International Social Work

Social work: A varied profession with some common concerns

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Social work is a complex and varied profession. Yet, within this global diversity, there are common concerns that require insights into humanity's struggles for social justice and human rights for marginalized groups and individuals, and careful thought in developing empowering, person-focused responses. This issue addresses a few of these.

Melanie Boursnell begins this reflection by raising questions about the methods social workers use to assess the capacity of parents with mental illness to care for children. She argues that current risk assessments are rigid and unhelpful in assessing parental capacity effectively. She provides interview data that show that risk-focused practice based on risk discourses intensifies parents' fears that they will lose their children if they do not conform to expectations. She suggests that engaging with parents to get their stories and views of what is going is more helpful and useful in supporting mentally ill parents to care for their children. It also enhances their human right to family life.

In the next contribution, Chaitali Das and Janet Carter Anand reflect upon the experiences of social work students working in international contexts. They highlight the importance of understanding power dynamics that can reproduce colonialism, racism and other forms of oppression utilizing critical reflective processes that unmask taken-for-granted assumptions and respond to the challenges of being in different geographical spaces that impact upon a student's positionality. The authors explore these issues through the experiences of students at Queen's University, Belfast. They conclude that learning about social work in India has helped shed light on their understandings of social work in their own divided country – Northern Ireland.

Lieve Bradt, Maria Bouverne-De Bie and Sven De Visshcher's article on restorative justice examines victim–offender mediation social work in Flanders. Using focus groups (one for each branch of the mediation service – juvenile and adult), they explore the views of the professionals working in both types of mediation schemes. They conclude that work with offenders has moved away from social work, and although welfare issues remain important, intervention trajectories have shifted from depicting young offenders as 'victims *of* society to being risks *to* society'. This produces a requirement that marginalized young people assume responsibility for their behaviour, make amends for it, and undo the damage caused. In contrast, adult mediation is about putting things right among those directly involved. The mediator's approach to a victim plays an important role in a victim's decision to participate in the scheme (or not). In this research, the mediators believe that the public prosecutor is more significant in shaping outcomes in juvenile mediation schemes than they, thus compounding marginalization amongst both practitioners and service users.

In the subsequent article, Kate M Wegmann reconsiders the impact of schooling in facilitating integration and cross-cultural interactions between immigrants and settled populations in Germany. She uses school achievement as a proxy for integration in a country that has traditionally seen (im)migrants as temporary guest workers rather than potential settlers claiming citizenship entitlements and the human rights this entails. Germany's approach has changed in the last few years,

moving away from excluding (im)migrants from the body politic to assimilating them. This was achieved through the National Integration Plan (NIP) that enforced coercive conditions of assimilation and required compliance amongst both established and recently arrived (im)migrants seeking to enjoy permanent residence or acquire citizenship status. Wegmann's article highlights the disadvantaged position of the children of (im)migrants at all stages of their school career and argues that school social workers can argue for deferred decision-making in the streaming of pupils to give both (im)migrant populations sufficient time to make informed choices about the school stream a particular child will follow in secondary schools – the Hauptschule, Realschule, or Gymnasium. Moreover, social workers can facilitate additional class provision including in the German language to overcome some of the structural barriers encountered by low-income (im)migrant families, thereby promoting integration.

Zeno CS Leung examines the use of knowledge sharing platforms in managing knowledge in social work. This involves the acquisition and transmission of knowledge. He argues that knowledge management can be either technical or people-oriented. Epistemologically, this covers evidence-based, logical approaches and reflective ones that examine 'know how' and the processes involved in making professional judgments. Leung examines how knowledge sharing is approached in a specific agency in Hong Kong to achieve a balance between the two approaches to promote the successful achievement of agency goals. The context for Leung's study included the retirement of older workers and recruitment of new employees from mainland China, raising the issue of knowledge transmission and acquisition as strategically important. The use of new information technologies, archiving of previous documents, and creation of new information artifacts were utilized in managing organizational knowledge. Face-to-face knowledge sharing was favoured for process purposes and understanding complexity in social work practice including supervision that went beyond simply exploring administrative requirements, although bureaucratic knowledge sharing was useful in collecting and transmitting information.

Hadi Ridha Ashkanani's contribution discusses the motivations of Kuwaiti social workers when collaborating across disciplinary and professional boundaries, categorizing them as extrinsically or intrinsically motivated. The former is managed through performance-related pay while the latter is more likely to lead to innovation and creativity. Extrinsic motivation may be problematic in that it might motivate people only to do what they can 'get by with' rather than the 'best they can'. A quantitative survey of 313 social workers, and qualitative interviews of 20 of these, drew upon a previously designed Arabic Achievement Motivation Scale to assess participants' views on specified items (similar to a Likert scale). The study found that the best predictors of motivation in collaborative endeavours were the support of immediate supervisors for such activities; having more rather than fewer children; and earning lower rather than higher levels of income. Given the paucity of research in this area in Kuwait, the author argues cogently that more research is required, especially that including service user outcomes.

Children's roles and places in war are contentious issues. There are many disputes about the legality and ethicality of the removal of children to 'rescue' them from conflict zones and presumed loss of family. Karen Smith Rotabi's article considers the 'living disappeared' children who were forcibly adopted in post-conflict El Salvador and Argentina alongside the removal of children during Vietnam's Babylift, Zoe's Ark child abductions in Chad, amongst other examples including Ethiopia and Haiti during natural disasters. The author considers the issue within a human rights continuum that is relevant, before, during and post-conflict situations. In Latin America, the '*desaparecidos*' or living disappeared, represent atrocities that have devastated families, communities and societies. They have also challenged distraught social workers who are involved in 'search and find' missions and adoption control initiatives post-conflict. In Argentina, children were abducted and forcibly removed to punish those engaging in the civil war and 'adopted' by those

who tortured dissenting individuals for the dictatorial regime. These included social workers defined as 'subversive' to the state for defending service users' human rights and access to social justice. Recently, adults like Maria Eugenia Sampallo successfully sued her 'adoptive' parents for kidnapping her. The author concludes that generalist social work skills are important in supporting children and families, and ensuring that conflict situations do not lead to the abuse of children, by their removal from their birth families, communities and cultures.

The issues of respect for human life and dignity, the struggle to ensure social justice, human rights and the freedom to live life as full members of society are common concerns for the profession. This issue helps us ponder their realization for all of the Earth's inhabitants.

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