Travelling Knowledge in Social Work: An Analytical Framework

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International Travelling Knowledge in Social Work: An Analytical Framework

Social work has a shared international identity, but is also diverse and context-specific. There is increasing interest in the international movement of knowledge into national and local contexts but at present there is little analysis of how and why this happens. Instead of seeing knowledge as ‘transferred’ in a straightforward export-import relationship, attention needs to be paid to how knowledge is assembled, mobilised, circulated, reformulated and reassembled as it travels from one country to another. Drawing on neo-institutionalism, a comprehensive framework is proposed that may serve as a heuristic for researching and analysing international travelling knowledge in social work. It includes nine elements: narratives, routes, barriers, boundaries, filters, providers, shape, roots, issues and topics.

**Keywords:** social work knowledge; knowledge transfer; international travelling knowledge; neo-institutionalism.

# Introduction

Questions about the relationship between knowledge and practice in social work have existed since its origins and are still on-going (Richmond, 1917; Mollenhauer, 1959; Gray et al., 2009). While the precise terms of the debates about this relationship change, they are premised on the recognition that the nature and purpose of social work are embedded in the interrelationship of knowledge and practice. This interrelationship has been examined predominantly in terms of vertical processes of knowledge transfer: how does ‘science’ – in the sense of abstract and general knowledge that may be theoretical or research-based – relate to the ‘art’ in social work, especially concerning the exercise of judgement and skills in practice? Although these are challenging questions, this model of knowledge being transferred from ‘science’ to practice has been critiqued and arguments have been made for an emphasis on knowledge and action ‘occurring in the real world’ (Gredig and Sommerfield, 2008). In this ‘real world’ context a less closely-analysed dimension of knowledge transfer is the horizontal processes of the movement and exchange of knowledge in social work, particularly internationally.

Social work has a shared international identity, but it is also diverse and context-specific (Payne and Askeland, 2008; Hugman, 2010). It has an internationally-agreed statement outlining its purposes and aims (IASSW, 2014 ) and the profession has sought to share and exchange ideas, skills and expertise globally. However, social work is also local in character. It developed within specific social and political regimes, and its national perspectives are significantly influenced by these settings (McDonald, Harris and Wintersteen, 2003). There is an emerging interest in the international movement of knowledge into these local and national contexts but at present little analysis of how and why this happens. Contrary to the dominant view, what are presented as good ideas, sound evidence and effective practices cannot simply be treated as readily portable and context-free; as simply being ‘transferred’. Bourdieu (1999) cautions against such assumptions and stresses the influence that the contexts and processes of knowledge creation, transfer and use have on the way that knowledge travels internationally. This suggests that the international travelling of social work knowledge is both an important and a complex issue. The ways in which knowledge moves (or does not move) and the impact of movement on knowledge require critical attention.

In the next section, we begin this process of critical attention by setting out the dominant understanding of international knowledge transfer in social work, before proposing the term ‘travelling knowledge’ as opening up the possibility of a more comprehensive perspective. Next, we turn to neo-institutionalism as an entry point into exploring the complexity of travelling knowledge. We draw on two neo-institutionalist contributions: transfer mechanisms in the work of Sahlin-Andersson and Engwall (2002) and DiMaggio and Powell’s (1991) concept of isomorphism. We then set out elements of a framework that might be used as a heuristic to facilitate analyses based on our conceptualisation of international travelling knowledge in social work and the social processes this conceptualisation involves. Finally, we argue for the need to augment the framework by considering issues of power in international travelling knowledge and levels of change in the receiving context.

# International knowledge transfer

The dominant understanding of international knowledge transfer is denoted by the term ‘transfer’ itself. It is seen in rational-formal terms as the straightforward process of transferring knowledge from country A to country B, facilitated by the agents of such transfer, who perspicaciously select from the pool of available knowledge what is best suited to the issue(s) they wish to address. Many years ago, Statham (1978) criticised this kind of approach, citing strands in radical social work that simply transferred ideas, such as ‘conscientisation’, from the global South to the North without considering the new context within which the concepts would be used and adapting them accordingly. Ignoring such considerations, the dominant understanding often sees knowledge in ‘model’ terms: country ‘A’ has knowledge that is used in particular ways in order to understand and/or intervene in an aspect of social work; country ‘B’ wishes to learn how to understand and/or intervene better in this aspect of social work; country ‘B’ adopts the knowledge fully-formed from country ‘A’, after it has travelled unchanged from one country to the other. The underlying assumption of this understanding is that ‘evidence from one culture can be applied in another, because science has established that, underneath minor local differences, there is a universal true human core’ (Evans and Hardy, 2010, p.53). For example, family group conferencing, an approach originally developed in New Zealand as a way of enabling Maori families to resolve issues by using processes that were embedded in their indigenous culture, is depicted as being universally applicable and thus as being easily transferred to any country in the world (see, for example, Rotabi et al., 2012). Even when the movement of knowledge into practice is seen as problematic, in the wider knowledge transfer literature the emphasis is usually on the way in which it can be improved by utilising ‘the best available knowledge, the use of educational and other transfer strategies that are known to be effective, and the value of learning about planned-action theories to be better able to understand and influence change in practice settings’ (Graham et al., 2006, p.13). The problem is generally depicted as being the need for more effective knowledge mobilisation, including ‘ideas and strategies that can be done quickly and easily to improve KM almost immediately in any organisation’ (Cooper and Levin, 2010, p.351). However, Greenhalgh and Wieringa (in relation to medicine) highlight that ‘knowledge obstinately refuses to be driven unproblematically into practice’ (2011, p.501). They call for a wider range of models that would enable the movement of knowledge to be engaged with in more creative and critical ways.

Accordingly, we have jettisoned terms such as ‘knowledge transfer’, ‘knowledge translation’, ‘knowledge management’ and ‘knowledge mobilisation’ in order to indicate our dissatisfaction with this dominant understanding and the constraints such terms place on conceptualisation. We use the more fluid term ‘travelling knowledge’. By the use of this term, we seek to convey a view of knowledge that sees it not as a stable object but as an array of social processes that constitute the complexity of what knowledge is, its movement and, in a field like social work, establish meanings, norms and practices. Knowledge can, of course, travel greater and lesser distances; across national and policy regime boundaries and across professional and organisational boundaries. Here we focus on its international movement as a critical example of ‘travelling knowledge’. Instead of seeing knowledge as ‘transferred’ in a straightforward export-import relationship (Dolowitz and Marsh, 1998), we think in terms of how it is assembled, mobilised, circulated, reformulated and reassembled as it travels. For example, assembly and reassembly involve arranging and organising knowledge, fitting it together in particular ways and for particular interests and purposes. This can be seen in the case of social pedagogy as it has travelled from continental Europe to the UK (Petrie and Cameron, 2009). In a recent study of German trained social pedagogues working in England, for instance, Bain and Evans (2014) found that while these practitioners had assumed they would be able to practise in England as they had in Germany, they encountered significant cultural and organisational challenges to their practice traditions. Reflecting on their experience of having to change and adapt their practice, many felt that while social pedagogy had a lot to offer English social work, it would have to be transformed to work in the English context. Knowledge is, therefore, not just a complex social construction, it is also relational; it mutates as it travels.

# International travelling knowledge: a neo-institutionalist approach

Given our dissatisfaction with ‘knowledge transfer’, we seek to develop a framework that might be used as a heuristic to facilitate research and analyses based on our conception of ‘international travelling knowledge’ in social work and of the social processes this conception involves. Our starting point for developing the framework is neo-institutionalism. Neo-institutionalism in general is concerned with understanding the interrelationship between organisations within an institutional field. Such fields have authoritative rules, values and fundamental beliefs that influence the organisations operating within them. The idea of ‘field’ - influenced by the work of Bourdieu (1993) - thus encompasses a social arena with networks of actors and organisations. Fields are not necessarily consensual. They can involve contest and debate, with competing organisational interests negotiating about the interpretation of key issues. Organisations are understood broadly in neo-institutionalism as collectivities within fields and can include not only formal bodies such as social work agencies but also other organised collectivities such as professions (Greenwood et al., 2002; Scott, 2008). Organisational structures and practices are seen as potentially unstable, reflecting and responding to rules, beliefs and conventions within local fields of operation. For example, Leicht et al., in their consideration of professions’ responses to neo-liberalism in different policy regimes, observe that the professions had to negotiate a tension between: ‘…the institutional logic of professional practice centred on professional-client relationships, autonomy, collegiality and professional ethics on the one hand, versus a technical environment stressing market efficiency, technological change and organizational innovation on the other’ (2009, pp. 583-584).

Two key propositions of neo-institutionalism are, first, that there is a strong tendency within a field for organisations to adopt similar forms (isomorphism) and, secondly, that this similarity is less a function of technical-rational adaptation and more a function of seeking legitimacy by conforming to fundamental and powerful assumptions. These assumptions within a field have been termed ‘rational myths’: ‘Organizations are driven to incorporate the practices and procedures defined by prevailing rationalized concepts … Organizations that do so increase their legitimacy and survival prospects, independent of the immediate efficacy of the acquired practices and procedures’ (Meyer and Rowan, 1991, p.41). Within this perspective, we draw on two neo-institutionalist contributions to examine international travelling knowledge: first, *transfer mechanisms* in the work of Sahlin-Andersson and Engwall (2002)and, secondly, the *receiving context*, by considering DiMaggio and Powell’s (1991) concept of isomorphism.

Transfer mechanisms are central in Sahlin-Andersson and Engwall’s (2002) edited volume on the international movement of management knowledge (see especially chapter 1). They identify three knowledge-transfer mechanisms: carriers, flows, and sources. These transfer mechanisms can also been seen as operating in the movement of social work knowledge. Organisations producing national and international knowledge in the field of social work (*carriers*) - for example, universities, government research units or consultancies - have increased significantly since the 1960s and the knowledge they produce is circulated through conferences, journals and the sale of knowledge ‘products’. Carriers translate, elaborate and codify knowledge as they transfer it, so, in developing an analysis of international travelling knowledge in social work, we need to know more about how knowledge is put together, processed and distributed by these carriers and how the carriers develop, act and interact with each other. Sahlin-Andersson and Engwall (2002) stress the significance of carriers of knowledge partly to emphasise that they do not see knowledge as flowing automatically under its own impetus. Thus they see value in paying attention to *flows* of knowledge, analysing how knowledge circulates, under what conditions it circulates and how knowledge is formed and transformed as it circulates. They argue that well-packaged and well-labelled knowledge that claims universal applicability flows more easily. It may not be the case that the more powerful ideas flow more easily but that they become more powerful as they flow, depending on who transports and supports them and how they are packaged and formulated. For example, the formation of networks may allow knowledge to flow or as knowledge flows, new interests, meanings and actors may emerge and knowledge may be shaped and re-shaped. Or, ideas may be legitimated as a result of being adopted by powerful organisations/actors in a particular field.

As well as stressing the significance of carriers and flows, Sahlin-Andersson and Engwall (2002) identify two trends in the *sources* of knowledge. First, *diversification*, which they also refer to (more clearly) as *universalization*, that is the development of specific and local types of knowledge into general, universal, diverse and widespread knowledge, illustrated in their work by the idea of ‘Americanisation’. This process seems to entail the shift of an increasingly powerful idea from one setting to another. Secondly, the trend towards *creolisation*,which refers to fields coming into contact with each other anddifferent sources influencing knowledge development and being shaped and integrated in different contexts (see also, Morris and Lancaster, 2006).

In addition to Sahlin-Andersson and Engwall’s interest in what they refer to as transfer mechanisms, we are interested in what happens when knowledge arrives at a destination. In order to consider the impact of international travelling knowledge on the receiving context, we draw on DiMaggio and Powell’s work on isomorphism (1991). Thus the adoption of international travelling knowledge may be enforced through the process of *coercive isomorphism*, for example, if a state seeks to ensure that a particular policy goal is implemented by drawing on international travelling knowledge for its legitimacy. Or, organisations may engage in *mimetic isomorphism*,modelling themselves on each other, if the adoption of international travelling knowledge increases their credence and standing in their institutional field. Finally, international travelling knowledge may be important in *normative isomorphism*, if such knowledge is seen as constituting professional best practice or as the currently fashionable form of management practice. These isomorphic processes seldom involve actors and organisations operating within a single hermetically sealed field. Rather, they tend to operate in several interconnected fields at the same time. Recognition of the multiplicity of fields connects to Sahlin-Andersson and Engwall’s observation with regard to sources; that some travelling knowledge has a tendency towards universalisation and other travelling knowledge towards creolisation. The role of multiple fields assists in understanding the impact and influence of travelling knowledge in receiving contexts because an important factor in understanding the impact of travelling knowledge on and in the receiving context is likely to be the intersection of complementary and contradictory isomorphic pressures operating on actors and organisations at the intersection of multiple fields.

The work of Sahlin-Andersson and Engwall and DiMaggio and Powell strengthens the case that the international travelling of knowledge cannot be regarded as simply the export/import movement of ‘good ideas’ from one context to another. In what follows, we seek to build on these authors’ work and set out a more comprehensive framework that can serve as a heuristic for researching and analysing international travelling knowledge in social work on its journey to the receiving context

# International travelling knowledge in social work: a framework for research and analysis

The framework we propose has nine elements: narratives, routes, barriers, boundaries, filters, providers, shape, roots, issues and topics. Each of these elements is considered in turn.

## Narratives

Knowledge travels in and through narratives. A narrative provides the ‘story’ of the knowledge and shapes how it is presented. It conveys what the knowledge is, the issues and topics with which it is concerned, what is attractive about it and why it should be accepted in different contexts. For example, the narrative about New Public Management stresses its usefulness, its consistency, its universal applicability and its production of results. A narrative is more than a descriptive account of knowledge.   
A narrative’s function is to tell potential recipients of the knowledge how it is to be interpreted and understood, how it should be used and the advantages that will accrue to those who use it. Accordingly, a narrative that can be framed as universal, that commodifies and dramatises knowledge and that can either be harmonised with existing practice or replace it (so that, either way, a claim of great improvement can be made) can have a powerful impact. This impact can come with emotional loading, for example, as when knowledge entrepreneurs claim that through the acquisition of their knowledge people will ‘see the light’ and have a transformative experience as a result of believing in and embracing their knowledge. Narratives are distinct from discourses as the latter are wider ways of thinking, though a narrative can draw on a discourse by recounting a specific story that is consistent with a discourse. For example, a narrative about a particular method of social work may draw on the evidence-based discourse or on the discourse of user participation. Narratives function to simplify situations, isolating particular knowledge from the messiness of the tensions and dilemmas of the contexts for which it is advocated. Narratives can also reduce the room for manoeuvre of managers and practitioners through legitimising certain paradigms and not others. Narratives often criticise, explicitly or implicitly, the role and expertise of social work practitioners.

## Routes

Routes are the interconnections that enable knowledge to travel from one context to another. Knowledge may travel from research to practice or *vice versa*, from one discipline to another, from one field of practice to another, from actors to organisations or *vice versa*. This may occur through the use of established interconnections or contribute to the emergence of new ones. Routes can be tracks along which ideas, programmes or concepts are carried from one context to another, for example, by a consultancy agency selling a specific programme internationally, but routes can also be weak connections, which allow actors to anticipate an idea, a programme or a concept voluntarily, for example, by contacting international colleagues via other colleagues in a private meeting. For the purpose of studying travelling knowledge in social work we reject the idea of knowledge being carried in hermetically sealed boxes on well-established highways without any impact on both the knowledge as it travels and the interconnections that transport it. Rather, we propose the use of theoretical frameworks that build on the concept of an ‘ecology of knowledge’ and attend to the ‘complexity, contingency, and indeterminacy associated with the process of knowledge production’ ([Akera, 2007, p.5](#_ENREF_1)). An examination of routes is essential as it reveals relations between actors, organisations and institutions involved in the process of knowledge as it travels between the producing and the receiving ends. Hence, routes refer to the interwoven spatial and social dimensions in the travelling of knowledge.

## Barriers

Barriers prevent the movement of knowledge or limit access to it. They are central to understanding the ways in which knowledge does and does not move between different contexts. Barriers can be material - the structure and interests of the publishing industry, constrained library budgets, etc. - and they can be cultural and intellectual, for example, the use of English as the primary international language of knowledge exchange and the assumptions for identifying and recording research and publications embodied in search engines and databases. Barriers can also exist in the organisational and administrative structures in the receiving context or that context’s capacity to absorb and learn from new knowledge. Furthermore, barriers can be visceral; they can take the form of ‘constantly peddled prejudices, stereotypes, received ideas, and hastily simplistic representations’ (Bourdieu, 1999, p.220). Evidence-based knowledge, for example, - conventionally defined as a ‘research-informed, clinical decision-making process’ (Gray et al., 2013) - can be characterised as cold, calculating and inhumane, as a way of resisting its application to social work practice or, from a continental European perspective, as an Anglo-Saxon imposition. Barriers give advantage to particular sorts of knowledge (by limiting access to others) and operate to the disadvantage of alternative knowledge (by limiting its potential movement). However, barriers are not only implicated in systems of knowledge within social work; they are also related to the broader political structures within which social work operates. For example, in many regimes of practice policy-makers’ rhetorical commitment to evidence can exclude traditional social work practice expertise, which can be characterised as lacking an evidence base that would require them to take it seriously.

## Boundaries

Boundaries and interrelations across boundaries mark, but also construct, spatial entities, where knowledge production and reception are located, such as those represented by different countries. The dominant understanding of ‘knowledge transfer’ (see above) often takes for granted a concept of given bounded spatial entities with clear borders. For example, in most of the dominant models of policy transfer, politically relevant knowledge is conceptualised as crossing given borders (for a critical overview see Peck and Theodore, 2001). In the case of evidence-based programmes in social work, the border between the USA and UK and later on the border between the UK and continental European countries have been particularly significant. The interrelations across boundaries between different nations seem to define the places from which knowledge is ‘sent out’ and ‘comes in’. In contrast to the dominant understanding of ‘knowledge transfer’, which takes boundaries and borders as territorially-fixed given phenomena, empirical reflections on travelling knowledge in social work show that boundaries and borders have to be reconceptualised as historical, social and cultural formations and processes (Social Work and Society, 2013). Thus boundaries and interrelations cannot be defined self-evidently from within themselves; they should be understood in relation to their symbolic dimensions and the surrounding spaces, the included and excluded parts (Heite, Kessl and Maurer, 2013).

## Filters

Filters are mechanisms of selection that result in some kinds of knowledge being kept out and therefore rejected and others getting through and being accepted. The process of filtering travelling knowledge is determined by the interests of knowledge providers, its recipients, socio-political factors and so on. For this reason, knowledge that travels is not simply the ‘best knowledge’; filters reflect interests that allow some kinds of knowledge to travel and others not to do so. There are various types of filters. For example, formal or structural filters connected mainly with public institutes (for example, education) and informal or interpretational filters based on the application of knowledge. Within informal filters we might also refer to personal filters, since professionals can create new purposes and meanings for social work knowledge. Filters highlight the issue of selection in the travelling of knowledge and are a key factor in its social construction.

## Providers

In contrast with the dominant understanding of ‘knowledgetransfer’ (see above) that relies on the notion of a simple sender-receiver relationship and fails to recognise the complexity involved in travelling knowledge, there is a need to examine carefully both actors, organisations and institutions, which act as brokers, consolidators or purveyors of knowledge, and also the processes of translation, exchange and distribution in which they engage. These entities, located between the originators and the recipients of knowledge, both in space and time and in social relations, are termed ‘providers’. Pointing to the significance of providers raises questions concerning who acts as a provider of knowledge and what sorts of knowledge are provided by which providers. What are the selection criteria by which providers make decisions about the ‘units’ of knowledge that are brought together and packaged for transport and those that are rejected or not even considered? How is knowledge transformed and modified during the processes of provision, for example, through assembly/disassembly/reassembly? Providers such as journal editors and reviewers, conference organisers, textbook authors, boards of research-funding bodies and service-funding bodies, licensors of interventions etc. may have considerable impact on knowledge flows in social work. Their practices influence the extension and retention of knowledge, as well as the valuing and devaluing of it, and, therefore, shape the legitimacy, accessibility and utilisation of knowledge. Furthermore, different providers are positioned in fields such as disciplines, professions, education and social policy, and their positioning in these fields comes with constraints and interests that impact on their dealings with knowledge, and, conversely, patterns of knowledge circulation may change or sustain existing positions, relations and practices in those fields.

## Shape

The shape of knowledge can vary. Knowledge can be explanatory, descriptive, procedural, instructive etc., depending on its place of production and the context of its use. In social work, knowledge is often shaped as ‘practical’ or ‘applied’ in order to denote its relevance for social work practice. Shaping knowledge as ‘theoretical’ or ‘abstract’, in contrast to ‘evidence-based’, is sometimes used to indicate that it is not very useful. Thus, the shape of knowledge tells us a good deal: what shape of knowledge is prominent at a specific time, what is not and why? The shape of knowledge also incorporates the way in which knowledge is presented to its users or potential users, for example, the way in which knowledge is packaged and wrapped, is licensed or free of charge, whether digital knowledge is sold online or is provided as an open source.

## Roots

The origins of knowledge are rooted in time, location, and history. In analysing international travelling knowledge in social work, the rationale for asserting that ideas are based on trustworthy and transferable knowledge needs to be questioned. The core and origin of knowledge must be scrutinised and many questions need to be asked when the roots are found and evaluated. When, where and by whom was the knowledge developed? What kinds of problems was it meant to solve and why? What interests encouraged the creation process that led to the knowledge in question? How is the development of knowledge influenced by contextual factors such as local history and welfare-political factors? What is the overall view of human beings within the knowledge, and how has the development and creation of knowledge been influenced by specific paradigms and other fields of knowledge? What are the intentions, benefits and outcomes for those who identified the knowledge originally and initiated its travel, and do the roots of the knowledge have an impact on how the knowledge is utilised in the receiving context?

## Issues and topics

Certain sorts of knowledge have attracted more attention than others, and some have become topics and international reference points in the academic, professional, social services and social policy spheres. Some prominent travelling knowledge refers to the ways in which social work and social services should be organised and delivered (for example, case/care management, quality management), some to the ways in which knowledge should be produced, valued and used (for example, professionalisation, the concept of the profession, models of evidence-based social work), some refer to rationales for good practice (for example, empowerment, anti-oppressive social work) and some to how service users should be constructed, grouped and addressed (for example, risk assessment tools in child protection).

# Beyond a descriptive framework

The framework that we have suggested as a heuristic for undertaking research into and analysis of international travelling knowledge in social work could be seen as simply a more complete set of descriptive elements than the carriers, flows and sources provided by Sahlin-Andersson and Engwall (2002), a framework that could still reflect the absence in their work of sensitivity to different political, cultural, social and economic contexts. Whilst this might be useful and result in more comprehensive accounts of international travelling knowledge than that provided by the dominant understanding (see above), the elements we have set out need to be suffused with dimensions that open up a more contextualised consideration. To the question, ‘how does knowledge travel?’ need to be added the questions ‘why?’, ‘when?’ and ‘where?’ Therefore, two caveats need to be added to our proposed framework.

First, we consider that issues of power are deeply embedded in travelling knowledge in social work because knowledge is located in uneven distributions of power (and resources) across local, regional and national levels and through global networks. Travelling knowledge is power-laden: ‘The relationship between power and knowledge is important…as they are mutually constitutive, thus enabling and restricting the emergence of ideas and their institutionalization’ (Tag, 2013, pp. 31‒32). Therefore, more comprehensive research into and analysis of travelling knowledge in social work of the type we seek to encourage, needs to be set in the context of the power relations at play, such as support for particular political and economic interests. For example, neo-liberal reconfigurations of welfare regimes, and associated changes in policies and services, do not just represent institutional change. Neo-liberalism as the institutional rationality endorses, legitimises and authorises some kinds of knowledge and not others because institutional rationalities shape what are seen as constituting problems and knowledge-solutions to them. Routes, barriers, boundaries, filters, providers, shape, roots, issues and topics link the travelling of knowledge to specific interests of actors and organisations and, therefore, to power relations and structures of domination. In other words, there is a politics of knowledge, reflected in the content and shape of knowledge that is prominent at a specific time. However, whilst stressing the significance of power, we need to be wary of seeing the power relations involved as a one-way street. Knowledge can be changed as it is implemented in the receiving context; it can be resisted, adapted and subverted. For example, managers and social workers can shape knowledge in ways that are consistent with their existing knowledge and the practice that follows from it (Evans, 2011).

Secondly, we need to ensure that the framework includes a focus on the receiving end of travelling knowledge and have suggested that DiMaggio and Powell’s work on coercive, mimetic and normative isomorphism can be used to ensure that this happens. In order to flesh out the concept of isomorphism, the notion of ‘levels of change’ might usefully be added to research and analysis of the impact of travelling knowledge at the *macro-level*, involving large-scale change to goals, strategy and policy at a national level, at the *mezzo-level*, consisting of organisational changes in service delivery and the *micro-level* of changes in social work practice.

# Conclusion

Social work is an international profession with significant and different local identities that result in knowledge and skills being developed in particular settings. Knowledge developed in a particular country is increasingly travelling internationally and contributing to social work elsewhere. However, debates about knowledge and social work tend to focus on the vertical relationships between knowledge and practice - seeking to engage practice with theory and/or trying to ensure that theory relates to the world of practice. Such debates have given much less attention to the movement of knowledge between different countries and social welfare regimes.

In this article we have sought to draw attention to this horizontal movement of knowledge; the ways in which knowledge travels and does not travel internationally in social work. Knowledge, we have argued, does not simply travel of its own accord under the impulsion of its own validity and applicability to wherever it might be of value. Rather, knowledge has increasingly become a commodity that is packaged and marketed - often with a narrative of its past success and future promise - and travels along routes reflecting international networks and connections. In making these observations, we do not claim that all knowledge that travels is necessarily ‘tainted’ and should be regarded with suspicion. On the contrary, the movement of knowledge between social work regimes is potentially valuable, but we have to understand why some knowledge travels and some does not and to be able to think critically about what happens to knowledge in the process of travelling.

We have identified ideas from neo-institutional theory as a helpful starting point in embarking on a careful consideration of travelling knowledge and offered a heuristic with elements that can be utilised in researching and analysing it. These ideas and the heuristic are offered tentatively as a contribution to thinking about the issues involved in travelling knowledge, the impact the dynamics of travelling have on knowledge and the processes of receiving knowledge in new contexts of use. As the ideas and heuristic are used and explored further, they will be developed, refined and amended, as part of a dynamic process of seeking to advance understanding of international travelling knowledge in social work.

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