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Why should they listen to me? Developing social work education and social work in Tajikistan

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Abstract
A critique of the notion that social work is an international profession operating with similar values and methodologies is presented. This is based on an ethnographic study of a project carried out in Tajikistan. It found that the Western social work universal values and models of working can be challenged.

Keywords
Baby P, indigenization, social work education, Tajikistan, values

Introduction

This article will explore two key questions: whether other nations/educators should listen to social work educators from the West and if so, is it possible to identify the conditions necessary for more effective educational or consultative processes? The article proffers a reflective account of an ethnographic study based on three visits to Tajikistan in 2008, where the author worked as a social work education consultant. Issues that arose and lessons learned will be considered in terms of writing course curriculum, advertising, approaches to learning, the role of the educator and the use of translators.

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Literature review: Key concepts and messages

An analysis of international social work allows us to think critically about social work in our own country. It enables us to view our own practice differently, via a critical lens (Cochrane and Clarke, 1993; Lyons et al., 2006). Social work is increasingly presented as a transnational activity with practitioners pursuing the objectives of the profession in the contexts of many countries and supported by international professional organizations (Lawrence and Lyons, 2009; Midgely, 1997).

Western definitions of international social work

As a starting point it is important to explore the key concepts such as definitions of international social work, globalization, imperialism, cultural hegemony and indigenization. The majority of these international definitions are based on social justice and human rights (Cox and Pawar, 2006; IFSW, 2000). Furthermore, Healy (2001: 7) contends that international social work is 'international professional practice and the capacity for international action by the social work profession. . . International action has four dimensions: internationally related domestic practice and advocacy, professional exchange, international practice and international policy development and advocacy'. These definitions can be critiqued in that they make assumptions about power, and arguably Western social workers cannot be successful advocates for countries of which they have only a limited understanding (Gray and Fook, 2004).

Healy (2008: 7) denotes the difference between global and international social work as 'global . . . pertaining to or involving the whole world, whereas international can mean . . . between or among two or more nations . . .'. Therefore it is the relationship that is important, in an international focus. However, it has been argued that social workers are often hesitant as 'globalization is generally seen negatively to reflect a new form of imperialism' (Sewpaul, 2006: 424).

Imperialism can be defined as 'a policy of extending a country's power and influence through colonization, use of military force, or other means' (*Oxford Dictionaries*, 2011). Indeed Al-Krenawi and Graham (2000) argue that social work should not be used as another instrument of Western colonialism. Midgley (1981) offered a classic critique of 'professional imperialism' in which it was argued that the transmission of social work knowledge and skills is derived primarily from Western practices. Thus it is far from being an open and equal exchange of ideas. Mandelbaum (2005) and

Midgley (2008) state that globally a new imperialism has been accepted by many who believe they can stabilize and develop through Western hegemony (Rankopo and Osei-Hwedie, 2010).

Following on from this, Freire (1970) presents two dichotomies: the student–teacher dichotomy and the colonizer–colonized dichotomy. Freire (1970) defines traditional pedagogy as the 'banking model' because it treats the student as an empty vessel to be filled with knowledge, like a piggybank. He states that this is the pedagogy of the oppressor, or colonizer. There exists a duality in the mind of the oppressed. On one hand, the oppressed adheres to the oppressor's conscience (their values and ideology) and is afraid of being free, and on the other hand, they wish to be free. Therefore, he argues for a critical pedagogy to treat the learner as a co-creator of knowledge (Freire, 1970).

The co-creation of knowledge via international social work is a much contested concept. Payne and Askeland (2008) argue that it is no more than Western social work influencing the wider world through postcolonial cultural hegemony. Cultural hegemony can be defined as 'the use of cultural and social relations to impose or maintain power' (Payne and Askeland, 2008: 735). Thus internationalizing social work education creates a Western hegemony in disseminating knowledge (Payne and Askeland, 2008). Moreover, relying on the claim to universal social work knowledge assumes, uncritically, that such knowledge may be transferred from Western societies to other societies with markedly different cultures and access to resources.

Western models may provide a framework for understanding social work, but different cultural assumptions and social needs may require different models. It has been argued that Western social work is not necessarily relevant to non-Western countries and its relevance should be challenged (Midgley, 1981; Payne and Askeland, 2008). Furthermore, Gray and Fook (2004) contest that the tensions between westernization and indigenization, or the balance between Western and alternative conceptions of practice, must be considered.

Indigenization has been defined by Gray et al. (2008: 1) as 'culturally relevant social work education and practice'. Gray and Coates (2010: 615) argue that 'social work knowledge should arise from within the culture, reflect local behaviours and practices, be interpreted within a local frame of reference . . .'. Therefore indigenous knowledge should be reflexive and social workers need to integrate their reflections on local history and cultures (Yang, 2005).

International social work standards

International social work standards for education have already been established (Sewpaul and Jones, 2004). These have been used to facilitate further

development of appropriate national standards. However, they have been contested. Yip (2004) asserts that these standards emphasize the value system of the West. Payne and Askeland (2008: 60) comment that 'what is valued academically, epistemologically and ontologically varies between countries and cultures'. Furthermore, Devore and Schlesinger (1994) argue that social work with Muslims needs to be adapted to Muslim values, rather than being grafted onto prevailing social work knowledge. It can be argued that universal standards cannot just be taken off the shelf and applied internationally.

There is a need to develop social work standards nationally by raising the awareness of those charged with the responsibility to educate social workers locally. This needs to be encouraged (if Western social work consultants are involved) without appearing imperialist. The universal standards of the West cannot be deployed to other countries in their entirety and should not be seen as a standard bearer, or perfect exemplar. Indeed it can be argued that the social work profession in the West is in crisis, with staff shortages, financial constraints and recruitment issues. Some of these issues are exemplified by the high profile death of Peter Connelly (Baby P) in the UK in 2007. He had been known to social services since December 2006 and was subject to a child protection plan, yet he subsequently died at the hands of his family. There is a strong argument that this case is not typical of social work practice or experience in the West. However, in the short term, arguably this may have impacted negatively on the profile of Western social work internationally.

Methods and setting

In this article the work in Tajikistan is subject to an ethnographic approach (similar to Holtzhausen, 2010). The understanding and representation of experience are central to ethnography, both empirically and theoretically (Willis, 2000). It is based on participant observation with the overall aim of contributing to a better understanding of the significance of indigenous cultural beliefs and values. This project involved the beliefs and values of Tajik Muslim students/colleagues, 'old school Russian' government ministers and Western social work values and beliefs of the consultant.

This article draws on aspects of insider and outsider status in a research setting and what Al-Makhamreh and Lewando-Hundt (2008) and White (2001) call reflexivity. According to White, 'reflexivity becomes a process of looking *inward* and *outward*, to the social and cultural artefacts and forms of thought which saturate our practices' (White, 2001: 102). The reflections are grounded in the author's outsider experiences at a university in Tajikistan.

She was caught between developing a predominantly Western value-based social work curriculum and the indigenous knowledge, values, traditions and practices of the students/colleagues and government ministers.

The project in Tajikistan

The project was implemented by two partners (a small charity and university from the UK), the donor being a large international non-governmental organization (INGO). The main aim of the project was to develop a four-year BA Social Work degree programme at a state university in the capital Dushanbe, as social work is in its infancy in Tajikistan. A secondary aim was to develop the skills of colleagues to teach social work. The Ministry of Labor and Social Protection was behind these proposals and the university was in favour of these developments. There were tensions throughout, however, between the ministry and the university as to who should set the agenda. This power imbalance has previously been viewed as a serious challenge to open communication and a possible destructive potential (Cottrell and Parpart, 2006).

The Terms of Reference for the project and the role specifically for the university were in capacity building. Capacity building often refers to what social work educators and practitioners do to improve people's qualifications and abilities to take control of their own destiny and welfare (Dominelli, 2008a).

The historical and political context of Tajikistan

Tajikistan forms part of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). This was formed in 1991, comprising Russia and a number of other republics that were formerly part of the Soviet Union. Unfortunately, Tajikistan plunged into civil war soon after it became independent. This war between the Moscow-backed government and the Islamist-led opposition ended in 1997, with a United Nations brokered peace agreement. It is estimated that 50,000 people were killed and over a tenth of the population fled. Central Asia is unique in its influences and the impact of post-colonial post-soviet culture on Islam must not be underestimated (Hanks, 2007).

The country's economy has been slow to recover and poverty is widespread. Indeed almost half of Tajikistan's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is earned by migrants working abroad (BBC News Tajikistan country profile, 2010). Furthermore, in 2007, Tajikistan was ranked 127 out of 182 countries according to the human development index (which gazes beyond GDP to a broader definition of well-being) (Human Development Report, 2010).

In the West, social work concerns itself with micro-level 'remedial' practices which focus on individuals, families and individual freedom (Williams and Simpson, 2009). Historically in the Soviet Union, the Communist Party ideology refused to acknowledge the existence of social problems and therefore these were dealt with by concerned individuals in the community (Dominelli, 2008a). In CIS countries, macro-level models converge on organizations, policies and central state cohesion (Mendes, 2007; Olson, 2007). Moreover, Muslim societies like Tajikistan tend to emphasize the collective over the individual (Al-Krenawi and Graham, 2000). Therefore ideologically there is a need to consider the relationship of social work to the state.

The shift to a reliance on INGOs has changed the face of social work in the CIS (Jordan, 2008). It can be argued that progress in Tajikistan may have come at a price with INGOs, charities and social work educators from the West unwittingly colluding with the loss of local community work (Stubbs, 2007). Unfortunately it has also been noted that INGOs are not always neutral politically or ethically, and they may practise from their own set of values (Koggel, 2007).

In Tajikistan it can be argued that there is a need to build up the social work profession slowly, using social activists on the ground. Historically in the West, social work grew from the 'bottom up' with concerned individuals responding to local problems. Therefore in the Tajik context, social work 'which fails to engage with local political, communal and cultural realities is ineffective, and at worst, it can promote active conflict and place local social work practitioners at risk' (Murphy, 2011: 153). However, there are tensions between the West's 'claim to universal values and the more recent international moves toward models of practice which embody indigenization of theory and methods and the broader incorporation of local culture' (Murphy, 2011: 153). This indeed may have caused some of the challenges whilst working in Tajikistan.

Working as an outsider in Tajikistan

This involved meeting powerful key partners from the ministry and the university, developing curriculum and advertisement materials and training Social Work Resource Centre (SWRC) practitioners and university lecturers (who had no background in or knowledge of social work). The five SWRC staff (employed by the ministry) were the only formally trained (educated in Scandinavia) social workers in the country. It was envisaged that they would be the key personnel teaching the new social work degree. However, they had not worked in a university before and lacked formal teaching experience.

Lectures to first-year students (who were to transfer to the social work degree course once it was established) were also ongoing, and it was requested that these sessions be used to highlight ways in which social work is taught in the West and allow the exchange of ideas for the content of the course.

Course curriculum

The course curriculum was designed with government ministers and based on a Western model (at their request) with little input from the university. Moreover, the content of individual modules appeared to be illogically copy pasted from Russian and Western sources, with no analysis of the national Tajik perspective. Unfortunately this caused some tension between the ministry and the university as it would be the university who had to deliver this curriculum. The consultant tried to have the university present in these initial discussions and encourage a Tajik influence, but this was discouraged. Moreover, she explained that she could only talk about social work from a UK perspective and was therefore dependent on them to apply the curriculum to the Tajik context.

Developing advertising materials

Staff were asked to critique the IFSW (2000) definition, to enable them to develop their own definition of social work to be used on advertisement materials. However, they found it difficult to challenge pre-existing cultural hegemony. For example, the consultant found the state-provided advertising images (of their president and army officers) difficult to reconcile with her view of social work, but it did not seem to occur to the staff group to challenge their use in this manner. Moreover, the consultant found it difficult to know how far to promote free and open discussion in the prevailing context of deference to hierarchical structures and an expectation that the word of those with more power carried more weight than the word of others.

Approaches to learning

Horwath and Shardlow (2001) considered fundamental factors underpinning adult learning from a Ukrainian context. Following on from this whilst in Tajikistan, Kolb's (1984) model of experiential learning was also utilized with students to identify their different approaches to learning. The students were asked to describe their caring experiences and experiences of education to date. Caring mostly involved attending to older relatives and it became evident that older people in Tajik culture were treated with respect.

Furthermore, the teaching they had experienced was formal, didactic and based on accepting the knowledge of the usually older 'expert' without questioning. It therefore may have been remiss of the consultant in that she primarily worked from an andragogic approach pioneered by Knowles (1980). This is not a didactic approach and one that the students, or indeed colleagues, may have felt less comfortable with.

Moreover, Horwath and Shardlow (2001) provide a framework for assessing ways in which educators can create a climate that enables them to work with learners collaboratively. This includes an element of 'High challenge/high support: I've got expertise, you've got expertise, let's work together and learn' (Horwath and Shardlow, 2001: 35). Following Horwath and Shardlow's (2001) recommendations, the author was aware of the need to question the perception regarding her own expertise.

The first part of the training was with the university lecturers (all male) and practitioners from the SWRC (who were predominantly female). The discussion included introductions, expectations, ground rules, planning, a critique of the international definition of social work (IFSW, 2000) and a briefing on social work education in the West. A discussion progressed around the expectations and communication skills inherent in adult learning and social work. It was evident from this discussion that in the Tajik context, ground rules were related to course content and did not include issues such as respect and confidentiality.

During a few sessions some overtly sexist and hierarchical attitudes were at play (for example, the men sat in order of their position of rank at the university, with women professors, then lecturers at the back). Al-Krenawi and Graham (2000) argue that an understanding of the implications of gender construction within Muslim society is needed. This was obviously a different cultural context for the author and a challenge to her value base, and made for uncomfortable feelings and a questioning of communication and values. Simpson and Littlechild (2009) argue that it is vital for social work consultants to avoid engaging in a form of 'cultural relativism' in which they have no knowledge of a particular culture and thus ignore potentially abusive behaviour as being aspects of culture, which they should not criticize. As previously argued theoretically, individualistic models do not usually apply in Central Asia and sexism is often inherent. Therefore how can social work develop in a culture which arguably does not have gender equality? Indeed, if social work is an international profession this contradicts the IFSW standards of equality for all.

The use of case studies as a Western teaching method was also elaborated on with the university colleagues. An interesting discussion was held regarding the status of children, older people and people with mental health

problems in Tajikistan. Future teaching needs to continue to be practice-based, focusing on the Tajik context and developing local case studies and practice issues. However, the only real way to establish this is by empowering the staff from the SWRC, as they are the only people to have knowledge of practice in Tajikistan. This was also an instance where the capacity building and current knowledge of the SWRC staff could have been included.

A later discussion with the students on the definitions of drugs, an historical and cultural context of drug use and an evaluation of the models of drug use in the West, was even more illuminating and open. The students discussed their experiences of problematic drugs and alcohol in Tajikistan, including the low prices, the money made which allegedly finances the large houses built on the outskirts of the city and the marginalization of drug users. Thus students and colleagues need to continue to be empowered to enable them to value their own knowledge, values and skills and explore Western ideas of social work within this context (Horwath and Shardlow, 2001). This was not an easy task however, given that the university staff appeared to prefer a more didactic approach to teaching.

The use of translators

It has been argued that working with interpreters introduces additional complexities to the teaching and learning processes (Horwath and Shardlow, 2001). Indeed there may be no comparable professional, or technical language to translate from English. Also working in three languages (Tajik, Russian and English) was exhausting for the interpreter, consultant and students/colleagues alike. All meetings, teaching sessions and materials were translated via an interpreter (as the author does not speak Tajik or Russian). This in itself caused problems, as in some debates it became evident that not everything was translated and nuances were often lost in translation. Moreover, there were problems between the predominantly male government ministers and university managers and the female interpreter and author. This was further compounded by age and cultural and religious differences. The author felt uncomfortable being in a minority due to her gender and religion and these issues were never fully resolved.

The experiences in Tajikistan confirm the conclusions of Horwath and Shardlow (2001) that those involved in social work education projects across nation-states should continually challenge the idea that people should listen to those from the West and base their work on a Western model. Furthermore, throughout this project there was the need for strategic cooperation, communication, understanding and ongoing development

between the government, the university and the SWRC practitioners. Like Chapman et al. (2005), the author found that in Tajikistan a lack of strategic development debates often degenerated into political contests between partners.

Recommendations for the future

There is an obvious tension when making recommendations to another nation on how their social work education should develop. However, the author recognizes the strengths of the project are the practice experiences and indigenous/authentic knowledge of the SWRC practitioners. Moreover, the transferring students are committed and have relevant life experiences (from their own country) to contribute to their social work education and shape education in the future.

It is recommended that continued support needs to be given to enhance the practical and theoretical skills of the university lecturers (maybe from another CIS country where social work is now established). Likewise, support needs to be offered to the SWRC practitioners. Both the SWRC practitioners and the staff at the university need to develop their own strengths (social work practice and education respectively), whilst recognizing that partnership working is likely to be the only way to establish social work in Tajikistan. The use of a SWOT analysis could be used for this cross-fertilization of ideas.

Competences needed when working in CIS countries

All CIS countries are unique and social work is established in some of these countries already. Ultimately, social work consultants in any country need to be open and reflexive (Hugman, 2010). It is exciting and interesting work; however, there is a need to work sensitively in another culture. This entails, as Pringle (1998: 4) states, 'gaining knowledge of their wider cultures, histories and their economic(s) . . . one is . . . engaged in emotional and international voyages of discovery . . .'.

The skills, knowledge and values adopted by social work consultants should obviously be linked to the culture they are working in. Moreover, questions need to be raised regarding the cultural appropriateness of the theories, practices and competences utilized (usually based on Western principles), and power relations need to be acknowledged. There is a need to foster an equal and open exchange of ideas. Finally, Graham (2002) argues that Western social workers need to value shared experiences and collective spiritual, family and community engagement.

Challenges faced whilst working in Tajikistan

'Social workers walk that tightrope between the marginialised individual and the social and political environment that may have contributed to their marginalisation' (Lawrence and Lyons, 2009: xii). In reality, working in Tajikistan was certainly like walking a tightrope and there were occasional falls. As a female working in a predominantly Muslim country, it was often difficult to reconcile the values of social work in the West with certain of the values exhibited by a few of the people in Tajikistan. Furthermore, it can be argued that the author can only realistically speak from her own pre-existing experiences, knowledge and power base (Dominelli, 1997). Therefore it can be questioned as to what she can actually offer a country like Tajikistan. Moreover, if there are problems accepting, listening to and working with practitioners from their own country, why should they listen to an outsider from the West?

Baroness Morgan has argued that there is a need for 'a strong voice for social work', making a comparison with the health and teaching professional bodies which promote knowledge about what these professions do (House of Commons, 2009: 26). It can be argued that the role of these two professions is widely known and understood. However, the general public's perception of social workers is one in which they often have the wrong impression of what we do in the West (Franklin and Parton, 2001). Therefore how can we presume to inform another nation as to the nature of our work, if it is difficult to get the message across in the West?

Furthermore, whilst the project was being developed in Tajikistan, the case of Baby P received media attention internationally, with arguably a great deal of sensationalized and overwhelmingly negative reporting. Students now live in the Facebook and digital generation (Montgomery, 2007; Parton, 2008) with increased availability and speed of information technology worldwide (Seitz, 2008). Therefore a simple Internet Google search would have elicited hundreds of derogatory comments about social work in the West. It could be argued that it would be the perception of potential students of social work in Tajikistan that the West has not got it right. Hence why should they follow our social work practice example, or base their education on Western ideas?

Social work values

When involved in international social work there is a need to recognize and analyse the perspectives and values of the other country. When working in a country like Tajikistan, a basic knowledge of the beliefs and values of Islam is needed (Al-Krenawi and Graham, 2000). Furthermore, there is a need to appreciate how social work focuses on these issues, as they may be grounded in forms of racism and neo-colonialism (Dominelli, 2008b).

Consideration should be given to the differences between 'universalism' (the position which states that core values apply widely) and 'relativism' (the position which holds that values are necessarily formed in relation to matters such as identity and context) in ethics (Hugman, 2005). Gray (1995) identifies social work's altruistic mission of helping others and responding to human needs and the pursuit of social justice as universal values. Moreover, concern for equality must extend worldwide and this should be reflected in the ethical obligations of social workers practicing worldwide (Healy, 2008). From the experiences in Tajikistan it can be argued that relativism is the more appropriate position, in that the values are formed by the identity and historical context of the country and are difficult to transgress.

Conclusions

The author contends that constructing a social work profession in a country needs to be organic akin to watering a plant, that is, from the roots up. Therefore, it is the SWRC practitioners and current students in Dushanbe who are the ones that should be listened to, as they are already 'on the ground'. Moreover, they will be the ones left to nurture social work in Tajikistan. Any form of social work is based on relationships, and if collaborative partnership working can be established, the project in Tajikistan will be a success.

Upon reflection, consultants from the West can only play a minor role in the development of social work education in a country like Tajikistan. Consultants working internationally (for short periods) can be viewed as 'working tourists', in that they cannot fully immerse themselves in a culture. Therefore they cannot fully appreciate the impact of that country's social problems. With the benefit of hindsight it can be seen that this project was heavily influenced (not always intentionally so) by Western ideas. This was often a fallback position as an open exchange of ideas/co-operation was often difficult. It is self-evident that Western social work knowledge and standards are not universal; indeed, how can we ever be culturally neutral or locate ourselves objectively? What is needed instead is authentic knowledge, based on local standards and primarily developed from within.

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