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# Global Interdependence and its Effects on Social Work Education in the United States

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*Social workers in the United States are confronted on a daily basis with challenges reflecting the imprint of globalization. Nevertheless, research shows that most of them are not trained to deal with the global realities of the 21st century, including how to use a rights-based sustainable development approach. This article proposes the use of a rights-based development model as opposed to a charity-based approach. It provides a rationale for implementing a global perspective in social work education that addresses sustainable development consistent with social work values and unique mission. Furthermore, it proposes that it is paramount to adhere to a global perspective in social work education, especially in light of growing global interdependence in economics, communication, and human migration. The article discusses the implications of trends in online/distance education learning to global social work practice, and outlines implications of globalization and the growing global interdependence to social work theory, welfare policy, and practice. It also stresses the need to include this content in field education. The article concludes with a discussion on how to incorporate global content into social work curricula and how to overcome the barriers that may emerge in this process.*

*Key words: globalization, social work education, charity model, rights-based development, sustainable development.*

## Introduction

Globalization as a concept has been at the forefront of the current interdisciplinary literature, with an emphasis on its effect on global economies and management across cultures. Throughout its long history, the charity-based model emphasized donations by individuals, foundations, and developed countries, creating an environment where the receivers became highly dependent on the donors with no long-term sustainable impact. According to many authors, a rights-based sustainable development approach should become an important part of social work curricula, and be incorporated into learning competencies (Barner & Okech, 2013; Mocanu, Vasiliu, & Stancu, 2012; Zolfaghari, Sabran, & Zolfaghari, 2009). During the last three to four decades, social work literature has emphasized the need to include global content and models for sustainable development in its curricula, consistent with the profession's mission and values (Barner & Okech, 2013; Dominelli, 2010; Gatenio Gabel, & Healy, 2012; Riebschleger & Agbényiga, 2012). Yet, we still have a long way to go before achieving comprehensive infusion of global content and learning outcomes throughout social work curricula. In light of current events, such infusion is of paramount importance to effectively respond to social problems in the United States and abroad (Barner & Okech, 2013; Edwards, 2011; IFSW, 2017; Riebschleger & Agbényiga, 2012). Furthermore, thanks to recent advances in technology and communication worldwide, more and more universities are now offering distance education courses and fully online social work programs. This phenomenon brings the need to include global content in theory and practice courses to the forefront of social work education (Alphonse, George, & Moffat, 2008; Mocanu, Vasiliu, & Stancu, 2012; Zolfaghari, Sabran, & Zolfaghari, 2009).

Emerging trends in social welfare include crisis response and rebuilding, and the need to empower displaced and/or oppressed populations due to natural or technological disasters. Images of the devastation caused by hurricanes, massive tsunami, wars, and refugee crises (such as those in the Middle East and Europe) are brought to us through the mass media on a daily basis. These events, along with increased globalization, make it evident that we live in a 'global village.' Individuals and

communities are becoming more aware of the effects of globalization on people and governments as a result of international economic treaties such as WTO, NAFTA, CAFTA, GATT and international social, economic, political, and environmental summits (Gibson, Hall, & Tavlas, 2012). Furthermore, the ease of global travel and economic and cultural exchange has made globalization a household issue (Bertucci & Alberti, 2001; Edwards, 2011; Gatenio Gabel & Healy, 2012).

Poverty, disease epidemics, and natural or technological disasters are not restrained by geographic or national borders. What happens in one part of the world often has an impact in other parts of the globe. For example, efforts to integrate refugees into a local community are often a direct consequence of events, social problems, and policies thousands of miles away. Immigration and refugee crises are triggered by situations in sending countries and these in turn necessitate community planning, interventions and additional welfare services in receiving countries (Riebschleger & Agbényiga, 2012).

Today, in the United States of America (USA), social workers are confronted on a daily basis with diverse situations reflecting the imprint of globalization. Examples of such situations are female genital mutilation of female refugees in the USA coming from African countries, and American global aid workers and their families experiencing culture shock, adaptation anxiety, and feelings of abandonment when working overseas and when they return to the USA. The United States Census Bureau (2015) estimates that over 13% of the total population living in the U.S. is foreign-born. This percentage includes economic immigrants as well as refugees and asylum seekers in need of specialized social work interventions by professionals with global social work expertise and skills. In order to effectively address these situations, social workers need knowledge and competence stemming from various social sciences such as anthropology, geography, sociology, psychology, etc.

The challenges faced by the social work profession in the 21<sup>st</sup> century have led scholars to question whether the profession and social work academic programs are up to the great demands posed by globalization (Hokenstad & Midgley, 1997; Zolfaghari et al., 2009). The way we respond to globalization is greatly influenced by our professional values of *service* and *social justice*

(NASW, 2008), and the mandate for a positive, sustainable, and human rights-based empowering social change that “enhances [the] wellbeing” of the people (IFSW, 2017, para 2). Because of this, many social workers are learning how events and policies abroad impact the profession at home and are preparing to effectively respond to these events (Gatenio Gabel & Healy, 2012). Global trends in the 21<sup>st</sup> century make more evident the need for a paradigm shift within in social work education and practice in the USA.

Social work scholarly literature projected this conceptual shift even before the end of the last century. In 1996, Payne stated that “we need a changed conception of social work which represents effectively the whole range of its knowledge and skills throughout the world” (p. 172). Nagy and Falk (2000) suggested two ways to attain the much-needed paradigm shift in social work higher education. In their opinion, social work programs in the USA should either: (1) infuse global content throughout the curriculum, or (2) provide specialized educational opportunities for those interested in pursuing careers in global social work. Current global trends, suggest that almost two decades after Nagy and Falk made their suggestions, it is more imperative than ever for social work practitioners to have a working knowledge of global social issues, and the ability to work with diverse clients in the USA and abroad (Edwards, 2011; Mocanu et al., 2012). Social work programs must educate students in global issues and/or provide hands-on experiences in other countries if they want their graduates to be competitive in the current workforce. This is particularly true considering the potential global impact of distance/online social work education. Online education may potentially change the face of social work education at the global level through unprecedented access to information and technology. In the long term, this educational shift could help the profession become more responsive to the needs of 21<sup>st</sup> century social work clients and practitioners. As shown in the following pages, the social work profession promoted the inclusion of global content in the curriculum before the widespread access to information and technology of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## The Mission and Definition of Global Social Work

Growing global interdependence and global population movements greatly influenced Elis Enval in the early 1990s. At the time, he was president of the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW). He became aware of the increasing effects of globalization on technology, economics, politics and culture. Based on these observations, he concluded that the social work profession should redefine its practice to respond to new global developments in order to become more relevant. Subsequently, during its 2000 biennial general meeting, the IFSW agreed to replace the 1982 definition of international social work with a new definition emphasizing the relevance of human rights as key aspects of healthy human relationships in a context of problem solving, social change, empowerment, and enhancement of people's well-being (IFSW, 2017). This new definition may serve as a mission statement that synthesizes the reason for the existence of a profession united in purpose while playing different roles across the globe. A year after adopting the new IFSW definition, the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) adopted IFSW's definition, showcasing the importance of understanding peoples and cultures in their social environmental contexts across cultures (Hare, 2004). Similarly, the National Association of Social Workers, through its Code of Ethics, emphasizes the need for social workers to promote the welfare of individuals and communities locally as well as globally (NASW, 2008). Following the same principles, the Council on Social Work Education, through its Educational Policies and Accreditation Standards, states that the purpose of social work education is to instill knowledge and skills for practice across systems, from the local to the global (CSWE, 2015).

## Globalization and Social Work

Current global events make evident the need for a paradigm shift in social work education and practice in the USA. For this reason, it is important to understand what globalization is and how it impacts social work education. Midgley (1997, p. xi), in his

seminal work *Social Welfare in Global Context*, defined globalization as “a process of global integration in which diverse peoples, economies, cultures, and political processes are increasingly subjected to international influences.” Almost two decades later, IFSW defined globalization as “the process by which all peoples and communities come to experience an increasingly common economic, social, and cultural environment” (IFSW, 2012, p. #?). These definitions show that globalization affects the state of the world economy as well as each particular culture and its people. The globalization of the economy, democracy, and science is redefining the way people relate to each other, address social justice and well-being, communicate, and exchange goods and services (Bertucci & Alberti, 2001; Mocanu et al., 2012; Mohan, 1999). Given that globalization may have both positive and negative effects on individual societies, social workers must be prepared to address both positive and negative consequences of globalization (Barbera, 2006). For example, the way in which the European Union (E.U.) handled the economic crisis of Greece illustrates some of the positive and negative aspects of globalization. Joining the E.U. required Greece to adopt the E.U.’s currency. The adoption of the Euro contributed to the Greek economic crisis, given that, as part of the E.U., the country now had to compete with large-scale European economies. Many believe that Greece’s inability to do this resulted in the country’s financial crisis and the subsequent social upheaval (Gibson et al., 2012).

### Implications for Social Work Theory, Welfare Policy, Practice, and Education

Social work practice in North America is primarily focused on clinical practice with individuals and families (Gray & Fook, 2004). As a result, there is not much room in the curricula to teach skills relevant for rights-based sustainable community development. According to Caragata and Sánchez (2002), North American social work focus on direct practice and clinical work represents the greatest obstacle to the involvement of social workers in the global arena. Very few graduates with a macro social work background become involved in global social work, in spite of the profession’s commitment to social justice (Hill, Ferguson,

& Erickson, 2010). This limitation was previously observed by Taylor (1999). He stated that deficits in the American higher education system have prevented the profession from developing a macro social work vision with an emphasis on social justice. In response to this, Katsui (2009) has proposed a shift from the charity model to a rights-based sustainable development approach expected to empower groups and communities. This will require addressing social work core principles and mission from a global perspective and understanding the implications of this for social work theory, policy, practice and education.

### *Implications of Globalization for Social Work Theory*

The “person-in-environment” approach, with an added global perspective, was chosen as a fundamental concept in social work practice in 2000 by the IFSW task force. It was also included in the revised 2015 CSWE Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (CSWE, 2015). This has brought attention to two major theoretical frameworks related to globalization: theories of human behavior and theories of social systems. According to Hare (2004), the IFSW highlights three important aspects: “evidence-based knowledge, indigenous knowledge, and bio-psychosocial factors” (p. 415). Evidence-based knowledge is used for decision-making in practice and stems from a combination of best practices, practitioner’s professional judgment, and the client’s environmental context and values (Spencer, Detrich, & Slocum, 2012). Indigenous knowledge stems from the cultural and economic reality of a specific community (Hare, 2004). Bio-psychosocial factors acknowledge the diversity of contexts, social and cultural values, and the uniqueness of each individual affected by social work assessment and interventions (Hare, 2004). Social work theory in the context of globalization recognizes the unique value and contribution of the environment to the development and well-being of all people.

### *Implications of Globalization for Social Work Advocacy to Impact Policy Change*

In the United States, social workers often engage in advocacy to produce policy change at the local, regional, state and



national levels. Two of the most important problems affecting humanity today are poverty and the violation of human rights. Given the complexities associated with these problems and given the interconnectedness of social, economic, and political systems, social workers are encouraged to draw from the experiences and/or expertise of other countries to aid in their change efforts (Hokenstad & Midgley, 2004). Regardless of its domestic or international context, the advocacy process designed to impact policy change should follow several main steps. These include: (1) researching the issues and potential impacts; (2) information dissemination and awareness building in the larger societal context; (3) coordinating and organizing grass roots advocacy activities, and last, but not least, (4) influencing sustainable policy change (Queiro-Tajalli, McNutt, & Campbell, 2003). Poverty presents many challenges, regardless of its geographical location, social, economic or political context. Poverty is associated with hunger, "disease, violence, family disintegration, indignities and sometimes even death" (Seipel, 2003, p. 191). Unfortunately, globalization has had the unintended effect of increasing poverty instead of eradicating it. According to Seipel (2003), some of the unintended consequences of globalization include: (a) economic stagnation or economic decline especially in underdeveloped or developing countries; (b) income inequality; (c) increased external debt among underdeveloped and developing countries; and (d) lack of commitment to education in many parts of the world (p. 195).

National economies are often poorly regulated or driven by unaccountable market forces. Furthermore, economic problems are exacerbated by lack of corporate responsibility. As a result, researchers and watchdog organizations have observed a continued increase in poverty levels and income inequality, despite the United Nations Millennium Goals (Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development, 2012). This shows that, although global capitalism and globalization have brought wealth to a few nations or individuals, it has also broadened the gap between the rich and the poor.

Social service spending represents a good indicator of increased poverty in many countries. Social service spending is usually drastically reduced or severed when countries face economic instability. A country's level of poverty is often reflected

in its education and healthcare spending (Seipel, 2003). Many believe that social work is one of the very few professions qualified to deal holistically with the consequences of poverty. For this reason, Seipel (2003) provides the following recommended course of action for the profession: (1) fully embrace the principles of social and political justice; (2) schools of social work must become active agents of social change; (3) social workers must increase their efforts to interact with international bodies such as the United Nations (UN), World Bank, the IMF, FAO, and other similar NGOs; and (4) facilitate the building of political solidarity among poor people (pp. 204–206). Furthermore, Krumer-Nevo, Weiss-Gal, and Monnickendam (2009) suggest that the social work profession should: (1) shift the focus from individuals and family treatment to community work and development; (2) use interventions at the global socioeconomic level rather than the individual level; (3) advocate and empower; (4) connect and network with others; and (5) use client input to determine the nature of needed interventions and desired social change.

Human rights are another very important concept intricately intertwined with poverty and social welfare policy. The United Nations Center for Human Rights defines human rights as “those rights which are inherent in our nature and without which we cannot live as human beings” (1994, p. 4). The headlines on television, newspapers, and magazines lead the public to erroneously believe that human rights abuses are taking place only in refugee camps, in countries torn apart by wars, or in countries struggling under oppressive regimes. Amnesty International, however, reports numerous past and present human rights violations that are taking place in the United States. This includes sexual and physical abuse as an ongoing reality and lack of access to qualified medical care in cases of treatable medical conditions among incarcerated men and women in the United States (Amnesty International Report cited in Queiro-Tajalli et al., 2003, p.150).

For these and other reasons, social workers should also undertake the role of human rights activists, consistent with the profession’s main mission and purpose of meeting people’s basic human needs and the desire to uphold and protect the rights of disenfranchised or at-risk populations, such as children,

women, the elderly, refugees, etc. The desire of social workers around the world to promote social justice has led them to engage in social action that in certain countries often resulted in incarceration (Hare, 2004). Education is “a process of empowerment” (Mohan, 2003, p. 70). For this reason, social work graduates must be empowered to bring about social change that will protect the human rights of vulnerable populations.

Access to basic and specialized education represents an often overlooked aspect of social justice. In response to this need, distance/online learning has emerged to provide greater opportunities for social inclusion and empowerment by providing access to education for individuals who otherwise would have little or no access, including disabled individuals, mothers of young children, full-time employees who must support their families, or other non-traditional students living in rural or urban areas. Social work education could use distance/online learning to prepare students for intercultural practice and the realities of diverse contexts around the globe (Barner & Okech, 2013; Mocanu et al., 2012).

### *Implications of Globalization for Social Work Practice*

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) represent key agents for social change and social development at the global level (Kamler, 2011). They provide humanitarian assistance to people in need, such as relief to people affected by natural and man-made disasters. They also assist with the mitigation and reconstruction process. Although the opportunities seem to exist, research shows that international NGOs and other international development agencies rarely hire qualified social workers for social work related jobs (Caragata & Sanchez, 2002). As a result of not using professionally-trained social workers, many international NGOs “deservedly” acquire a bad reputation in spite of their good intentions (Drucker, 2003). Drucker saw this phenomenon as a failure of the social work profession to influence practice at global levels through direct practice in international NGOs and other international agencies (Drucker, 2003).

*Implication of Globalization for Social Work Education*

The underlying causes of poverty, human rights violations and many other social issues are overlapping and interrelated, regardless of a country's geographical location or economic situation. Knowledge of these overarching similarities and dynamics will, without a doubt, help social workers respond more effectively to these problems in their own practice contexts. Gaining this awareness must begin in the classroom and continue through lifelong learning and continuing education (Riebschleger & Agbényiga, 2012).

Although the Council of Social Work Education does not mandate the introduction of global content in social work curricula, its Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) recommend that curricula should be "guided ... by a global perspective" (CSWE, 2015, p. 5). Furthermore, EPAS states that the purpose of social work is to enhance "the quality of life for all persons, locally and globally" (CSWE, 2015, p. 5). Finally, the racial, ethnic and gender diversity of the student body of schools of social work should serve as additional motivation to include relevant global content in their curricula.

### Incorporating Global Content into Social Work Curricula

The growing interdependence of modern societies and the effect of this on social work practice and education should motivate students and faculty members to seek a greater understanding of economic, political, social, legal, ethical and environmental factors contributing to global or international social problems. Students must learn in the classroom to address social issues in their global context, how to develop relationships with other countries to implement social work solutions for global issues, and how to compare social problems and responses among industrialized and developing countries (Gatenio Gabel & Healy, 2012). The previously described competencies are needed to produce effective social work practitioners who can intervene and advocate across national and international systems.

Healy (1986, 1995) has proposed five approaches that could be used in order to include global content in social work curricula: (1) inclusion of specific courses on global social work; (2) infusion of global content into select existing courses; (3) internationalization, or a comprehensive infusion of global topics across the curriculum; (4) a concentrated program of specialized courses; and (5) individual study, which can be considered specialization at the individual level. The effectiveness of these approaches has not been researched extensively. There is some evidence suggesting that these approaches may effectively help address the need for social work practitioners educated from a global perspective to address domestic issues resulting from globalization. Other scholars suggest that international field placements for students, and teaching abroad experiences for professors, could also help raise the awareness of global issues and better prepare students and academics to keep pace with the demands of the new century.

Opportunities for adding global content to the curriculum exist even when some social work programs believe that adding such content may overburden the program's curriculum, or that there are no resources available for students to study abroad. In these cases, programs have the option of infusing global content into existing core courses as suggested by Healy (1986, 1995). Meyer (2007) shared research findings related to infusing global content into a macro practice course. Findings revealed that exposure to global content increased students' level of understanding of the global dimensions of social problems. Study findings suggest that social work educators can use diverse approaches to address issues such as growing global interdependence and its influence on local practice. Other courses that could benefit from global content infusion are human behavior in the social environment, social policy, administration and planning, social welfare, ethics and diversity, research, and practice courses (Riebschleger & Agbényiga, 2012).

### Barriers to Incorporating of Global Content into the Social Work Curriculum

Zolfaghari, Sabran and Zolfaghari (2009) identified two types of barriers: institutional and individual. At the institutional level,

challenges include competing interests that may derail resources from such endeavors, lack of financial resources to design, create, or overhaul curricula, and lack of qualified personnel to assist with course development and technologies that allow for global educational exchange. From an individual perspective, faculty members may lack competence, expertise, or interest in global applications of social work practice, they may fear branching out into an unfamiliar area of study, or they may face academic overloads and no incentives for developing or including global content in their courses. There are also environmental factors affecting efforts to internationalize the curriculum. These include the employers' demand for specialized skills and competencies, and professional and regional accreditation requirements that may leave little room for additional curricular content (Edwards, 2011; Meyer, 2007; Zolfaghari et al., 2009).

These barriers could be overcome by raising the deans' and/or program directors' awareness to the importance of introducing global content into the social work curriculum. Working with the deans and directors has strategic value, given that they are well positioned to implement policy changes within their programs. Social work programs can also provide seminars and extracurricular events to help faculty, current students, alumni, and the community at large to become familiar with some global issues that may have global impact.

## Conclusion

Global economic, technological and political interdependence helps us understand how natural and manmade disasters and related events may impact local communities. It also highlights the need for social work programs to include cross-cultural and global content in their curricula, given that social work practitioners in the United States must also work with foreign-born individuals. The need for a global perspective has existed for decades. We propose that social work organizations should rely on such a global perspective to engage in effective local social work practice. Unfortunately, social work programs have been slow to incorporate or infuse needed global content in their curricula.

Efforts to globalize social work curricula may be greatly facilitated by the unprecedented level of access to computerized instructional technology and distance/online education opportunities. This significantly increases the potential for international students to participate in the United States' educational system. We recognize however, that students must be able to apply internationally acquired education to their respective local contexts in order for it to be relevant.

Poverty, human rights violations, and related problems are not only the responsibility of national legislative bodies. The global community must share responsibility for addressing these problems, given that they impact individuals and communities across the globe. In the United States, our profession should step outside of its comfort zone and the parameters imposed by the clinical paradigm. Social work programs are encouraged to add a global perspective and a rights-based approach to their curricula in order to provide students with the knowledge and skills needed to effectively respond to social problems (Offenheiser & Holcombe, 2003).

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