
‘Always take the weather with you’¹ – Aotearoa New Zealand social work in a dynamic global society

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Introduction

Social work in Aotearoa New Zealand and in the international community has weathered many storms over the years. The forecast is for further challenges ahead as the world continues to grapple with economic uncertainties, changing political forces and environments. While in the South Pacific, indigenous and local models of practice are being recognised, developed and refined, social work is also shaped by the global context of our profession. This article reviews the history of the 2000 International Definition of Social Work (International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), 2000) and explores the increasing diversity of voices behind the proposed new definition to be presented for ratification at the Joint World Conference on Social Work, Education and Social Development in July 2014. The influence that social workers from our small South Pacific nation are having on the future of global social work is then explored from the perspectives of an emerging social work student and one who has been active in the profession for over three decades.

The global context of social work

Over half a century ago C. Wright Mills (1959) developed the concept of the sociological imagination to describe the way in which personal problems could be understood in the context of public issues. The linking of personal stories and social, historical, political and geographical forces through the sociological imagination is fundamental to the way in which social work defines its unique contribution to global society today (Fraser, 2011, p. 72).

Whilst the concept of the sociological imagination remains at the core of social work, the public face of the profession is continuously reshaped by the forces of global history, politics, and economics (Payne & Askeland, 2008). Characteristics of the profession such as its fundamental values and roles are contested and adapted over time (Blewett, Lewis & Tunstill, 2007). This continual need for adaptation can be perceived as an endlessly frustrating cycle of challenges, or, more positively, as providing opportunities to develop new perspectives and initiatives (Connolly & Harms, 2009).

Development of the 2000 International Definition of Social Work

It is within this ever-changing context that successive IFSW definitions of social work have evolved. The first formal definition was approved in 1957– significantly influenced

¹ Crowded House (1991, 5).

by the world views of the founding European member associations of IFSW, by the structural-functionalist sociological theories of Parsons and other writers of the time (Sciortino, 2010) and by the post-world war environment in which it was developed. It stated that:

Social Work is a systematic way of helping individuals and groups towards better adaptation to society. The social worker will work together with clients to develop their inner resources and he will mobilise, if necessary, outside facilities for assistance to bring about changes in the environment. Thus, social work tries to contribute towards greater harmony in society. As in other professions Social Work is based on specialised knowledge, certain principles and skills (Sewpaul & Truell, 2013, p. 2).

From this foundation the social work profession continued to reflect on its roles and purpose throughout the following years, responding to both the changing issues in the world around it and its own developing knowledge base. This process of ongoing adaptation gained urgency with increasing awareness of the need for the profession to clearly define itself so that it could more effectively respond to the rapid changes in global social and economic forces taking place in the world from the early 1980s (Dodds & Johannesen, 2006). Representatives from every region as well as recognised professional leaders from around the world coordinated global discussion and debate, which culminated in the adoption of the current definition by the IFSW and International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) in Canada in 2000:

The social work profession promotes social change, problem-solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance wellbeing. Utilising theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work (IFSW, 2012, para.1).

Sewpaul (Chair of IASSW) and Truell (Secretary-General of IFSW) (2012) consider that this has been the most influential version of the international definition to date. They argue that it is the first to have given an explicit commitment to social justice and human rights, and that it attempted to address oppressive aspects of the profession's history. In their assessment, the 2000 definition brought forward the political face of social work, motivating social workers to confront oppression in their local and national contexts. However, the IFSW and IASSW have always acknowledged that the definition is neither complete nor permanent but is rather a living document that needs to be regularly reviewed and updated. As the world and the profession have continued to change over the last decade, challenges to this definition have arisen.

Challenges from within the profession – from a modernist to post-colonial and post-modernist perspectives in social work

The origins of social work lie in the industrial and political revolutions of westernised countries in the 18th century which brought about fundamental shifts in social, economic and political organisation. These shifts led to a rapid rise in poverty and dislocation from society for many people (Lorenz, 2008). Social work grew out of a view of the world which considered social problems could be dealt with by the state through rational use of science and knowledge. The development of state organised and funded welfare provision was thus based on a 'modernist' perspective which argued that human behaviour could be universally known and understood.

Such knowledge seeks to provide explanation and understanding about human beings, their behaviour and their society. The idea is that universal knowledge will apply to everyone, in whatever culture or society they live ... and provides firm evidence for deciding how best to act when intervening with any human beings (Payne & Askeland, 2008, p. 1).

From modernism comes the argument for one universal definition that captures the essence of social work. The obvious risk inherent in this perspective is that one world view is given pre-eminence over others. While modernism is valued for the progress it has brought in understanding scientific and technological thinking, it has been criticised for leaving little room for social diversity as it has worked to find universal truths applying to all cultures and societies. The IFSW recognised this risk and attempted to ameliorate it in the process of developing the 2000 definition. In spite of their efforts to involve all members of the Federation and incorporate their perspectives, however, many social workers feel that their voices were not adequately reflected in the final document. Whilst Latin American social workers, for example, wanted to see a greater emphasis on social change, others from within the Asia Pacific region wanted more emphasis on social stability and harmony (Sewpaul & Truell, 2013). Criticism has thus centred on an argument that the definition agreed in 2000 still reflects a predominantly western, individualistic view of social work. Indigenous social workers and those holding a post-colonial perspective argue that whilst the definition is presented as representing the many faces of social work, it in fact continues the imposition of western values and theories on cultures with widely different world views and values. As a result, local and indigenous perspectives have been devalued and discounted (Gray & Fook, 2004). In our own region Akimoto, President of the Asia Pacific Association of Social Work Educators (APASWE) noted that:

Social work was born in Europe and grew up in North America. The present international definition was made through the rich experiences and great efforts of these regions, based on their own practices in their own context. If social work wants to be a global profession or entity, it must be founded on the experience and practice in the context of other parts of the world where social work was not born and did not develop. Thus without input from the Asia Pacific, social work could never become richer or global. Our earnest yet innocent dissemination of the present international definition does not necessarily contribute to the development of social work in the world. We must say something different otherwise social work won't improve. (Akimoto, 2011, p. 5, 6).

Challenges to the notion of a universal understanding of social work have thus grown along with the increasing prevalence of a post-modern perspective within the social work profession. Postmodernism has many different definitions, but at its core it questions the modernist belief of a universal framework (or one grand narrative) that is relevant and true for all people and societies. Instead it identifies multiple truths and perspectives and argues that these are fluid and constantly changing (Payne & Askeland, 2008). A strengthening post-modernist perspective sits behind the argument from many of the member associations of IFSW and IASSW that the voices of their nations are missing and should be both visible and respected in any future international definition of social work.

Challenges from global forces – the impact of globalisation and neoliberalism

Whilst challenges from within the profession have led to an increasing respect for difference, diversity and identity, events such as the recent global economic recession, the appearance of climate change refugees and consequences of new regional conflicts have demonstrated more than ever the interconnectedness of social problems and issues

across the globe (Jones & Truell, 2012). The predominantly economic forces and processes that deepen this global interconnectedness are collectively referred to as 'globalisation' (Deepak, 2012). Deepak describes these forces as a series of flows – the flow of capital and production through multinational and transnational corporations continuously seeking the cheapest labour and most beneficial business conditions for maximising profit, the flow of people following employment and business opportunities around the globe and the flow of cultural influences and information through these movements and through technologies such as the internet. Deepak describes neoliberalism as the economic philosophy associated with globalisation. This philosophy argues that private enterprise, market forces and individual self-interest are the most effective strategies for the creation of global wealth. Proponents of neoliberalism claim that success of big business through free trade, privatisation and deregulation will flow down to the poorest peoples of the world and lift them out of poverty. For social workers internationally the reality has been quite different. The adverse effects of globalisation and neoliberalism have impacted most significantly on the people the profession works alongside – the marginalised and vulnerable. The potential good that globalisation can bring is enormous in terms of connections and productive capacity but for the majority of people in the world this has not been realised (International Labour Organisation (ILO), n.d.). The economic benefits and social costs of globalisation have not been evenly distributed, with global unemployment and poverty levels reaching record highs over the last ten years. The World Commission on the Social Dimensions of Globalisation (2004) has identified that unskilled workers and indigenous peoples are particularly vulnerable. 'Investments in extractive industries, mega-hydroelectric dams, and plantations have led to massive dislocations, disruption of livelihoods, ecological degradation and violation of basic human rights' (ILO, n.d., p.20). Other negative impacts have included cutting of spending on social programmes and an increasing emphasis on individual responsibility and risk in social policy (Deepak, 2012, p 782).

O'Brien (2013) argues strongly that social work, with its increasing acceptance of post-modern perspectives, has neglected to recognise and respond to these structural forces:

Identity matters, individuality matters, difference matters but in focusing on these and related elements social work and social workers have forgotten, perhaps ignored or neglected, the crucial significance of the material disadvantage (poverty) which blights the lives of clients. In our (legitimate) focus on and interest in diversity and identity and the ways in which these factors shape lives and opportunities, the key importance of the adequacy and availability of income in shaping and determining what happens for clients has been lost and we have failed to be an active and effective voice for poverty (p. 57).

O'Brien's is not the only voice arguing that social work has not been effective in responding to the deep-seated and ongoing inequities in the current workings of the global economy (Gray & Fook, 2004). Garrett (2010) argues that this is in large part due to the impact neoliberalism and an associated managerialist ethos have had on the profession itself. Harlow (2003) describes the development of a managerial-technicist practice within social work which is a result of policies of privatisation and cuts to welfare services, purchaser/provider separation and limited contestable funding models that offer only short-term contracts for delivery of community social work services. Within a managerial framework successful intervention is measured in terms of rapid throughput of clients and closed cases. Social workers' pro-

professionalism is measured in terms of compliance with organisational requirements through achievement of performance indicators and is scrutinised and controlled more than ever before through 'proceduralisation of practice' (Rogowski, 2011, p.162). Garrett (2008) and O'Brien (2013) challenge social workers to think beyond the predominating frameworks of neoliberal social work to find alternatives that offer fresh perspectives and approaches for the future.

Responding to the challenges: A new Global Definition of Social Work and the Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development: Commitment to Action

Given all of the above, a number of social work educators and writers contend that, 'there are far more pressing concerns confronting the profession than generating global definitions and standards' (Gray & Fook, 2004, p.640). A multiplicity of voices from the profession around the globe argue, however, that whatever the obstacles, there is significant value in an internationally agreed definition of social work. Whilst agreeing that the 2000 version is lacking in many aspects, it is widely considered to have provided a platform for expressing collective social work views on social and economic policies (including those of globalisation and neoliberalism) and on issues of human rights and social justice. It has also provided support for the development of the profession in countries where there is no voice for the vulnerable and the oppressed. Many hope that a new global definition may provide a mandate for what Fergusson and Lavalette (2006) describe as a social work practice of resistance. Deepak (2012) argues persuasively for this in relation to the people we work with and alongside:

Currently, global neoliberal hegemonic norms emphasise individualism and consumerism as the best way to express one's individuality and create a better world. As a profession, our counter-hegemonic vision is of inclusion, community and valuing the contributions and health and well-being of marginalised populations. We envision a world where it is simply common sense that all children are fed and educated, resources are shared equitably, and all voices are heard and valued (p. 784).

For the profession itself, a practice of resistance means that it is crucial social work sets its own definitions and standards rather than allowing these to be determined by external bodies (Dominelli, 2007).

Given the challenges of indigenous, post-colonial and post-modernist perspectives, it is also vital that any new globally acceptable definition of social work truly reflects the diversity of voices, cultures and experiences of social workers from around the world and clearly articulates what the profession offers to people and to their communities (Hare, 2006). In 2008 Payne and Askeland proposed that, rather than considering social work as one profession with local variations, global social work should be conceived as many local social works that share common elements. Thus, rather than looking for a universal 'one size fits all' statement, it is argued that an internationally shared definition has the potential to capture common themes whilst recognising and upholding the importance of local and cultural contexts through multiple layers and dimensions (Gray & Fook, 2004). This position underlies the approach the IFSW and IASSW have since taken with the development of the proposed global definition of social work.

The Global Definition of Social Work for ratification in 2014

The new definition to be presented for ratification reflects a strengthened post-modernist perspective in terms of the process of the development, the integration of diverse themes and voices, and respect for local and regional differences, but it marries this with a critical social work theory and practice framework in response to the challenges of the global environment. It states:

Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing.

The above definition may be amplified at national and/or regional levels.
(International Federation of Social Work, 2014, para. 5)

Most significantly, the new definition acknowledges the value of social cohesion as well as change and development, and collective responsibility as well as individual human rights. This reflects a wide range of indigenous and cultural perspectives and addresses a major issue for European social work in terms of the social integration of immigrant and refugee communities.

Respect for diversity and difference is stated explicitly in the new definition. Social work's own theory base is acknowledged for the first time as is the knowledge of indigenous peoples. Equally significantly, the need for recognition of local and cultural contexts is captured in the final sentence: 'the ... definition may be amplified at national and/or regional levels'. This gives recognition to, and opportunity for expression of, the diverse and rich range of social work forms and priorities around the world.

The new definition does not stand alone, however. It needs to be understood in the context of the commentary that sits alongside it, which sets out the core mandates, principles, knowledge and practice base of the profession. Whilst too extensive to be detailed here in full, there are a number of points that are of particular interest to social workers in Aotearoa New Zealand.

The core mandate includes reference to social development as an important strategy for social work. Social development is described as being a holistic approach that intervenes at multiple levels and incorporates co-operation between sectors and professional groups. Social work in Aotearoa New Zealand has been moving in this direction for some time.

The section of the commentary on principles includes recognition of collective responsibility for the wellbeing of each other and for the environment. Ruwhiu (2009) and Mafilé'o (2009), amongst many other writers, have consistently emphasised the importance of this for Māori and for the many diverse peoples of the Pacific.

Perhaps one of the most exciting and radical developments for international social work lies in the section of the commentary on social work knowledge:

Social work is informed not only by specific practice environments and Western theories, but also by indigenous knowledges. Part of the legacy of colonialism is that Western theories and knowledges have been exclusively valorised, and indigenous knowledges have been devalued, discounted, and hegemonised by Western theories and knowledge. The proposed definition attempts to halt and reverse that process by acknowledging that Indigenous peoples in each region, country or area carry their own values, ways of knowing, ways of transmitting their knowledges, and have made invaluable contributions to science. Social work seeks to redress historic Western scientific colonialism and hegemony by listening to and learning from Indigenous peoples around the world. In this way social work knowledges will be co-created and informed by Indigenous peoples, and more appropriately practiced not only in local environments but also internationally (IFSW, 2014, para. 19)

This statement reflects and fully endorses the position the Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers (ANZASW) and the Tangata Whenua Social Workers Association have held and promoted over many years (ANZASW, n.d.; Tangata Whenua Social Workers Association, n.d.).

Alongside the development of the international definition, the IFSW, IASSW and ICSW (International Council of Social Work) have together published the Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development (2012). The purpose of the Agenda is to complement the new global definition, to strengthen social workers' confidence in their unique professional voice and to strengthen the profession's contribution to international policy and responses to the adverse effects of globalisation and other global structural forces – in other words, to put the newly developed philosophy into a plan of action.

With the Global Definition of Social Work to be ratified at the Joint World Conference on Social Work, Education and Social Development in July 2014, it is hoped that the profession is entering a new and exciting phase of truly international co-operation and collaboration.

In conclusion: Reflections on international social work from an emerging social worker in Aotearoa New Zealand

Social work is a unique social science profession, as it provides a voice between the vulnerable and the powerful; the privileged and the oppressed. Politically, culturally, socially and economically the modern world is webbed together. Healy (2001) argues that when looking forward into the 21st century it is difficult to imagine any social work practice that does not need to consider the multi-dimensional aspects of global interdependency. Globalisation is not new, but it continues to create new forms of exploitation and oppression. Social workers need to understand the dynamics of these and know how to respond to them in a way that upholds human rights and social justice (Ife, 2012).

The ability to adapt is crucial for social work theory and practice. The profession must embrace opportunities to adapt to global changes and more effectively challenge global structures and norms. An international perspective based on the new global definition should be promoted as a key and positive aspect of Aotearoa New Zealand social work.

Aotearoa New Zealand is where my heart is. However, I know that working at an international level is also where I need my career to take me. We live in a globalised world which for me means thinking bigger than our individualistically constructed lives. I am excited

at the prospect of one day working alongside other professionals who seek to understand, accept and work from preventative frameworks to address global and national social issues.

An experienced social work practitioner's reflections

It is possible to believe, when living in a small South Pacific island nation, that we can sit back a step from the social, economic and political storms that challenge many communities. However, the reality is that this country has constantly been shaped by external forces – from the arrival of the earliest travellers and explorers of the Pacific, to the earth-shaking impact of colonialism and British rule. Our grandparents and those who lived through the world wars and the Great Depression experienced in a very intimate way how global forces could shape life courses and impact on family and whānau experiences for generations. In more recent years the development of technologies that allow us to be in instant communication wherever we are, to witness human conflicts as they unfold, to travel from one side of the world to the other with relative ease, and to see at first hand the impact of the global recession on our own communities, has demonstrated with startling clarity just how interwoven and interconnected our world is.

Aotearoa New Zealand's social workers reflect these connections with an increasingly diverse workforce engaged with increasingly diverse communities. At the same time many New Zealand-born and educated social workers are to be found practising in communities around the world.

It goes without saying that it is much simpler for a social work educator, researcher or policy maker to be internationally focused than for social workers absorbed in the overwhelming needs of their client groups and demands of their agencies and funders (Trygged, 2010). However, social workers in Aotearoa New Zealand come face to face with the personal stories of those whose lives have been shaped by broader global contexts and structures every day and are themselves subject to policies and practices shaped by those same contexts and forces.

Jones and Truell (2012) put forward a challenge to all social workers to 'build the linkages between global trends and realities and local community responses' (p. 455). Ife (2001) argues that social work is in the perfect position to do this through extension of the profession's long-established tradition of linking personal problems with social and political issues.

Social workers from this country have had a significant impact on the conceptual framework and language of the new Global Definition of Social Work and the plan of action accompanying it in the form of the Global Agenda. Our challenge for the future is not only to build the links from global to local but to keep our voice strong on the international stage so that we can share our rich local practice experiences and frameworks with others, whilst learning in turn from them.

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