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Opportunities for Social Workers in an Aging World

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It is believed that there are professional opportunities for gerontological social workers in an aging world. To be discussed are potential social work roles within international organizations, multi-national businesses, foreign social service and academic institutions, with newly-arrived elderly immigrants, and in social work education, research, and training. It is concluded that—given global aging—if gerontological social workers do not respond to career opportunities, they will lose out to those from other professions.

In a call for “global mindedness” on the part of social work educators, Asamoah, Healy, and Mayadas (1997) allude to world-wide demographic changes. A major component of such changes is “world aging.” In fact, the countries in the world are growing older at an unprecedented pace. The United Nations (1992a) has estimated that those 65 years of age and older in the world will be increasing from 6% of the total population in 1985 to 9.7% of the population by the year 2025.

In the past, the number and proportion of the elderly were the highest in the more developed nations of the world, resulting from higher standards of living; better preventive, acute, and chronic health care; and the greater economic ability to care for the needs of the elderly by the aged themselves, their families, and society (Cowgill, 1986). Currently, this growth in the aging of world’s population is not a phenomenon characteristic only of developed countries. The increasing number and proportion of elderly persons in developing nations exceed those in developed nations (United Nations, 1991). Hernandez (1992) has indicated

that the projected increase in the elderly population in developed nations—between 1990 and 2025—will be 67%, whereas the increase will be 205% in developing nations.

“The [old-old are] the fastest growing population group in the world, projected to grow by a factor of 10 between 1950 and 2025, compared with a factor of six for those 60-and-above, and a factor of little more than three for the total population” (United Nations, 1992b, p.3). Inasmuch as advanced age is associated with social, psychological, physical, and economic problems, the growing need for resources (personnel and programs) can be anticipated for meeting the growing needs of the increasingly elderly populations in the countries of the world. Changing demographics are coupled with contemporary changes in decreasing family size; increasing rates of mobility and emigration of younger members of society, divorce and remarriage, and the in-migration of older populations; and—most importantly—the changing role of women (Kosberg & Garcia, 1991).

Professional Consequences

“Social Workers’ ethical obligations to improve social conditions, choice, and opportunity; eliminate discrimination; and promote social justice demand a look not just beyond one’s own agency but also beyond national borders” (Herrmann, 1991, p. 102). Over the years, social workers in the U.S. have focused upon developing and developed countries (Rosenthal, 1990, 1991; Healy, 1987; Hokenstad, Khinduka, and Midgley, 1992). As Mary (1997) has recently stated: “Placing social work in the context of global problems . . . is the overarching theme of [the] exploration into social work in the 21st century” (p. 587).

The aging of populations in different countries has prodigious ramifications for the potential involvement of social work practitioners, researchers, and educators (Kammerman, 1976; Teicher, Thurz, and Vigilante, 1986; Hokenstad, 1988; Kosberg, 1995). In an article on an international imperative for gerontological education, Kosberg, Sohn, and Sheppard (1991) argue that in addition to the intellectual search for universals, a focus upon international gerontology permits (1) the study of commonalities and differences in aging within diverse societies, (2) the determination of

effectiveness of different methods by which to meet the needs of aging and aged persons, and (3) the identification of relationships between variations in attitudes toward the aged and opportunities for them. Thus, the study of international gerontology has both heuristic implications with regard to the interests of theoreticians and researchers as well as applied implications with regard to better meeting the needs of elderly populations.

In this latter regard, an international orientation to aging and old age also has great importance for social work practice and social work education by focusing upon how knowledge and experience gained in the U.S. might be beneficial to those in and from other countries (and vice versa). This is to suggest that there are several themes for social work education from world aging: (1) Expert Consultants To Foreign Social Workers. Those from developed and developing nations turn to professionals from the U.S. for guidance in planning, program and policy development, and intervention models for elderly populations. (2) Academic Interests in an Aging World. Social workers in the U.S. are interested in describing and analyzing aging and old age in other countries and carrying out cross-national research. (3) Social Work Employment in Other Countries. There are social work opportunities for those willing to relocate to developing and developed nations. (4) Social Work with Older Immigrant and Refugee Populations in the U.S. There are special needs for working with and for elderly groups newly-arrived in the U.S.

The "technical transfer," of sorts, between policies, programs, and models of care for the elderly in one country and applied to another is possible only with extreme care borne out of knowledge of the values, traditions, governments, economies, etc., in different cultures and different societies. Successful examples of such cross-national borrowing in the field of applied gerontology can be seen in hospice care, granny flats, retirement communities, day care, ombudsman programs, and respite services. Again, it is important that such possible cross-national "borrowing" should fit within cultural values, for fear that either the idea will be rejected or that it will be ineffectively altered to fit the adopting country (see Billups & Julia, 1996). The attention to culturally sensitive practice in the U.S. reflects concern with regard to the

appropriate application of social work in a manner consistent with cultural values brought to the U.S. from other lands.

Given the aging of the world, with more pronounced interdependence between nations; and social worker skills, commitments, and values; might there not be increasing roles and opportunities for social workers within the international scene in the future? Such involvement, in the above-mentioned areas, is perceived to be possible for practitioners, researchers, consultants, and educators alike. Indeed, it is suspected that greater attention is needed by social work education for the preparation of social workers functioning within the international scene, in general, and with regard to aging populations, in particular. A decade ago, Healy (1988) highlighted a growing imperative for social work education; more recently, Asamoah, Healy, and Mayadas (1997) have suggested a "Global Curriculum for the Millennium."

Thus, it is suggested that there will be increasing need for social workers with gerontological knowledge and skills in the international arena. Not only are such opportunities congruent with social work values and history, but may well provide rewarding career paths for social workers in a variety of settings using a variety of skills. What follows is an overview of the interface between international and gerontological emphases in social work education, and the identification of personal and professional benefits from a deliberate plan to pursue social work career paths in international gerontology.

International Organizations and Associations

There are an increasing number of international organizations and associations which focus upon the social welfare of those in different countries. Starting with the United Nations, and continuing with regional organizations (i.e., the PanAmerican Health Organization), there are many international associations which focus upon social welfare and social work, and such cross-national groups exist for different populations (i.e., children, women, families) and those with particular problems (i.e., mentally-retarded, the abused, AIDS victims). These organizations can be sectarian or non-sectarian, private or public, and organized by a country or a coalition of countries.

The United Nations Centre for Social Development and Humanitarian Affairs (in Vienna) is among the many international organizations devoted to aging and old age. Among others are Help Age International, the International Congress on Gerontology, the International Federation on Ageing, and the American Association for International Aging. The United Nations International Institute on Ageing, located in Malta, brings together those from both developing and developed nations for education and exchange of ideas on improving the lives of the elderly in different countries of the world. There are also regional organizations for the elderly located in every part of the world (i.e., European Association of Aging, Asia and Pacific Rim Association for Aging). Recently, the American Association for Retired Persons (AARP) emphasized its international commitment by establishing an International Activities Section and the publication of *Global Aging Report*.

A consequence of the growing number of international organizations and associations is that social workers may secure employment within such entities, as they may be excellent candidates for staff positions as administrators, planners, or organizers. Rosenthal (1990) has argued that social workers are especially well-prepared for, although under-represented in, overseas positions in international social welfare organizations for which people with social work training are eligible and desirable. Her explanation for the desire to pursue such professional opportunities includes the freedom to relocate, expectation of a rewarding overseas experience, possession of requisite skills, interest in the foreign intercultural arena, and global-mindedness (Rosenthal, 1991). While personal goals and family responsibilities will influence the desire and ability to pursue international employment opportunities (outside the U.S.), social work education can play an important role by creating interests and developing skills for students (in the classroom) and professionals (through continuing education).

Multi-National Businesses for the Elderly

As American social work educator Msgr. Charles Fahey has stated (1997): "Business and industry have discovered aging, and

are responding to it in a variety of ways" (p. 40). Although he was referring to the U.S., it is suspected that world aging is gaining the attention of those in the business sector who are aggressively marketing efforts to meet the needs of aging populations. While lacking in empirical proof, it seems likely that the increasing size, affluence, and organization of elderly populations in foreign countries (as well as in the U.S.) are resulting in the development of new industries focusing upon long-term care, housing for the elderly, retirement communities, and leisure time activities, among other areas. And while it may be that American businesses are reaching out to meet the needs of elderly consumers in other countries, so too are businesses from other countries seeking to meet present and growing needs of the elderly in their own countries as well in other ones.

It is further suspected that these business ventures may benefit from the contributions of social work employees who help identify needs, create effective resources to meet these needs, and "package" these resources to attract elderly consumers. As businesses can "market" their goods and services, so too can social workers seek to "market" their skills for the benefit of business, on one hand, and the needs of the foreign elderly, on the other. These are not mutually-exclusive goals and profit is not inconsistent with social work values.

Relatedly, social workers can "market" their professional skills for use by those in foreign countries (as clinicians, program planners, consultants, trainers and educators, or administrators). Jean Coyle (1985) has written about entrepreneurial gerontology, and stated:

In order to operate successfully in today's work force, gerontologists need to learn, and to utilize, marketing skills for their gerontological expertise. Both professionals experienced in the field of aging and gerontology students seeking entry into the field should find it beneficial, indeed increasingly essential, to employ creative approaches to assessing skills need[ed] in the field, and, then, to identify and even create new types of positions, including roles in industries and in fields previously not employing full-time gerontologists (p. 161).

Coyle was not specifically referring to the profession of social work; yet, her words do have significance for the social work

educator and practitioner interested in aging and old age. An entrepreneurial orientation is not inconsistent with social work values or principles—consider the growth of private practice in the U.S. In addition, Mor-Barak, Povernny, Finch, et al. (1993) have suggested the aggressive development of occupational social work in business and industry. Thus, it may be that the future will see social workers reaching out for employment opportunities with social welfare agencies, public institutions or private businesses, or municipal and national governments in foreign countries, or seeking to develop their own private practice outside their native lands.

Foreign Employment Opportunities

Social workers from the U.S. have long been employed overseas in the military and as civilians working with military personnel and their dependents. Additionally, on a permanent or temporary basis, others have sought employment outside of the military in foreign countries. While such work possibilities include those with international associations or corporations, other employment possibilities might be found in social service agencies or in academic institutions. Of course, knowledge of the foreign language is generally (but not always) a prerequisite for such employment, along with an ability and a desire to leave the U.S. and live in another country. Additional incentives, especially for academics, are the possibilities of higher income, greater prestige, better quality of life (i.e., less crime), attractive benefits, and travel opportunities. Employment in foreign countries can have potential disadvantages resulting from political instability, subtle or overt discrimination (toward foreign employees), distance from family and friends in the U.S., and a high tax structure (i.e., Canada, Great Britain, Sweden).

American social workers who relocate to developing nations face special challenges and rewards. As witnessed by those who enlisted in the Peace Corps, working in developing nations provides personal and professional satisfaction in community development activities, meeting the needs of vulnerable populations, and aiding in the empowerment of citizens. Given the rapid growth of elderly populations in developing nations, and given

the concomitant challenges to traditional informal caregiving mechanisms by changing values (Kosberg & Garcia, 1991), social workers can play important roles in developing nations. Working in such countries, of course, often comes with a lower standard of living and quality of life, and potential political pressures resulting from advocacy efforts for empowerment on behalf of indigenous populations.

Working with Newly-Arrived Elderly Populations

As mentioned, an international orientation for social work focuses within as well as outside of a national border. The U.S. is a nation of immigrants, perhaps less so than in the past; but, nonetheless, still with immigrant populations who have unique problems and are in need of social work assistance. Asamoah (1997) refers to the search for a better life in the U.S. by those in poverty coming from a foreign country and states: "This glaring contradiction is what has driven many immigrants to this country, and they form a significant portion of caseloads in agencies in our inner cities" (p. 2).

Social work involvement might be especially needed for recently-arrived groups of refugees who not only have problems of adjustment with which to contend, but also the "scars" from the past (Potocky, 1996). For example, Petzold (1991) has discussed the physical and emotional problems resulting from the rapid and radical cultural changes affecting Southeast Asian refugees, Jacob (1994) has discussed the problems of Salvadoran refugees and their need for social services, and Mui (1996) has written about the depression among elderly Chinese immigrants. The history of abuse suffered by migrant groups in the U.S. (often coming from foreign countries) also requires social work concern and action. The needs of the elderly immigrants groups can be neglected by those in the helping professions who focus more often on younger individuals.

Working with in-migrating populations necessitates special training, sensitivity, and knowledge. This knowledge not only pertains to individual immigrant groups, but to immigration policies as well. Castex (1994) has indicated that many social workers are confused by the influence of national origin, language,

racial ascriptions, religion, and citizens status when dealing with Hispanic or Latino clients. Drachman (1995) has described the importance of being aware of the statutes which influence immigrant status and the provision, access, and use of social services by immigrant groups.

American communities with significant immigrant populations may not be able to develop a social service system with sufficient numbers of professionals having similar backgrounds as the foreign born target population. For example, Miami has undergone the most dramatic ethnic transformation of any major American city and has the largest proportion of foreign born residents of any city in the U.S. There are, thus, educational ramifications for Miami-area schools of social work. Although the need to be conversant in a foreign language may be highly desirable, the need for social workers to have special preparation (and screening) for working with or planning for such in-migrating populations should be mandatory.

Social Work Research

Whether or not driven by funding opportunities, research efforts have often included cross-national studies of groups in need and services which attempt to meet such needs. Taking the lead from cultural anthropologists, social work researchers who engage in cross-national comparative analyses with regard to aging and old age must be prepared to understand and appreciate the dynamics which exist in the foreign countries they study and about which they make inferences. There is a danger in being too casual an observer, or as Kosberg, Sohn, and Sheppard (1991) have stated: it is wrong to engage in "the classic attraction of amateur anthropological-touristic curiosity about what is different" in foreign countries (p. 477).

Not only is there a challenge in the conceptualization of cross-national studies, but important tasks to be undertaken with regard to the creation of a methodology which permits the valid comparison of findings (i.e, data collection techniques). The need to ensure the comparable terminology or phraseology on questionnaires (resulting from translation) is a vital requirement for such research. Obviously, social work researchers need special

awareness and training for such subtle, but important, components of the research process in cross-national studies. For example, Kosberg, Garcia, and Lowenstein (1997) have written about conceptual and methodological challenges in carrying out cross-national studies of elder abuse.

Given the rich array of resources for American senior citizens, gerontological social work researchers in the U.S. who engage in cross-national studies may well be in a special danger of measuring differences between the roles and status of the elderly and/or the resources available to them through ethnocentric lenses. Thus, there is a special need for social work researchers to be anti-ethnocentric. In fact, they should take a leadership role in challenging commonly-held stereotypes and empirically verifying the differences and similarities popularly thought to exist in the treatment of the elderly from different cultures, in different countries, during different periods of time.

Practice Exchanges for Common Problems

Many of the issues and problems which are faced by social workers in the U.S. are similar to those which are faced by professionals in many different countries. Accordingly, an international perspective can be beneficial for professionals from different countries with regard to treatment models, planning efforts, and policy formulations. It is imperative that the attitudes of practitioners transcend parochial ethnocentrism to view—with an open mind—efforts made in other countries. Indeed, professionals representing different nations or different cultural groups can learn from one another—however similar or dissimilar the experience.

As one example of the fact that those in one country have as much to learn as to share with those from other countries, Dr. Nelson Chow (1995), Professor from the University of Hong Kong Department of Social Work and Social Administration, made the following observation in his presentation to the Annual Meeting of the Japanese Association of School of Social Work:

. . . social work education nowadays requires us to take a global view and to introduce to our students, other than what is happening in our countries, also the policies and practices that are prevalent in

other societies with different cultural traditions. This will not only enrich our curriculum but also give our students a greater sense of tolerance. Second, that in adopting the social welfare and social work theories from the West [or from the East], we should also be aware of the developments and changes which are occurring there.

Pearson and Phillips (1994) have discussed psychiatric social work in China and Mokuau and Matsuoka (1995) have written about social work practice with Hawaiians. The sharing of such information is believed to have importance not only for meeting the needs of a specific group, but also has wider general ramifications for other populations as well.

In the field of aging, elder abuse is one example of a common problem faced by professionals in all nations (although not always labeled as such). The problem was first thought to be an American problem, then believed to be a problem only in developed nations, but currently it is known that elder abuse exists in developing as well as developed countries (Kosberg & Garcia, 1995). International meetings, along with international publications, permit the exchange of ideas and experiences with regard to common problems faced by social work practitioners working with and for the elderly in different countries.

Additionally, an international perspective by social work publications—directly or indirectly—related to the elderly will provide (1) a heuristic description of the state of knowledge and practice in different countries for students, practitioners, and academics alike, and (2) practice examples to be considered by professionals in different countries. As an illustration of this, among articles in a special issue on home care services appearing in the *Journal of Gerontological Social Work* is one by Monk and Cox (1995) on such services in foreign countries. Both authors and editors need international orientations (and comparative analyses) for providing discussions of current social work practice and programs in a more global context.

Educational/Training Opportunities

As a reflection of social work's increasing attention to the interdependence of the countries in the world, the 1994 Council on Social Work Education *Handbook on Accreditation Standards and*

Procedures contains specific reference to the importance of global interdependence as a premise underlying social work education in the Curriculum Policy Statement (Asamoah, 1997). Additionally, the “shrinking” and aging of the world, given the history of American social work’s experiences with aging and elderly populations, will increasingly result in opportunities for social work professionals to provide education and training to professionals, and others, in foreign countries. There are formalized efforts—both proactive and reactive—which will necessitate a commitment from universities and agencies. Three will be briefly mentioned: distance learning, visits to foreign countries and by foreign professionals, and program exchanges.

Distance Learning. Modern technology facilitates the cross-national exchange of information. Whether it is simultaneously-transmitted telecommunications or videotapes for later use, social workers with gerontological backgrounds may be asked to provide professional guidance to those from foreign countries. For example, one social work program in Florida is in the process of developing training modules to be broadcast to educational institutions within Latin American countries. While in this instance, competence in speaking Spanish becomes an important prerequisite for participation, so too is an interest in foreign countries and a desire for reaching out to those in other countries.

While it is true that such distance learning efforts have not frequently focused upon aging populations; given the increasing need for such models in the future (resulting from global aging), it is suspected that social work educators will be increasingly participating in such international activities. At one university (within which is located a school of social work), a Latin American Center on Aging and Old Age is being considered and will include distance learning as well as the exchange of students and faculty. Social work faculty are involved in planning efforts and will hold significant roles in such a center.

The increased sophistication of distance education (such as by satellite) opens up a plethora of possibilities for alternatives to on-site learning. Social workers with such skills will be attractive to educational facilities in the U.S. and helpful to those from other countries in the world.

Visits to Foreign Countries and by Foreign Professionals. Educational and employment opportunities for American social workers with gerontological backgrounds may result in invitations to visit foreign countries to meet with social worker practitioners, students, and educators. Such activities can be associated with the presentation of papers at professional conferences, consultations, or staff development and in-service training. It is also possible to meet with those from foreign countries either in the U.S. or in foreign venues with the purpose of providing education and training to others.

It is not uncommon for American social workers to host visits by those from outside the U.S., especially visitors seeking to learn more about how the needs of the elderly in the U.S. are being met. Such educational visits by foreign social work practitioners, educators, and students can vary in length from a few days to a semester or year. Some U.S. programs in social work education have established ongoing efforts for students and faculty to visit foreign countries as well as host visits by social workers from other countries.

Program Exchanges. Schools and departments of social work have established both formal and informal relationships with foreign universities. Some ventures are related to foreign students securing their master's or doctoral degrees in American social work programs. Other activities involve the exchange of faculty and/or exchange of students.

While there are, no doubt, many such arrangements at the university level (i.e., the University of South Florida and Nankai University in Tianjin, China), there are probably similar efforts involving schools and departments of social work. The University of South Carolina College of Social Work has established a program in South Korea. The Ph.D. Program in Social Work at the University of Texas at Arlington and the Universidad Autonoma De Nuevo Leon, in Monterrey, Mexico, have formalized a "collaboration between the two universities that will result in the first Ph.D. program in social work ever to be offered in Mexico and, indeed, in the whole of Spanish-speaking Central and South America" (University of Texas at Arlington *Social Work News*, 1996, p. 4).

No doubt, many social work programs throughout the U.S. have made efforts to establish similar relationships with foreign universities. It is suspected that, where they exist, little attention is being given to gerontological social work education and training. Yet, given a demographic imperative, such attention on aging and old age will become increasingly important.

Implications for Social Work Education

As Asamoah (1997) states: "Some schools of social work have established mechanisms to promote knowledge building and professional competence in international social work The foci includes curriculum development, faculty research on international issues, faculty and student exchange, sponsorship of internationally related regional and national seminars and conferences" (p. 4). This article calls attention to the potential opportunities for social workers with gerontological backgrounds and interests in the international arena, in response to the aging of countries in the world and elderly populations coming to the U.S. from other countries.

There is much to be done by social work education for preparing those wishing to meet the needs of such populations and seeking foreign career opportunities. Clearly, the creation of a cadre of well-prepared professionals necessitates two pre-conditions which can occur separately or together: (1) a social work educational emphasis on the international field of practice and (2) such an emphasis on aging and old age. While gerontological social work educators have their own national organization, the Association for Gerontological Education in Social Work, and journal, the *Journal of Gerontological Social Work*, the educational opportunities for such emphases in U.S. social work programs have been modest, at best. Despite the aging of America, in particular, and the aging of the world, in general, there is little reason to be optimistic regarding the present and future efforts for preparing social workers for careers in the field of international gerontology.

Healy (1988) has asked "How can social work students be better prepared for practice and professional action in an increasingly interdependent world? How might educators change curricula and educational objectives to assure that future social workers

have a better understanding of global issues and their impact on practice?" (p. 221). Her words are directed toward general efforts to train and educate social work students for careers in the international field, not toward the international study of aging and old age. There is a need for discussions regarding the minimum curriculum offerings in international social work, specializations in international gerontological social work, and the possibility of specific social work programs focusing upon particular areas of the world or cultural groups.

While some social work programs do offer a course or two in international social work or social welfare in developing or developed nations, it is suspected that there are few, if any, programs having a rich array of courses which focus upon international gerontological social work (or even on working with and for older immigrant populations). Clearly, then (if this suspicion is accurate), the field of social work education needs to actively work toward meeting the growing need for courses in international gerontological social work. Yet, Healy (1989) notes the realities faced by advocates of international curriculum: "Resource limitations, especially scheduling limitations with an already crowded curriculum, shortages of faculty time and expertise, and competition from other interests, all will make implementation of international curriculum difficult" (p. 228). In the U.S., weak interest by social work students for gerontological courses further limits the optimism that such curriculum offerings combining attention to international and gerontological social work will be wide-spread.

Given global aging, social work professionals will be competing for international gerontological opportunities with those from other disciplines (i.e., sociology, psychology, anthropology) and professions (i.e., urban planning, public administration, gerontology) in the coming years. Clearly, inattention to international gerontology by social work education, in a competitive world-market, will result in lost opportunities, will for social work students, graduates, researchers, consultants, educators, and practitioners alike.

Conclusion

As CSWE Executive Director, Donald Beless (1996) has stated: "The internationalization of social work education is not a utopian

ideology, but a useful approach to widening and sharing knowledge toward improving the course and experiential offerings of teachings and programs. The concentration of the world into reachable and comparable units makes the sharing more urgent [even] while [we must continue] recognizing and acknowledging the individual, regional, and cultural differences that remain" (p. 2). Such efforts and knowledge are related to not only the preparation of professionals for the international arena, but for the preparation of all social workers to be sensitive and knowledgeable citizens of the world.

It has been argued that there are many advantages for the internationalization of American social work education and practice which focuses upon aging and elderly populations. Aside from the important scientific and professional benefits with regard to education, training, and research, such an international orientation can provide career opportunities for social work students, graduates, practitioners, and academics. Moreover, with world aging, social workers are presented with real opportunities to assist elderly populations in other countries and elderly populations in the U.S. (from native and foreign subcultures).

There are many reasons for action in pursuing a path toward greater attention to career opportunities in international gerontological social work. But while there are many opportunities, so too are there dangers from inaction which will result in social workers losing out to those from other disciplines and professions. Thus, there are both personal and professional reasons for greater attention being given to aging populations in countries of the world. It is hoped that these opportunities resulting from demographic changes in the world will produce increased discussion, planning, and action by individual schools and departments of social work in the U.S. and elsewhere.

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