

DEFINING INTERNATIONAL SOCIAL WORK FOR THE PURPOSE OF STRENGTHENING CURRICULA IN SOCIAL WORK GRADUATE SCHOOLS

Sara Van Gunst

This paper examines some of the challenges the social work profession faces in expanding the field at the international level. Defining what we mean by international social work is a fundamental issue to provide greater recognition for the field in order to recruit new students and expand the presence of social workers in international organizations. One of the main avenues for pursuing these goals is to strengthen the international social work curricula at universities. The paper looks to social work values in defining the field's strengths in international work and uses this as a base to provide suggestions for deepening international social work curricula.

In today's increasingly globalized world the social work profession is looking to expand its role to meet emerging demands at the international level. Such a monumental task poses substantial challenges. Because social work is geared toward working within the context of people and their environment, broadening social work education to the international level requires comprehensively evaluating the transferability of the field's approaches across cultures. This paper will examine one of the main challenges to this growth, defining what social workers mean by international social work, and will provide suggestions about better structuring international social work programs in the United States (U.S.) to best prepare future practitioners.

Defining International Social Work

As Midgley (2001) points out, two of the greatest challenges in developing strong international social work curricula are both the lack of a common definition of what international social work is and, therefore, coherent professional goals. Definitions of international social work are inordinately broad, ranging from a practice area that affords practitioners skills that can be applied internationally, to a global awareness that

enables social workers to view their own role and issues within a broader international context (Midgley). Part of the problem is that international social work can involve many different roles, including clinical work, policy, social administration, or generalist practice. In my experience, it is also unclear in talking with professors whether international social work should be a practice method or a field of practice. However, if social work is to move forward in establishing international competence, there must be a more coherent and cogent definition of the domain of international social work and how the goals are advanced by the different methods as a whole.

A sound definition of international social work is critical since social work is competing for students across a variety of other disciplines with strong international identities, such as political science, law, public policy, and area studies. In addition, social work must gain the trust of agencies working in international development. Currently, many international agencies do not recognize social work's strengths and, as a result, social work does not have a strong presence in the international development field outside of academia (Caragata & Sanchez, 2002). Through an articulation of social work's relevance to international development, social work can attract both more students interested in international work and also increase the presence of the profession in the field.

Taylor (1999) argues that social work should abandon clinical work to psychologists and psychiatrists and instead focus on community development and advocacy. This argument may be too drastic a move in the domestic arena, but it possesses merit when applied at the international level. For example, many argue that clinical casework is culture specific, both in terms of effective interventions and in its function as a luxury rather than a necessity in well-developed countries. These well-developed countries have the resources to focus on the psychological health of the population instead of on the struggles facing many developing countries, such as the acquisition of the more basic needs like food and shelter (Drucker, 2003; Taylor).

One way of addressing this dilemma is to examine the profession's value system to determine what is most appropriate for international work. Social work's values can be divided into two categories: fundamental, or primary, values and secondary, or instrumental, values. Fundamental values represent overarching humanitarian concerns of the profession, while secondary values pertain to the social, cultural, economic, and political conditions that impact how fundamental values are enacted (Mullaly, 1997). Taylor (1999) argues that fundamental values are more applicable to the international arena

than are secondary or instrumental values. She proposes that social work's fundamental values of "helping others, preventing harm and social justice" (p. 311) are transferable to other cultures, as well as social work's dedication to empowerment, "both as a state of mind (feeling worthy or competent or perceiving power and control) and as exercising control over the course of events in the socio-political arena through social and political influence" (p. 311). However, the social, cultural, economic, and political environment of individual countries should determine how these fundamental values can be realized.

Starting with more commonly shared or transferable values, such as social justice, may be an effective way to unite social workers around the globe in common interests and may also be more appropriate in terms of the most pressing international needs. Even more importantly, these values maximize social work's relative strength in working at the grassroots level as compared to other disciplines. This is not to minimize the importance of sharing successful clinical interventions on the international level, but perhaps practitioners need to tie clinical work more closely to the goals of social justice and carefully examine which interventions are most transferable to the international context.

Based on these arguments, the case can be made for a more narrow and targeted definition of international social work. One of the earliest definitions of international social work emphasized it as a field of practice that hones the skills and knowledge needed to work in international agencies (Midgley, 2001). While this definition can seem a bit confining at first, my personal experience in international development has taught me that most Americans working abroad in the field do so through international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), multi-lateral agencies, or government agencies, and this is, therefore, the most likely arena in which social workers would be employing their skills. This definition can be further refined to clarify the type of skills and knowledge most appropriate to international work. Thus, international social work may be delineated as a field of social work practice that hones the skills and knowledge needed to work in international agencies around issues of social justice and empowerment. Because of the unique set of skills required for work in this field, international social work should continue to be included as a field of practice, but careful consideration should be given to the nuances of working abroad for individual methods, such as clinical, policy, or generalist practice.

Establishing Criteria for Evaluating International Social Work Curriculum

In applying this new definition, which focuses on the skills needed for work in international agencies, it is important to review the role that international social work schools play in fostering relevant skills for international practice through appropriate topics of study. Healy has developed a continuum of internationalization by which to assess how well social work schools have internationalized their programs as outlined below (Johnson, 2004).

Tolerance	Responsiveness	Commitment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unsolicited presence of foreign students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offering an occasional elective 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Well-articulated program through program of study and independent work
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual faculty doing international work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Occasional international field placement for a student who initiates it • Doctoral dissertations • Independent study with international focus 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • International field placement program with adequate preparation • School-maintained program with specified purpose and accountability

The continuum provides a good starting place, but can be expanded to consider other critical aspects of the social work education process. First, the continuum needs to clarify what “well-articulated curriculum” means and should assess the depth of the curriculum. The following questions may be addressed: How many classes are offered? What do the courses cover and do they sufficiently prepare students for the nuances and unique challenges posed by international social work? What particular skill sets are taught to students through the curriculum and is this appropriate given the field’s definition of what international social work is and how the profession seeks

to assert itself in international development programming?

In order to refine the curriculum, it is important to identify the unique role social workers can bring to the international development arena and form courses around these topics. While there are many options to work towards this goal, based on the more narrow definition of international social work proposed above, a starting point might be the following:

Bottom-Up Approach

Social work takes a grassroots approach that focuses on community organizing to foster social change. Many recent program models in the civil society area focus on a community mobilization model rather than funding large, national-level agencies or organizations (USAID, 2005). Social work can help take the lead in developing appropriate approaches in this area.

Empowerment

Social work takes an empowerment or strengths-based approach to working with individuals and communities by identifying existing resources to solve problems rather than focusing on weaknesses and deficiencies (Taylor, 1999). The issue of empowerment has become a common theme in the international development field, and social work is well positioned to offer approaches and tools to give the concept real meaning in practice.

Ecological Perspective

Because social work focuses on the person and community within its own context, the profession has the skills to go beyond promoting a particular political ideology, such as free-market democracy, as an answer to a country's development needs. This perspective provides the profession with important tools to avoid cultural imperialism and the creation of solutions that are not appropriate in other countries.

Social Justice

Social work values place particular importance on social justice and reducing poverty, arguably two of the most urgent international development needs. While other disciplines address these issues, they are central themes in social work and form the foundation of the profession.

While much work needs to be done to create a comprehensive list of social work's international strengths, educators need to carefully direct

the type of specialized courses provided to students, rather than rely on a haphazard selection of international courses within other departments. For example, at Columbia University School of Social Work (CUSSW), there is only one required course offered for those choosing the International Social Welfare Immigrant and Refugee Services field of practice. To fulfill the remaining requirements for the field of practice, students take courses at other programs within Columbia University. In order to avoid reliance on other departments, international social work curricula should be a practice method, rather than just a field of practice, which would help to deepen the curricula and provide students with a more in-depth training in the nuances of working in international settings and how to responsibly employ Western or U.S. models of practice in the international context. Establishing international social work as a practice method would require that social work schools recruit and retain a committed group of professors with a strong international background, including experience conducting international research and projects, publishing articles in international social work publications, collaborating with international social work professionals, and maintaining contacts with international development agencies and organizations.

Comprehensive international social work curricula should also consider the diversity of the student body and faculty. A committed international social work program should include an institutionalized international exchange component that actively recruits students and professors from around the world. For example, CUSSW's partnership with The Open Society Institute brings Central Asian students to CUSSW to receive their master degrees in social work. The U.S. State Department Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA) funds many international exchange programs that could also be tapped for attracting professors and professionals to teach and conduct research at U.S. universities. The Contemporary Issues Fellowship Program, which is currently coming to a close, recruited professionals across a broad array of fields, including social welfare, for four-month research positions at U.S. universities (IREX, 2005). The Fulbright Program's Hubert H. Humphrey Fellowship Program is another active ECA program that brings talented mid-level professionals to the U.S. for a year of study at selected host universities (U.S. Department of State, 2006). Most costs for the program are covered by the government, making it a viable option for social work programs that may not have sufficient funds available to cover the costs of frequent international exchanges.

It is essential that committed international social work programs institutionalize opportunities for international learning and practice that extend to both research and field placements. While the Healy continuum does include international placements (cited in Johnson, 2004), more emphasis should be placed on the permanence and structure of this component. International field placements should not only be available, they should be an integral part of the degree process (cited in Johnson). Schools must have standards for international experience among students majoring in international social work and require international field placements for those not meeting the set standards.

Sufficient international, experiential learning is critical for students to develop the necessary cultural awareness and sensitivity to apply social work's models effectively. Boyle, Nackerud, and Kilpartrick (1999) make a valuable point that too little emphasis has been given to the importance of experiential learning in fostering cross-cultural skills in social work students. They explain that experiencing culture shock helps students understand themselves better and develop new sensitivities. This experience is hard to simulate in the classroom, so cultural immersion programs are critical to gaining cultural competence.

Opportunities to participate in international research projects are also invaluable for helping students gain a deeper understanding of international social work and examine the nuances of applying social work interventions and approaches around the world. In order to develop both international placements and research, it seems that social work programs would greatly benefit from institutional agreements and contracts with other schools abroad. Having an established agreement in place, which outlines a formal relationship between universities, could help to break down bureaucratic barriers to collaboration on grant-funded or school-funded programs. Agreements could also contribute to clarifying expectations and setting goals for future collaboration, which can create a more solid, sustainable relationship.

Finally, the Healy continuum (cited in Johnson, 2004) does not address the need for programs to form ties to the professional international development community, including international NGOs, multi-lateral organizations, and government agencies. It is important to make the distinction between ties with agencies in terms of field placement arrangements and active collaboration at the institutional level that includes sharing professional expertise on common projects. Institutional connections with the professional community

have many advantages. They can lead to collaborative partnerships on international grant projects that open doors for more international research and field placement possibilities (USAID, 2005). In addition, links to the international community can raise the profile of the social work field and provide practitioners and academics with a stronger voice in setting priorities for international development programs.

How Well Do U.S. Universities Currently Prepare Students for International Social Work?

Many of the ideas posed above can be considered ideal scenarios and there may be realistic concerns about meeting these goals based on funding constraints. However, research indicates that social work programs have a long way to reach even the responsiveness level in the Healy continuum (cited in Johnson, 2004). Caragata and Sanchez (2002), for example, reviewed international social work curricula at U.S. and Canadian schools and found significant deficiencies. Of the U.S. schools interviewed, only 11% demonstrated linkages with other institutions or agencies in developing countries. Similarly, only 11% of U.S. schools had research projects in developing countries. A slightly higher number, 14%, of schools noted individual faculty members with research projects in developing countries. Twenty-seven percent of schools had international field placements which, in one case, included a summer course in Mexico. On a brighter note, 66% of schools at least had linkages or connections with international projects, although only 39% of the cases included formal relationships. Twenty-three percent of U.S. schools invite international students and teachers to visit or teach within their programs. While more research needs to be done to examine the effectiveness of international social work programs, these statistics point to a serious lack of progress on the part of many schools to internationalize their curricula.

Conclusion

While social work faces many challenges in establishing itself in the international arena, there is great potential for the field to play a key role in shaping international policy and intervention. The field must first establish a clear identity for international work by settling on a focused definition of the subfield and then move to evaluate social work programs to test how

well they prepare students. A superficial international focus combined with the general curricula cannot adequately prepare students for the myriad of challenges they will face in an international setting. Social work programs must establish more rigorous criteria if the field is to develop more capable professionals. The best way to prepare students is to develop a more focused curriculum that focuses in on social work's strengths for international development, rather than covering a broad spectrum of issues. Social work has much to offer the international development arena and social work schools play an important role in providing that connection.

References

- Boyle, D., Nacherud, L., & Kilpatrick, A. (1999). The road less traveled: Cross-cultural, international experiential learning. *International Social Work, 42*(2), 201-214.
- Caragata, L., & Sanchez, M. (2002). Globalization and global need: New imperatives for expanding international social work education in North America. *International Social Work, 45* (2), 217-238.
- Drucker, D. (2003). Whither international social work?: A reflection. *International Social Work, 46*(1), 53-81.
- International Research & Exchanges Board (IREX). (2005). Contemporary Issues Fellowship Program (CI). Retrieved October 31, 2005, from <http://www.irex.org/programs/ci/index.asp>
- Johnson, A. K. (2004). Increasing internationalization in social work programs: Healy's continuum as a strategic planning guide. *International Social Work, 47*(1), 7-23.
- Midgley, J. (2001). Issues in international social work: Resolving critical debates in the profession. *Journal of Social Work, 1*(1), 21-35.
- Mullaly, R. P. (1997). *Structural social work: Ideology, theory, and practice*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Taylor, Z. (1999). Values, theories and methods in social work education. A culturally transferable core? *International Social Work, 42*(3), 309-318.
- U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). (2005). U.S. Higher Education Community: Doing Business with USAID. Retrieved October 31, 2005, from <http://www.usaid.gov/university/>
- U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). (2005). Moldova Citizen Participation Project. Retrieved November 2, 2005, from http://www.usaid.kiev.ua/moldova_act.shtml#irex

U.S. Department of State. (2006). Hubert H. Humphrey Fellowships Program. Retrieved March 13, 2006, from <http://exchanges.state.gov/education/hhh/>

SARA VAN GUNST is a first year student at CUSSW. She holds a bachelor's degree in International Relations with a focus on countries of the former Soviet Union from the College of William & Mary and a master's degree in Russian Studies from Indiana University at Bloomington. She has over 5 years of experience developing and implementing civil society programs in the International development division of the International Research & Exchanges Board (IREX) in Washington, DC and Moscow, Russia. After finishing CUSSW, Sara plans to work with immigrant communities in the United States and explore social work opportunities abroad. Her email address is sev2107@columbia.edu.