

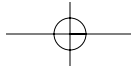


# Editors' Introduction: International Social Work

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## Setting the Scene for Social Work

**T**hese four volumes of *International Social Work* are partly occasioned by the significant increase of world-wide interest in social work. From India to China, from Latvia to Lithuania, social work is experiencing an international boom in pure research and research-for-practice. Once regarded as a rather marginal preoccupation of applied policy and practice interventions, the field of social work has now moved into the centre of social sciences research. As part of this shift, the study of social work has changed enormously over the last forty years or so, with both the values and language of social work evolving. Indeed, part of our motivation for producing these volumes is a growing awareness that important changes have taken place in social work in recent years. At a most obvious level, social work functions within constantly changing frameworks of policies and legislation and, as a profession, is required to respond to new frameworks, expanding knowledge and increasing societal expectations. The result of these changes has been the proliferation of perspectives and approaches in social work. While this emerging diversity of approaches to social work appears quite striking, there continues to be something of a 'mainstream' even though it is navigated by fewer than before. Internationally, social work has grown in stature and influence as well as making important contributions to the social sciences. Social work holds special research promise because it explicitly attempts to cut across diverse social, cultural, economic, and political dimensions. Within the contemporary situation, social work also addresses many of the pressing problems facing people across the globe. In some key respects, social work is more than a field of interventions or set of ideas, it is, in effect, a response to some of modernity's central predicaments, a possible solution for its remedies, and hence, by implication, an ethical stance in contemporary societies. Perhaps this is a consequence of the fact that the emergence of social work in many countries has

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been explicitly tied to forms of political activism and community engagement (Stepney & Popple, 2008). To a great extent, the pathways and procedures for developing social work follow not only from attention to a particular subject matter, modes of intervention or theoretical perspective but also to a set of moral commitments (Gray & Webb, 2009c).

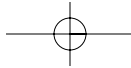
These volumes seek to identify the dimensions of social work and its varied effects, to discuss social work in relation to its intellectual history, its varying definitions and roles, its current affiliations and leanings and diverse objects of intervention, and its possible futures. The uniqueness and originality of contemporary social work is reflected in the sections into which we have grouped the texts in the four volumes. We identify the important dimensions by carefully gathering together some of the most highly cited, influential and seminal texts in the history of the social work literature. However, this is not a history of social work, since not only is social work itself still history in the making but its historiography is still in the formative stage (Webb, 2007a, 2007b). This collection organized into four volumes is a presentation of international researchers' significant and original contribution to social work. One of the aims of these four volumes is to provide an intellectual map of the development of the study of international social work within the social sciences. While we are aware that the story of social work cannot easily be told by a linear narrative, wherever possible we have tried to group the material with a certain chronology of development in mind. However, chronologically, it is important to recognize that there are several moments of overlap within and across the four volumes. This links to the fact that there are many occasions where developments in social work turn back on themselves to reconsider and sometimes reactivate what seemed buried and gone. The upshot of this is that some seminal readings could have been situated in more than one volume and, moreover, that some readings sit very uncomfortably in only one part. The seminal texts as we have collected them belong together, but they do not lean on one another. Having said this, the readings are organized thematically and, wherever possible, chronologically in the four volumes. Each volume marks a distinctive component in the history of modern social work:

- Volume I contains readings on Welfare Theory and Approaches.
- Volume II concentrates on Social Work Practice.
- Volume III draws together readings on Social Work Research
- Volume IV focuses on Future Challenges for Social Work.

In these volumes we have tried to draw a particular route through the development of social work within the interdisciplinary field of the social sciences. We have prefaced each volume with an introduction that situates particular contributions in relation to the overall volume and have provided a brief summary of each text. The section divisions in each volume provide

an intellectual map not only to the overlapping subject matter of social work but also to the significance of and the major themes in contemporary social work, these include: perspectives on the development of welfare; welfarism, governance and the State; welfare professionals and street level bureaucrats; gender, care and the subject of welfare; welfare and social development; practice perspectives; knowledge for practice; the theory and practice relationship; practice assessment; practising empowerment; mapping the social work research agenda; qualitative social work research; researching reflective practice; evidence-based social work; critical perspectives in social work; the future(s) of social work; social work, modernity and postmodernity; new policies and technologies for practice; service-users and participation; and international social work. While this marks out the distinctiveness of social work, the field can only be partially identified by such themes of emphasis since no list can properly accommodate every aspect of its significant contributions or constrain the categories social work may address in the future. Moreover, given the vastness of the actual subject matter in social work and the limitations on material we were able to include, it is difficult to claim any significant level of comprehensiveness. Therefore, our attempt to collect seminal texts in social work must not be confused with either presenting a definitive history of the profession or of selecting only those readings that are considered to be of outstanding merit. We have to confess that, in approaching and facing the task of selecting these seminal social work texts and putting them together, we often felt a special thrill in seeing a landscape emerge which probably has never been surveyed in such scope before. The sheer range and span of content in these volumes cannot avoid impressing the reader. Indeed, the uniqueness of these four volumes of *International Social Work* is not only that they serve as a major reference work for students but also that they provide the most comprehensive and authoritative survey of social work's seminal outputs to date. The highly cited texts that comprise these volumes attend to all major aspects of social work. Witnessing firsthand the quality and significance of these important volumes as they were collected gave a strong impression of the contribution social work has made to the modern intellectual landscape. However, we also felt uneasy with the responsibility of laying down benchmarks for future readers of the social work scene. We felt particularly uneasy about the thinkers and writings omitted from the story of social work, even more than about those that we included. We therefore wish to make it plain that our selections make no claim to finality.

Social work is a most varied activity. There is disagreement on some of its most basic concerns: on what kind of social work is possible, on what should be its core subject matter, on what sort of interventions are feasible and desirable, the significance of its professional ethics and value base, and on what perspectives and policies it should endorse. In the volumes that follow, a representative overview of articulations around these issues can be



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found. We have selected scholars, topics and texts carefully in order to provide a systematic reference to both the leading traditions of thought in social work and to reflect the trends and changes that have occurred in recent times. For our purposes as editors, the aim has been to represent the diversity of viewpoints that exist in social work and to provide a context for some of their most prominent representatives to stage their ideas. These four volumes provide a systematic resource to the leading traditions and trends in social work. We do not take social work to belong to any one discipline, for issues about social life and the needs of people stretch across the social sciences. In bringing together these defining, highly cited and influential texts in the field, it is our hope that this first major reference in social work will be a valuable addition to researchers, students, practitioners, policy makers, government and non-government organizations, and specialists and non specialists in the broad fields of welfare, the social and human services, social pedagogy, community work and community development, and professional social work. We trust that the reader will find *International Social Work* a useful guide and reference work on the present state of social work as a phenomenon practised in diverse contexts around the world which, nevertheless, continues to draw the bulk of its knowledge from the two centres where it originated, namely, the UK and the USA. The international significance of the texts collected here is indicative of the maturity of the field and the way in which social work has increasingly taken a global position whereby research increasingly moves from a domestic sphere to an externally led one. Research agendas have become more and more integrated at an international level. In the sections that follow, we begin to address some of the substantive issues that are framed within these four volumes drawing together many of the common themes and underlying presuppositions that form social work. Before going on to provide an introduction to the first volume, we think it will be helpful to reader to map out some of the overarching considerations, debates and themes that are central to social work in the contemporary situation.

### **The Nature and Role of Social Work**

It has proved enormously difficult to achieve agreement about the nature and role of social work in modern societies. This has as much to do with the diverse nature of its concepts, methods and values as with its regional specificities and local determinations. It also has to do with the debates, disputes and sometimes irreconcilable tensions within the field of social work and beyond. Its contestable nature is most evident in these four volumes that attend to some of the key debates in social work. As both an established academic and professional discipline, it has had a mixed reception in academic, political and public circles. On the one hand, some regard it as playing a

distinctive role in promoting and securing the wellbeing of individuals, groups and communities. Here it is argued that, in enhancing wellbeing, social work has promoted social change along with positive problem-solving interventions in the lives of people (Perlman, 1957 vol. II). For advocates of this perspective, social work has become an institution of social wellbeing. On the other hand, social work has been characterized as having pernicious and deleterious effects on the lives of people and society at large. From this perspective, social work is regarded as a functionary of normative moral, ideological and political regimes, particularly in its relation to the State, and its laws and regulatory apparatus. In plain terms, it is an apparatus of social control in a malign advanced capitalist state and is symptomatic of the malaise of modernity. Debates that critically enquire into the basic structures, the core values, the fundamental functions, and the guiding concepts of action have raged hard and fast in the recent history of social work.

How are we to make sense of the nature and role of social work? If we take the texts collected in these volumes as a whole, they are indicative of certain patterns, themes and tendencies. From a systems perspective, we suggest that the nature and role of social work is best understood in terms of three related dimensions: *network*, *discourse* and *function*. Our proposal is that we take the idea of social work and evaluate it in terms of its manageable parts along these dimensions. This requires that we first treat it as a set of patterns that are constructed within the networks of social work, e.g., its organization, policy frameworks and relationships between people. In comprehending social work in terms of networks, we can identify how it functions in relation to other networks, institutions and social processes. Secondly, we should look for discourses in the plural, not a singular discourse or combination of two discourses as modes of ordering social work or, better still, as ordering attempts, e.g., business management, science and political economy. We should examine the way in which these discourses are performed, negotiated, reconciled or resisted, as well as the way in which they interact and change (Law, 1994). Thirdly, we should examine the specific functions that social work performs at the level of social relations, organizations and the wider society. In this sense, social work can be understood in terms of functionally coordinated systems that aim at system maintenance and integration or the reduction of complexity – for clients and practitioners. Understanding the role of social work in this way is useful in specifying the types of targets towards which a given system functions within the field. With regard to its functionality, it can be understood as an effect of certain roles, legislation, policy or procedures that produce a designated or latent consequence in a given social context. Such latent effects may be normative, transformative or ideological. With regard to normative aspects of social work's functional position, it achieves these effects through a highly specific form of ordering of the social world, e.g., good or bad enough parenting, eligible or ineligible for social resources and so on. Moreover,

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social work inevitably rests upon determinate normative, theoretical and empirical assumptions about how human society works. Such assumptions, in our opinion, remain implicit even in postmodern approaches to social work that claim to reject 'grand theory'.

Let us turn briefly to the transformative aspects of social work. In contrast to the normative function of social work, which happen more or less by chance, without any overarching vision of society, the transformative model of social work very much holds to a strong conception of the good life or an emancipatory view of society. In a very different way to that proposed in the UK by the General Social Care Council (GSCC, 2007) to describe the roles, tasks and value of social work by attempting to standardize definitions within a closed system, the transformative perspective does not shy away from the fact that social work is a contestable, political and dynamic field. Unlike the GSCC's anodyne attempt to frame social work activities through narrow psychosocial frameworks and lists of performative competencies, social work should celebrate the richness of its theoretical legacy, its pluralistic value base and the critical dimension it brings to modern societies with its emphasis on social justice, progressive social reform and egalitarian principles. Social work is not just about self-foundation based on roles, tasks and skills formation, but also about self-assertion (Gray & Webb, 2009a). Crucially, it is through this notion of self-assertion that social work can best be understood as an agent of change. This transformative aspect of social work, whether at the level of individual or community, should be a central focus in any attempt to define its role and nature at either national or international levels.

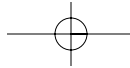
**The Logic of Social Work**

In surveying the history of social work ideas through these four volumes – its language, research and knowledge; its professional affiliations, roles, values and leanings; and its mandatory responsibilities and intervention tasks – we can ask whether it is possible to identify an essential rationality that structures the nature of social work? In other words, is there a meta-rationality at work in all aspects of social work that structures it to mesh in a particular way? We may ask what the underlying presuppositional logic of social work is. This, of course, leads directly to the question about whether the combination of conceptual and empirical dimensions in social work is something that distinguishes it from other activities. Through the seminal texts collected herein, we think it possible to discern an underlying logic to social work that is understandable as part of a dialectical process of formation. Undertaking a systematic appropriation of the material contained in these volumes helped us to find the level of integration on which the different texts unfold, from T.H. Marshall to James Midgley, in identifying the

essential logic of social work. So what is it that constitutes this underlying rationality to social work? Here is the claim. In formulating a two-level concept of social work that dialectically connects the regulatory logic with the security logic paradigms, we can explain the essential rationality of social work (Webb, 2006). Consequently, as we shall see, change in social work must be understood as one complex and inter-related process situated between the twin logics of regulation and security. From here we contend, in Weberian terms, that social work is best conceived in terms of an account of the rationalization of modernity. If our diagnosis is correct in isolating the twinned constellations of regulation and security as the defining elements of social work, this converges toward the point of a *theory of rationality*. The task of explication would be, then, to outline the conditions that structure the action-orienting logic of regulation and security in social work as confirming to the ordering rationality of modern societies. Broadly, these two logics mirror Max Weber's distinction between instrumental rationality and substantive rationality. The former is means-end driven, self-interested, calculating, predicting, and regulative, with the latter focusing on broader expressive values, affects and meanings. The latter is a moral-practical rationality whereby an action is oriented towards understanding (see Habermas, 1984) and the former a calculating rationality. Social work is mediated on the one hand by its instrumental rationality, as complicit in calculating and regulatory practice, and on the other hand, by a substantive rationality, in security, safety and identity, through dialogic and expressive face-to-face work (Webb, 2006).

### The Logic of Regulation

The rationality of regulation is pervasive in modern social work. As a mode of ordering, it is frequently achieved by legal rules, procedures, policy requirements, and regulatory mandates that are likely to be backed by behavioural sanctions and standards. Hood, Rothstein and Baldwin (2001) explain that successful regulatory regimes must possess three linked components to be effective: information gathering, standard setting and behaviour modification. These activities sit at the centre of many of social work's tasks. Indeed, regulation penetrates all aspects of social work whereby professional interventions are increasingly controlled, monitored and audited. In many respects, these are risk-management systems that focus on the requirement of regulatory objectives, records of compliance, the quality of performance management systems, and their capacity to comply. To regulate is to govern and control through a set of rule-bound actions or procedures, which adjust behaviour in respect of some time or quantity to some prescribed standards. This is often referred to as the normative function of social work. As a form of determinate judgement, the logic of regulation



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monitors specific targets, measures their performance and tries to adjust their behaviour. For regulation to work successfully, it requires benchmarks and rules to be standardized and repeatable in achieving the same results. Regulation is one important way in which risks are managed, with systems-based risk management as a form of self-regulation. With this trend we see the introduction of more external regulatory processes – a mixture of competitive, quality assurance, performance management, and bureaucratic processes. The predominant regulatory tendencies that underlie social work are mirrored in many of the most notable features of the last two decades, that is, the prominence given to regulation as a technique of governance and the rise of a 'new regulatory state', especially in Western democracies. With this shift, marketized public policies are given prominence with the regulatory state acting essentially as a controlling form of governance over people's lives.

## The Logic of Security

The second rationality that underlies social work is what we refer to as the logic of security. Drawing on the work of Francis Ewald (1991), we can recognize significant shifts in welfarism and social work, not only in terms of the maintenance of social order and national productivity but also as a form of insurance and protection that is based on the creation of security and safety for citizens. To be secure is to be free from fear, harm, apprehension or doubt. How safe is safe enough is a crucial question for social workers in their work with children and vulnerable adults. The focus is not on closed circuits of control and regulation, but on calculations of the possible and probable in terms of an individual or community's wellbeing. In this sense, the concrete experience of security in the daily lives of people is crucial. It is within these parameters that the significance of face-to-face relationships becomes most apparent. These involve relationship building and maintenance, shared meanings and empathy, and establishing trust, reciprocity and confidence between practitioner and client. Here we might talk about the 'we-relationship' between social worker and client that takes places in a shared spatio-temporal domain. Only in face-to-face encounters is the other person (the social worker or client) apprehended as uniquely individual within a particular situation. The essence of the face-to-face encounter is simultaneity (the recognition of getting or coming together) to build relationships for change or continuity. This is often referred to as intersubjectivity, understood as a fundamental category within the social worker-client dynamic, the foundation for relationship building at the core of direct work with clients. Therefore, the rationality of security can be stretched to include safety, vulnerability, coping strategies, social support, and care and protection. Expert mediating systems, such as social work, are crucially caught up



within the logic of security with 'we-relationships', trust and empathy as key markers of direct work (Webb, 2006). Social work acts as a kind of social guardian that is forward looking as well as providential in protecting against risk.

It is our contention that the essential rationality of modern social work is ambivalently configured through these twin logics of regulation and security, which work in and through each other. Briefly put, on the one hand, the interplay between the two rationalities shows how risk regulation has come to dominate social work while, on the other hand, an increased sensitivity to security, trust and intimacy also significantly shapes the contours of social work. This results in the development of expert forms of social protection with social work increasingly acting as a safety net in modern societies.

### Professional Social Work in the Making

Social work has strenuously sought to develop demarcation criteria that systematically discriminate it from other forms of professional knowledge. This boundary work is often done as a means of hardening professional identity and casting authoritative claims around its professional mandate and public legitimacy (Abbott, 1988 vol. I). Unlike medicine, social work has struggled to maintain tightly framed demarcation criteria precisely because it is an interdisciplinary program that is permeated by numerous disciplines, e.g., sociology, psychology, economics, social policy, criminology, applied philosophy, anthropology, and law. It is also an interprofessional practice that organizationally sits alongside social pedagogy, education, health care, medicine, and law. Furthermore, social work has a distinctive identity that is constantly reproduced in its communication and depends on what is considered meaningful, and what is not, to its field of practice. While filtering out noise, this also produces a continuous tension in professional boundaries as well as boundary maintenance in social work. Social work must fend off hostile attempts from other professions – counsellors, community nurses, NGO workers and life planning coaches – and disciplines to penetrate its boundaries. Linked to this is another important dimension of knowledge production that is highlighted in these volumes. Professional disciplines, such as social work, must produce knowledge that maintains the social order but seems independent of that end. However, because of its very nature as a practice intervention field and the controversies that sometimes ensue from this, it has found it difficult to maintain this stance. The 'child abuse scandals' that have plagued social work over the past fifty years are indicative of the ambiguous situation it has found itself in, one that often undermines its professional authority. Therefore, an ongoing area of contestation in social work concerns its 'knowledge base' and the way in which this relates directly to its nature and role: Is it an art or a science, a scientific dis-

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cipline or emancipatory profession or a combination of these? Does its knowledge empower or disempower? Such questions relate directly to how its knowledge base is constituted, formed over time and the way in which it is transferred to practice settings. The very idea of a 'knowledge base' implies a certain type of thinking in knowledge development in which knowledge is seen as *foundational*. In some quarters this relates strongly to a scientific view of the world, which rests on a positivistic epistemology, that is to say criteria for judging the soundness of knowledge relate to the validity, rigour and replicability with which it fits observable phenomena in the real world. The implication is that science corresponds with or mirrors reality and that this, in turn, produces 'scientific truths'. As these volumes clearly show, the evidence-based practice approach in social work knowledge building is highly contested by those who see social work as a reflexive experiential endeavour rather than a rational-technical, outcomes-oriented one. Postmodernists, especially, have questioned the privileging of science as a route to knowing and its influence becomes visible in titles bearing the label 'many ways of knowing' (Hartman, 1991 vol. II) and the 'limits of science' to a social work understanding of the world (Goldstein, 1988, 1999; Smith, 1987 vol. III). The epistemological differences between knowing and understanding, between empirical 'truth' and interpreted meaning are brought to the fore in this context.

**Contested Knowledge in Social Work**

Historically, the pursuit of a sound, scientifically constituted knowledge base – similar to that of the medical profession – was set in train as early as 1915, when Abraham Flexner – a medical doctor with little knowledge of the fledgling social work profession – addressed the First National Conference on Charities and Corrections (the equivalent of an international social work conference today) at the invitation of Mary Richmond, Director of the Charity Organization Society. Flexner (1915/2001 vol. II) proclaimed that social work was not a professional activity and outlined what it would take to become one. Besides a scientific knowledge base, it would require its own code of ethics, paid workers and educational training programs. Thus social work was set on a trajectory to professionalize, which drew heavily on a scientific understanding of the world (see Thyer, 2008 vol. III).

Dating the profession's inception to the late 19th century, many would argue that, over 100 years down the track, social work's knowledge base remains a 'disorderly heap of concepts' (Smith, 1987, p. 402 vol. III) or a smorgasbord of theories or ideologies and that social work is essentially a value-based rather than a scientifically driven activity. For those who believe that facts have precedence over values and ideology, i.e., positivists like Brian Sheldon (2001) and Bruce Thyer (2008) this is insufficient grounds

on which to base effective practice. Others refute social work's quest to found its knowledge base on science proclaiming its distinctiveness as an 'art' and humanities as a source of wisdom and interpretation about human behaviour and complex moral problems (England, in Smith, 1987 vol. III). Both Hugh England (1986) and Howard Goldstein (1992) argue convincingly that priority should be given to 'artistic over scientific criteria in judging social work' (Smith, 1987, p. 411). And Goldstein (1992) raises the pertinent question: If social work hasn't made progress as a science, might it be an art? Is its knowledge base theory, wisdom, analogue or art? (Goldstein, 1990 vol. II) One thing is certain, however, 'doing social work' is a complex and dynamic process that may not easily reduce to either-or type distinctions. In practice contexts, this involves continual permutations of actions some of which become standardized and embedded in the local agency context. This means that the institutionalization of social work across multiple communities of practice, over time, produces the structure of professional life. Information gathering for social work assessment is a good example of this complexity at work (Parker, 1998 vol. II). It is our view that social workers are active interpreters of information who occupy multiple contexts – interprofessional and intra-agency – of use and practice (see Gray & Webb, 2009b, p. 3-4). Thus information only becomes professional judgement when there are multiple interpretations. One practitioner's deliberations may be another's taken-for-grantedness or two practitioners may agree to attend to something, but it is the tension between contexts that actually creates professional judgement. What becomes decidable under these circumstances is that it is the relationships among people and things, or objects that create judgements and not just facts or evidence. In our view, 'doing social work' is a dynamic combination of active interpretation and rule following.

Controversially, Bruce Thyer (2008 vol. III) demeans social work's 100-year quest for its own *discipline-specific* knowledge base as futile since neither social problems nor practice interventions are configured in this way. Social workers are found in diverse disciplines and institutions in social work related and non-social work related fields and occupations. Collaborative, interdisciplinary research holds the best promise for empirically based social work practice. However, Givier (in Karger, 2001, p. 201 vol. III) notes that when 'we borrow knowledge . . . from other disciplines, we also borrow an epistemology without critical evaluation of its contribution . . . to our professional purpose' (see also Taylor, 1997 vol. III). It is for this reason that Cathy Aymer and Toyin Okitikpi (2000 vol. III) claim that 'social work knowledge has to be more explicit about its philosophical base' (p. 73) and students must be taught to interrogate what is meant by knowledge, how we come to know, how our thinking is shaped, how particular approaches to knowledge production imply underlying values about knowing, and the limits of our knowledge, and so on.

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One general solution put forward in social work is to deal with such matters by adopting a critically reflective approach to practice. For advocates of this approach, critical reflection enhances practitioners' ability to move beyond managerially imposed performance and procedural regimes to scrutinize their own practice in relation to personal and professional value commitments (Gould & Baldwin, 2004; White, Fook, & Gardner, 2006). The critically reflective perspective relates to a deliberative process of becoming critically aware of how and why our presuppositions have come to constrain the way in which we perceive, understand and feel about the social world. Reflective practice is essential to professional judgement because the social world is not, as it might seem at first sight, homogenous but incoherent, only partially clear, and on occasions contradictory. For social workers, reformulating pre-given assumptions through reflection permits a more inclusive, discriminating, permeable, and integrative perspective. Even this approach, however, has its discontents (Ixer, 1999 vol. III). Aymer and Okitikpi (2000) situate reflective practice in the critical tradition of critical theory while Jan Fook (2002) has developed a postmodern variant of the Deweyan approach subsequently developed by Chris Argyris and David Schön (1974). It approximates a theory in action or practical reasoning approach of praxis in critical theory. For Graham Ixer (1999), this commonly accepted approach in social work came in to fill 'the void left by the abandonment of positivist research . . . and of the logico-deductive method as an orientation to knowledge [development]' (p. 514). Ixer raises the question of whether reflective practice is a genuine, feasible and desirable activity for social workers or just another fashionable self-legitimizing concept. On the other hand, William Epstein (1990 vol. III), echoing Abbott's emphasis about the need for boundary work in professional knowledge production, claims that scientific credibility is more important, i.e., our ability to provide sound evidence that our primary statements about our services are true and a 'critical literature [able] to lend weight to those statements' (p. 10). This links to a clear theme in the social work literature relating to the effectiveness of what social workers do, with gathering momentum pushing social work towards evidence-based practice, i.e., towards a scientifically grounded knowledge base. This, after all, is what Flexner argued, in 1915, is what it needed to qualify as an 'accepted profession'. Volume III deals with issues involved in social work research such as what counts as valid research and, therefore, valid evidence and knowledge on which to base social work practice. This has been an enduring question in social work and is likely to remain a continuing challenge in the future. Future challenges for social work forms the subject of the final fourth volume of this major work, which is aimed at students, academics, researchers, policy makers, and practitioners alike with an interest in social welfare and social work in contemporary society.

## Crossing Cultural Divides: A Transnational Social Work?

The title of our four volumes is international social work but we may consider in this final section of the introduction whether a 'transnational social work' is a viable, sustainable and desirable conception. A major future challenge, reflected in certain key texts in these volumes, concerns the way in which social work deals with diversity and, more specifically, the crosscultural transportability of its international literature (see, e.g., Gray, 2005; Hugman, 1996; Midgley, 2001; Webb, 2003 vol. IV). There is some evidence that social workers in developing countries have difficulty understanding and applying western social work approaches in their day-to-day practice and that they are particularly critical of the one-way transmission of western social work practice knowledge to non-western countries and cultures (see Gray et al., 2008). Though we have not focused in these volumes on the practice of social work in any particular country, except insofar as particular practice and policy developments have had a marked impact on the international policy and practice arena, we are acutely aware of the cultural exigencies of particular contexts and of resistance to social work's standardizing predilections in many quarters (Gray & Webb, 2008). The fact is that, despite repeated claims to local relevance, social work, through its international organizations and standards setting bodies, does exert a territorializing influence as it seeks a common professional identity for itself, which spans national divides and which unites the profession as a recognizable endeavour with shared rationalities and values (Hare, 2004 vol. IV).

Besides crosscultural and ethnic-sensitive practice, approaches often advanced to deal with diversity include anti-oppressive practice (Dominelli, 1996; Lymbery, 2001 vol. IV), empowerment (Braye & Preston-Shoot, 1995 vol. II; Hartman, 1993 vol. I; Levy Simon, 1987; Ward & Mullender, 1991 vol. II), and service-user engagement (Beresford, 2001; Beresford & Croft, 2001 vol. IV) but they are not without their problems (see, e.g., Beresford & Evans, 1999 vol. III; Cruikshank, 1999 vol. I). However, the crosscultural transportability of social work is being seriously questioned as social work moves further into the Indian sub continent and Asia Pacific Region, especially China, where debates about the indigenization of social work and the suitability of social and community development have been re-ignited (Gray, 2005 vol. IV; Gray, 2008; Midgley, 2001 vol. IV). While crosscultural social work, including notions of cultural competence and ethnic and culturally sensitive practice have developed mainly in Western contexts where social workers come into contact with diverse non-western cultures, there has been little transnational research to examine the transportability of Western crosscultural social work approaches to non-western contexts. Further, these approaches have many limitations, including their failure to realize the situatedness or embeddedness of culture. People do not easily let go of their cultural beliefs and practices and it is not possible to become competent at

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the culture of another merely through intellectual learning or technical skill development (Dean, 2001; Gray et al., 2008; Park, 2005).

This is becoming abundantly clear in relation to 'issues surrounding the development of social work in China in the 2000s [which] relate very much to those that faced social work as it spread across the western world in the early decades of the 1900s' (Gray, 2005, p. 236-237). Hence there is some debate about the 'type of social work' China should import given that it does not have a massive welfare bureaucracy neither has it 'gone through a period of psychologization and widespread adoption of the language of mental health and therapy as the West has' (Tsang & Yan, in Gray, 2005, p. 237).

Even in India, which has a long tradition of social service and where the first professional training in social work was established in 1936 at the Tata Institute, 'indigenous' or culturally relevant social work knowledge – generated from within Asian countries – has tended to be drowned out by irrelevant Western theories and approaches (Desai, 1993; Drucker, 1993; Ejaz, 1989, 1991; Kulkarni, 1993; Nanavathy, 1993; Nagpaul, 1972, 1993; Narayan, 2000; Nimmagadda & Balgopal, 2000; Nimmagadda & Cowger, 1999; Wadia, 1968). However, there is a growing drive for Indian social workers to 'localize' their western knowledge and to develop locally relevant practice approaches, especially in India's largely rural settings, where community development is the dominant mode of practice (Nimmagadda & Bromley, 2006; Nimmagadda & Chakradhar, 2006; Venkataraman, 1995, 1996; Nimmagadda & Martel, in Gray et al., 2008).

Hence the possibility of a transnational social work remains open to question given that, as the contributions to this volume show, some aspects of social work remain rooted in locally embedded national contexts (Gray et al., 2008; Webb, 2003 vol. IV). Moreover, the types of acute socio-economic problems faced in countries such as India, South Africa and China, e.g., child malnutrition, occupational suicide, ecological disasters, rural deprivation, urban shack-dweller poverty and child prostitution, very much shape the type of social work interventions undertaken and the research programs developed.

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