Migration of Professional Social Workers: Reflections on Challenges and Strategies for Education

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International migration of social workers has had, in recent years, a substantial influence on the political agenda of different countries in the world, and is fraught with challenges. In some countries, recruitment of internationally qualified social workers has even become an important strategy to meet staffing demands and to fill shortages in the social work profession. This paper aims to promote debate on the key role of social work educators in assisting social work students and practitioners to practise within both a national and an international context, by reflecting on specific practice examples from Canada, England and South Africa. We explore challenges, as well as possible strategies for adaptation in new contexts, such as the facilitation of additional training, globally comparable social work programmes, and the development of a stronger professional identity, based on integrated social work values. We conclude that by enabling a stronger professional identity through the development of professional virtues, social workers will be empowered to become more confident practitioners and internationally more adaptable.

Keywords: Higher Education; Staff Training and Development; Post Qualifying; Professional Migration; Professional Identity; International Practice; Virtue

Introduction

This paper aims to promote debate on the key role of social work educators in assisting social work students and practitioners to practise within both a national and an

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international context, by reflecting on specific practice examples from Canada, England and South Africa. These countries have been examined as they are greatly affected by professional migration of social workers in distinctive ways. Indeed, both South Africa and Canada every year loose social workers who professionally migrate to undertake social work abroad, particularly in England. England, Canada and South Africa are therefore interesting to examine since they have both pull or push factors that are stimulating the policy debate on how to deal effectively with professional migration. The migration of professional social workers has significant international relevance for social work education and the role and requirements of global social work practice, as postulated by authors such as Asquith *et al.* (2005), Lyons (2006), Simpson (2009), Beecher *et al.* (2010) and Rodgers (2010). Indeed, Rodgers (2010) highlights competencies for global practice which include ethics, culture, theory, interventions and perspectives.

The United Nations has estimated that the number of international migrants or persons living outside their country of birth worldwide has reached approximately 190 million (Lowell, 2007, p. 7). As a result immigration is an important phenomenon that affects virtually every country and region. Given these statistics, it is not surprising that interest in facilitating migration between countries has increased considerably and this matter is appearing more prominently on governments' agendas, albeit for differing reasons.

Although precise figures on the international migration of social workers are difficult to obtain, evidence is that social workers are migrating for professional and personal reasons. For example, in the past two years, the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) has received just under 200 applications from social workers from outside Canada for validation of their qualifications (CASW, 2009). This number excludes applications to work as a social worker in the provinces of Quebec and British Columbia, which undertake their own assessment of qualifying credentials. Similar trends exist in the UK where, during the past decade, 10,000 foreign trained social workers have been given letters of verification enabling them to work as social workers, although not all have taken up employment (Welbourne *et al.*, 2007). Similarly, Engelbrecht (2006) found in his study of South African social workers, that in terms of workers registered for the first time between 1 April 2003 and 31 March 2004 at the South African Council for Social Service Professions (SACSSP), the country had lost the equivalent of 66% of these social workers to the UK. Reasons for this include financial and opportunities for career development.

Although professional migration has not reached the level found in other disciplines such as nursing (Brush, 2008), evidence is that social workers are migrating significantly, that this is a global social reality and that the phenomenon is likely to continue. For instance, in the UK more than 25% of those working with children and 33% of those employed in other social work posts are over 50 years old, suggesting that in the next 10 years large numbers of new staff will be required (Welbourne *et al.*, 2007). As a consequence, workforce shortages experienced by some countries have already resulted, as in the case of the UK, in active international recruitment (Engelbrecht, 2006; Hill, 2007; Bowcott, 2009; Walsh *et al.*, 2010). Whilst the UK coalition government has

cut the number of skilled workers from outside the EU allowed to work in the UK, social work remains a 'shortage occupation' allowing additional visa applications to be made (Marsden, 2010). Similarly, the Department of Social Development (2006) in South Africa has declared social work a scarce skill and has called on social workers not to leave the country in search of better paying jobs abroad. With the passing of the country's new Children's Act, an estimated additional 16,000 social workers are needed in the country as a result of the additional statutory demands of the new Act.

International recruitment of social workers is also currently underway in countries such as New Zealand and the USA. This is not surprising, given the scope of globalisation, the development of new policies and multilateral agreements to facilitate the mobility of workers such as the Bologna Treaty in Europe (European Ministers of Education, 1999), and the France Quebec Mutual Agreement in Canada (OTSTCFQ and MTRFSVF, 2009). These present two examples of international treaties that facilitate the recognition of qualifications to allow workers to move from one designated country to another. Indeed, social work can be described as '... a transnational activity with practitioners pursuing the objectives of the profession in the contexts of many nations' (McDonald *et al.*, 2003, p. 191).

We begin this article with an overview of some of the challenges in international social work professional migration, substantiated by examples from Canada, England and South Africa. Variations in the contexts between different countries are highlighted, leading to an exploration of strategies in social work education that could empower students and social workers to adapt professionally to local and international contexts. The strategies expounded are: the facilitation of professional adaptation through the provision of additional training; the integration of globally comparable social work standards into national social work programmes; and the facilitation of a stronger professional identity among students through the development of social work values. We conclude with the suggestion that a stronger professional identity through the development of professional virtues will empower social workers to become more confident practitioners and internationally more adaptable.

Some Challenges in Social Work Migration

Literature on the topic of migration of social workers remains comparatively limited and mainly originates from Europe. Spolander *et al.* (2011), in reviewing the different educational standards and regulations in South Africa, Canada and England, identified some similarities among the social work programmes examined, but also alluded to some important differences. These differences may lead to confusion and create a sense of displacement among social workers who are educated in one setting and seek to practise in another. For example, the authors note that within Canada itself, assessment of foreign credentials differs between provinces. In contrast, in England and South Africa assessment of foreign credentials is the purview of the national professional regulator. While these varying processes may be meeting local demand, some professional bodies are calling for universal procedures to reconcile standards and practices transnationally (Beddoe and Duke, 2009). Indeed, some

countries have begun to sign bilateral agreements that allow for a social worker qualified in one country to practise in the other without having to undergo a formal process of equivalence testing, such as that achieved under the Bologna Treaty in the European Union (EU) (European Ministers of Education, 1999). As a result, a small number of researchers have begun to identify challenges in relation to recruitment and training of international social workers. For example, Firth (2004) emphasised that social work training does not necessarily enable workers to cross borders easily. In fact, some researchers questioned whether social work practice is culture-specific or whether a common understanding of the profession would transcend local requirements (Williams and Sewpaul, 2004; Yip, 2004). McDonald *et al.* (2003) furthermore argue that even in Anglophone countries sharing similar political and cultural traditions, practices remain linked to context, whilst other authors (Weytes, 2003) argue that some social work terminology has different meanings, resulting in confusion for some overseas trained workers. In this regard Rodgers (2010) suggested that certain key areas of competency in global social work practice be contained in a kaleidoscope model in which ethics, culture, theory, perspectives and interventions are key competencies; and Morrison (2010) proposed a social development paradigm to help social workers to think globally, in which it is suggested that the profession has increasingly been focused on individual and remedial work in the West and may thus be limiting its impact on and contribution to society. Lyons (2006, p. 366) further concludes that globalisation has influenced almost all societies and that in turn social work practices have been influenced not only by both the processes and effects of globalisation, but also by regional pressures.

Moreover, we also note other crucial challenges evolving in relation to the transfer of qualifications and skills acquired in different countries (Evans *et al.*, 2006; Manthorpe *et al.*, 2010). These challenges can be illustrated by the current situation in Canada where a significant number of immigrants face difficulties in getting their social work qualifications recognised; an indication that recognition of qualifications proves to be a major barrier to integration of the migrant workforce, especially for those clearly from ethnic minorities (Danso, 2009). Another difficulty lies in the fact that even where policies are introduced to facilitate the recognition of qualifications, many migrant social workers often still have difficulty in gaining access to the additional training required. A government report published in Canada highlighted that the recognition of qualifications, as well as some cultural barriers and discriminatory practices in the hiring process, impede integration of immigrant workers in Quebec (Bouchard and Taylor, 2008). This situation is echoed in England where, according to Hussein *et al.* (2009), immigrant workers not only experience great difficulty in having their qualifications recognised but also face a challenging adjustment to their new role, which is very often different from that in their country of origin. All of these challenges are substantiated by South African social workers migrating to the UK (Engelbrecht, 2006). Integration into the workplace, therefore, seems to be an equally important challenge for successful workforce migration.

Studies have recognised that migrant workers tend to be subjected to many forms of discrimination in the workplace, including racial discrimination during their job

search (Manthorpe *et al.*, 2010). In addition to the problem of discrimination at institutional levels, social work migrants may face discrimination in the workplace on a personal level. For example, they explain that some workers feel excluded from team decision-making processes. In a recent study conducted by Hussein *et al.* (2009), it was found that 50% of respondents reported being victims of discrimination, and 15% have witnessed such incidents. In contrast, 34% of them had never experienced or witnessed any such incident (Hussein *et al.*, 2009).

Another pivotal challenge in professional migration is that immigration of qualified professionals usually results in a positive outcome for the receiving country only; for example, by promoting economic growth through gaining professionals without the costs of training them and by aiding the renewal of the labour force (Tossou, 1998). Despite this, and specifically in relation to social work, there has been a paucity of systematic study into the impact of employing foreign qualified staff on service delivery, stability of the workforce and a recruitment skill mix. A recent study however, identified a small sample of social care organisational representatives that perceive migrant employees as being harder workers, more productive, more reliable, more focused and more likely to stay in a post longer than local workers (Manthorpe *et al.*, 2010, p. 393).

It is evidently important to consider the ethical implications in debates surrounding social work migration. At one level the chance to migrate offers opportunities to individuals to develop their careers, and broaden their skills and knowledge, but ethical concerns arise when large numbers of people migrate, especially with an impact on 'developing' countries. The number of overseas trained social workers working for instance in the UK, highlights the dependence of 'developed' countries on these workers. Pull factors for inward migration include the possibility of higher standards of living, financial and political stability, better working conditions, and greater professional and family opportunities (Engelbrecht, 2006). Given the high costs of training social workers, some employers in 'developed' countries rely on the importation of 'cheap' professionals. This poses significant ethical questions as this practice may result in population harm in 'developing' countries, due to their dwindling numbers of professionals. Indeed, Hussein *et al.* (2011, p. 6) report that four regions in the world provide 67% of the international social workers in England. These workers, in order of prevalence, come from Australia and New Zealand, North America, Southern Africa and South Central Asia, in particular India (Hussein *et al.*, 2011). Hence, whilst professional social work training focuses on personal ethics, the wider international implications for social workers and general policy, or the social and financial exploitation of countries from which wealthy countries draw additional professionals, are not receiving the required focus. Professional migration is therefore not without its challenges, politically, ethically and professionally.

We shall now consider three strategies that social work educators can employ with regards to the growing challenges faced by social workers who migrate for professional and/or personal reasons and who work within diverse population groups. We will begin by reviewing the case for additional training to be provided to immigrant social workers in a receiving country; followed by a look at how local programmes can

contribute to both preparing the workforce to be more mobile, at the same time as improving local practice through aligning the value base with that of international standards. Finally, we discuss how an enhanced professional identity and the development of virtues may empower social workers to develop a more competent practice at home as well as in a global context.

Facilitating Professional Adaptation Through the Provision of Additional Training

Adaptation to a new country and a new work context can lead to many difficulties, some of which can be alleviated through the provision of additional training for immigrants. Reitz (2007) suggests that in professions like social work, there is a particularly strong connection between education and effective performance. It is therefore not surprising that many countries require additional training for immigrant social workers. It is important to note that the law, values, social policy and what is considered best practice may vary among countries, such as in the care of older people and children. A study conducted by Simpson (2009) states that the most pressing need of the migrant social work candidate is in the areas of learning about the historical development of the profession in the new country and understanding of the legal, political and local social practices, as well as the mastery of language and culture in general. Indeed, the migrant social worker will still have to face the challenge of gaining knowledge and understanding of local policies and laws, and is likely to require additional training, or at least a highly structured employment induction process (Sims and Hanks, 2009; Hussein *et al.*, 2009).

Working in another language may specifically trigger many difficulties in social work practice, which in itself may require additional language training (Harris and Lavan, 1992). In fact, social workers will need to acquire at least sufficient mastery of the language to communicate on a day-to-day basis, but also to be able to capture the subtleties, emotional content and even the humour in their interactions with service users and colleagues. As Kornbeck (2001) noted, language skills (both native and foreign) are invaluable to social workers. Unfortunately, while a first set of language skills, such as written and oral communication, can be checked at application level or gained through adequate second language training, a second set of skills, such as communicating through an appropriate cultural context, normally takes longer, is more complex to develop and is culture-specific.

Many countries, such as England, Canada and South Africa have some regulations, varying from formal to optional, to ensure that migrant social workers meet the minimum training requirements set for their countries. Requirements for additional preparation, for instance, are therefore already common practice in Canada. Migrant social workers will have to undertake some form of additional training, which may also take the form of practice experience or formal knowledge. Whilst it appears that a requirement for additional training is not rare, the way in which this training is provided depends greatly on the country concerned and on the nature of the requirements to be met. In some provinces in Canada for example, training must be provided and assessed by schools of social work, whereas elsewhere schools are not

involved and the requirement is met through an agreement between an employer or professional regulator and the candidate, as by the GSCC in England (Simpson, 2009) and by the SACSSP in the case of South Africa (SACSSP, 2010).

Demands for additional training may pose some challenges for schools of social work, although there are many options that could be explored. For example, foreign candidates could be accommodated in existing courses offered by the various schools of social work, depending on the key competency that is to be met. For schools of social work that have to align their programmes to their respective regulators' requirements (for example, GSCC and the Department of Health in England; CASW in Canada; and the SACSSP in South Africa) we could infer that they may already be providing courses meeting the specific demands of their national regulator. Any changes to social work programmes should be balanced carefully in respect of the impact on the social work curriculum, such as having to revise course structures and content for components such as prerequisites, admission requirements or simply the number of students allowed into the module or course. Schools should also carefully explore the possible impact of the integration of foreign candidates on students already enrolled in regular programmes. Any increase in the number of students in existing groups could also have budgetary challenges. The faculty staff may already be stretched and national funding for such an enterprise may be less attractive or limiting for social work schools.

Challenges faced by recent immigrants especially relate to the existence and availability of training courses and the difficulties the candidates themselves may face in gaining access to such training courses. Indeed, foreign trained workers may experience pressures in terms of the resources, finances and time necessary to undergo additional training. Therefore, while additional training may appear to be a solution for some difficulties faced by the migrant social worker, access to training remains an important barrier to the migrant worker's integration. On this note, Browne and Braun (2008) suggest increasing the modalities through which training is offered, such as distance learning, simulation and work-based learning, all of which may be effective in helping migrant workers gain access to additional training. These alternative training modalities could also be of assistance in developing the migrant worker's second language skills as referred to earlier.

Integrating Globally Comparable Social Work Standards into National Social Work Programmes

The development of standardised programmes or programmes based on common international standards could have some benefits, such as promoting the mobility and diversity of the workforce, while ensuring that similar standards are achieved regardless of the region where the social worker has trained. Programmes, such as those in 'international social work', are already being developed at some universities (Cwikel *et al.*, 2010). However, some disadvantages may also arise, for instance in a discussion of the Bologna process, Johnson and Wolf in Walsh *et al.* (2010) question whether the policy on international social work will actually encourage the development of

transferable skills effectively. In this regard, Bergan (2009, p. 39) finds that an ongoing challenge is to develop a common understanding of qualifications, which may comprise five components (quality, level, workload, profile and learning outcome). As a result, the imposition of minimum standards may not offer any guarantee on how these standards will be interpreted from one country to another. In truth, a global standards document for training and education of social workers already exists (IASSW and IFSW, 2004). Although this document identifies universal values and proposes a consensus around key issues, the roles and goals of social work at an international level, as well as its application, varies greatly depending on the structural and cultural contexts. In this regard Beecher *et al.* (2010) explain that it is difficult to achieve a social work training programme based on universalist values due to: the influence of the local contexts on the definition of practice; disagreement among social workers; the lack of clear terminology with regard to international standards; difficulty in applying such principles, while at the same time allowing for local differences; and finally, the emphasis on a Western perspective in defining social work.

Hence the development of standards, be they global, national or European, provides a valuable framework to support individual recognition of the transnational mobility of workers and to recognise the impact of global events on local practices (Lyons, 2006). Such standards, however, do not necessarily guarantee the quality of education or practice. Global standards are not always relevant at the international level, which makes their application difficult because of the diversity of languages spoken in the world, differences in geographical and economic situations as well as cultural norms (Yip, 2004; Hugman, 2005).

Universal criteria for social work education would thus facilitate mobility of the workforce while ensuring that equivalent standards are being achieved regardless of the country of study; however, criteria and standards do not address the need for an inclusive and rigorous process for determining equivalence. While the Global Standards for the Education and the Training of the Social Work Profession (IASSW and IFSW, 2004) articulates the criteria, not all countries have integrated them into their curricula (Barretta-Herman, 2008). Indeed, Johnson and Wolf in Walsh *et al.* (2010), in reviewing a range of initiatives relating to qualifications to facilitate migration across Europe, question whether such a policy may encourage the development of transferable skills, or may simply restate minimum standards. Walsh *et al.* (2010) also note that minimum standards, even if implemented, may still be interpreted differently from one country to another and will therefore not guarantee that minimum standards are reached.

Finally, as social work educators are committed to analytical and progressive social work pedagogy and practice, it is difficult to endorse standards that are 'minimum', given the potential impact minimally prepared practitioners could have on the lives of service users, employers and the profession. Social work is a contested activity in that not all agree on definitions or the theoretical perspectives adopted in practice, thus social work education varies according to local practices, contexts and cultures. Expectations for global standards can therefore not be the sole means for ensuring competent practice across cultures and countries; however, strengthening a global

professional identity and preparation for practice could be useful additional means to support more internationally informed practice.

Facilitating a Stronger Professional Identity Among Students Through the Development of Social Work Virtues

It is hardly contestable that values are central to professional identity in social work (Asquith *et al.*, 2005) and that, once internalised, values are known to affect the way a person feels and acts (Furnham and Ward, 2001). On this basis it can be argued that social workers who internalise social work values should also possess a stronger sense of professional identity and practise in a way that is coherent with global professional values.

Fully integrated professional values, as a cross-over between the professional and personal life of a person, have been closely linked to the development of professional identity (Clark, 1997). Pullen-Sansfaçon (2011) noted in this regard that the development of a stronger professional identity, through internalising core social work values, would contribute to better social work practices overall. This argument may also be pertinent to social workers practising in a different geographical location from where they were trained.

In addition, Beauchamp (2001) propounds that professional practice involves both 'universal (external) morality' and 'particular (internal) morality', which are critical concepts in defining normative practice standards. The concept of 'universal morality' refers to norms universally agreed upon, such as those found in internationally accepted charters, for example in the case of social work, the Ethics in Social Work Statement of Principle (IFSW and IASSW, 2004). In 'particular (internal) morality', universal norms have undergone an adaptation to fit a local context (IFSW and IASSW, 2004). These norms draw on universal morality for justification but are not universal, as they take cultural, religious or institutional sources into consideration to adapt to local contexts (Beauchamp, 2001). In this sense, social work practice is based on a set of universal principles (or universal morality) but is also subject to morality derived from local contexts. Thus, to be prepared for practice, both locally and internationally, social workers must develop a strong professional identity based on the universal morality recognised in social work, while at the same time being able to adapt to the local context (which additional training may provide as discussed earlier).

The question for the social work educator is: how do we assist students to internalise universal morality standards, or globally accepted social work values? The work of MacIntyre (1999) can be useful in addressing this question. Indeed, he explains that the identification of appropriate social work virtues and their eventual development are usually specific to different communities of practice. Social work at the global level is an example of MacIntyre's community of practice, like nursing or architecture (Pullen-Sansfaçon, 2007). Understandably, a virtue which is praised by one community of practice (for example, social work) may or may not be considered as equally important within another one (for example, nursing or architecture). Social work, globally, can be discussed as a community of practice since it has recognised

standards of excellence (i.e. standards and values) and a narrative which is specific to the context where it has developed (Pullen-Sansfaçon, 2007). It is through these standards, but also by taking careful account of the specific histories, that appropriate virtues can be identified. In social work, for example, virtues include professional wisdom, care, respectfulness and courage (Banks and Gallagher, 2009). Virtues, being embedded traits of character appropriate to a specific community of practice, therefore constitute an effective way of integrating values because they are directly inspired by them. As such, developing virtues would not only strengthen the notion of professional identity, but could help social workers to gain the basic required qualities while at the same time being also able to adapt to specific differences of new local contexts. Indeed, as they have the potential to draw both from universal and specific moralities as defended by Beauchamp (2001), developing virtues can help social workers to have the basic required qualities while at the same time being able to adapt to specific differences of new local contexts.

Thus, these students and practitioners who have developed social work virtues may be better equipped to transpose social work activities from one context to another and to undertake professional social work activities in a different cultural, geographical or political context. Hence, the adherence to a strong social work value base to the point of it becoming ingrained in a personal character trait seems to remain central to achieving transferable professional practice regardless of the context. The additional benefit for social workers who develop strength of character, coherent with universal social work values, would result particularly in the development of critical, confident and robust professionals. These practitioners would furthermore be empowered, apart from meeting requirements of distinct national professional regulators, to identify their professional expertise and deficits, and engage in critical self-assessment and debate on what areas still require additional knowledge development in relation to new practice contexts.

Whilst national funders of social work education may question suggestions for funding social worker training that may promote migration, the benefits obtained from strengthening individual competence and resilience may make this worth considering from a national self-interest perspective. Moreover, as 'developed' countries continue to rely on the importation of workers from the 'developing' world, it may well be morally imperative for those developed countries to fund social work training in countries on which it relies so heavily to fill its professional vacancies. This funding, however, should not be undertaken explicitly or covertly to encourage migration as a cheaper alternative to training in the developed world.

Conclusion

In this article, we discuss some challenges posed by the professional migration of social workers, illustrated by reflections from Canada, England and South Africa. Based on these reflections, we asserted that professional migration of social workers is not an obscure phenomenon, peculiar to specific countries. Professional migration of social workers is rather a global social reality, which should be recognised and accommodated

in social work education. Subsequently, we argued that the key role of social work educators is not only to facilitate social work skills, knowledge and embedded values for social work students to become competent social workers. Social work educators should also empower students with a strong professional identity, comprising of a set of professional character traits such as critical thinking, empathy, social justice and integrity, which can be used by social workers to adapt to various indigenous realities and cultural differences when opportunities arise to discover new practice contexts. Indeed, certain professional knowledge and relationship skills would always be areas of expertise, which are essential for all social workers regardless of their place of practice. With strategies such as additional training and integration of globally comparable social work standards into national social work programmes, social workers can continue to adapt to new cultural, political and geographical practice contexts. This may result in the integration of particular practice moralities so that social workers' interventions would address the needs of the populations they work with. The key role of social work educators should thus be to develop a methodology to empower social work students and practitioners to understand and mediate with their world, specifically in policy contexts in which social workers practise, and especially when the policy context is altered due to a change in geographical context. To this end, social workers should be equipped with appropriate knowledge, skills and values as global professionals to adapt to whichever new practice context may arise. As a result, educators, social workers and students are duty bound to constantly review what is needed to be better equipped for practice as critical and competent practitioners within a global context. Ultimately, we suggest that the enabling of a stronger professional identity through the development of professional virtues will empower social workers to become more confident practitioners and internationally more adaptable.

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