

# The Quest for a Universal Social Work: Some Issues and Implications

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*What debates and issues are involved in moves to generalise about social work across the globe? This paper attempts to examine some of these major debates and, in so doing, to suggest some directions for a flexible approach. Crucial to these debates are several tensions around the issues of Westernisation, localisation and indigenisation in social work. It is also important to seek clarity around the complexities of international social work. The political implications involved in these movements are discussed and possible approaches to finding a flexible framework which allows for differences yet provides for accountability, responsiveness and connectivity are suggested.*

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There is a quest for universalism in social work, partly exhibited by attempts on the part of international social work bodies to find agreement on an international definition of social work (International Federation of Social Workers, 2000) and, more recently, on global qualifying standards for social work education (International Association of Schools of Social Work, 2002). While there may be very good reasons for seeking to define and identify common aspects of the profession across countries and cultures, the quest is also problematic. For example, as Midgley (2001) rightly points out, social workers are sharply divided on a number of important international issues: the nature of international social work; the profession's commitment to internationalising social work education and practice; the universality of social work values; internationalism as a desirable normative position; and on the nature of social work itself, that is, whether the profession should be committed to remedial, activist or developmental forms of practice.

It is therefore important to examine more closely the debates and issues involved

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in attempts to seek universal social work definitions and standards. What does the idea entail, and what are some of the implications of such a quest? These questions relate to concerns about the relevance of social work as a Western invention in post-colonial contexts or, the relevance of a type of social work developed for a modern, developed, industrial environment to traditional, developing or industrialising countries (Midgley, 1981).

The increasing trend towards globalisation is raising further questions about the nature of international social work (Midgley, 2001). Some believe that increased fragmentation challenges the very nature and definition of social work on a global scale (Tsang *et al.*, 2000). Many social workers across the world are becoming ever more vocal about the forces of 'professional imperialism', particularly in the developing world. Over the past 30 years social work writers have been trying to raise awareness of the dominance of Western influences on social work and have been stressing the need for social work in the developing world to free itself from the 'in-built assumptions and cultural biases of first world theories and models of practice' (Cossom, 1990, p. 3) and to develop indigenous education and practice (Brigham, 1982; Campfen, 1988; Hammoud, 1988; Ife, 2000; Mandal, 1989; Midgley, 1981; Mupedziswa, 1997; Osei-Hwedie, 1995; Ow, 1991; Payne, 1990; Resnick, 1980; Rosenman, 1980; Shawkey, 1972; Tsang *et al.*, 2000; Walton & Abo El Nasr, 1988).

Recognising the challenge to draw the best from international influences while developing local models of social work education and practice (Cossom, 1990), some have suggested social development as an alternative, as the case of South Africa shows (Gray & Mazibuko, 2002; Midgley, 1995). Some draw attention to unifying values, such as empowerment, justice, human rights, and equity (Hokenstad *et al.*, 1992; Ife, 2001) while others question the universal applicability and superiority of professional social work values (Bar-On, 1998; Cossom, 1990; Tsang *et al.*, 2000). Still others caution against modification-based approaches whereby social work's development involves adapting imported ideas to fit local needs (Mupedziswa, 1997; Osei-Hwedie, 1995; Toors, 1992; Tsang *et al.*, 2000). In Asia and Africa, discourse on the development of indigenous models tends to centre on the irrelevance and inapplicability of Western models (Midgley, 1981; Osei-Hwedie, 1995; Tsang *et al.*, 2000). However, this is a contested domain. Hence Ife (2000) warned against seeing Western social work as a 'homogenous, monolithic entity' (p. 150), over which there was universal agreement. For example, models of interpersonal practice developed in the United States of America may not be entirely applicable in all Australian cultures (Healy *et al.*, 1986; Fook, 1989). This point highlights the need for social work practice to be much more contextually oriented.

Nevertheless, despite these areas of disagreement, there are shared areas of understanding and there are commonalities in social work education, practice and research across the world, which provide common ground for discussion and debate. We believe it is important to facilitate discussion about the implications of some of these universalising trends in modern social work. To this end, this paper explores the idea of a 'universal social work', and the issues involved in developing such a concept. The authors believe that there is room for many types of social work across

widely divergent contexts, united by shared human rights and social justice goals, even though its mission may take various forms and expressions in different countries. We argue that dialogical processes within local contexts are far more likely to create indigenous and relevant models of social work practice than imported ones since they directly address the needs of the country, respond to the culture of the people and focus on pertinent social issues. Where experiences are shared, it might be possible to transfer local approaches to diverse contexts.

For the purposes of this paper, the question of a 'universal social work' rests on several inter-related debates, which can be articulated as follows:

1. The *globalisation–localisation* debate was well articulated by Jim Ife in the Eileen Younghusband address at the Joint IFSW/IASSW International Congress in Montreal in 2000, where he argued strongly that alongside the process of globalisation was a counter tendency towards the development of locally based solutions.
2. The *Westernisation–indigenisation* debate concerns the relevance of Western social work to third world or developing contexts, such as Africa and Asia. There are those who believe that social work is a modern invention that fits developed Western contexts and is not geared to the problems of developing countries, such as poverty, AIDS/HIV, hunger, drought, and war. This then begs the question 'what is Western social work', and how relevant is it in diverse and multiple contexts.
3. The *multicultural–universalisation* debate concerns the 'implications of built-in cultural biases' (Goldstein, 1986, p. 149) within social work's multicultural or culturally sensitive perspective, the notion that its values are universalisable and the potential conflict with non-Western and traditional cultures with collectivist values based *inter alia* on kinship, community networks and the extended family system.
4. The *universal–local* standards debate may or may not be relevant to the notion of 'universal social work' since it might be acceptable to think philosophically about an international orientation without necessarily attempting to attain universal agreement on definitions of, or standards for, professional social work education and practice. The latter concerns behavioural competencies and relates to a broader philosophical issue of whether social work is seen as a technical-rational or artistic-humanistic enterprise (Goldstein, 1992; Gray & Aga Askeland, 2002).

Central to these debates is the notion of 'Western social work' and the idea that we know what this is. Many would argue that what is now being touted as 'universal social work' is 'Western social work' in the same way that globalisation is equated with Westernisation or even Americanisation. There is a growing lack of agreement across the world about what social work is and this is becoming an increasingly contested domain. There are people working to transform social work practice in several different ways. One argument is against 'governmentality' wherein social work is an instrument of government (Rossiter, 2001). Another is against the trend to make social work into a 'technical-rational' enterprise. Those concerned about

this trend are arguing for a balance of interests with social work's humanistic, value, moral, artistic, and creative dimensions (Goldstein, 1986, 1992; Gray & Aga Aske-land, 2002; Imre, 1984). Yet another concerns whether there is such a thing as international social work (see Ife, 2000). There are many such debates.

The paper is organised in the following way. First we discuss the concept of universal social work and compare this with the notion of international social work. Secondly, we examine some issues involved in the idea of Western social work in the light of post-colonial debates. Thirdly, we discuss the tensions involved in the ideas of globalisation and localisation before examining universal values and multiculturalism. We then draw out arguments about the desirability or otherwise of universal social work, before ending with a final section which outlines some directions that the quest for a universal social work might take.

### **What is Meant by 'Universal' Social Work?**

As we have foreshadowed in the introduction, there are many facets to the idea of 'universal' social work. By 'universal social work' we mean a form of social work that transcends national boundaries and which gives social work a global face such that there are commonalities in theory and practice across widely divergent contexts. However, given that there are many facets to social work and the way in which it is defined, practised, theorised, and positioned, just what aspects are we talking about when we attempt to delineate aspects which are universal? In this paper we attempt to discuss some of the major aspects about which there have been attempts to make generalisations. However, before we enter these discussions it is helpful to review briefly a comprehensive coverage of these aspects and some of the complexities they entail.

It is common to talk about both the theory and the practice of social work. However, if we examine the term 'theory', it has many different usages. For instance, we may be talking about articulated models of practice theory (see Payne, 1997, for example), the different levels of these (ranging from philosophical or value under-pinnings to practice wisdom), or the articulated and often unarticulated 'discourse' that is embedded in the way we conceptualise what we do. Clearly there will be some similarities between the 'theory' we espouse and articulate, but that which is more hidden may be widely variable, and may even differ in the practice of the same person in different times and contexts.

The term 'practice' is equally problematic. It may refer to skills, strategies, roles, or sets of roles, or the forms and institutions which represent the way practice is organised. It can also be described in varying ways as behaviours, competencies or actions. These terms vary in specificity and complexity. When we enter the social or political world, broader questions arise. Is practice professional or employer defined? Is it market or consumer-driven?

When we talk about 'defining' social work, all the issues attached to the terms practice and theory also apply. Is social work defined by the discourse about it or its actual practice? How do we know whether we are talking about the same observable

phenomenon, or simply using the same ways to describe actions which might be dissimilar? And how much of how we define social work, its theories and practices, is influenced by what we are defining it in relation to, such as local infrastructures, histories and cultural contexts?

As we mentioned in the introduction, two forms which the quest for universal social work has taken at the international level are to develop a global definition for social work, and to develop minimum qualifying standards. Those who argue for universal standards do so in the belief that there is a danger in values and practices being limited to particular societies, especially where they are deemed unjust. Hence radical feminists might interpret the treatment of women in many Eastern societies as being oppressive. Having recourse to international human rights charters enables them to apply their Western values to these contexts, conscientising Eastern women towards their way of thinking. Also in countries that are working hard to professionalise social work in keeping with the Western tradition, global standards provide a bargaining tool in arguing for resources, both in education and practice arenas.

Hessle (2000) notes the tension between unification and diversification in Europe. On the one hand there are those who believe that it is important to unify social work through the creation of global education standards to facilitate communication between universities and to formulate common evaluation criteria for social work practice across diverse contexts. On the other hand there are those who draw attention to socio-cultural traditions and contextual factors that create forms of social work practice, social policies and methods unique to particular regions and localities.

Lorenz (2001) suggested a continuum along which social work might be positioned relating to the three dimensions that he considered important, namely, relationship to the state, degree of professionalisation and academic status. These dimensions fit with the Western view of social work within a professional model. However, there are equally important dimensions that are overlooked, for example, the degree to which the values of social work fit the context, social work's effectiveness in meeting human need and the extent to which social work contributes to social improvement. While social work's history has been tied to the institution of social welfare in most Western countries, there are many who argue that this link with statutory responsibility has hampered its social change and social reform impetus, leading to social control and support for the *status quo*.

In some countries, for example the UK and South Africa, the government exerts control over professional organisation and both have moved towards regulating bodies broader than social work, social care in the UK and social development in South Africa, which include a wide range of social service workers. This broader umbrella was applauded by some and panned by others. Still, in both countries social work did not have sufficient political muscle to withstand these changes and this was partly due to a lack of agreement on the nature of social work and its role in society.

Notwithstanding historical antecedents, Adams (in Leveridge, 2002) suggests that three factors have reinforced a lack of consensus about the nature of social work in

the UK, namely, the development of managerialism, the creation of a contract culture, and the introduction of a competence-based approach to education and training. He suggests that these factors have made the 'customary processes of practice ... more procedurally governed' (Adams, 1998, p. 254). Control of professionals by managers is policed by an ever-increasing array of procedures and standards, creating tight parameters of managerial control that dramatically curb professional autonomy (Shaw, 1995). Thus Stepney (2000) notes, 'In the restructured and marketised welfare state, social work is now required to have a narrower and more instrumental focus' (p. 9).

In South Africa, Hochfeld (2002) describes indigenous social work as having a strong radical framework focused on structural change, in a social development context via a postmodern perspective that values diversity and pluralism. The policy thrust is towards social development and social action models capable of addressing *inter alia* mass poverty, gross inequality, growing unemployment, and HIV/AIDS. This seems to suggest a very different model of social work, away from the Western professional model towards an indigenous social development model more relevant to the needs of the population (Gray, 1998, 2002; Mupedziswa, 1992; Osei-Hwedie, 1995; Ministry of Welfare and Population Development, *White Paper for Social Welfare*, 1997).

To complicate matters further, even when there is agreement that standards should be defined and monitored, there is disagreement on the criteria to be used, and on the processes that might work best. For instance, should social work qualifications best be regulated through course content requirements, or through outcomes? Are these outcomes best expressed as competencies? Who should have prime responsibility and power for regulation? What degree of detail is useful or helpful in defining standards? There are quite marked differences between the way in which these are defined in the UK, Canada, Australia, and Ireland, for example.

While trends to find a universal way of understanding and speaking about social work, and for identifying and ensuring effective practice are laudable in many ways, the more difficult issue is to work out ways in which such an emphasis on commonalities is meaningful to a diverse range of players in a variety of contexts. In the following section we examine the concept of international social work, in particular to see how this understanding can assist in the attempt to conceptualise a universal social work.

### **International Social Work**

Is 'international social work' the same thing as 'universal social work'? The notion of 'international social work' is a related concept, in the sense that both seek to focus on social work which crosses national boundaries. There are, however, quite a few different ways of thinking about international social work (Healy, 1995, 2002; Midgley, 2001). It can refer to social work which focuses on issues of international concern (for example, the problem of refugees, or ecological issues) and/or the way these are worked with at either international or domestic levels. It can refer to social

work activities which take place at a global or international level (for example, work with international level organisations). It can also include activities involving international exchanges.

There has been little systematic study of comparative social work (Nagy & Falk, 2000). Haug (2001), in her systematic study of social work literature on the subject, reported that the majority of texts on international social work operated from the construction of international social work either as a cross-cultural comparative exchange, or as international development practice, that is, 'as a direct practice activity within the domain of international humanitarian organisations' (p. 3). International partnerships and exchanges have certainly led to a spread of social work across the world such that Hokenstad & Kendall (1995) reported 1,700 professional schools of social work in more than 100 countries. Garber (2000), who spearheaded the IASSW World Census of Schools of Social Work, reported a convergence between social work curricula around the world. However, these results need to be approached with caution as they are based on only 392 responses from 35 countries, that is, a response rate of 21%. Barretta-Herman (2002), who compiled the second Census report focusing on the regions, reported as follows:

The data highlights the response rate dominance of particular countries in each of the regions and illustrates the absence of a regionally representative sample. Korean responses dominate in the Asian Region (36 of 82 responses), the United Kingdom dominates the European Region (37 of 94 respondents), and the United States dominates in the North American Region (178 of 197 responses). The low rate of return from the African Region (10 responses) and South American Region (9 responses) was particularly disappointing.

Perhaps this might reflect the extent to which Western social work models are seen to fit these contexts. Be that as it may, the trend has been to export Western models of social work from the highly industrialised Northern nations to developing countries in the South rather than to internationalise course content in Northern universities. In fact, Healy (1995) reported a drop in international content in North American curricula. The situation is complicated by lack of understanding as to exactly what international social work is and what an international social work curriculum would cover. Thus Hokenstad *et al.* (1992) ask, 'What is the place of the organised profession in different countries?' (p. 4) and 'what is the place of social work in international agencies working in the Third World?' (p. 53). Haug (2001) found that questions like these, though their scope was ostensibly global, reflected a Western perspective which casts international social work in 'normative and ideal terms, largely ignoring issues of power, voice and privilege. They tend to reflect unquestioned assumptions about who has expertise, the superiority of a professional model, what is "development" (shaping the South in the likeness of the North, with the help and expertise of Northerners), and so on' (p. 4). The IFSW and IASSW have, nevertheless, formulated an international definition of social work despite lack of agreement on many aspects of social work. Does social work have a role in social development? Is policy practice part of social work's brief? What is social work's role in community development? Although there are aspects of these methods and

approaches in social work practice in some contexts, in many countries, including the USA, social work remains a largely individualistic, clinically focused activity (Fraser *et al.*, 1991; Wyers, 1991).

What both 'universal' and 'international' social work might have in common then is a tendency to use or impose social work models from the 'developed' world as having global applicability. However, international social work need not necessarily reinforce this model if the work is truly about exchange or comparison. Or if it is about development, there are plenty of models of development which allow for work in partnership.

### Western Social Work

Western social work is the term used to describe British and North American social work, which was transported into Africa and Asia as part of Britain's colonising mission during the twentieth century. Many social work educators in Africa and Asia received their social work education in British or North American universities and took these 'Western' ideas back home with them. In this way, the history of social work generally followed a similar pattern and assumed a similar character in diverse contexts. In addition, as Said (1978, pp. 25–26) points out in his famous work on 'Orientalism', even 'Oriental' individuals educated in colonial regimes may have difficulty in tracing how Western cultures have been infused into their ways of thinking and being.

What tended to shape social work into the form it eventually took in different countries was the response of governments to social welfare and the role of social work in the human services. For example, in South Africa social work and social welfare were intimately linked while in Australia they were not. Britain and Europe adopted a welfare state system while South Africa followed a residual model based on partnership between the state and private, voluntary welfare sector which received support from the state.

Across these different contexts, social work became increasingly professionalised and codes of practice were devised to fit this professional model based on a growing body of literature on the theory, values and skills of social work. It can also be argued that the process of professionalisation is a type of masculinisation (Fook *et al.*, 2000). Many occupations which were essentially engaged in what was seen as 'women's work' of caring, took the professionalisation route in order to gain status, and in so doing took on the characteristics of the more traditional male-dominated professions.

Not surprisingly, therefore, the type of social work practised across these contexts usually involved agency-based, individually oriented casework. Though group and community work became increasingly accepted methods of social work in the latter half of the twentieth century, as did involvement in social policy, for the most part, work with individuals and families within fields of service such as disability, family and child welfare, and mental health, became the dominant mode of practice. This remains the main domain of social work in North America where there is a distinct



separation between direct clinical practice and broader community and policy practice. Apart from a period of activism in the 1960s, 'most of social work resumed a more conservative posture and withdrew from social activism' (Wyers, 1991, p. 241). Hence policy practice is not generally recognised as a domain for direct social work practice in the USA where clinical practice predominates. Also, from the 1970s onwards, empirically based social work practice became a dominant theme in the USA. Here as in the UK, Europe and Australia, social work was part of direct human services and operated within a well-developed service infrastructure. In the UK, Canada and Australia, where radical and feminist social work began to take hold from the 1960s onwards, social work became increasingly about working with marginalised and oppressed groups in society and anti-oppressive practice assumed prominence. In Australia there is an increasing literature on critical and feminist social work, reflective practice and strengths approaches, such as narrative therapy. Hence there are differences even in Western contexts but there are similarities too, which is not surprising since most Western countries draw on a similar cultural tradition in the development of social work, exchanging, exporting and importing practice models, curricula and literature. In a sense these countries belong to the same 'discourse (and language) pool', so it is understandable that they would articulate similar thinking about the fundamental aspects of the social work profession (Gray & Fook, 2002). But, as we have raised earlier, does the same talk or discourse about social work mean that social work is (or should be) the same in different contexts?

### **The Westernisation–Indigenisation Debate**

In post-colonial times much of these debates revolve around questions of how the respective cultures of 'coloniser' and 'colonised' interplay, and to discuss how identities and cultures are made now that there is no longer overt imperial control (Andermahr *et al.*, 1997). To some extent, these also involve questions of indigenisation, in the sense that the term 'indigenous peoples' can refer to any peoples who have been subjected to colonisation and loss of sovereignty (Smith, 1999, p. 7).

The indigenisation debate rests on two central premises:

1. Social work is a Western invention and a product of modernity. The notion of progressive change fits this paradigm. The question here is 'whether or not, for example, Western perspectives on practice are really responsive to the personal and social needs of the population of other regions' (Goldstein, 1986, p. 149).
2. Indigenisation is postmodern to the extent that it questions the dominance of 'social work as a Western invention' and seeks to relate it to local culture, history, and political, social and economic development. Implicit in the indigenisation side of the debate is the question of 'whether it is incumbent on particular nations to develop their own orientations to social work practice' (Goldstein, 1986, p. 149). This can also be extended into the question of whether national boundaries or commonalities make the most responsive basis for 'localised'

practice, or whether in fact there might be less structural or static boundaries, based on shared experiences, which provide a more appropriate framework for practice.

In Africa, it can be argued that colonialisation destroyed much of what was good, right and just in African culture and the problems policy makers are presently confronting arise because of its international heritage whereby indigenous modes of helping and natural kinship networks were overlooked in favour of professional and educational developments (Gray, 2002). This included the 'scientific assessment of human situations, high craftsmanship and skill in individualised curative and restorative work with people and families, and the formation of sound organisational structures to support social work practice' (McKendrick, 1998, p. 99). What would African social work be like if this had not happened? Perhaps there would have been no need for Western social work in African culture at all since the social system was naturally supportive of collective interests.

However, one of the difficulties in developing indigenous approaches to social work is that the process of indigenisation, of rediscovering and redeveloping indigenous identities in a post-colonial and postmodern world, is that identities are being made and remade in a dynamic process of interaction with many diverse groups and structures (Brah, 1992). And with the recognition of concepts like 'hybridity' (Docker & Fisher, 2000, p. 17), referring to mixtures of nations, races, cultures and ethnicities, and 'emergent ethnicity' (Fook, 2000), referring to new ethnicities developing in new contexts, it is more difficult to identify a clear 'indigenous' culture. At the same time, even 'Western social work' as a monolithic entity, is changing and developing, and attempting to incorporate new and diverse perspectives.

According to Osei-Hwedie (1995), internationalism is leading to trends distancing social work from locally based solutions. For example, the rise of anti-oppressive practice models further distances most African countries which cannot afford a Western-type of social work that focuses mainly on marginalised individuals and groups that, by definition, form a small proportion of the population. Furthermore, poorer countries did not have a well-developed infrastructure to buttress social work's role in social service provision, hence the need for social workers in this context to replace the prevailing colonial management paradigm and professional elitism in social work organisations with participatory processes that reflected people's true needs and interests. As it became clear in most developing contexts of the world that social work was not having a major impact on widescale poverty, its relevance began to be questioned. This was especially true in South Africa through the 1990s when the first democratic government came to power and moved towards a social development model to the extent that today there is no longer a Ministry of Welfare. This raised the question of the relationship between social work and social development. For the most part, social workers around the world do not agree that they should play a major role in social and community development and as a result of the trends in South Africa, the fastest growing professional grouping of social

workers in the last five years has been the association of private practitioners, following the North American model. This has led to a questioning of social work's role in social development and arguments that it is far more relevant to Africa than a service-oriented, professionalised, largely clinical, individualistic, Western invention called social work. While it might seem that Africa is moving away from this so-called Western model of social work, Gray (1996, 1998) highlighted the compatibility between social work and social development.

In countries like New Zealand, which has a strong bicultural policy, there have been some constructive moves to articulate Maori culture and hence indigenous social work practice models. Examples are the 'Just Therapy' approach (Waldegrave *et al.*, 2003) and Maori family group conferencing (Lee, 1997) both of which are consequently having an impact beyond national and cultural boundaries. Gray & Allegritti (2002) have highlighted the need for African writers to articulate African cultural or indigenous models to demonstrate the way in which they differ from the Western models which they criticise.

### **The Globalisation–Localisation Debate**

Ife (2000) argued strongly that alongside the process of globalisation there was a counter tendency towards localisation borne out by increasing interest in locally based solutions as evident in *inter alia* communitarianism, the environmental movement, the development of militia-style groups, and extremist political parties. These locally based solutions shared an interest in the creation or maintenance of a sense of community in the face of the 'perceived universality and uniformity of the globalized world' (Ife, 2000, p. 56). He saw it as having its intellectual counterpart in the rise of relativism and postmodernism, which led to fragmentation as overarching structures, grand schemes and meta-narratives were debunked. In this vein, advocates of indigenisation emphasise the local as a possible site for the solution of social problems. However, it is becoming increasingly difficult to discern what's 'local' when global trends take hold so quickly. A kid in Asia, or Botswana, or on the streets of LA looks the same, drinks Coca Cola, eats McDonald burgers, wears his hat backwards, his shorts too long, his T-shirt too big ... jives to the same hip-hop music and so on, and the question of indigenous culture, which is changing all the time, becomes difficult to pin down. Midgley (2001) draws attention to our growing global consciousness, citing Estes' (1992) view that it was only through the adoption of internationalism as a belief system that social problems might be solved. To emphasise the equal importance of global awareness and local solutions, a new term 'glocal' has emerged. To some extent, these debates are also aligned with the postmodern emphasis on the importance of 'situatedness' or contextuality. Arguing that knowledge and/or identities are 'situated' in that each are made and/or changed relative to local context and the perspectives of different players, means that social work models and practice can only be relevant if relevant to context.

### The Universal Values–Multicultural Social Work Debate

Here the question relates to ‘the implications of built-in cultural biases’ (Goldstein, 1986, p. 149). It could be argued that the crux of the indigenisation debate rests on the notion of ‘shared values’ in social work and the fact that we are dealing with a professional culture that seeks to be universalising. This sets up antagonistic and irreconcilable trends in social work (Bar-On, 1998). On the one hand we have values about individuals which are essentially Judeo-Christian in origin and fit well within liberal, rights-based, democratic systems and on the other we have values about social justice that focus on collective interests and issues of equality and fairness, which fit well with socialist ideals. Social work’s roots in the Charity Organisation and Settlement Movements as pioneered by Richmond and Addams, respectively, reflected differing perspectives on social work. While social work embraced these differences as it evolved, many developing contexts in Africa and Asia are tending towards values and practices more consistent with Addams’ perspective which privileged grassroots values. Addams believed that ‘the people she was trying to help had better ideas about how their lives might be improved than she and her colleagues did. She came to believe that any method of philanthropy or reform premised on top-down assumptions ... is ineffectual and inherently false’ (Menand, 2001, p. 311). This is a far cry from the expert professional model social work subsequently pursued.

There is a broader debate as to whether social work’s universal value system is at odds with current thinking relating to cultural autonomy. Social work’s values ‘prescribe a *total* ideology of how the social universe should cohere ... (which), in effect, are like a religious frame of mind to which practitioners are expected to subordinate their entire *modus operandi*, and expect as much of themselves by virtue of their professional socialisation’ (Bar-On, 1998, p. 153). Thus Dominelli (1988, 1989, 1997) consistently advocates that social workers be evaluated primarily by their values. Elevating social work values to universal rules (Shardlow, 1989) puts social workers ‘in a position akin to many so-called liberals who claim to respect people’s way of life *provided these people abide by their ... rules*’ (Bar-On, 1998, p. 154). Bar-On (1998) argues that this stance is at odds with the notion of multiculturalism, which is predicated on tolerance and, at the very least, demands that we respect people’s choices as to how they wish to live their lives. However this is precisely what the liberal notion of multiculturalism means. It advocates multiculturalism so long as processes of liberalism are not compromised (Gray & Allegritti, 2002).

Self-determination is a case in point. Despite its universal nature, there are important differences in its cross-cultural application (Ejaz, 1991). In Eastern and traditional cultures, more emphasis is placed on collective rather than on individual interests, and on the achievement of individual fulfilment via group means (Hutchison, 1987). Studies show that poor and uneducated people tend to have a different worldview from that of their social workers. For example, they tend to be dependent and fatalistic and expect social workers to be directive (Ow, 1991). Likewise, Ejaz (1991), writing about self-determination in India, emphasised the

importance of culture commenting on people's willingness to take advice from an educated person, and on the duty of the learned person to impart knowledge to the less informed. While Indians do not disregard individualism, they are not threatened by dependency and generally have trust and faith in their helpers. Consequently, Indian social workers tend to slip into the guiding role that is expected of them despite the fact that most of them have been educated in the Western casework tradition. Thus 'taking a non-directive, passive role in the casework situation might leave the Indian client wholly dissatisfied' (Bannerjee, as cited by Ejaz, 1991, p. 139). It might be argued that the same is true in South Africa.

Seeing their values as universal puts social workers in an ethical dilemma when they are required to uphold their professional values in the face of cultural or religious differences. Gray (1995) identified minimal moral and epistemological principles, which could guide interaction between different social and cultural groups to overcome relativism and to enhance inter-group and intercultural understanding, namely, respect for the priority of human interests and an egalitarian conception of social justice. She emphasised the need for flexibility and encouraged social workers to be open to new understanding. To this end, she expressed the belief that 'social workers should commit themselves to an open, reflective approach with these minimal principles to prevent them from slipping into an "anything goes" kind of relativism' (p. 59) and simultaneously avoid universal judgments.

Interestingly, there is also literature showing that mainstream social work interventions produce the same, or sometimes even better, outcomes for ethnic clients (Soydan *et al.*, 1999). Wilson *et al.* (2002) found no evidence that mainstream delinquency intervention programmes yielded poorer outcomes for minority youth than for white youth despite a lack of cultural tailoring for minority clients. They argue that more evidence is needed for claims that special interventions are needed for ethnically diverse populations.

### **The Desirability of Universalising Social Work**

Given the inconclusiveness of the debates outlined in this paper, what are the pros and cons of attempts to define a universal social work? Gray & Fook (2002) believe that it might be acceptable to think philosophically about an international orientation without necessarily attempting to attain universal agreement on definitions of social work or standards for professional social work education and practice. There are clear advantages in developing an international orientation in social work. Midgley (1992) lists some obvious benefits of international exchange: increasing our knowledge and understanding of human problems, strengthening practice, and further development of the profession in raising its profile. Comparative knowledge can serve to improve our practice. Emphasis on shared social work aims and activities can serve political ends in raising standards and expectations of good service, especially in countries less inclined to value social services.

Therefore, the central questions in the universalising debate should be less about professional preservation and universalising values, and more about finding ways to

best achieve the goals of social justice and of making the world a better place for those who suffer as a result of widespread injustice and poverty. The issues are less about imposing a unified conception of social work, and more about a ground up collaborative process for finding and developing commonalities to fight a common cause. How can we become more accountable and responsive to our different contexts, and at the same time become more connected with each other's work, so that together we can develop ways in which our practice becomes more transferable across contexts? Gray & Fook (2002) suggested that the main challenge was to find ways to celebrate and recognise commonalities while at the same time valuing and including differences. The current top-down search for global standards is premature and antithetical to this goal. Care needs to be taken in making generalisations about social work so that it does not become a new exercise in cultural imperialism. Gray & Fook (2002) speculated about the implications of trying to generalise about social work across international contexts.

First, they suggested, it is widely recognised that there are political problems in making generalisations. As postmodernists rightly point out, trying to universalise experience often means that many marginal and different perspectives are omitted (Pease & Fook, 1999). For example, as already discussed, social work's universal value system is at odds with current thinking relating to cultural autonomy. Secondly, while there are clear similarities in the discourse about social work across countries, this does not necessarily mean that it is practised similarly in different contexts. This may simply be a question of how and whether our theory matches our practice, but it may also be a question of whose discourse dominates and why? In the histories of social work in most Western nations, the literature and cultural traditions of Britain and the United States of America dominated. It is little wonder then that many of us share these discourses about social work. But it may also be little wonder that the actual practice of social work differs in relation to the varied contexts in which we operate. If we attempt to make generalisations, we must ask the important question of whose generalisations they are? Are we simply perpetuating the life of a dominant discourse developed in contexts inappropriate to those at hand? While their analysis might appear critical of the attempt to generalise about social work, Gray & Fook (2002) did not in fact intend this to be the case. They recognised that there was a need to find a common way of speaking about social work not only to value and reaffirm each other's work, but also to improve and scrutinise our practice. There is also political mileage to be gained in generalising about our work. We need to find meaningful and persuasive ways of packaging what we do to ensure that we do not become marginalised in new economic environments (Fook *et al.*, 2000). This packaging needs to be both outward (expansive) and inward (reflective) looking.

### **Future Directions**

First, given the need to recognise the importance of context in the different forms and expressions social work might take, it seems important to emphasise a *grounded*

*approach* to understanding and documenting what we do. This includes placing value on the ways in which workers who are indigenous to the situation conceptualise their work, but also developing processes that encourage this. This does not mean that overarching or imported discourses might not be used, but that they be used, not so much as defining discourses, but as tools for developing grounded perspectives. In this type of approach, for instance, it may be that there are different levels of principles identified. Minimal ones might be those that belong to common discourse, about which common understandings can be developed, such as 'social justice', about which people agree that there is some shared abstract meaning across different contexts. This does not preclude there being a different expression of social justice in different contexts.

Secondly, what approaches to professionalism and professionalisation are relevant? Are more rigid or more flexible boundaries most productive in the current environment? In relation to this question, Payne (2000) argued that despite its 100-year history, social work plays a marginal role in social intervention and makes a limited contribution to social science. One way of overcoming its marginal influence is for social work to join with other forces within society working for social change, such as national and international organisations like the Australian Council for Social Services (ACOSS) and its equivalent the National Welfare and Social Services Development Forum (NWSSDF) in South Africa both of which are linked to the International Consortium on Social Welfare (ICSW); the International University Consortium on International Social Development (IUCISD); and Amnesty International to name a few. In this way its value premises undergo constant scrutiny and it potentially becomes more assertive about its social and political role. Social work needs to reconstruct itself to overcome the hostile forces pitted against it. Payne's (1998, 2000) solution suggests an *expansive approach to professional definition* rather than a self-protective stance. Given the views of those calling for a collaborative model of East–West sharing, the more rigidly circumscribed professional boundaries become, the more counter-productive they are likely to be for international exchange. The same argument applies for inter-disciplinary co-operation within team settings or where solutions to or interventions in social problems require a multi-disciplinary response (Gray, 1999). A broader view of human need and broad conceptions of welfare render professional boundaries relatively superfluous.

Thirdly, we would argue for the *relevance of a social development response* to poverty and injustice, since, by its very nature, it requires a multi-layered approach. It requires horizontal collaboration with various social sectors, like education, crime prevention, justice, welfare, and health, working together; and vertical co-operation with various tiers of government, local, regional and national, working in harmony with one another, and with non-government organisations. More importantly, it requires a synergy between social, economic, political, and environmental interests (Coates, 2000; Ife, 1995; Midgley, 1995). As already outlined, in South Africa social development provides the macro policy perspective within which social workers are being asked to transcend traditional boundaries and make an impact on problems of

mass poverty, unemployment and social deprivation through greater use of diverse social work methods, such as advocacy, community development, empowerment, consultation, networking, action research, and policy analysis (Gray, 1998). In short, the social development perspective forces social workers to revisit their values relating to social justice and to redirect their services to the poor by finding effective ways of addressing poverty (Gray, 2000).

Fourthly, there is a need to conceptualise *social work as contextual practice*, as not only about working *with people in contexts*, the 'person-in-environment', but also about working *with whole contexts*. In this type of approach, of working both within and with contexts, social workers would need to emphasise *inter alia* an understanding of the nature of contexts in developing relevant practice strategies; positionality, that is, a reflexive understanding of their own perspective and practice; an ability to work with whole contexts (involving all the disparate players); an ability to develop practice and practice theory that is transferable across contexts, and to reframe skills in contextual terms (Fook, 2002).

Finally, *dialogical processes within local contexts* are far more likely to create indigenous and relevant models of social work practice than imported ones since they directly address the needs of the country, respond to the culture of the people and focus on pertinent social issues. This is not to say that there is not a shared area of understanding and that there are not commonalities in social work education, practice and research across the world. We believe it is important to facilitate discussion about the implications of internationalising trends in modern social work. Let us take heed of the wisdom of Ruth Smalley (1968) who noted, 'Because the form that social work takes is so intimately related to any society's or country's goals for itself and its people, its values, its mores, it is inevitable that forms of social work should differ from country to country, and that its patterns of social work education should differ from country to country' (p. 163) and one might add, even within one country!

## Conclusion

In this paper we have examined universalising trends within social work which appear to continue unabated in the face of widespread disagreement as to the value of universalism in social work. While noting a shared discourse in social work arising from its historical development and ongoing international exchanges, we draw attention to the wide disparities in values and practices in diverse multicultural contexts. It is our view that it might be acceptable to think philosophically about an international orientation without necessarily attempting to attain universal agreement on definitions of social work or standards for professional social work education and practice. We believe that widespread discussion and debate on the implications of internationalising trends in modern social work is needed. There is a huge gap between theory and practice in social work and there are far more pressing concerns confronting the profession than generating global definitions and standards which further distance us from those whom we seek to serve.



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