

Global double standards in Social Work – a Critical Review

Mel Gray, Newcastle (Australia) and Stephen A. Webb, Brighton (UK)

The two leading international social work organisations, the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) have recently pushed hard to develop the “*Global Standards for Social Work Education and Training*”.



These ‘global standards’ were compiled as the joint work of the two international social work organizations representing educators and practitioners respectively to serve as a guide for schools of social work around the world.

First presented at the international social work conference held in Montpellier in 2002, they were adopted by the social work community in Adelaide in 2004. The standards aim to establish homogenous guidelines for social work education internationally. In so doing, they seek to formalize and standardize what is taught across diverse cultural, racial, religious, and ethnic contexts. Undoubtedly this reflects optimism about the possibility of a ‘universal profession of social work’ which can span vast social, political, economic, geographical, and cultural divides. With one fell swoop the standards aim to be simultaneously universal or global with some emphasis on the local context. This global-local divide is then seemingly accommodated by the rhetorical claim that these ‘global standards’ are, in fact, ‘minimum standards’ and ‘flexible guidelines’ within the parameters they establish for international social work education programs. They set benchmarks for those involved in establishing new schools of social work, the contributors for which are mostly social work academics from affluent Western countries. For others, in developing or democratizing countries in Eastern Europe, Africa, Asia, and China, the expectation is that they must adopt ‘the core knowledge, processes, values and skills of the social work profession, as applied in context specific realities’.

The ‘global standards’ are a vain attempt to show that social work is responding to globalization. Here we can trace the inclination for social work to deepen its institutional power base with a growing awareness of its place within the information age and neoliberal moral order. It seems to us that social work has, at best, a minimal role to play within any new global order, should such an order exist. Debate about whether globalization is actually a real phenomenon is fiercely contested in the social and political sciences. This seems to have gone completely unnoticed by IASSW and IFSW.

It strikes us that a strong dose of realism is necessary for IASSW and IFSW. Against a prospect of social work movements being individually and structurally transformative on a global level, local cultural orders of reflexivity are the ground from which to properly understand the purpose and remit of social work’s practices. The notion of a global or transnational social work may be little more than a vanity. Local cultural orders of reflexivity—concentrating as they do on the raw stuff of interactions, plans, interventions and ethics—recognize the need for a shared culture of depth and an understanding that comes with being native to that culture as a language user and agent of the kinesics and proxemics of ‘being-here’. As Webb (2003) states, ‘By ignoring the communitarian encumbered self the global standards are insufficiently sensitive to the importance of language and culture and ignore the role social work plays in maintaining local cultural diversity’ (p. 194). Communitarians think attempting to globalize standards is wrong, and based on a mistaken and altogether unrealistic picture of ourselves. Who I am is defined by my class, ethnicity, religion, and membership in

a tradition and community. Hence, my good is what is good for the roles I inhabit. One detects a deep contradiction in the 'global standards' in this respect.

In denying the importance of the encumbered self, proponents of a 'global social work' fail to recognize its enriching communitarian value. With the encumbered self, relations to others in community are experienced as part of the very fabric of identity, rather than external possessions we abandon or discard according to the vagaries of universal duties, abstract contracts and 'global standards'. Only encumbered selves can participate in the construction and maintenance of a good society, and only they can escape the anomie and mutual estrangement that afflict our lives under a neoliberal dispensation (Sandel, 1984). Professional social work organizations seem to give little consideration to the important role that NGOs perform in the 'global context' where change activities are more than the mundane protection and regulation of aspects of clients' lives which are the remit of social work. Neither the nation-state nor irredentism provide a basis for a perfect match between culture and successful practice, but without either of these within whose borders each of us lives, the idea of social work as culturally sensitive to the lives of others with whom we are working becomes increasingly distant and difficult.

Against this backdrop, the failure of the 'global standards' to grapple with cultural diversity beyond hortatory claims to 'the promotion of respect for traditions, cultures, ideologies, beliefs and religions among different ethnic groups and societies' (Sewpaul & Jones, 2004, p. 493) is problematic, and potentially discriminatory. Little is said about the challenge of cultural relevance in social work education and practice and of the dangers of applying liberal Eurocentric ideals, such as individual freedom, human rights and political empowerment in non-western, non-democratic contexts like China or Islamic countries. The potential value conflicts and contradictions are rife within such a scenario. Some quarters in Islam, for example, are vehemently against organ donor transplants.

What does it mean to consider 'the impact of interacting cultural, economic, communication, social, political and psychological global features' (Sewpaul & Jones, 2004, p. 503) and how does one simultaneously claim cultural relevance in and cultural sensitivity to particular contexts? Is it possible to be tolerant of diversity to the point of radical relativism—in fashionable postmodern discourse—and be able to argue unashamedly for homogenizing, standardized, universal, global standards? It strikes us that here we have two incompatible global *double* standards. We want to straddle the divide of the global and local godheads, having a foot on both sides when cultural relevance—whether expressed as indigenization, localization or authentization—is a counter trend to universalization, globalization and internationalization, all of which smack of cultural imperialism. How can social work accommodate these two irreconcilable positions? On the one hand social work takes the moral high ground critiquing homogenizing forces, grand narratives and territorializing forces like globalization, neoliberalism, colonialism, and imperialism in the name of 'difference'. On the other hand it argues for cultural relevance and sensitivity in local sociocultural contexts most affected by these territorializing agendas. You can't have it both ways.

Social work is no different now than it was in the last century as it spread from the west to the rest with its colonizing civilizing mission replacing local, Indigenous healing practices and communitarian values with psychologizing individualistic treatment regimes. What is different now? 'Global standards' are more of the same. They are a 'levelling down' process that seeks to impose a benchmark standard to bring diverse nations across the world with varying levels of socioeconomic wealth and political stability to a global 'gold standard measure' which is essentially Western, Eurocentric, Anglo-American. This flight of fancy by the likes of IASSW and IFSW is thoroughly paradoxical.

Culturally relevant social work practice is by its very nature localized and 'indigenized'. Put another way, indigenization raises challenges for universalization and the challenges are compounded by international efforts which can quickly become imperialistic depending on what is proposed as 'universal' or 'global' in social work (Gray, 2005; Gray et al, forthcoming). Internationalizing processes tread on the toes of indigenization or the adaptation of western social work to local cultural contexts. In densely multicultural societies how does one include 'the traditions and cultures of different ethnic groups and societies in the core curricula in social work education programs' (Sewpaul & Jones, 2003, p. 10) modeled on international standards? Which cultures and societies' perspectives must we include and whose 'knowledge of how traditions, culture belief, religions and customs influence human functioning and development at all levels, including how these might constitute resources and/or obstacles to growth and development' (Sewpaul & Jones, 2004, p. 497). One might usefully ask how much cultural diverse practice Sewpaul and Jones have actually undertaken themselves at a coal face level to inform the construction of the gold standards? We know from practice experience the extreme difficulties faced when social workers from very different ethnic backgrounds try to mediate conflicting cultural values. The crucial question is who gets to decide whether a particular cultural practice is an obstacle or a resource, a moral virtue or not? Presumably, the various mouthpieces of IASSW and IFSW?

There is a naiveté at work here which is bizarre from a profession which claims to be politically and culturally sensitive. The 'global standards' process is itself a political process of formalization in which international social work seeks to dominate social workers in local, cultural contexts who are unable to build practice from the ground. This is largely because they are lacking in infrastructural systems and resources and trained personnel not because they lack 'standards'.

Social work should be aware of the dangers of over standardization and its tendency to 'inhibit the profession's ability to respond effectively to local needs ... [Thus they] impede the goals of [the] professional development' (Midgley, 1992, p. 24) of culturally relevant social work in diverse local contexts. There is a strange irony, vanity or blindness in the claim that one can at once appreciate 'and respect ... diversity in ... race, culture, religion, [and] ethnicity' (Sewpaul & Jones, 2003), in other words 'otherness', while simultaneously promoting sameness. This move by IASSW and IFSW is not about ethics, effectiveness or raising standards for social work, put plainly, it is about power.

References

- Gray, M. (2005). Dilemmas of international social work: Paradoxical processes in indigenisation, imperialism and universalism. *International Journal of Social Welfare*, 14(2), 230-237.
- Gray, M., Coates, J. & Yellow Bird, M. (forthcoming). *Indigenous social work around the world: Towards culturally relevant education and practice*. Aldershot, Hants: Ashgate.
- Midgley, J. (1992). *The Challenge of International Social Work*. In Hokenstad, M.C., Khinduka, S. & Midgley, J. (Eds). (1992). *Profiles in International Social Work*. Washington, DC: NASW Press.
- Sandel, M. (1984). The procedural republic and the unencumbered self. *Political Theory*, 12(1), 12-28.
- Sewpaul V. & Jones D. (2003). *International Guidelines for Social Work Education and Training: Fourth Review Document (August, 2002)*. International Association of Schools of Social Work and International Federation of Social Workers.
- Sewpaul, V. & Jones, D. (2004). Global standards for social work education and training. *Social Work Education*, 23(5), 493-514.
- Webb, S.A. (2003). Local orders and global chaos in social work. *European Journal of Social Work*, 6(2), 191-204.

Mel Gray is Professor of Social Work and Head of the School of Social Sciences at the University of Newcastle, NSW, Australia. Stephen Webb is Senior Lecturer in Social Work and Social Policy at the Centre for Social Work and Social Care, University of Sussex, Brighton, UK.

Tags: [professionalization](#), [quality](#), [social work](#)