
EDITORIAL/REDAKSIONEEL

GLOBALISATION AND INDIGENISATION: REPOSITIONING SOCIAL WORK WITHIN A CHANGING ENVIRONMENT

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According to Newton's first law of motion, "...any object in a state of rest or of uniform linear motion tends to remain in such a state unless acted upon by an unbalanced external force..." His third law, which is also known as the principle of action and reaction, states that "...every action (or force) gives rise to a reaction (or opposing force) of equal strength but opposite direction" (Settles, 1996). In other words, every object that exerts a force on another object is always acted upon by a reaction force.

The extent to which the fundamental natural laws of classical mechanics is applicable to the human condition and social work has been open to questioning since general systems theory married the ecological approach in the 1980s, and even subject to ridicule since the arrival of the newest kid on the block: chaos theory (alias non-equilibrium/self-organisation/complex systems theory) (Hudson, 2000:215,219). However, the temptation to draw an analogy between it and globalisation is overwhelming.

GLOBALISATION

Although globalisation has been an "object" in accelerating motion for decades, it only burst into our collective consciousness with the dawning of the Internet age and the arrival of the "global village". Then it became a hotly debated issue not only on the international economic and political stage, but in social work as well. The result was the adoption of "Social Work and Globalisation" as the theme for the joint conference of the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) held in Canada in 2000.

In spite of the conference, what is meant by "globalisation" is still (as in the case of beauty) somewhat in the eye of the beholder. Therefore the following, somewhat esoteric definition will have to suffice for this argument's sake: "Globalisation is the process of worldwide unification of economic, social, political and cultural orientation through a borderless society..." (Rowe *et al.*, 2000:70).

SO, WHAT IS THE FUSS ALL ABOUT?

So, if globalisation is a "process of worldwide unification", what is the fuss all about? It has, according to Rowe *et al.* (2000:69) "... been happening for centuries though religious conversion, trade and colonization". What has changed, is the pace at which it occurs and the speed with which an event in one place on the globe effects the rest. Let's take an example. Two airborne human bombs struck the World Trade Centre and the New York Stock Exchange tumbled. The result: your pension invested on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange is worth approximately 12% less

(that's more than a month's income) in a week. The Rand tumbles and many of your local workers (including yourself?) face layoffs. Poverty increases and due to lower economic growth the funds to combat it dry up. And so the economic ramifications continue.

Globalisation, however, is not only an economic phenomenon, but a social and cultural one as well. For example, the international discourse on human rights and related issues spawned a variety of international treaties and conventions (e.g. the Beijing and Copenhagen declarations) (Ife, 2000:60). South Africa's (often blind) adherence to these treaties and conventions helped to shape our current social and social work policies (Weyers, 2001:267-9) and, voilà, globalisation has started to determine the way you do social work at ground level.

But, to misquote an American cartoon strip, "that's not all folks": cultural globalisation has started to manifest itself in the form of "...the reproduction of mass-produced quasi-American culture in the form of McDonalds, Levis... television sitcoms, and other cultural symbols, perhaps the most important being the English language" (Ife, 2000:52-3). Globalisation in all its facets has thus gradually percolated through our whole society, often without us even noticing it.

NEWTON'S FIRST LAW

This is where Newton's first law of motion comes in. The question is, if globalisation is an "object in a state of uniform linear motion", would there be an "unbalancing external force"?

James Midgley (2000:21) set the scene for an appropriate answer when he stated that "...much of the literature treats globalisation as if it were an unchanging, static phenomenon when, in fact, trends suggest that technological, social and economic developments are extremely volatile and subject to rapid change." The New York disaster and the consequent international realignments showed that Midgley (and many others) had the right idea, but missed the fact that international politics could be (and have been) the most volatile, "unbalancing force". This force may have sent globalisation on a completely new course and caused a paradigm shift that Thomas Kuhn (1970) would have been proud of.

NEWTON'S THIRD LAW

The possible redirection of globalisation is, however, not the only issue at hand. Newton's principle of action and reaction has also (be-it somewhat more unobtrusively) manifested itself in the thoughts and writings of social workers for some time.

Prior to the 2000 IASSW conference, a reaction to globalisation came in the form of i.e. Midgley's (1981) views on professional imperialism, Roche's (1992) reconceptualisation of citizenship and Drover & Kerans' (1993) analysis of new approaches to welfare theory. At the IASSW conference itself, three primary schools of thought emerged. The first could be described as the "anti-globalisation school" in which the focus was on mechanisms to counteract it as well as to shield local citizens against its harmful effects (Roby, 2000:21; Saravanamuttoo, 2000:30), the second being the "empowerment school" in which the central idea was that globalisation was inevitable and that it was social work's task to align itself to the new order and to enable those who were outside the mainstream to gain access (e.g. Menon, 2000:13) and thirdly the "integrationist school" in which the idea was "to think and act at both local and global levels" (Ife, 2000:60). This school, in essence, focused on "marrying" globalisation and indigenisation.

Finding the right globalisation/indigenisation mix is not only an international issue, but a regional one as well. During the 2001 conference on "Indigenising social work" held in Gaborone,

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Botswana by the Joint University Committee of Social Work (JUC), some presenters were of the opinion that the indigenisation of Western forms of social work was impossible (e.g. Bar-On, 2001). Others (e.g. Osei-Hwedie, 2001) held an opposing view, but at the same time thought that social work's response thus far had been inadequate. Then there were those presenters (e.g. Green, 2001; Simpson, 2001) who were able to demonstrate how social work has already succeeded at some elements of this task.

THE REPOSITIONING OF SOCIAL WORK

As the globalisation and indigenisation debates rages on international and regional stages, it seems to generate more questions than answers. For instance: *If social work's prophets of doom are correct in their view that the profession's response to local and international issues is misplaced and inadequate, why has it become the profession on the forefront of the fight against a plethora of social ills throughout Africa and the rest of the world and is recognised as such by others, although not always by social workers themselves?* Could it be that social workers have (again) underestimated their impact, adaptability and resilience? An inkling of an answer was provided by Nimmagadda & Conger (1999:261-276) who found that practitioners in India "spontaneously" developed their own locality relevant practice and were not perturbed by incongruencies between local socio-cultural dictates and "imported" social work values and models. Was the same thing happening in Africa and elsewhere?

Other questions that beg an answer include the following:- *How relevant are global social work knowledge, values and skills to local cultures and circumstances? How can we operationalise concepts such as 'locally/locality specific social work'? How can (and should) new technologies be used on the different levels of practice? What is the link between (universal) human right and (relative) local human needs? How should indigenous knowledge be researched and utilised in practice? And especially: how should social work training and practice be repositioned within the changing local, national, regional, North/South and international environment?*

Whatever the answers to these questions might be, one thing is for certain, they will have to be found and acted upon quickly. This task is going to be difficult, but who said doing social work is easy. We are working with the pinnacle of creation, the most complicated "organism" on this planet. If you wanted it easy, you should have chosen an occupation in which Newtonian laws applied.

POSTSCRIPT

I e-mailed a draft of this editorial for comment to a social work friend in Charleston, South Carolina, USA. It was easier to reach him than a practitioner who works and lives three kilometers from my office. Alas, in the global village, not all the roads are paved with fiber-optic cable.

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