Defining international social work: A social service agency perspective
Qingwen Xu
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Defining international social work
A social service agency perspective

Qingwen Xu

Social workers are increasingly confronting social problems stemming from myriad international forces ranging from political oppression, famine, and war to genocide and pandemics. Social work practice increasingly includes various related activities such as providing services for undocumented immigrant women who are victims of domestic violence, assisting in the settlement of unaccompanied refugee minors, working in developing countries on health projects, and building an international human rights coalition to advocate for the rights of children. This ‘internationalization’ of social work practice stems mainly from our increased global interdependence. As such, many social work practitioners and scholars have argued that the field of social work must ‘internationalize’ itself to address these new, complex social problems stemming from the international context. While interest in international social work has been growing, and a considerable amount of literature has been written on this topic, surprisingly, there is little agreement on what kinds of activities encompass this particular field of practice. This leads us to the question, what is the field of international social work?

Definitions of international social work in the literature

The term international social work was first used by George Warren in 1943 to describe social work practice in agencies that were
engaged in organized international efforts. Following the introduction of international social work, scholars defined it as a distinct field of practice and stressed the importance of specific skills and knowledge to enable social workers to work in international agencies such as the International Committee of the Red Cross. Over time, the term international social work also came to encompass domestic social work practice with immigrants and refugees (Sanders, 1984; Sanders and Pedersen, 1984). Since the 1990s, rather than emphasizing specific social work activities, many experts have defined international social work from a broad perspective as a professional practice that crosses national boundaries, and relies on contacts and exchanges between countries (e.g. Hokenstad et al., 1992).

Some academics though view international social work practice as going beyond the comparative approach (Lyons, 1999; Ife, 2001). Lyons (1999) suggests a distinctive field of international social work that includes cross-border practice and efforts to influence policy and practice at a supra-national level. Healy (2001) does not view international social work practice as a field, but uses the term international action and makes the case that due to increased global interdependence, both local social workers and domestic human service agencies have greater opportunities and even a responsibility to engage in international activities. The use of the term international action as the basis of the definition of international social work has led to four practice categories: ‘internationally related domestic practice and advocacy, professional exchange, international practice, and international policy development and advocacy’ (Healy, 2001: 7). Based on Healy’s definition, Dominelli and Bernard (2003) add another essential ingredient to the definition – the penetration of the local by the global and vice versa – but this added dimension and how it is carried out in practice require further exploration.

While social work educators and researchers have thoroughly discussed and defined international social work, and have documented the importance of internationalizing social work, they have focused very little on the international social work practice involved in real-world settings. Educators and researchers’ lack of on-going communication with social service agencies, combined with the fact that social work education programs predominantly serve local populations and produce professionals for local social service agencies, contributes to the necessity of defining international social work from a social service agency’s perspective.
The history-defined field of practice

International social work has had an interesting history, evolving through periods of growth and retrenchment. While the international aspect of social work is sometimes considered a recent phenomenon, the literature indicates that from the profession’s beginnings, social work practitioners and scholars have tried to internationalize practice. For instance, in the late 19th century, a group of American social workers traveled to England and brought back the concept of settlement houses. As a result, settlement houses were established in numerous American cities (Lyons, 1999; Healy, 2001). The primary tasks during the early development of the profession were to forge ties within the profession and learn from practitioners in other countries. Consequently, international organizations such as the International Association of Schools of Social Work and the International Federation of Social Workers were established in the early 20th century, shortly after the birth of the profession (Hokenstad et al., 1992; Ramanathan and Link, 1999; Lyons, 1999; Healy, 2001).

Following the Second World War, Western social workers significantly expanded their practices to a global scale while focusing on humanitarian aid and social development issues. With the goal of creating more economic and social opportunities in relief and development work, social workers from Western countries became involved in the UN Relief and Rehabilitation Administration’s (UNRRA) programs, which became a hub of international social work activities. The UNRRA’s programs contributed to the spread of international social work, as well as international social work education (Healy, 2001). During this post-Second World War period, social work education in Western countries became greatly involved in training and educating social workers for developing nations (Ramanathan and Link, 1999). Subsequent commentators (e.g. Midgley, 1990) have considered this period as an example of professional imperialism, whereby Western social work theories, practice methods, and skills flowed one way from the world’s richest nations to the poorer African, Asian, and South American nations.

Since the 1990s, after a two-decade decline of international social work, primarily because developing countries adopted new social work paradigms and practice methods that better reflected their particular circumstances and needs (Asamoah et al., 1997), international social work has taken a new path. Practitioners in both
developed and developing countries have adopted a more cautious approach to international social work practice, which has built upon mutual exchange of ideas, resources, and services; collaboration; and respect for differences (Midgley, 1997). The recent upsurge of international social work practices has been prompted primarily by the emerging and expanding global economy, the large waves of immigration in the 1990s, and new international relationships of interdependence, so that today, individual countries’ policy and practices are greatly influenced by international forces, and subject to other countries’ approaches (Midgley, 1997; Ramanathan and Link, 1999).

It is noteworthy that almost 80 years after social work first ‘went global’, international social work is still struggling to become a well-recognized and permanent field of social work. If history has helped define this unique field of practice, the current internationalization has completely changed the social work environment. International social work practice is moving toward addressing social problems stemming from international pressures and events, instead of simply extending traditional practices across national borders. Scholars have observed that today, due to economic globalization, social workers in both wealthy and poor countries alike are facing similar social concerns such as increased resource scarcity, poverty, hunger, and oppression, and have to help their local clients cope with the consequences, such as increased migration, underemployment and unemployment, and economic inequality (Johnson, 1996; Boyle et al., 1999; Caragata and Sanchez, 2002). While these similar concerns and issues often vary in scale in wealthy and poor countries, as Kendall (1995) noted, ‘the problems with which social workers deal transcend all national boundaries’ (1995: 223) also vary. Therefore, the inclusion of internationally related domestic practices in the field of international social work is logical.

Nevertheless, some authors express reservation as to whether social work practice can be truly international in nature (Harris, 1990; George, 1999; Drucker, 2003; Webb, 2003). They argue that social workers perform vastly different tasks in different countries, and that to apply the methods and values of social workers in one country to another country can be quite complicated and socially incongruent, given the different set of social arrangements and values in different regions of the world. Some scholars also indicate that international social work is based on understanding of the principles of human rights. However, discourses on human rights and adherence to a universal concept of human rights vary across
countries, thus making international social work practice conceptually and practically difficult. In addition, regardless of material wealth levels, social service agencies face limited financial resources in all countries. Scholars argue that to expect these local agencies to address global issues and their effects is unrealistic, given budget and staffing constraints.

Can international social work practices become a part of a local social service agency’s daily work? If so, how? And, how can the field of international social work contribute to domestic practices? This paper provides some answers to these questions from the perspective of social service agencies.

Method: needs assessment

In order to communicate with social service agencies about their perspective on international social work, I employed a cross-sectional research design and conducted a self-administered survey from February to March in 2004 to collect data. I chose this method for its economic feasibility, time efficiency, and ability to identify characteristics of a large agency practice environment.

A purposive sample was employed that included social service agencies that hosted social work interns between 2002 and 2004 from the School of Social Work at San Francisco State University in the United States. All social service agencies in this study are based in California’s San Francisco Bay Area, a region with a long tradition of multiculturalism and global economic and political influences. A list of 267 social service agencies was obtained. Considering that social work field instructors are key informants of social service agencies because they work directly with social work students and maintain current knowledge of the field and their agencies, the questionnaires were mailed directly to field instructors at the agencies. In order to improve the response rate, a self-addressed stamped envelope was included, and a follow-up letter was mailed out one month after the questionnaire had been sent. Of the 267 questionnaires sent out, 96 field instructors from different social service agencies completed the questionnaire, a response rate of 36.0 percent.

The researcher designed the instrument for this study. In order to increase the reliability of the instrument, a pilot test was conducted. In addition, the instrument underwent an abbreviated peer review to assess biases or vagueness and to ensure face validity. The instrument includes a broad definition of ‘international social work’ in
order to decrease respondents’ random error by ensuring a general understanding of what was being asked. The instrument’s definition of international social work is based on Healy’s (1995: 422) and Barker’s (1999: 250) definition: ‘international social work is about using social work methods or personnel internationally; about social work cooperation between countries; and/or about transfer between countries of methods or knowledge about social work.’ Therefore, international social work practice was measured by five specific types of practice: practice in other countries, partnership with agencies in other countries, collaboration on international issues, service of international clients who are based outside of the United States, and practice with immigrants and refugees in the United States. For agencies that might have multiple types of international practice, a variable of international social work practice (PRAC) was created by combining all the types of practice.

Based on an extensive review of the literature, I identified six factors to examine social service agencies’ perceptions of international social work: willingness of the agency to form international partnerships and/or practice in other nations, benefits to the agency from international social work practices and international social workers, necessity of incorporating international social work in the agency’s practices, usefulness of including international perspectives in social workers’ domestic practices, awareness of international impacts on social workers and local practices, and capacity of social workers to practice in diverse local communities as a benefit of international social work practices. The questionnaire asked respondents to rate their level of agreement with the above six factors on a Likert scale with the following options: ‘1 – strongly disagree’, ‘2 – disagree’, ‘3 – neutral’, ‘4 – agree’ and ‘5 – strongly agree’. A reliability analysis was conducted to test the internal consistency of the six items; the overall reliability coefficient, using Cronbach’s Alpha, was .91. An international social work perspective (ISWP) scale was then constructed by averaging the response to the six items.

**Agencies’ perceptions of international social work**

The 96 social service agencies that participated in this study varied greatly in terms of number of full-time employees, services and programs, client population, financial situation, as well as institutional goals and objectives. Thirty-three agencies (34.4%) have fewer than 20 full-time employees, and 17 agencies (17.7%) have 21 to 40 full-time employees, while 23 agencies (24.7%) employ more than
100 full-time staff members. The agencies provide a broad range of services including child protection, mental health care, family services, case management, and residential services, to name a few. The most common type of service provided is mental health; 26.0 percent of the agencies provide mental health counseling, followed by general casework services and health care (both 13.5%), and residential services and child protection (both 9.4%). While most agencies serve racially and ethnically diverse populations, the most heavily represented group is Caucasian, which comprises 31.4 percent of the overall client population, followed by African-American (25.3%), Hispanic (21.9%) and Asian (15.7%).

As expected, this study found that the social service agencies had not been actively or profoundly involved in international social work practices. Of the 96 responding agencies, 60 (62.5%) declared that the agency had been involved in some sort of international social work practice. More specifically, 17 agencies indicated that they served international clients, either individuals, groups or communities; only one agency had maintained an office in another country; six agencies had working relationships with international organizations or foreign social service agencies, and five had been working on international issues such as human rights concerns abroad. While 40 agencies (41.7%) provided services that could benefit immigrants and refugees, only 13 agencies (13.5%) concentrated on serving the immigrant and refugee population. Overall, the immigrant and refugee population comprised on average 28.1% (SD = 28.18) of all of the 96 responding agencies’ clients.

In terms of the social service agencies’ perceptions of international social work, the 96 social service agencies expressed a slight interest in expanding their practices into the international field, and have a positive view of doing so. The mean score of the international social work perspective (ISWP) for all agencies was 3.76 (SD = 0.74). While ‘1’ represents the highest level of disagreement and ‘5’ represents the highest level of agreement, this result indicates that the average agency’s response approximated a basic level of agreement with international social work practice in local settings.

Table 1 displays agencies’ level of agreement with the six detailed international social work perspectives. Among the six items, the majority of agencies (71.3%) held an unfavorable attitude towards international practice, i.e. a willingness to establish collaborations with foreign agencies or to practice in other countries. However, 63.8 percent of the respondents agreed that staff with international social work experience and training would benefit the agency, and
more than half (55.2%) reflected a positive attitude about the necessity of incorporating international social work in their agency’s daily practice. Most of the respondents agreed that an international perspective, and incorporating international social work knowledge and skills into their agency’s daily practices would be useful for understanding local policies, populations and communities (87.2%), increase the awareness of international impacts (84.9%), and improve social workers’ practice capacity in diverse communities (73.1%). Overall, data (see Table 1) suggest that few respondents disagreed with the value of international social work aspects; agencies placed greater emphasis on the perception that international social work practice and perspective could contribute to their agency’s daily practices, as well as their social workers’. But clearly, the respondents did not perceive an enormous urge

Table 1 Agency’s perception of international social work (%) (N = 96)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>U</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>SA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Willingness</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>56.3</td>
<td>19.8</td>
<td>8.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benefit</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>26.0</td>
<td>43.8</td>
<td>18.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Necessity</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>32.3</td>
<td>37.5</td>
<td>17.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Usefulness</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>52.1</td>
<td>73.1</td>
<td>33.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awareness</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>57.3</td>
<td>25.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capacity</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>20.8</td>
<td>49.0</td>
<td>21.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: SD = Strongly Disagree; D = Disagree, U = Unsure, A = Agree, SA = Strongly Agree.
either to practice international social work in their local settings or
to extend their agencies’ practices to other countries.

To further explore which background factors, among others,
could contribute to a positive perception of international social
work (ISWP), a multiple regression analysis was conducted. Back-
ground variables included the size of the immigrant and refugee
population on agency’s caseload, number of full-time employees,
and agency’s international social work practices (PRAC). In addition,
 hypothesizing that the prevailing migration pattern in the
United States might affect social service agencies’ perception of
international social work, the sizes of ethnic populations, i.e.
African, Asian, Caucasian, Hispanic, and Pacific Islander, were also
included in the regression analysis. As expected, PRAC was the only
significant factor, \( R = 0.147, R^2_{adj} = 0.061, F(8,79) = 1.707, p = 0.110 \) (see Table 2). In other words, the extent of the agency’s
international social work practice was the predictor of a positive
perception of international social work. A one-way ANOVA test
was then conducted to examine whether agencies with different ser-

Table 2 Coefficients for model variables (dependent variable: ISWP)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>B</th>
<th>( \beta )</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>( p )</th>
<th>Bivariate</th>
<th>Partial</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>( r )</td>
<td>( r )</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model</td>
<td>3.324</td>
<td>5.494</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRAC</td>
<td>0.246</td>
<td>0.338</td>
<td>3.210</td>
<td>0.002</td>
<td>0.343</td>
<td>0.340</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immigrants %</td>
<td>-0.001</td>
<td>-0.043</td>
<td>-0.208</td>
<td>0.836</td>
<td>-0.080</td>
<td>-0.023</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment size</td>
<td>-0.026</td>
<td>-0.069</td>
<td>-0.603</td>
<td>0.548</td>
<td>-0.033</td>
<td>-0.068</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African %</td>
<td>0.003</td>
<td>0.073</td>
<td>0.369</td>
<td>0.713</td>
<td>0.021</td>
<td>0.041</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian %</td>
<td>0.003</td>
<td>0.084</td>
<td>0.313</td>
<td>0.755</td>
<td>0.029</td>
<td>0.035</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic %</td>
<td>-0.001</td>
<td>-0.018</td>
<td>-0.084</td>
<td>0.934</td>
<td>-0.143</td>
<td>-0.009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian %</td>
<td>0.005</td>
<td>0.180</td>
<td>0.852</td>
<td>0.412</td>
<td>0.102</td>
<td>0.092</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pacific Islander %</td>
<td>0.007</td>
<td>0.028</td>
<td>0.253</td>
<td>0.801</td>
<td>0.026</td>
<td>0.028</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Discussion

The findings of this study closely align with the current literature on international social work. This study presents similar international circumstances and global events as the literature identified, that prompt social workers and their agencies to incorporate international social work practices. Social service agencies in this study located in the San Francisco Bay Area of California (USA), which is home to a variety of ethnic communities whose presence has been created largely by decades’ worth of international forces such as political repression in Central America, economic stagnation in Mexico, and wars, poverty and oppression in Southeast Asia. Similarly, this study’s findings show that the agencies appear to be well aware of how international forces impact local populations and social work practice in local settings; the majority of agencies in this study have been greatly involved in providing services to immigrant and refugee populations. In addition, the agencies in this study clearly perceive the benefits of international social work for their clients and local practices, and the majority of respondents agreed that knowledge and skills from international social work will increase their practice capacity and understanding of global and local policies. These findings largely mirror the propositions in much of the literature on international social work – that international component is an essential element of today’s social work practice.

This study’s results indicate that while the social service agencies surveyed would strongly support the inclusion of international social work practice in their local practices, they are somewhat reluctant to actually engage in this area of practice. The social service agencies that have a strong commitment to advance international social work practice are those which currently practice international social work. While local social service agencies’ involvement in international social work might vary in terms of the nature of the work, mission, goals, and funding resources, to name a few, results from this study suggest that multiple background variables do not significantly correlate with an agency’s perception of international social work.

Various reasons could explain the inconsistency between social service agencies’ perceptions of international social work and the reality of – the paucity of – international social work practice. One reason might stem from how local social service agencies define the field of international social work. While scholars and social work
educators argue for the inclusion of internationally related domestic practices as part of the field of international social work, social service agencies in this study did not reflect this understanding. Despite Ife’s (2001) suggestion, the local social service agencies in this study do not agree, or are not aware, that professional practice in a globalized society is a part of international social work. In this study, the size of an agency’s immigrant and refugee population is not a predictor of whether the agency embraces international social work practice; this result suggests that social service agencies do not link local issues and client problems to the larger global context. That is, agencies might confine their services to immigrants and refugees on local issues such as adjustment and resettlement by providing them with local resources, and fail to see the value of, for example, establishing an international network and providing pre-migration services in refugee camps. Therefore, a more comprehensive understanding and awareness of how international forces impact local issues is necessary if international social work is to be pursued as a valuable activity.

One might also speculate that budget constraints facing social service agencies could account for such limited interest in international social work practice and in establishing international linkages and networks (Harris, 1990; Drucker, 2003). It is unreasonable to expect social service agencies that are often severely underfunded – and individual social workers who are often underpaid – to take on the sizable task of broadening their scope of practice to the international or global arena. When a social worker is faced with the immediate needs of clients in the community in addition to the needs of people in other parts of the world, very likely the former will take precedent over the latter, even though both client groups may be coping with problems resulting from international events or forces. Since the adequacy of agency funding and resources is not assessed in this study, this possible explanation needs further examination.

Another possibility is that the perspectives of social service agencies in this study might reflect the current trend of American social work profession that focuses on psychodynamic models and evidence-based clinical interventions at the individual and family level, obscuring social workers’ view of larger global issues (Watt et al., 1995). This could be in part because the changes in larger global community are hard to measure without implementing a rigorous, long-term and costly research methodology. In addition, while nurturing an international perspective in local service agencies
is achievable and important for effective practice, international social work practice and perspectives rely on critical thinking about oppression, human rights and social justice issues, both at home and around the world (George, 1999; Hare, 2004). The dominant social work practice models in the United States leave inadequate space for a global view (McBeath and Webb, 1991; Howe, 1994).

While social service agencies currently appear to have limited interest in practicing international social work, this should not deter efforts to further develop international social work, both as a field of practice and in social work education programs. Results indicate that a substantial majority of social service agencies see some value in adding such international perspectives or practices to agency services. Theories, practices, and strategies of international social work, as well as understanding international and global phenomena that impact local communities, can be of substantial benefit to social workers and their daily interactions with clients, particularly in ethnically and culturally diverse areas. However, the gap between social service agencies’ rhetoric on international social work and their actual practices calls for social work educators’ attention. In order to design relevant curricula to meet the needs of current social service agencies’ domestic practices, the approach recommended by Asamoah et al. (1997) – infusing international content into the curricula – seems more appropriate than an intensive, integrated international social work program.

**Conclusion**

This agency-oriented study aimed to explore an important aspect of today’s international social work practice – the penetration of global influences into the local context. In this study, domestic social service agencies are increasingly working on international-related issues in their local settings, and domestic social work practices involve many international components. The field of international social work is becoming, or already is, an important component of social work practice in local settings, contributing to the understanding of a variety of social phenomena that social workers regularly confront. As the future of international social work will focus on the ever-growing multi-ethnic populations who inevitably live in societies influenced by global interdependence and increasing internationalization, social work scholars need to continue the discourse with social service agencies on issues of human rights, global justice.
and equality, and readdress social work practice models and approaches in a global era.

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References


Qingwen Xu is Assistant Professor, Graduate School of Social Work, Boston College, 140 Commonwealth Ave, Chestnut Hill, MA 02467, USA. [email: xuq@bc.edu]