriculum at Al Balqa' Applied University has been extensively reviewed, partly in response to advice and guidance framed by UK colleagues, but primarily informed by the views and expectations of employers in Jordan. Consideration has been given to the overall structure of the curriculum, with particular attention paid to the balance between tutor-directed learning and practice placements.

In November 2007, Hashemite University established the Social Work Centre (SWC-HU) which aims to improve evidence-based practice within the kingdom. It provides training for social workers, is

implementing a complex research schedule related to social work issues and concerns; and offers consultancy to agencies engaged in social work. Alongside a large number of short courses focused on practice offered by the centre to social workers, a number of research projects are being undertaken, which will help to provide examples of best practice and contribute to the development of a Jordanian social work theory base. The research carried out to date explores the experiences of a number of different groups in Jordanian society, for example, street children, orphans, schoolchildren and older people in nursing homes. In addition to the centre, Hashemite University launched a post-graduate diploma in social work in October 2008.

The third outcome is related to the development of practice learning opportunities, support and assessment at Al Balqa' Applied University. A practice learning committee has been established and practice learning assessors have begun to develop and use a practice portfolio for their students to use when out on placement. This has been well received by the students and assessors alike.

Finding commonality through dialogue

When the project was formally completed, the British Council, which is staffed primarily by Jordanians, noted that the project was particularly successful, with unexpected positive outcomes due to the relationships which had developed over the duration of the venture. This is something that we consider was essential to the success of the project as it is those relationships which have significantly enriched and contributed to the quality and character of the completed project.

While all of the visits to Jordan have provided the UK team with much to learn and discover about Jordanian culture, policy, its people and geography, the prime focus has been on effective dialogue with the individuals in Jordan who had invested time and energy to get the project off the ground. What was apparent from the start was that the Jordanian colleagues were deeply engaged with the process. This was a project that they, as a group, had identified as providing a valuable step toward establishing social work as a profession. It was evident that the move to involve external educators and consultants had been discussed carefully with consideration of what needed to happen next. The key point is that this motivation and direction came from Jordan, not the UK.

As noted above, there has been concern within the realm of international social work that this type of venture may recreate colonial power imbalances where the knowledge, culture and language of those coming in to assist less developed professional organizations are seen

as superior to and more powerful than those of the host country (Askeland and Payne, 2006; Yan and Tsui, 2007). From a Jordanian perspective these concerns did not seem to reflect their experience of the project and indeed were considered a distraction. There were several possible reasons for this disjuncture between theoretical concerns and the experiences of those from both countries participating in the project. First, Jordanian colleagues instigated, directed and coordinated the project from Amman; and at no point were they passive within the process. Indeed, their views were canvassed at each stage of the project by the funder (the British Council) before further work was agreed. Second, as a team they were well qualified (many to PhD level) and experienced enough to understand the cultural differences, and thus the significance of context in developing a Jordanian social work which will meet the needs of society. There is a danger in some of the critiques of post-colonialism that participants in the less rich country are portrayed as necessarily passive recipients without agency. This was not the experience of either party in the current project. Third, the larger team recognized that the above debate fails to recognize the interdependency which occurs within such a project (Lyons et al., 2006).

From the perspective of the UK team it was apparent that our colleagues were working inside a professional framework which, while emergent, was sophisticated and held unique Jordanian characteristics.

The group which initiated and established the project, while all Jordanian nationals of both Islamic and Christian faiths, also had a range of experience and education gained from both within the region and outside it, which provided the team with a variety of dynamic, energetic and sometimes conflicting visions of social work as a profession in Jordan. The UK team was culturally diverse, with not only UK nationals but also Canadian and Australian, of a range of faiths and of social work backgrounds rooted in practice, research and education. Similar to our Jordanian colleagues we have debated, yet not agreed, on a collective view of what social work is or should be – in the UK, or anywhere else across the globe.

Instead of focusing on our differences, there was an effort to ensure that there was acknowledgement and respect for the cultural differences between all the members of the team, as Askeland and Payne (2006: 733) explain: 'Each has to gain self-sufficiency and confidence in their own cultural identity. Each has to establish a fair valuation of the identity of the other which does not rely on a continuation of the cultural power relationship.'

The outcome of this was that within this diversity it became apparent that we all shared a clear common goal, across the entire team, which is

a commitment within our own contexts to contributing to and improving what is currently in place, a concern for identifying and upholding a national standard and a desire to have a positive impact on the experience of service users. This reflected a core value, shared by all of us, which was a respect for human dignity, at both its most simple and most complex, and belief that this was 'integral' to our practice (Borowski, 2007). This was considered to be the unifying commonality between us, providing a platform from which to base our discussions and work.

In addition we also shared a number of concerns and frustrations about social work itself, experienced in both countries. First, there is a lack of recognition in public, policy and private spheres of social workers as professionals. Second, social work is a low-status profession which holds an inferior position in the professional hierarchy. Third, on the whole social workers are underpaid, undervalued, yet overworked.

Throughout the time spent working together we carefully considered and spoke openly about the potential impact of our work on society, the profession and our students, both in Jordan and in the UK. Much of our discussion concerned potential criticism that this project might be viewed by some as an instance of cultural hegemony (Askeland and Payne, 2006), where the UK team would attempt to homogenize practice in line with their own in the UK. In ensuring that this was not the case we focused on how social work could develop within the unique Jordanian context.

The processes of indigenization of practice are complex and ongoing, and in this instance, most certainly did not begin with this project. Similar to the growth of social work as a profession in China (Yan and Tsui, 2007), scholars from Jordan have been actively engaged in furthering their knowledge and skills through studying overseas and implementing change on their return to Jordan, and encouraging colleagues to enter into the process of developing practice. How to transfer that expertise in a meaningful way, utilizing skills in a fashion that is responsive to the Jordanian context, has become one of the main foci of the Jordanian team.

There is a concern about the response within social work practice in Jordan to the increasingly multi-cultural nature of society, which is host to a range of nationals from a number of Arab states, such as Iran, Iraq, Syria and Egypt. To view Jordanians as Arab or Muslim fails to recognize the cultural variation and range of worldviews across the region, especially in relation to societal responses to social support, gender relations and family structure (Moaddel and Azadarmaki, 2005).

Al-Makhamreh and Lewadno-Hundt (2008) have highlighted the difficulties in attempting to divorce social work from its social context in

Arab Middle Eastern countries, concluding that this is not possible, nor should it be attempted. This positions Islamic cultural practices centrally within social work practice, such as that of using fictive kinship to access family units. Within the project, while the UK team referred to their experiences in practice, the key discussions were based on examples of practice and case studies provided by Jordanian practitioners prior to the training. Participants in the various stages of the project particularly benefited from discussion of methods of intervention, such as motivational interviewing and the development of culturally sensitive communication skills. This linked in many ways to the discussion and debate around how Jordanian legislation, Sharia law and culture influence practice. Examples raised by the Jordanian participants related mostly to cases where family problems and women's issues were central. For example, in seeking and identifying solutions within situations where family honour was destabilized, such as through divorce and domestic violence, social workers in Jordan might first turn to relatives and religious leaders on an informal basis for help in finding a solution before implementing a more formal intervention.

The outcome of the hosts striving to put their best into the project was that the UK team learnt more from the project and their Jordanian colleagues than could have been anticipated or identified from the outset. In order to engage in constructive dialogue about social work in another context, we needed to feel comfortable together and be clear about social work within our own borders. The UK team entered into lively debate about our own practice in the UK and how social work has evolved and developed. Another aspect of this is that we spent a lot of time in one another's company outside the formal work arena, travelling to and from Jordan, in hotels in both Jordan and the UK and enjoying the wonderful hospitality of the Jordanian team. This friendship exchange contributed greatly to the levels of understanding between us, as friends and as colleagues. It facilitated open and honest dialogue in order to share thoughts and ideas which, while not always comfortable, we believe contributed greatly to the strength of the project.

Conclusion

Collaboration between academics from different cultures is not a straightforward journey: it can be exciting, challenging and beneficial; full of pitfalls; and open to criticism from onlookers. Articles reflecting on such work tend to focus on the more practical and technical aspects of initiating, implementing and standardizing practice (Mayadas and Elliott, 1997), or on the potential problems in such work, especially

post-colonialism, cultural hegemony (Askeland and Payne, 2006), global inequality (Midgley, 2007) and universalism (Healy, 2007).

In reflecting on the project to develop social work in Jordan our focus has been somewhat different, considering the importance of the human relationships within the team, the commonalities between us and how they have provided a platform from which to work. As Cochrane (2009: 55–6) notes of development work generally:

> It is an ethical challenge to build and maintain a partnership if one side has substantially more power and resources than the other. Ideally, the power roles between the two parties are somewhat balanced, even though interests in the outcome may differ. No matter what, however, a partnership is, and must be, a social relationship. As anthropologists have documented . . . enduring social relationships involve some sort of reasonably balanced understanding and exchange.

He goes on to argue that all too often development involves outside experts being parachuted into a country for brief periods of time. Cochrane powerfully argues that it is both more effective and more ethical to engage in sustained relationships to support change.

As the hosts of this project the Jordanian academics, supported by their UK colleagues, feel strongly that this project was directed and led by themselves. To engage in post-colonialist discourses would assume degrees of passivity and lack of knowledge on the part of the host, which was certainly not the case in this instance. In its place – and through a process of ongoing dialogue and relationship building – emerged the significance of our commonalities in wishing to achieve a positive and productive outcome which reflected our shared belief in and commitment to human dignity and the value of human relationships. It is important to be aware of differences, whether they relate to culture, resources or other areas. However, ultimately, our common humanity, our common experience of living as social beings in complex societies and our common aspiration toward goals of individual fulfilment and social justice allow dialogue, debate and hopefully understanding when there is difference.

Acknowledgements

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