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# Globalization, contemporary challenges and social work practice

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## Abstract

Globalization has had a profound effect on social work practice, changing service delivery; altering the labour process for professional social workers; creating new social problems for practitioners to address, such as people-trafficking and environmental issues; and producing demands for indigenization, or the development of locality specific forms of theory and practice. This article considers globalization in terms of these issues and the impact of the current financial crisis on a more closely connected and interdependent world. It also explores the role of the state in these developments and considers the implications of these for social work practice in the 21st century.

## Keywords

environmental challenges, financial crisis, globalization, indigenous practice, international social problems, nation-state, 'new' managerialism, privatization; service delivery, social services

Globalization has given the world opportunities to bring people together in ways previously undreamt of in both real and virtual worlds. However, it has privileged industrialized capitalist growth and initiated a series of environmental, financial, demographic and political crises (Giddens, 2009). The poorest people on the planet have been most adversely affected, through loss of jobs, low-paid work that is insufficient to provide a decent standard

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of living, health hazards, rising food and energy prices, environmental degradation, armed conflict and resource depletion. In this context, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) which had looked to a more prosperous future for the planet's most disadvantaged people only a few years ago are unlikely to be met across the board (Correll, 2008). And the challenges of environmental degradation question the very relevance of the MDG targets in contemporary societies. Moreover, the financial crisis that brought about the virtual collapse of the global banking system has highlighted the weaknesses in international institutions' capacities to handle the ensuing problems, although these have affected everyone. That the heaviest price is exacted from poor people has become increasingly clear. These costs include public expenditure cuts in the personal social services and welfare provisions aimed at providing poor people with education, health and income support, as these are reduced in order to find funds to bail out banks and enable bankers to sustain their usual high standards of living. Social workers have been slow to theorize these challenges, although they deal with their effects on the ground, by responding to large numbers of unemployed clients, people migrating to escape environmental disasters and armed conflicts over scarce resources and people tackling the devastating effects of disease on their lives for lack of medicines.

Globalization is a contested term, ranging in meaning from the economic integration of countries in one economic system, to one that considers the impact of economic global relations on social relationships from the meta-level of a social system to the interstices of everyday life practices (ELPs) (Dominelli, 2004b). This article focuses on the latter meaning, as this addresses both the complexity and depth in which globalized social relations are enacted daily in the economic, cultural, political and social domains; and the connectedness between different aspects of society that link experiences between people and places to create interdependence among those spatially located at considerable distances from each other.

It also examines how globalization has affected service delivery in personal social services; labour processes, as these affect social workers as employees and in practitioner-user relationships; the internationalization of social problems; and the changing nature of the nation-state. The story does not end here. The emerging economies of China, India, Brazil and Mexico are introducing their own challenges, not least in the economic sphere where other models of development are coming to the fore, regardless of a country's location within the global economic system. Each of these countries has a high birth rate and presents demographic challenges that must be met by the world as a whole if everyone is to be fed and housed. Additionally, indigenous people and poor people are fighting back through anti-globalization movements,

indigenous movements and new ideas about organizing work and meeting human needs outside core capitalist social relations in their neo-liberal forms.

## **Defining globalization: Comments from the social work field**

Globalization has been defined primarily in economic terms as a singular entity that affects all regions by integrating them into one economic global system (Hoogvelt, 1997). Research by Held and colleagues (1999) has argued against this definition to highlight globalization as a set of processes that reflect regional differences. Hirst et al. (2009) emphasize the differentiated impact of globalization, despite its commitment to capitalist economic relations. Conceptualizing globalization along these lines tends to ignore its impact, especially in its neo-liberal form prevailing today, on everyday routine life practices. In social work, Dominelli (2004a, 2004b) reformulates globalization as the embedding of capitalist social relations in daily routines in personal lives, public life in general and professional practices. Although there is no agreement over the definition of globalization, a close reading of the literature suggests that there is consensus on its key features, namely:

- cultural diffusion and rapprochement contradicted by increasingly nationalist tendencies in many different countries;
- social relations that shape all aspects of life by giving primacy to market mechanisms and discipline;
- migration as a response to economic hardship, environmental degradation and violence;
- general integration and a widening of economic forces across borders compared with protectionism and exclusion;
- rapid technological change that has introduced new forms of social exclusion, e.g. the digital divide;
- disparities between urban and rural; and
- urbanization and centralization that stress environmental capacities to support ever rising population numbers (Dominelli, 2010).

Globalization has had a significant impact on social work practice and has affected the profession in several ways. Much of this has been attributed to the new managerialism and privatization (Clarke and Newman, 1997). In the UK, new managerialist practices and market discipline began with Thatcherism in the late 1980s in the form of community care (Griffiths, 1988) and later spread to other parts of the profession. However, this development has been poorly articulated by practitioners (Khan and Dominelli, 2000). And,

with a few exceptions like Dominelli (1991) and Lyons (1999), it passed with little comment in the general theoretical social work literature until recently, for example with Lyons (2006), Dustin (2007) and Payne and Askeland (2008). The last two authors argue that globalization has heightened uncertainty as an issue for practitioners. Their approach identifies weaknesses highlighted by postmodern authors like Fook (2002), Webb (2003) and Healy (2005). This neglect is odd given that the term globalization has been used in the social sciences since the 1980s (Cox, 1981).

In the UK, globalization has affected social work practice in the following major ways.

- Promoting a new managerialism that has introduced business practices and market discipline into arenas formerly excluded from market forces and the profit motive.
- Disempowering social workers by restricting their access to resources that match their assessment of needs, particularly of those required by specific individuals.
- Increasing the techno-bureaucratic nature of practice through performance indicators and efficiency measures aimed at maximizing the use of limited resources for the greatest number of people.
- Shifting the practitioner–worker relationship away from relational social work to one that is more distant, as a result of the state’s involvement in commissioning processes for services to be delivered by private and voluntary sector agencies.
- Altering the relationship between service users and the state by turning them into consumers of services in a quasi-market while simultaneously offering them greater choice and control over their lives through the personalization agenda and individual budgets.
- Reducing the impact of solidarity in service provisions by moving away from universal services in favour of residual ones that target the neediest of the needy.
- Encouraging individual responsibility for meeting one’s own needs while the state becomes preoccupied with competitiveness, opening the welfare market to international corporations keen to profit from their engagement in this field and supporting privatization.
- Increasing the impact of the international on local practice through the internationalization of social problems like poverty, the drug trade, trafficking in women and children, the arms trade and organized crime.
- Increasing the impact of migration in both the demands made by movements of people on services, and also the movement of social workers who train in one country and go to work in another (Dominelli, 2004a, 2004b).

These features are not unique to the UK. Aspects of them are recognizable in locations in the global North and global South, although their specific details need to be considered according to particular contexts – economic, political, cultural and social. Sewpaul and Holscher (2004), for example, consider the effect of globalization in South Africa; Netto (2008) does likewise for Latin America. Similar trends have been identified elsewhere (Dustin, 2007; Lyons, 2006) including Canada, New Zealand, Australia and the USA.

The complexities arising from the financial and environmental crises require practitioners to look for new paradigms for practice, and give greater priority to social and community development within an ecological framework that cares for the environment as well as the people living within it. Among these new approaches, the demands of indigenous people are particularly important. As previously silenced voices, they have heightened aspirations for new theoretical understandings that take account of the spiritual needs of people, reclaiming traditional rights and heritages, and dreams of developing into whole human beings, not simply consumers in the market-place (Grande, 2004).

Their calls for indigenous and endogenous forms of social work with their own forms of social work practice stand in contrast to the homogenizing tendencies of the McDonaldization or Americanization of social work (Dustin, 2007). In eastern Europe, for example, skills that practitioners had in meeting the welfare needs of communities during the Soviet era are being reaffirmed. These had been discounted by Western academics whose assumptions decried local practices and imposed inappropriate models on transitional societies (Dominelli, 1992, 1996; Reitzer, 2000; Stubbs, 2007). Critiques of globalization highlight neo-liberalism as a bankrupt ideology, despite its Benthamite claims to produce the greatest good for the greatest number, often spelt out as the trickle-down effect. Those creating new theories and forms of practice engage with interdisciplinarity and interdependence, and replace ideologies that glorify the possessive individualism of looking after oneself and family with reciprocated forms of solidarity that encompass all the world's inhabitants (Shiva, 2003).

## **The challenges of globalization for social work practice**

Globalization and the new managerialist practices accompanying it have challenged social workers in various ways. These include responding to growing numbers of poor people throughout the world; dealing with problems that cross borders; and becoming deskilled professionals as practice becomes bureaucratized and commodified in response to market disciplines

that demand more out of each unit of resource that is expended on welfare services; and controlling the workforce in predictable directions as market discipline permeates an arena that had been considered exempt from it. Hence, social workers have become familiar with terms like 'value for money', 'business plans', 'targets', 'outputs' and 'performance management' (Dominelli, 2004a, 2004b). Case management techniques have begun to dominate many domains in practice, particularly in work with older people.

The state has become a purchaser that commissions services from a range of providers in the independent, voluntary, not-for-profit and commercial sectors. Techno-bureaucratic social work has replaced relational social work in many statutory offices, while working with people migrates to the voluntary sector (Dominelli, 2004b). Social workers have countered these developments by formulating new theories and models of practice, among which indigenous ones are crucial because they have given rise to new forms of practice that have been adopted elsewhere, like family group conferences and new theories that emphasize spirituality that have spread into the mainstream. Others include becoming involved in anti-globalization movements; arguing for social justice and human rights-based forms of practice in local, national and international fora; forming alliances and partnerships with service users and community groups; and strengthening relationships between key international organizations such as the International Association of Schools of Social Work, the International Federation of Social Workers and the International Council on Social Welfare. High rates of turnover and staff vacancies are also indicative of resistance to these trends in the UK (Unison, 2009).

### *Privatization, the commodification of goods and services and the impact of fiscal crisis on social work*

Turning goods and people into commodities lies at the heart of neo-liberal globalization as it advances across the globe in search of profit-making opportunities for shareholders and those who own and manage multinational corporations. The drive to earn and make money without substantial assets to underpin various ventures has been the undoing of neo-liberalism as a system that produced unlimited profits for rich people. Unsustainable loans on the housing market in the USA precipitated a financial crisis that sent the stock markets into free fall following the collapse of Lehman Brothers Bank on 14 September 2008. This raised insecurity for ordinary people as income inequalities were exacerbated and the numbers seeking help and assistance to cope with the aftermath rose considerably.

The rescue of the banking system required huge injections of public money, paid for by taxpayers, most of whom were people struggling to meet their own bills, not least housing payments and utility charges. In 2008, American taxpayers spent £2.9 trillion to prevent Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac from going under because these two institutions guaranteed half the mortgage loans in the country. In 2008, it was estimated that each person in the UK had contributed around £50,000 to bail out the country's financial sector. Saving ailing financial institutions has cost the British taxpayer £1.5 trillion in public funds (Waugh, 2009). Paralleling this type of government expenditure have been cuts in education, health and other public services. At the same time, bankers have insisted on getting their golden handshakes and pensions for leaving the institutions that their questionable judgements had brought to their knees. For example, Sir Fred Goodwin, chief executive of the Royal Bank of Scotland (RBS) resisted pressure to forego his perks when RBS went into public ownership after losing £24.1 billion in 2008. Although RBS underperformed and was taken into public control, his bonus payments were reputed to be worth £8 million (Connon, 2009).

This crisis affected all major economies, but fell heavily on the British and American ones because they had invested extensively in subprime mortgages where money was lent without ensuring that the assets necessary to underpin the loan or the income to repay these were in place. Recovery promises to be painful. Taxpayers are paying for the crisis as 'bank aid' to keep the financial sector afloat and in reduced public expenditures on items intended to curb the worst excesses of capitalism – education, health, personal social services and income support. Gross inequalities in wealth challenge social workers struggling to find resources, for example, to pay heating bills for children in freezing homes, fund personal care or feed refugees.

Prior to the financial crisis, the failure of neo-liberalism to meet ordinary people's aspirations for a better life was already evident. Integral parts of its legacy were: high levels of poverty; high rates of illiteracy, especially among women; poor access to clean water; and lack of sanitation, schooling and health care for millions of people. The MDGs agreed at the United Nations in 2000 were a response to these failures as they targeted reductions in each of these areas. None of the MDGs are likely to be met (Correll, 2008), except possibly poverty reduction targets in China, where 150 million people have already been taken out of poverty. Urbanization in China is set to rise to unprecedented levels as the countryside empties. Moreover, the size of the urban population globally is expected to exceed the rural one for the first time in history by mid-century. Mass movements to urban areas are linked to rural poverty and the centralization of economic development in cities.



By 2009, over one billion people were going hungry as a result of rising food prices, decreased agricultural output and reduced aid budgets (Blair, 2009). *Social Watch* (a voluntary network committed to eradicating poverty and discrimination) argues that this predicament is avoidable. There is enough food if governments distribute it equitably to all people. Social workers could advocate for this. Wealth and income inequalities have increased between and within countries. In 2006, the richest three billionaires in the world held more money between them than the 48 lowest-income countries. At that time, there were 946 billionaires on the planet; 40 per cent of them were American and most were men. Only 63 were women. The richest woman held one-third of the money that the richest man did (Kroll and Fass, 2007). At the same time, 2.8 billion people lived on less than \$US2 a day, the figure deemed the poverty line; 1.3 billion lived at the absolute poverty level of \$US1 a day. Women are most likely to suffer from poverty and work in the sweatshops of the world for low wages (Wichterich, 2000). Women are crucial to the development effort because they make best use of whatever resources can be ploughed into families at the local level (Ross, 2008). Social workers often mediate these relationships.

### *The internationalization of social problems*

Globalization has been accompanied by the internationalization of social problems as issues that arise in one location become problematic in another. People move across different parts of the world for various reasons: poverty, wars, famine, environmental degradation. All have implications for receiving countries, some of which are hard pressed to assist. The UN has estimated that 42 million people are seeking refuge globally. Most are in Africa. Climate change is anticipated to create a further 25 million refugees by 2050 (Sanders, 2009). Many move from one poor area to another in search of refuge and add to the numbers living in urban slums that lack the infrastructures to care for people already there. Additional numbers exacerbate tensions in already stressed environments. For example, at the Kenya–Somalia border, a refugee camp built for 90,000 refugees caters for three times that number (Sanders, 2009). Ruling elites that insist that refugees remain on their own side of the border ignore the realities of nomadic lifestyles and artificial boundaries set up through colonial imperatives rather than the traditional patterns of movement. Jordan has enormous difficulty in meeting the housing, education and health care needs of two million Iraqi refugees displaced in the West's invasion of Iraq. Droughts are increasingly becoming regular occurrences in places like Ethiopia, leading to famine. In other countries, like Bangladesh, floods occur with a frequency that is disturbing (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2007, 2008).

These disrupt many people's lives. They barely have time to recover before the next unexpected flow hits them. The search for food enforces migratory movements that lead people to refugee camps where they wait for humanitarian assistance to enable them to survive from one day to the next. Social workers deliver such aid and are frustrated by the obstacles they often face.

Other aspects of the internationalization of social problems include the organized drug trade, human trafficking and arms smuggling. These cause unknown levels of hardship as they are founded on coercive and violent interactions aimed to keep people in their place while those heading the cartels that organize and manage such activities earn fortunes. The trade in humans has become an industry worth billions. It is now the third-highest income earner after arms and drug smuggling (Lyons et al., 2006). People taken across borders are charged exorbitant fees by agents known as snakeheads (Hume, 2009). For example, migrants from central Asia who had been given passage in a rusty ship paid \$45,000 per person to go to Canada or \$15,000 to go to Australia (Sinoski, 2009). One person who reached Canada as an unaccompanied minor in 2002 said it took him six years to pay the \$80,000 he owed for his voyage (Sinoski, 2009). Payment is unavoidable because the lives of families and friends left behind may be at risk if no money is paid (Shore, 2009). Being deported carries dangers for those concerned: a Mexican woman was murdered following deportation when her claim for asylum status was refused; she was also charged the costs of the flight back (Greenaway, 2009). Similar fates have awaited other deportees in countries as different as Iraq and Zimbabwe. The failure successfully to pursue a case for asylum may say more about the suspicions of those processing claims than about the actual situations of asylum-seekers, who are treated like criminals just because they seek shelter in a country when they do not have the requisite documentation. But they may have legitimately feared for their lives and been unable to get the necessary permits, passports and birth certificates together. Halima Bashir (2008), who was finally given asylum in the UK, wrote poignantly about her ordeal in *Tears of the Desert*.

Children also cross borders by being adopted. International adoptions rise and fall according to wider events (Selman, 2009). However, publicity associated with the involvement of celebrities such as Angelina Jolie and Madonna reproduces the notion that people in Africa and other industrializing countries are poor and that children need to be rescued by those with a conscience or who can offer children greater opportunities in the West. The cult of such personalities is strong and may distort people's views of what is possible, as is indicated by one young child who apparently told Madonna, 'You are our God', during one of her fleeting visits to an orphanage

in Malawi where she had earlier adopted a boy (Collins, 2009). Celebrity interventions play havoc with social work routines of assessment that aim to establish the best parenting situations for children and ascertain how the retention of their cultural heritage can be assured. Sadly, childless couples' demands for children result in organized criminal gangs stealing children and selling them for cash. This is a large problem in China, for example, where between 60,000 and 200,000 children are stolen annually for this purpose. Stolen boy children are sold for \$US4000 and girls for \$US1000 (McCabe, 2009). This gender disparity indicates the higher value placed on boy children than girl children. Yet Chinese men outnumber women by a considerable number, leaving heterosexual men of marriageable age with a problem (Smith and Hugo, 2008).

The numbers of international child abductions are rising as married couples from different religions and nationalities divorce in acrimonious circumstances. There were 336 cases of child abductions in the UK in 2008, of which 134 were to countries that had not signed the 1980 Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction (Hague Convention). Litigation in courts not covered by the Hague Convention may make resolving a situation more difficult as these do not have to honour the decisions made in other jurisdictions (Cree and Wallace, 2009). Social workers experience great difficulty supporting these families.

### *Indigenizing social work*

Globalization has critics who oppose its spread. These include indigenous people who have a history of struggling to maintain their cultural legacies and promote new forms of practice, some of which resonate among majority populations. These are particularly evident in the UK's ex-colonial territories of the USA, Canada, New Zealand and Australia, where indigenous children and young people have been disproportionately taken into care and subjected to criminal proceedings. They were forcibly removed from parents, grandparents and extended families, placed in care or residential schools and deprived of family, language and culture to ensure that they were physically and spiritually denied all that mattered to them. Forced into becoming 'good Englishmen and women', they were subjected to systematic physical and sexual abuse in these establishments (Furniss, 1995). The legacy of this abuse continues and indigenous people are struggling to heal themselves and reclaim their heritages and rights so that they can rebuild their lives anew (Chrisjohn et al., 2006). In the process, some have created their own welfare services, for example the First Nations in Canada and the Maori peoples in New Zealand. New forms of indigenous practice have been

adopted by other nations. For example, the Maori family group conferencing and redistributive justice systems (Tait-Rolleston and Pehi-Barlow, 2001) have been adopted by social workers in countries as distant as Canada, Sweden and the UK. Canadian First Nations have also used their teachings around the Medicine Wheel to encourage people to think of spirituality and the environment in their social relationships (Bruyere, 2001).

Other forms of indigenization have focused on celebrating local forms of social work practice, including those that preceded a nation's encounters with the West, and developing locality-specific forms of practice to assert their own autonomous paths following periods of colonization. Eastern European countries that had different ways of dealing with welfare issues before and during Communist rule had to rediscover them after Western academics and practitioners informed them that they had none and offered them Western models to adapt to their needs (Stubbs, 2007). Others, like Ilse Arlt of Austria, were silenced because their works were not written in English. Her insights into the links between people's environment and their social problems have recently been translated into English by Mais and Pantucek (2009). And most English speakers do not know about the excellent social work practices that exist in Latin America.

## Conclusions

Globalization has produced winners and losers as it has spread its tentacles across the world. Its benefits are hotly disputed, but enjoyed by people living in the West and elites in the global South. At the same time, it has created considerable problems that social workers are asked to resolve. These include internationalized social problems that bring the global to the local and raise the local to the global arena. They are helped in their tasks through the development of theories, practice and research that can cross borders while still recognizing the significance of local inputs into social problems that have local and/or global dimensions. The rise of indigenization has much to offer in this regard. But learning from the experiences of indigenous peoples does not absolve other social workers in the global North from innovating if they are to avoid using their professional expertise and power to oppress people anew.

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