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## ISSUES IN DEFINING "UNIVERSAL SOCIAL WORK": COMPARING SOCIAL WORK IN SOUTH AFRICA AND AUSTRALIA

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### ABSTRACT

In this paper we discuss the issues involved in making generalisations about social work across different contexts by comparing the development of social welfare and the practice of social work in South Africa and Australia. Given that the idea of the profession is, to some extent, constructed in historical, social and cultural contexts, we next look at what this means for the idea of a universal definition of the social work profession and its implications for indigenous practice. We argue that while the discourse of social work might be similar across countries, the actual form and expression its practice takes may be quite variable. We end by appealing for a grounded approach where flexibility allows for relevant and appropriate practice responsive to local contexts yet still allows for accountability, connectivity and a common professional identity across countries in the belief that "because the form that social work takes is so intimately related to any society's or country's goals for itself and its people, its values, its mores, it is inevitable that forms of social work should differ from country to country, and that its patterns of social work education should differ from country to country" (Smalley, 1968:163).

Many social workers across the world are becoming more vocal about the forces of "professional imperialism", particularly in the developing world (Brigham, 1982; Campfen, 1988; Hammoud, 1988; Ife, 2000; Mandal, 1989; Midgley, 1981; Ow, 1991; Payne, 1997; Resnick, 1980; Rosenman, 1980; Tsang *et al.*, 2000; Walton & Abo El Nasr, 1988). Over the past thirty years these social work writers have been trying to raise awareness of the dominance of Western influences on social work and have been stressing the need for social work in the developing world to free itself from the "in-built assumptions and cultural biases of first world theories and models of practice" (Cossom, 1990:3) and to develop indigenous education and practice (Brigham, 1982; Osei-Hwedie, 1995). Recognising the challenge to draw the best from international influences while developing local models of social work education and practice (Cossom, 1990), some have suggested social development as an alternative, as the case of South Africa will show (Gray, 1998; Midgley, 1995). Some writers question the universal applicability and superiority of professional social work values (Bar-On, 1998; Cossom, 1990; Tsang *et al.*, 2000) while others draw attention to its unifying values, such as empowerment, justice, human rights, and equity (Hokenstad, Khinduka & Midgley, 1992; Ife, 2001). Still others caution against modification-based approaches whereby social work development involves "adapting imported ideas to fit local needs" (Shawky, 1972:3). In Asia, as in Africa, discourse on the development of indigenous models tends to centre on the irrelevance and inapplicability of Western models (Midgley, 1981; Osei-Hwedie, 1995; Tsang *et al.*, 2000). However, this is a contested domain. Hence Ife

(2000:150) warned against seeing Western social work as a "homogenous, monolithic entity" over which there was universal agreement.

In the light of these broader debates, this paper explores the tensions between universalising forces in social work and indigenous practice. While we believe that there is room for many types of social work across widely divergent contexts, united by shared human rights and social justice goals, its mission may take various forms and expressions in different countries. We examine whether it is possible to develop local approaches to practice that are transferable across these diverse contexts. We argue that dialogical processes within local contexts are far more likely to create indigenous and relevant models of social work practice than imported ones, since they directly address the needs of the country, respond to the culture of the people and focus on pertinent social issues. This is not to say that there is not a shared area of understanding and that there are not commonalities in social work education, practice and research across the world. We believe it is important to facilitate discussion about the implications of internationalising trends in modern social work. We use Australia and South Africa, the contexts with which we are most familiar, in arguing for a "grounded approach" to exploring potential for shared models of practice.

## **SOCIAL WORK IN SOUTH AFRICA**

Many of the questions relating to the relevance and appropriateness of social work in South Africa today are the product of its international heritage whereby local, indigenous modes of helping and natural kinship networks were overlooked in favour of professional and educational developments which included the "scientific assessment of human situations, high craftsmanship and skill in individualised curative and restorative work with people and families, and the formation of sound organisational structures to support social work practice" (McKendrick, 1998:99).

Social work in South Africa is a relatively recent phenomenon and its development, beginning in the late 1920s, was intimately related to the evolution of the institution of social welfare and, in many respects, mirrored historical trends in England and North America. However, where it differed was in its conception of the extent of government responsibility for people's welfare, the role of the government in the provision of welfare services (hence the residual nature of the South African welfare system) and policies leading to racially unequal services. It was within this context that social work as a discipline and a profession developed. Social work's evolution as a discipline revolved around the development of social work education where there tended to be a heavy reliance on Western, mainly North American and British literature. However, over the last twenty years, indigenous literature has grown, albeit slowly. Its development as a profession, guided by a particular set of values, was tied to the evolution of government policy and the influence exerted initially by social work educators and, from the 1950s, by the formation of professional associations. However, the divided nature of South African society has prevented these associations from becoming a united, powerful force for social workers. This led to a unique situation where a Council for Social Work, established in terms of the Social Work Act (1978), regulated the social work profession. From then on social workers were required by law to register for practice. With the transformation of the social work council in the 1990s, a broader Council for Social Service Professions was established. This legislatively constituted body effectively reduced social work's domain within welfare (Gray, 2000) and subsequent developments in implementing a developmental welfare system, established in terms of the White Paper for Social Welfare (Ministry for Welfare and Population Development, 1997), led to the renaming of the Department of Welfare to the Department of Social Development, indicating a complete paradigm shift from welfare to development (Joint Universities Committee for Social Work 2001).

South Africa offers a unique example of the application of social development thinking which is consistent with the enormous problems faced in addressing the inequities brought about by forty years of apartheid. A Western-style welfare model cannot effectively address the problems of poverty and under-development, including HIV/AIDS, which affect a large proportion of its population. South Africa cannot afford a pension system guaranteeing a minimum standard of living for all; neither can it support a model of social work practice that focuses on marginalised individuals and groups, which form a small proportion of the population. The challenge for social workers is to find ways of extending agency-based services to reach a broader section of the population in need by embracing diverse models, including community development and policy practice, and multidisciplinary approaches where social workers work side-by-side with allied social service "professionals" like child care, youth and community development workers, and informal helping networks. Perhaps the developmental model, which is evolving in South Africa, offers a microcosm of the type of practice needed in developing contexts. To this extent South Africa is a pioneer in the development of indigenous social work practice. Having said this, the increase in the number of social workers in private practice bears testament to a counter trend to cling to clinically oriented practice within an expert professional model. However, most social workers are employed by local, provincial or national state government and face increasing pressure to conform to developmental social work practice models.

## SOCIAL WORK IN AUSTRALIA

"The relationship between work and welfare has been at the heart of social policy in the West since the nineteenth century" (Penna, Paylor & Washington, 2000:113). One of the most distinctive themes of the Australian welfare state has been a focus on guaranteeing the wages of workers. However, unlike South Africa, the notion of professional social work in Australia has developed somewhat separately from conceptions of welfare in that the social or community services sector tends to be run largely by non-professional staff and volunteers. Social work tends to be more "specialist" within inter alia health and mental health, disability, child protection, aged care and sexual assault services. Similar to social work in South Africa, its history is relatively recent, beginning in the 1920s and, as in other Western countries, Australian social work drew heavily on North American and British models and is still in the process of developing its own identity (Blanchard, 1979). The Australian Association of Social Workers and its journal *Australian Social Work* recently celebrated their 50th anniversaries.

Social workers in Australia are mostly employed in casework or direct service positions (Franklin & Eu, 1996; Laragy, 1997), and in the health and community services sectors (McCormack, 2001). The social work workforce has always been and is increasingly dominated by women, with the number of men decreasing. Most social workers are employed in the non-profit (government and non-government) sectors (McDonald, 1999). Very few are self-employed or in private practice (DiNitto, 1995) and because state governments are responsible for the bulk of community service provision, most social workers are state government employees, rather than employed by local or Federal governments (Napier & George, 2000).

Employment prospects are high and the sector is growing (Quiggin, 2000; Rosenman, 2000), but the downside is that jobs available to social workers are either losing their social work designations (Hawkins *et al.*, 2000), or are being downgraded professionally. People without formal occupations or with non-social work qualifications are taking up much of the "growth" (McDonald, 1999). This is especially true in rural areas, where it is difficult to attract qualified social workers. Conversely, social workers might hold positions that do not require their level of qualification, such as "residential aid worker". Hence high employment levels could also be due to

the downgrading of professional expertise, in particular social work. These threats to professionalism, and the competition with other professional and occupational groups, are a feature of the globalisation and marketisation of services (O'Connor *et al.*, 2000) currently being experienced in many Western countries.

The current global context, therefore, constitutes a particular threat to Australian social work because it poses challenges to many of its distinguishing features. For instance, Ife (1997) argues that Australian social work is distinctly based on a professional model. The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) maintains strong control over professional standards and the accreditation of professional social workers and social work education programmes. It is generalist rather than specialist in nature. It pays particular attention to the social justice value base of the profession and, being based on a Western rationalist way of thinking, it is secular rather than religious, spiritual or non-rational in orientation.

Professional social work accreditation is known to be quite stringent in Australia. The equivalent of a four-year integrated (combination of social work and related studies) degree at undergraduate level is required, in a programme officially accredited every five years by the AASW. This controversial standard excludes quite a number of practitioners from overseas, including many from the UK and the USA, as well as a very large number of welfare and community development trained professionals within Australia with two- or three-year qualifications. There has been a great deal of controversy over whether the AASW should be more inclusive, and whether more flexible boundaries might in fact strengthen the position of the profession. Despite maintaining relatively rigid boundaries, however, there is a commitment by the AASW to improve procedures for the recognition of overseas qualifications.

One of the ongoing issues in relation to the AASW is the degree to which it controls and represents Australian social workers. Membership of the AASW is not compulsory but many jobs require eligibility for membership, which is obtained by graduating from an accredited programme. It is commonly believed that Australian social workers are sceptical of the assumed conservatism of professional associations, and that AASW membership represents only a proportion of eligible members. While conclusive figures of the total numbers of social workers in Australia are difficult to estimate, some analysts have put the figure at 11,400 (McCormack 2001). This means that the AASW represents just over half of all eligible members.

The other distinctive feature of Australian social work is the healthy radical and empowerment tradition reflected in its social work literature, which has gained international recognition, beginning with Throssell (1975) and Benn (1981) and continuing through the work of Rees, de Maria, Fook, Mullaly (Payne, 1997) and Ife (1995, 1997, 2001). Writing on the feminist perspective has also been prominent (Marchant & Wearing, 1986; Petruchenia & Thorpe, 1990). Most recently the critical tradition in Australian social work writing is being continued by Healy (2000) with other writers exploring the possibilities of postmodern and post structural thinking (Pease & Fook, 1999). Australians, who have attracted international attention championing non-traditional research approaches, include Fook (1996), Peile (1988, 1994) and Scott (1990).

Currently, a major challenge facing Australian social work is finding ways to negotiate a future in the face of social and economic policies that are inimical to traditional professional values and practice (Crimeen & Wilson, 1997; Laragy, 1999). For example, in the health field the welcome rhetoric of community-based care, health promotion and prevention unfortunately goes hand in hand with the intention to reduce costs severely (Patford, 1999). Policies for standardising hospital funding, like "casemix", whereby payments for categories of treatment are set, effectively minimises the role of social work, which might be more needed in one-off complex cases (Cleak,

1995). Similar issues are echoed in the mental health field where a recent large survey indicated social workers' general concern with the lack of counselling and community services, such as accommodation and residential rehabilitation facilities, and a decreasing emphasis on discipline specific roles and skills (Ziguras *et al.*, 1999). Given the broadly grim picture for professional social work practice, new research areas are attempting to delineate positive roles for practitioners and social work managers in new practice contexts (e.g. Crofts & Gray, 2001; Healy, 2001 in social enterprise development; Starbuck, 1998).

## **SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES ACROSS CONTEXTS**

### **Comparison of South Africa and Australia welfare development**

While the development of welfare systems in both South Africa and Australia were subject to colonising influences, in South Africa the main force was a civilising mission for economic development, whereas in Australia, its development as a primarily penal colony meant that economic concerns followed much later. Reflecting the initial economic interest of white settlement, South Africa's system was more residual in focus. On the other hand, perhaps reflecting a more egalitarian early settlement, Australia, at one stage, showed potential to be progressive in terms of more universal benefits, particularly with its basic concern to build welfare into the wage earning system. Yet Australia's earlier pride in its welfare state seems to have declined so that issues of national social concern are not necessarily handled effectively at national level. Ironically South Africa's system of government allows a more universal control, whereas in Australia, the system of government (split between local, state and Federal levels) has often meant that universal policies are difficult to achieve, often also being dismantled and changed by successive governments.

A telling example of this occurs in relation to race issues. Whereas South Africa has tackled race issues in a structured way, with much clearer structured divisions between "white" and "black" classes, the Australian situation is much more ambivalent. The current Federal government refuses to take action on a national level regarding reconciliation with indigenous peoples, preventing a universal response to this situation. Also, Australia is a multicultural and pluralist society, despite the fact that there may be deeply seated prejudices regarding non-white peoples. For South African social workers the framework and context regarding race relations is relatively clear. In Australia it is not. This context has clear implications for the practice of social work, and for the development of a professionalism that speaks for all.

A major similarity between the expressions of social work in the two countries is the adherence to what is regarded as universalisable values based on respect for individuals and social justice, and indeed this is a similarity shared across most social work, at least in the Western world. One major reason for this may be that most countries in the Western world draw on a similar cultural tradition in the development of social work, exchanging, exporting and importing practice models, curricula and literature. In a sense these countries belong to the same "discourse pool", so it is understandable that they would articulate similar thinking about the fundamental aspects of the social work profession. But does talking about social work in the same ways mean that social work is (or should be) the same in different contexts?

As we have illustrated in the case of South Africa and Australia, the ways in which social work is organised and practised may be widely divergent, even though it is based on a similar ethos (see Table 1 for a summary). Following are some of the more specific similarities and differences that emerge.

TABLE 1

## SOUTH AFRICA AND AUSTRALIA: SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

Features	Australia	Africa
<b>History</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relatively recent history beginning in the 1920s</li> <li>• Drew heavily on North American and British models and is still developing its own identity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• History is relatively recent, beginning in the 1920s</li> <li>• Influenced mainly by British welfare models and British and North American literature</li> </ul>
<b>Links to welfare</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Welfare state focused on guaranteeing the wages of workers</li> <li>• Social work's development not tied to welfare</li> <li>• Social or community services (welfare) sector run largely by non-professionals and volunteers</li> <li>• State governments are responsible for bulk of community service provision</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Residual welfare system based on partnership between state and voluntary sector</li> <li>• Social work's development tied to welfare</li> <li>• Social workers were major players in welfare but this is changing</li> <li>• Services involve partnership between state and private sector though state is the dominant partner</li> </ul>
<b>Areas of practice</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social workers mostly urban-based and employed in casework positions</li> <li>• Most are employed in the non-profit sectors</li> <li>• Most are state (rather than Federal or local) government employees</li> <li>• Social work tends to be "specialist" within <i>inter alia</i> health and mental health, disability, child protection, aged care, and sexual assault services</li> <li>• Few are self-employed or in private practice</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social work urban-based, largely casework oriented though since 1994 this has been changing</li> <li>• Most are employed in not-for-profit sector</li> <li>• Most are employed by national and provincial government</li> <li>• Main area is child and family welfare; related areas include aged care, disability, corrections and police, addictions, health (AIDS) and mental health</li> <li>• Private practice grew after the transition</li> </ul>
<b>Nature of profession</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dominated by women</li> <li>• Practice is generalist rather than specialist</li> <li>• Social justice value base</li> <li>• Secular rather than religious, spiritual or non-rational in orientation and based on a Western rationalist way of thinking</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Women constitute about 90%</li> <li>• Practice is generalist rather than specialist</li> <li>• Focus on poverty and social development</li> <li>• Diverse religious and traditional beliefs acknowledged though Western models of practice predominate</li> </ul>
<b>Professional organisation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social work based on a professional model</li> <li>• One professional association - Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW)</li> <li>• Membership is voluntary</li> <li>• Approx. 50% of the estimated 11400 social workers are members</li> <li>• Journal <i>Australian Social Work</i> published by AASW; both have been in existence for just over 50 years</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social work based on a professional model</li> <li>• Several professional associations, largest is that for private practitioners; those in government also join unions</li> <li>• Membership is voluntary</li> <li>• Possibly 20% of South Africa's 10 000 social workers belong to professional associations</li> <li>• Journal <i>Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk</i> published by University of Stellenbosch since April 1965</li> </ul>

Features	Australia	Africa
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maintains strong control over professional standards and the accreditation of social workers and social work education programmes</li> <li>• Professional social work accreditation known to be quite stringent in Australia</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Professional and educational standards for social work as well as for other social service professions regulated by quasi-government Council for Social Service Professions</li> <li>• Council also handles accreditation of overseas qualifications</li> </ul>
<b>Statutory regulation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• None</li> <li>• Conduct regulated by AASW</li> <li>• AASW sets educational standards</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Compulsory registration with the Council</li> <li>• Council regulates professional conduct</li> <li>• Council sets educational standards</li> </ul>
<b>Educational standards</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social work education programmes are based in Universities</li> <li>• Four year integrated BSW (combining social work and related studies) undergraduate degree</li> <li>• Social work programmes are officially accredited by the AASW every five years</li> <li>• Social work and welfare studies or youth work training programmes remain completely separate</li> <li>• Welfare studies and youth work may be offered as part of generalist degrees in Universities or via TAFES (equivalent to South Africa's technikons).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social work education is offered at 19 Universities and one college</li> <li>• There is talk of reducing the four year integrated undergraduate degree to three years</li> <li>• There is no official accreditation of social work degrees or programmes</li> <li>• Articulation between programmes and the possible amalgamation of universities and technikons have led to inter alia child and youth care and community development courses previously offered in technikons becoming university-based in competition with social work.</li> <li>• Major mergers and changes in structure of tertiary education institutions will lead to fewer schools of social work</li> </ul>
<b>Future prospects</b>	<p>Employment prospects good; sector is growing; downgrading of professional expertise; jobs available to social workers losing social work designations or being downgraded; social workers in positions not requiring their level of qualification, e.g. "residential aid worker"; people without formal occupations or with non-social work qualifications taking up the "growth"; difficult to attract social workers to rural areas</p>	<p>Increasing competition from broader "social service professions" with decrease in posts for social workers; many are moving into private practice; do not favour rural practice although since 1994 more younger social workers and health workers have been going into rural areas; although many are embracing development, agency-based direct practice is still the preferred practice mode, especially in specialist practice</p>

First, while both South African and Australian social work are based on a professional model, the form the professionalism takes is different. For instance, in South Africa there are several professional associations, representing and developing historically from different interests groups, which are proving difficult to unite (Drower, 1991; Gray, 1992). In Australia, there is one professional association. However, it only represents about fifty percent of the Australian social work population. On the face of it the Australian situation appears more united, but in fact there may still be a large proportion of social workers who are not represented, and which may in fact involve many more disparate groups, as is the case in South Africa.

The types of professional control are also different. While in South Africa registration is compulsory, in Australia membership of the professional association is voluntary. Again, on the face of it, this would seem to indicate that there is more professional control in South Africa. However, this control is not in the hands of professional associations but in the hands of the more inclusive and integrative quasi-government Council of Social Service Professions, which emphasises that the social service sector draws on the collective expertise of a wide range of occupations, such as child care workers, probation workers, community development workers, and youth workers. It effectively curtailed social work's continued dominance of this sector (Gray, 2000). In Australia, while membership is voluntary, there are significant numbers and groups who are excluded from membership including many professionals with overseas qualifications, and those with related qualifications like welfare and community development. There are strong lines drawn between social workers and other human service professionals, especially welfare workers, many of whom are not professionally trained but have years of practice experience and considerable expertise in their field of work. Social work and welfare studies educational programmes remain distinct. A joint attempt to compile competency standards for these two occupations proved a dismal failure.

Secondly, while social workers in both countries espouse a critical approach to practice, in South Africa this has taken form in the social development approach. Nevertheless, as in Australia, the bulk of professionals work in casework positions. While the practice of casework does not necessarily have to be traditional or conservative, the fact that this model dominates does indicate something about the essentially professionalised model of practice when compared with other models, which might have predominated and which in South Africa, social workers are being challenged to adopt.

A major issue, which arises from an analysis of differences such as these, is the question of the extent to which social work can be unified and controlled even in one country. In Australia this appears to be less easy than in South Africa, partly because of the role of the states in service provision. This means that policies and programmes pertaining most directly to service provision tend to be adopted only within one state. Harris and McDonald (2000) point out how Federal-level policies are often mitigated at state level in Australia, with the result that the Australian response to post-Fordism has been much less uniform than in Britain. There may in fact be much more room for internal difference in Australia than in South Africa, making it less meaningful or possible to make generalisations about social work practice across the country.

## **POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS**

So what are the implications of trying to generalise about social work across international contexts? First, it is widely recognised that there are political problems in making generalisations. As postmodernists rightly point out, trying to universalise experience often means that many marginal and different perspectives are omitted (Pease & Fook, 1999). For example, social work's universal value system is at odds with current thinking relating to cultural autonomy. Bar-On (1998) argues that elevating social work values to universal rules (Shardlow, 1989) is at odds with the notion of multiculturalism, which is predicated on tolerance and, at the very least, demands that we respect people's value choices. Requiring that social workers uphold their professional values in diverse cultural and social circumstances creates an ethical dilemma when the resultant expectation is that people need liberating from their views so as to conform to universal standards.

Secondly, as we have argued, there are clear similarities in the discourse about social work across countries. This does not necessarily mean that it is practised similarly in different contexts. This may simply be a question of how and whether our theory matches our practice, but it may also be

a question of whose discourse dominates and why? In both the histories of South African and Australian social work, the literature and cultural traditions of Britain and the United States of America dominated, as they have in the development of social work in so many other countries. It is little wonder then that many of us share these discourses about social work. But it may also be little wonder that the actual practice of social work differs in relation to the different contexts in which we operate. If we attempt to make generalisations, we must ask the important question of whose generalisations they are? Are we simply perpetuating the life of a dominant discourse developed in contexts inappropriate to our own? We need to be careful that making generalisations about social work does not become a new exercise in cultural imperialism.

While our foregoing analysis appears critical of the attempt to generalise about social work, we do not in fact intend this to be the case. We do recognise that there is a need to find a common way of speaking about what we do, in order to value and reaffirm each other's work, but also to improve and scrutinise our practice. There is also political mileage in generalising about our work. We need to find meaningful and persuasive ways of packaging what we do to ensure that we do not become marginalised in these new economic environments (Fook *et al.*, 2000). The main challenge, as we have outlined in this paper, is how to find ways in which we can celebrate and recognise the commonality of our work, while at the same time valuing and including differences. How can we become more accountable and responsive to our different contexts, and at the same time become more connected with each other's work, so that together we can develop ways in which our practice becomes more transferable across contexts? In the last section we discuss some approaches we might take to help with this endeavour.

## FUTURE OPTIONS

First, given the need to recognise the importance of context in the different forms and expressions social work might take, it seems important to emphasise a grounded approach to understanding and documenting what we do. This includes placing value on the ways in which workers who are indigenous to the situation conceptualise their work and developing processes that encourage this. This does not mean that overarching or imported discourses might not be used, but that they be used, not so much as defining discourses, but as tools for developing grounded perspectives. For instance, in relation to the question of social work values, Gray (1995) emphasised the need for flexibility and encouraged social workers to be open to new understandings and to resist dogmatism. To this end, she identified the need for minimal principles to guide interaction between different social and cultural groups, to overcome relativism and to enhance intergroup and intercultural understanding, such as respect for the priority of human interests and an egalitarian conception of social justice. In this type of approach, for instance, it may be that there are different levels of principles identified. Minimal ones might be those that belong to common discourse about which shared understanding can be developed such that people agree to their importance despite their abstract meaning across divergent contexts. Social justice provides one such example. This does not preclude there being different expressions of social justice in different contexts. For example, in relation to race issues, social justice in both the South African and Australian situations might involve further recognition of indigenous rights, but the form that this takes might differ. In Australia, a formal Reconciliation is necessary. Perhaps in South Africa this is being expressed by social work embracing social development and addressing the problems of poverty and HIV/AIDS on a broader scale.

Secondly, what approaches to professionalism and professionalisation are relevant? Are more rigid or more flexible boundaries most productive in the current environment? In relation to this question, Payne (1998) argues that despite its one hundred-year history, social work plays a

marginal role in social intervention and makes a limited contribution to social science. One way of overcoming its marginal influence is for social work to join with other forces within society working for social change, such as national and international organisations like the Australian Council for Social Services (ACOSS) and its equivalent the National Welfare and Social Services Development Forum (NWSSDF) in South Africa both of which are linked to the International Consortium on Social Welfare (ICSW); the International University Consortium on International Social Development (IUCISD); and Amnesty International to name a few. In this way its value premises undergo constant scrutiny and it potentially becomes more assertive about its social and political role.

Social work needs to reconstruct itself to overcome the hostile forces pitted against it. Payne's (2000) solution suggests an expansive approach to professional definition rather than a self-protective stance. Given the views of those calling for a collaborative model of East-West sharing, the more rigidly circumscribed professional boundaries become, the more counter-productive they are likely to be for international exchange. The same argument applies for inter-disciplinary co-operation within team settings or where solutions to or interventions in social problems require a multi-disciplinary response (Gray, 1999). A broader view of human need and broad conceptions of welfare render professional boundaries relatively superfluous. The central question is less about professional preservation and universalising values, and more about finding ways to best achieve the goals of social justice and of making the world a better place for those who suffer as a result of widespread injustice and poverty.

Thirdly, we would argue for the relevance of a social development response to poverty and injustice, since, by its very nature, it requires a multi-layered approach. It requires horizontal collaboration with various social sectors, like education, crime prevention, justice, welfare, health, and the like, working together; and vertical co-operation with various tiers of government, local, regional and national, working in harmony with one another, and with non-government organisations. More importantly, it requires a synergy between social, economic and environmental interests (Coates, 2000; Ife, 1998; Midgley, 1995). In South Africa, social development provides the macro policy perspective within which social workers are being asked to transcend traditional boundaries and make an impact on problems of mass poverty, unemployment and social deprivation through greater use of diverse social work methods, such as advocacy, community development, empowerment, consultation, networking, action research, and policy analysis. In short, the social development perspective forces social workers to revisit "their values relating to social justice and to redirect their services to the poor by finding effective ways of addressing poverty (Gray, 2000:106). Such an approach should fit nicely with the expressed social justice aims of Australian social work as well.

Lastly, there is a need to conceptualise social work as contextual practice, as not only about working with people in contexts, the "person-in-environment", but also about working with whole contexts. In this type of approach, of working both within and with contexts, in developing relevant practice strategies social workers would need to emphasise *inter alia* an understanding of the nature of contexts and the way in which they mould and shape theory, policy and practice; positionality, that is, a reflexive understanding of their own perspectives and their effects on practice; an ability to work with whole contexts (involving all the disparate players); an ability to develop practice relevant to local contexts and practice theory that is communicable across contexts; and an ability to reframe practice models, skills and techniques in contextual terms (Fook, 2002).

## CONCLUSION

In this paper we discussed differences and similarities in the development of social work and social welfare in South Africa and Australia in order to examine the tensions between universalising forces within social work and calls for indigenous practice. We argued that while it might be possible to generalise about social work across international contexts, since we shared a common discourse pool, the actual form and expression which its practice takes should be directly relevant and appropriate to specific countries and local contexts. We ended by discussing the political implications of universalising trends and speculated about the approaches we should take in order to work towards a flexible framework, which allows for differences, yet provides for accountability, responsiveness, connectivity, and a shared professional identity.

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