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Redefining social work standards in the context of globalization
Lessons from India

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We are living in a period of globalization that is currently affecting many countries of the world. Globalization is not only a system of worldwide networks of macro-organizations engaged in commerce and trade but is also a local and household phenomenon that affects decisions related to family, education, employment, health practices, and other civic and political roles. The trend is characterized by a diminishing role and/or replacement of the public sector by the corporate sector, resulting in gross inequities, injustices and marginalization of various vulnerable groups. This poses immense challenges for social workers who are expected not only to respond to the deleterious effects of globalization on local communities but also to make a critical analysis of the dialectics of local and global factors. This raises the issue of how we make social work education relevant to the changing context. In this article we argue that standards of social work education need to be revised to consider the effects of globalization in developing countries. Specifically, we use examples of social issues influenced by globalization in India to illustrate the need for revising national and international standards.

Key words • community • globalization • self • social work • standards
Globalization and international social work

In the context of the increasing inability of nation states to contain human suffering as social problems become internationalized, there is a corresponding increase in the need to look beyond the local and consider how social problems might be solved on a global scale (Ahmadi, 2003). The field of international social work holds important potential in this context as a response to globalization (Caragata and Sanchez, 2002; Cox, 2000). Diverse approaches, ranging from culturally-sensitive practice with refugees, to cross-cultural exchanges of social work theory and practice, to work in international humanitarian organizations, have been labeled as international social work (Dominelli, 2005; Gray and Fook, 2004; Yip, 2005b). Given this variation, Midgley (2001) suggests the utility of adopting an encompassing definition that integrates the different approaches under the rubric of international social work.

Ife (2001: 6) has argued that globalization and its effects on the well-being of humanity are ‘familiar demons in new clothing’, that is, old oppressions are simply being played out in new ways through globalizing forces. In terms of the stance necessary for social work in this climate, Ferguson and Lavalette (2006) speak about a ‘social work of resistance’ with an emphasis on grassroots, social justice movements. Tesoriero and Rajaratnam (2001: 32) concur that social work must fulfill the role of offering ‘an alternative voice that challenges the supremacy of economic motives’. While feminist and Marxist perspectives may be useful, other authors have drawn attention to the relevance of theories of human rights as guiding frameworks for a liberating social work practice in the global era (Dominelli, 2005; Ife and Fiske, 2006; Skegg, 2005).

Authors envision social work as a profession that will integrate local concerns with a global awareness and meet the needs that emerge in that context (Ahmadi, 2003; Dominelli, 2005; Ferguson and Lavalette, 2006). Gray and Fook (2004) use the term ‘glocal’. Ife (2001) talks about a ‘global-local discourse’ to describe the potential focus of social work as a profession. Yip (2005a) proposes a ‘dynamic model’ of cross-cultural social work that involves ‘vigorous cultural exchanges’ between western and Asian countries.

Writers have argued that social work is currently failing in its potential as a global force for social change (Midgley, 2001), and point out that against its domestic focus (Johnson, 2004) social work students need to be adequately prepared to work in a globalized context (Gray and Fook, 2004; Healy, 2004; Sewpaul
and Jones, 2004; Tesoriero and Rajaratnam, 2001) with skills in policy, mediation, alliance-building and communication technology (Ahmadi, 2003; Caragata and Sanchez, 2002; Roff, 2004).

Just as it is important for practitioners to collaborate across the globe, it is similarly imperative for schools of social work to develop ongoing cooperative relationships (Noble, 2004; Tasse, 2006; Walsh et al., 2005). Several authors describe how the concept of globalization from below can encourage schools of social work to internationalize the curricula (Johnson, 1999, 2004; Tesoriero and Rajaratnam, 2001). We define international social work as the critical analysis of global economic and social forces, taking into consideration the differential impact upon nations and communities. International social work is a series of transnational organizing principles for the profession that focus on a form of resistance that is conscious of the dialectic between the local reality and global forces.

Conversely, the internationalization of social work curricula has begun in the Global Standards developed collaboratively by the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) (see Sewpaul and Jones, 2004), which will be discussed in greater detail below.

**Standards for the social work profession**

In recognition of the global changes affecting social work, in 2001 the IASSW and IFSW initiated the dialogue on Global Standards in the social work profession that included the following international definition of social work (Sewpaul and Jones, 2004: 494):

> The social work profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Utilizing theories of human behavior 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.

Some Asian social work professionals enlarged this definition to emphasize responsibility and collectivity, since they considered that these key elements were missing in the western paradigm of social work. Additionally, these social workers redefined social work profession as a profession that should: bring about social change; promote social stability; enhance harmony and well-being;
respect unique cultures and traditions of different ethnic groups and bring about social justice with responsibility and collective harmony (Sewpaul and Jones, 2005). These dimensions are significant in the current context of globalization that is sweeping across some of the Asian developing countries.

IASSW and IFSW also identified the core purposes of social work in the global context. Historically the purposes of social work interventions have been developmental, protective, preventive and/or therapeutic. In the global context IASSW and IFSW have refined the emerging purposes to include the following.

- Focus on marginalized, socially excluded, dispossessed, vulnerable and at-risk groups.
- Challenging inequalities and injustices.
- Mobilization of groups and communities to exercise and demand their rights.
- Promotion of policies and programs to protect the well-being and human rights of affected people.
- Advocacy on issues at local, national, regional and global levels.
- Engaging in social and political action to impact on social policies and economic development.
- Enhancing stable, harmonious and mutually respectful societies that do not violate people’s human rights (Sewpaul and Jones, 2004: 494–5).

This search for a global vision for international social work has had an impact in India too, where attempts have been made to develop national standards in social work education and practice.

The national standards of social work education and practice in India

In 2004–5 efforts were made in India to respond to changing social realities. Representatives from schools of social work met to formulate national standards and develop their mission and goals to address human rights violations that are victimizing marginalized communities through denial of access to resources and services. The efforts culminated in the development of the following goals.

- Promotion of human dignity, human rights, democratic participation of people, peaceful and collaborative social relationships.
- Challenges to the unequal relationships and marginalization of people due to sex, age, ethnicity, caste and creed.
- Work towards democratization of the socio-economic political systems by empowering people and building their capacity to bargain for basic rights and essential resources.

These efforts to develop global and national standards for the social work profession seem to be a direct outcome of globalization processes affecting both the developed and the developing world. The efforts also draw educators’ attention to the commonalities and specificities of the problems encountered in India that have been intensified by globalization.

**Emerging concerns in India**

India has traditionally been an agricultural economy and the shift to the international global economy has had a profound effect on the traditions and ethos that constitute the social fabric of the country. The demands of globalization have resulted in the need for individuals to respond, adjust and change to new identities. Individuals are now forced to construct identities in a self-conscious and reflexive manner (Giddens, 2004). The emerging new individualism has meant that people have had to actively constitute and construct individual identities (Goldewijk, 1999). Individual identity formation has been in tension with traditional cultures in India that value cooperation, interdependence, group identity and community loyalties (Hebbar, 2003).

The consequence of this readjustment of identity is that traditional forms of social organizing and cultures are disrupted and redefined without political debate, government decision-making or revolution. Rather than being free from confining social structures, people are expected to deal with a whole array of contradictions as well as personal global risks. This modern global social structure based on individualization puts the responsibility on individuals to create and produce their own biographies. The act of individualization is not based on free choice, but rather the compulsion created by global forces to adjust to the new social order and economy (Beck, 1994).
In the context of the discussion and search for an international social work practice paradigm, we present below key social issues affecting marginalized communities in India. Furthermore, each of the issues has a global context that both creates and exacerbates the problem. HIV/AIDS is a global disease that has been hidden in India due to the recent promotion of India as a new economic force of global capitalism. The suicides of farmers and deaths due to malnutrition are situated in a context of increasing socio-economic disparity influenced by global economic trends. The increase in communal violence can be partially attributed to the disruption of networks and culture that has occurred as a result of the introduction of the global concept of the self. These issues have in common the marginalization of some persons in the context of increasing impoverishment and disparity. While some people in India have benefited from the gains of economic growth due to global capitalism and liberal politics, other people have been greatly disadvantaged.

Community care and support for PLWHA

India contains 3 million people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA), the second largest population in the world. One of the millennium development goals of the United Nations (UN, 2005) is to slow down this growth and if possible to reverse it by implementing relevant measures of control.

The Indian government has introduced three policy initiatives to deal with HIV/AIDS. The initiatives include strengthening private-sector delivery; providing treatment for mothers who have the infection and through them reaching out to spouses; and providing free treatment to the poorest 40 percent of the patients in the country.

These initiatives do not take into consideration the social costs or effectiveness of treatments for people living with HIV/AIDS, nor their involvement in the control of transmission. The latter is a crucial area, which needs to be assessed adequately in order to influence the development of more people-friendly policies. Existing minimal policies without the inclusion of care and support components convey an underlying discriminatory message that HIV-positive people need to be removed from the community as early as possible since they are a drain on the country’s resources.
Suicides of farmers in Maharashtra

According to government statistics, between 2001 and 2006, 8900 farmers in different states of India (Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala and Maharashtra) have committed suicide (Suri, 2006). In particular, the total number of farmers’ suicides in Maharashtra increased from 1083 in 1995 to 4147 in 2004. The increase was mainly seen in the suicides of male farmers (288%) from 978 to 3799 (Mishra, 2006).

This agrarian distress is not a new phenomenon in India, but farmers committing suicide in such large numbers in such a short period is something new that requires attention. The reasons are multiple and include:

- the changing nature of agriculture from food crops to non-food cash crops;
- the failure of public credit institutions to meet farmers’ needs;
- growing disparities of wealth between rural and urban sectors;
- the inability of farmers to unite and bargain for their rights;
- a disjuncture between farmers’ interests and their political representatives;
- a lack of realistic prices for their produce in the market;
- the individualization of agricultural operations.

These have all led to a deterioration in farmers’ conditions that is likely to be exacerbated in the wake of integration of agricultural trade into the global system (Government of India, 2000; Suri, 2006).

Gender discrimination and deaths due to malnutrition

India faces other problems, such as: a wide gap in women’s literacy (52.3% of women compared with 76.6% of men); high numbers of women (83.6%) working in the agricultural sector; an increasing number of women-headed households (20% in 1971 compared with 35% in 1996); poor health related to anemia (48.5% of women); and significantly higher levels of malnutrition among women of a particular tribe (Kulkarni, 2002). All these factors have a bearing on the malnutrition of children. For instance, more than 10,000 children are believed to have died of malnutrition in the state of Maharashtra in 2004–6 (Times of India, 2006). Although the Indian government claims that only 29 percent of its population lives below the poverty line, malnutrition affects 46 per cent of the
child population in the country (Mehrotra, 2006). Government officials deny that malnutrition was the cause of these deaths, but it is also noticeable that most of the child deaths have occurred among poor tribal communities.

Women are the primary care-givers of children in India, but their capacity is highly influenced by their socio-economic status. Care-giving practices such as breast-feeding, health-seeking behavior, cognitive stimulation of children and feeding them nutritious food are very dependent on the women’s status, and caring capacity is also determined by women’s autonomy in decision-making and their value systems and beliefs (Mehrotra, 2006). Even though tribal women do exercise a certain level of autonomy compared with women in caste-based communities, their chronic poverty and lack of access to resources affect their nutritional status and that of their children. An undernourished or malnourished woman is likely to give birth to a malnourished child and the vicious cycle continues.

Communal conflicts and peace-building efforts

Although there are several historical and political reasons for communal tensions in India, the growing problems of underdevelopment, such as unemployment, the marginalization of rural and tribal masses from economic development processes, and the lack of basic amenities like water, food, sanitation and education contribute significantly to the existing communal conflicts. Lack of access to non-agricultural employment for rural youth, mass migration to urban areas to join unorganized labor and the low wages and appalling living conditions in urban areas are creating a socio-economic political vacuum in the country (Ghosh, 1999). A strange coincidence of the globalized new economic world order with the aggressive nationalist and religious propaganda distracts the attention of frustrated masses from structural exploitation by whipping up communal feelings and nationalism in the majority population. History is distorted by stigmatizing and segregating the others and creating a majority–minority divide.

Implications for social work standards and education

Social work standards
The international definitions and purposes of social work are essential for redefining and reframing curricular aspects of social
work education and setting new directions for social work practice. Professional training can no longer happen in isolation, insulated from international processes. Globalization has necessitated a search for global standards in education and practice. The global standards drafted by IASSW and IFSW have taken into account the impact of globalization. While the standards in the past have introduced aspects of human rights, social justice, responsibility and collectivity, there is a need for stating them in the current context of global capitalism. Lack of recognition and naming of the context depoliticizes and delinks the global from the local and spares global standards from a responsibility to respond to the local impacts of global forces. Exclusion of the context permits the perpetuation of the status quo at the global level and means that concepts such as social justice and human rights have very limited local scope. These concepts are useful, but they may need to be more strongly reinforced in the light of the Indian experience. The global effects on the economic health and social fabric of India and on collective concepts of culture (as well as the pressures on culture) should be directly expressed within the standards. More attention can be drawn to the destruction of cultures and communities through a direct statement about dealing with cultural imperialism in the standards.

Within this context, the standards also need to redefine the role and scope of social work practice so that it is responsive to the local context and can also transcend the local in order to accommodate the impact of globalization. Such changes could rejuvenate the progressive orientation of social work and re-establish its relevance today. Standards need to be understood in terms of the dialectics of local conditions (Sewpaul, 2006) in countries such as India. Furthermore the interplay between local concerns in developing countries and the global forces that affect them need to be directly addressed in the standards. The dialectic of global conceptualization and local conditions creates a complex reality for individuals and communities that needs to be addressed.

Although well-intentioned, the national standards in India do not sufficiently address the challenges posed by globalization and individualization. For example, the standard that states that practice needs to be culturally-sensitive obscures the fact that entire local cultures, minority religions and rural communities as a whole are at risk. Perhaps the standard would be more relevant if it discussed the importance of collective cultural struggles.
The global social work field could benefit from a more critical appraisal of the standards, with a greater emphasis on marginalized and dispossessed communities and countries. Malnutrition among mothers, the suicides of farmers, the spread of HIV/AIDS without preventative services and communal tensions are not naturally occurring phenomena; rather they are social work concerns situated in particular political and social contexts. These social work issues are better conceptualized as complex social realities that are influenced by an interlinking network of social phenomena. Some of the social relations are intentional in their effects, but some of the exacerbated conditions are the unintentional consequences of international networks of powerful forces. To continue to define social work as the adjustment of the person to the environment obscures the multi-layered, complex net of relations that social work must now deal with. Contemporary social work issues in India cannot be addressed without a shift to a more politically aware definition of the profession, guiding both national and international goals for social work. Standards that support equity and human rights as well as focusing on adjustment are necessary to address these issues in the global context.

Standards have yet to deal adequately with deeper philosophical questions, especially in the light of the wide difference in understanding of the self between the east and the west. The standards reflect a view that the burden of responsibility for social problems lies with the individual. This concept of the self is so powerful that farmers in India commit suicide as a form of individualism in a situation where global markets have replaced their social, economic and cultural networks. As the cultural markers of communal living are disrupted, individuals are left without support. In the social work literature there is a concept of social construction that situates the self as social. Authors from the UK, Canada and the USA have argued for a perspective that situates social work issues and practices in the social conditions that have constructed them (Arnd-Caddigan and Pozzuto, 2006; Moffatt et al., 2005; Parton, 2003; Saleeby, 2004). The logic of this thinking is the collapse of dichotomies such as self and context, person and environment. The logic of social constructivist thought is that a "saturated self" is constructed by the multiple layers of social influences, international, national, local and interpersonal (Giddens, 2004).

In addition, social work literature has specifically explored the self as social. Miehls and Moffatt (2000) argue that rather than a reified self that stands in separation from interpersonal relations, the self
can be best understood as a project that is being constituted through the presence of the other. This grappling with the social self – the saturated self and the self in relation – in western social work literature may come closer to eastern definitions of the self as defined in communal relations. Since these concepts of the self stand in contrast to the individuated reflexive competitive individual, they can be used to guide us in our understanding how an impoverished person in a developing context may take personal responsibility for a socially constructed phenomenon that causes them personal pain. The concept of the social self in conjunction with working from local conditions and communities may also help us to devise an emancipatory project outside the logic of global capitalist forces and to guide us through the social structures of oppression. If the international and national standards move their conceptions of the self in this direction we may be able to better explore in our curriculum how to bring in eastern concepts of the self alongside congruent western concepts.

How contemporary social issues in India inform standards is through reminding us that a concrete agenda is required to deal with global capitalism. This social work agenda can only be created through a multi-layered analysis of the individual, community, culture, nation and global consciousness. The analysis needs a form of social intelligence that can consider these factors at the same time as, rather than in isolation from, each other.

**Social work education**

While we continue to refine standards, it is important to think about social work education emerging from the current situation. A central question is how to deal with the move to the reflexive individuated self that is associated with the spread of global capital when the traditional cultural context is one of communal identity. The types of social issues facing India invite us as social workers to consider such deeper philosophical issues. Philosophical questions such as 'what does it mean to be human?' and 'what is the nature of the human being?' need to be explored further, in order to enrich the value base of the profession.

Furthermore, the current global context calls for a paradigm shift in the social work curriculum in India from its current emphasis on clinical or generalist practice, including the person-in-environment fit, to more critical theories. The curricular objectives in courses can create opportunities for a critical analysis of the context, its multi-layered impacts and practices that transcend the local. These
changes at the curricular level require an understanding of social work that integrates the personal with the broadest of social relations. The individuated reflexive person associated with global change comes with both promise and pain. The promise may entail opportunities for people in marginalized positions to free themselves from prejudicial structures in communal settings. Women, for example, might be enabled to better understand the processes of community that have so disadvantaged them. Similarly, minority groups within which HIV/AIDS has spread might be better able to understand how they too have been socially disadvantaged. This type of awareness, however, is not implicit in the demands on the individual in a global capital context. The awareness needs to be nurtured and supported through the social work curriculum.

At this point the pain of the reflexive individuated self far outweighs the promise. The pain of global capitalism is evident in the grim social realities existing in India today.

It can be argued that the pain experienced by all marginalized groups is intensified by the move to the individuated self as demanded by global forces. The current scenario causes despair for the individuated self by framing structural problems within a personal context and shifting the responsibility for problem-solving on to the individual. Specifically, women are left increasingly alone and responsible for care-giving in the context of structural factors that create poverty. The social realities of India might suggest a preoccupation with the local, but social work must respond to the changing context. Social work development calls for a form of international enrichment that is not simply the adoption of the western capitalist competitive culture but addresses both the communal and the personal as well as eastern concepts of the self defined in communal relations.

References


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