**EJSW EDITORIAL—Special Issue: Travelling Knowledge in Social Work**

The origin of this special issue lies in a series of questions about social work knowledge. Discussions about knowledge in social work tend to focus on the application of theory and research in practice. However, there’s relatively little consideration of how knowledge moves around and between social work in different countries. The assumption seems to be that ideas flow freely; that what’s useful will be picked up and what isn’t useful will be discarded. However, this assumption needs to be questioned. In one sense it’s quite attractive, in that it plays in to a discourse of the international nature of social work, which can be seen in developments such as international statements about the profession. But social work, by its nature, is also very much tied in with its particular setting and context—it’s social—and this raises questions about the transfer of knowledge between different societies and its application in one context being seen as relevant in another one.

If we look at the international movement of knowledge, there seem to be established trade routes—from the US to the rest of the world; from the global north to the global south—and a predominance of the English language. It’s important to consider that, while these well-trodden routes may make the movement of knowledge easier for some, they may also restrict and constrain the flow for others. However, the issues are not just about tracing and understanding of knowledge and how this could be an advantage to some and a disadvantage to others. It seems to us that ideas, when they travel, are not hermetically sealed. They tend to be picked up for a reason, and will reflect a particular agenda; and in the process of moving they are liable to change—travel not only broadens the mind; it can also change it. The process of change may be intentional or accidental: a misunderstanding or a skilful adaptation. This may also be related to the way these ideas move and who moves them. Are they seen as property, under the control of the original author and licensed out to others? Or are they treated as common goods, which can be picked up and changed without reference to a proprietor?

Underpinning these questions are ideas about the nature of professional knowledge and professional practice, which relate back to the tension within social work of being both an international profession and a confederation of national professions. Depending how one sees social work, one may emphasise the global nature of knowledge and the importance of learning lessons from others and applying their solutions locally. The other perspective is that, alongside a more society-specific idea of social work is a sense that knowledge is deeply embedded with local assumptions and engaged with the economic and social realities of that particular context, which means that knowledge is primarily located and useful in that specific setting. The risk, though, with this latter perspective is that it resists change and can set itself against learning from others. At the same time, it is also a useful corrective to the danger in the global idea of social work that knowledge can just be lifted from one setting to another and understood and applied by social workers doing the same things, dealing with the same problems, with the same concerns, in the same socio-economic setting.

The challenges and questions this special issue explores are located in the tension between these two perspectives, which recognises the problems in an overly romanticised view of the local and specific nature of knowledge and the open and free-flowing marketplace of global knowledge.

There is also a very practical purpose to exploring these issues, which is to argue for a corrective to current debates about research and knowledge in social work. These tend to focus on methodology, particularly in disputes between evidence-based practice and its opponents. These methodological debates are important, but we hope that this special issue will also underline the view that it’s as important to understand the ways in which knowledge moves; the powers which influence this movement and constrain it, and the way in which the meaning and focus of ideas and research are not fixed in this journey, but themselves change in the process; and that these factors need to be part of the evaluation of theories and research for practice.

Many of these observations and questions reflect discussions held by a group of social work academics in a series of meetings in Warwick in England; Oslo in Norway; Basle in Switzerland, and Essen in Germany—discussions which gave rise to the idea of this special issue. Through these discussions the group has developed a framework which it believes to be useful for analysing the international movement of knowledge. **Harris *et al***, in the first chapter of this special issue, presents this framework, which draws on a neo-institutional perspective to examine how knowledge is assembled, mobilised, circulated, reformulated and reassembled as it travels from one context to another.

**Chambon *et al*** show that these questions about the movement and change of knowledge across borders are not new, but permeate the history of social work. They look at the history of the Settlement House movement, and the development of child agency work during the late 19th and early 20th century, looking at developments in Toronto and how these were influenced by a mixture of common concerns, personal and professional networks, and larger political and ideological formations, such as imperial links between Canada and the US and religious revivalism in North America.

**Guenter et al** point out that over the last decade the EU has promoted projects based on transnational knowledge exchange and learning. Using the example of an EU-funded International Youth Inclusion and Engagement project, the authors explore barriers to exchange, and factors that facilitate connections—including the key role of ‘institutional entrepreneurs’.

**Hardy and Jobling** combine insights from two perspectives— ‘analytics of government’ and ‘historical political sociology’—to explore the dynamic and interactive flow of knowledge between actors, institutions and jurisdictions. They illustrate the relevance of their approach by applying it to the international development of community treatment orders in mental health over the past two decades.

Two articles explore the aspirations of the Global Mental Health (GMH) movement to disseminate best mental health practice from high income to low and middle-income countries (LMIC). **Newlin and Webber** point to the pressing need for more effective and more accessible mental health interventions for people in LMIC. Their article reports a review of research on the transfer of social interventions across economic boundaries. They find clear evidence of the transfer of mental health interventions to LMICs resulting in positive local outcomes. They also point out that many of these interventions were changed or adapted in the light of local circumstances. **Orr and Jain** consider the impact of the GMH movement from the perspective of countries on the receiving end of evidence-based initiatives. They present a critical analysis of key documents and argue that, as currently formulated, the GMH discourse constrains engagement with local expertise and insight which have the potential to reshape approaches to GMH and engage more effectively with social professional practice.

**Slettebo and Schnurr** use Multi-systemic Therapy (MST) to explore the assumed authority of research-evidence supporting the original development of a programme as a sufficient basis for its transfer and adoption in a new setting. They argue that the ‘evidence-based’ credentials of a new programme need to be supplemented by research on local needs and conditions to establish the local authority of any programme in a new setting.

**Macpherson** looks at the potential for international contact to challenge and question local assumptions about the nature of social work practices. She looks at rights-based practice in Brazil and examines different ways it can operate in practice; and she considers how these approaches might be adopted or adapted to develop human rights-informed practice in the United States.

**Miljenovic and Knezevic** examine the influence of neoliberal reforms of social care in Croatia over the past 20 years. They examine the national history of these internationally inspired reforms, looking at the construction of problems in need of a solution, the identification and transplantation of international solutions to the local context and their adaptation in policy and practice. They also identify key processes underpinning these developments —particularly the way in which certain approaches are given legitimacy as the solution and ambivalence to local adaptations.

The final article in this special issue is a country profile looking at social work in Russia. **Borodkina** examines the impact of international influences on developments in social work education, policy and practice in Russia over the past twenty-five years. She identifies a number of problems that arose when US and European models of practice were not adapted to the Russian context and provides an example of mutual knowledge exchange in a joint Russian- Finnish project where social workers from each country learnt from and exchanged their professional expertise.

The articles in this special issue make a valuable contribution to our understanding of the extent and nature of travelling knowledge in social work. The ways in which ideas move between different policy and practice regimes matters — ideas are taken up because they reflect the interests and concerns of particular groups, and ideas are not fixed but can change and be adapted in the process of translation from one context to another. And understanding these processes has a very practical purpose for social work practice. Debates about research and knowledge tend to focus on research methodologies and how to encourage practitioners to take up research findings in practice. However, in assessing ideas and research for practice it’s also important to:  consider the origins of these ideas; understand how power has promoted dissemination; and understand how the meaning and role of ideas can change as they move. Awareness of these factors, and consideration of their influence on practice, needs to be part of the evaluation of theories and research in social work.

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