

## THE FUTURE OF GLOBAL SOCIAL WORK

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**Abstract.** *This article addresses social work within the context of internationalism and globalization. Based on an examination of published documents on international social work in the past decade, the authors make an evidence-based projection of what is likely to occur in the future of global social work. Finally, the authors make a social work values-based projection of what should occur.*

*Keywords: global, social work, future*

### INTRODUCTION

During the past twenty-five years, two contemporary forces have impacted the context in which social work is practiced: (1) internationalism, that is, the increasing involvement of society and social work in international activities, and (2) globalization, that is, global interdependence, with its positive and negative consequences for societies. In contemplating the future of global or international social work, at least two possible projections come to mind: what is *likely* to occur (reality), and what *should* occur (ideal). Indeed, the role of social work in the global arena has always been characterized by a disconnection between ideals and reality (this may, of course, characterize many other aspects of social work apart from its global dimension). On one hand, scholars of international social work note the opportunities and indeed the imperative for an international perspective in a globalized society (Healy, 2001; Hokenstad & Midgley, 2004; Ife, 2001). On the other hand, scholars (often the same ones) lament the marginalized position of social work in influencing global affairs. Similarly, calls for increased international content in social work scholarship and education are not uncommon, yet such content remains largely ghettoized to a minority of professional journals, schools, and interested individual practitioners, educators, and researchers.

In recognition of this duality between ideals and reality, in this article we address both types of future projections. The projection of what is likely to occur is derived from social work knowledge; that is, it is evidence-based. The projection of what should occur is derived from social work values.

### EVIDENCE BASE: WHAT IS LIKELY TO OCCUR

Prediction of the future from an empirical basis necessitates an examination of the past in order to discern patterns that serve as forecasts. While there are many ways to gather such empirical data, due to resource constraints, we decided to base our analysis on an examination of published documents on international social work over the past decade. Clearly, such an approach has its limitations, in particular, that what is written does not

necessarily reflect what is practiced. Nonetheless, some degree of insight into the future of global social work may be gained from this approach.

We examined four major types of documents on international or global social work: (1) books; (2) policy statements of the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW); (3) the IFSW Action Plan for 2004-2006; and (4) journal articles on international social work appearing during the past decade. Each of these is addressed below.

## **Books**

A number of books on international or global social work have appeared during the past decade. These include *International Social Work: Professional Action in an Interdependent World* (Healy, 2001); *Lessons from Abroad: Adapting Social Welfare Innovations* (Hokenstad & Midgley, 2004); and *Human Rights and Social Work: Towards Rights-Based Practice* (Ife, 2001).

Healy (2001) provides a definition of international social work as "international professional action and the capacity for international action by the social work profession and its members. International action has four dimensions: internationally related domestic practice and advocacy, professional exchange, international practice, and international policy development and advocacy" (p. 7). Internationally related domestic practice includes working with refugees and immigrants, international populations, international adoptions, and so forth. Professional exchange involves communication of knowledge and sharing of experiences. International practice involves direct work in international agencies, such as relief and disaster work. International policy development and advocacy involves the formulation of policy positions and actions to resolve global social problems. Healy's book addresses each of these issues in detail, with many global examples.

Hokenstad & Midgley (2004) address the challenges and opportunities of globalization and examine the role of social work in this context. The chapters in this edited volume provide examples of social policies and programs from other countries that can be used as models in the United States. Thus, this book is a direct example of the international professional exchange described by Healy.

Ife (2001) provides a conceptualization of social work as a human rights profession. Grounded in the fact that human rights are universal, this therefore means that social work must have a global or international perspective. Throughout the book, Ife provides many examples of how rights-based practice is affected by global interdependence. He addresses three generations of human rights (civil and political rights; economic, social, and cultural rights; and collective rights) and describes how social work interfaces with these in both theory and practice.

Together, these representative books demonstrate an increasing recognition within the profession to the issues of global or international practice.

## **IFSW Policy Statements**

"The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) is a global organization striving for social justice, human rights and social development through the development of social

work, best practices and international cooperation between social workers and their professional organizations" (IFSW, 2004a, p. 1). This organization has issued fourteen policy statements for the purposes of "address[ing] some basic concepts from a social work perspective" and "provid[ing] social workers globally with practical as well as philosophical guidelines on a number of particular issues" (IFSW, 2004b, p. 1). The fourteen topics are:

1. Health
2. HIV/AIDS
3. Human rights
4. Migration
5. Older persons
6. The protection of personal information
7. Refugees
8. Conditions in rural communities
9. Women
10. Youth
11. Peace and Social Justice
12. Displaced persons
13. Globalization and the environment
14. Indigenous people

Presumably, the choice of these fourteen particular issues can be taken as a reflection of what the global representatives of the profession collectively consider to be the major social challenges facing the international community now and in the near future.

IFSW Action Plan for 2004-2006. This plan (IFSW, 2004c) addresses nine goals for IFSW as a whole:

1. The IFSW has a contemporary, well-researched and articulated policy position on critical social issues and matters central to social justice and the aims of IFSW.
2. The IFSW has a human rights orientation for all its activities.
3. Social work practice is governed by an internationally-recognized and accepted statement of Ethical Principles and Code of Ethical Conduct.
4. Establish an organizational structure which is contemporary, transparent, democratic, and best meets the needs of the IFSW and its membership.
5. Ensure the effective and efficient management of the federation's finances.
6. Develop, publish, and maintain high quality publications serving practice and information needs of members and the international social work community.
7. Increase the access of individuals and other interested groups to the work of IFSW.

8. Represent the profession and IFSW on an international level by establishing relations with relevant and key international organizations.
9. Seek strategic partnerships that will assist IFSW in strengthening the voice of social work.

As can be seen, about half of these goals (i.e., 4, 5, 7, 8, 9) are concerned with the maintenance and promotion of the organization itself, rather than directly addressing the social problems of the world. However, it is not known what amount of time and effort the organization expends on each of the goals. It may be that indeed most of the work does go into those goals directly addressing global problems.

### **Journal Articles**

We conducted a content analysis of article abstracts that were retrieved from the Social Work Abstracts database for the period 1995–2004, using the key term “international social work” in any search field. This yielded 279 articles (excluding editorials and commentaries). (A search using the term “global social work” yielded only 9 articles, all of which were also retrieved in the prior search). Clearly, this search method excludes some relevant articles and includes some irrelevant ones. Again, resource constraints played a role in this decision.

We coded all the abstracts in five content areas: (1) topic; (2) level of practice; (3) whether the article concerned one or more than one country; (4) the region of the world that the article addressed; and (5) the research methodology used. The results are presented below.

### **Topic**

For purposes of convenience, the topic areas used by the Society for Social Work and Research (2004) to identify members’ research interests were used to categorize the abstracts. The results are shown in Table 1. As can be seen, the highest numbers of articles addressed social work education and social work practice. These two topics together accounted for almost 30% of all the articles. In the area of social work education, the articles typically concerned the development of social work education programs in various countries, particularly those that were recently formed democracies (i.e., the former Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, and South Africa). Other education-focused articles addressed student and faculty exchanges between countries, and the inclusion of international content into existing curricula. In the area of social work practice, most of the articles addressed the role of the social work profession in various countries.

All of the other topic areas were substantially less represented. Among these, the most frequently appearing were child welfare; immigrants; international social work; poverty and social/economic development; and women’s issues. However, each of these had less than half the articles as were devoted to social work education or practice. Thus, similar to the IFSW Action Plan, the published scholarship on international social work appears to be focused somewhat more on the maintenance of the profession (including education for the profession) rather than on addressing global social problems themselves. In general,

the fourteen topics identified earlier by the IFSW policy statements are minimally represented in the published social work literature of the past decade.

We further examined these data year by year to determine whether there were any changes in topic frequency over time (i.e., increases, decreases, or cycles). No such changes were readily apparent. Thus, a continued pattern of steady maintenance within each topic area would be expected in the future.

**Table 1. Topic areas in articles on international social work, 1995-2004.**

Topic	n (%)
Social work education	44 (16)
Social work practice	36 (13)
Child welfare	19 (7)
Immigrants	19 (7)
International social work	17 (6)
Poverty/development	16 (6)
Women's issues	15 (5)
Mental health treatment and services	14 (5)
Ethnic minority groups	12 (4)
Civil society	11 (4)
Social policy	10 (4)
Social work research and scholarship	9 (3)
Health and illness	7 (3)
Spirituality	7 (3)
Aging	4 (1)
Drug use/abuse	4 (1)
Ethical issues	4 (1)
Cultural competence	3 (1)
Domestic violence	3 (1)
HIV/AIDS	3 (1)
Community development	3 (1)
Criminal justice system	2 (1)
Homelessness and housing	2 (1)
Theory	2 (1)
Violence in communities	2 (1)
Environment	2 (1)
Military	2 (1)
Adolescent delinquency	1 (0)
Disability	1 (0)

### Level of Practice

Social work practice in the United States has been criticized by some for straying from its roots and overly focusing on micro practice, an approach that is seen as irrelevant to most of the rest of the world. We therefore examined the extent to which the selected abstracts addressed micro (individuals, families, small groups), meso (organizations, service delivery systems, communities), or macro (nations, policies) practice. As seen in Table 2, the overemphasis on micro practice that dominates in the U.S. is not evident in the international literature. There was an approximately equal number of micro- and macro-focused

studies, and a large number of studies that addressed all or none of the levels (for example, generic studies on social work education were coded into this category). Meso practice was the least represented.

### Country and Region

As seen in Table 2, sixty percent of the studies concerned only one country and the remainder concerned more than one. Many of the former could not really be considered "international social work" according to the definition given earlier, even though they were retrieved under that search term. That is, they involved strictly domestic practice, not internationally related domestic practice as previously defined. The articles were fairly evenly distributed across the regions of the world, with the exception of the Latin American/Caribbean region, which had relatively few articles.

**Table 2. Characteristics of articles on international social work, 1995-2004.**

Characteristic	n (%)
<b>Level of Practice</b>	
Micro	76 (28)
Meso	26 (10)
Macro	73 (27)
All/none	95 (35)
<b>Country</b>	
1 country	158 (60)
2 or more countries	105 (40)
<b>Region</b>	
Africa	27 (10)
Asia/Pacific	54 (19)
Europe	40 (14)
Latin America/Caribbean	14 ( 5)
North America	39 (14)
Middle East	36 (13)
All/None	71 (25)
<b>Research Method</b>	
Conceptual	126 (47)
Survey	67 (25)
Case study	54 (20)
Phenomenology	6 ( 2)
Program evaluation	5 ( 2)
Ethnography	4 ( 1)
Content analysis	4 ( 1)
Grounded theory	1 ( 0)
Narrative	1 ( 0)
Instrumentation	1 ( 0)

## Research Methods

The research methods utilized in the articles were coded according to a list of methods used by the Society for Social Work and Research (2004). The category of “conceptual” was added to the list of empirical methods. As seen in Table 2, almost half the articles were conceptual rather than empirical. Among the empirical articles, by far the most dominant methods were the survey and the case study. The latter were not clinical case studies, but organizational, community, and country case studies.

### WHAT IS LIKELY TO OCCUR

Newton's first law of motion states that a moving object will continue on its established path unless acted upon by an outside force; this is known as the law of inertia. The same principle applies to social phenomena. Thus, the evidence reviewed in this article suggests that, in the absence of outside forces – i.e., unforeseen events or intentional actions – global social work will continue into the future along the same pathways that have been followed over the past decade. Specifically:

1. *There will continue to be an increased interest in the impact of globalization and internationalism upon social work, and continued arguments for the inclusion of global and international perspectives.* This is evidenced by the recent books on the topic.
2. *Much of the literature will continue to be preoccupied with issues of professional education, roles, and identity.* This is suggested by the evidence from the journal articles showing that about one-third of the articles in the past decade focused on these issues.
3. *The social problems of the world will continue to be addressed largely within national borders, rather than globally.* This is likely because although two-thirds of the articles in the past decade did address substantive social problems, many of them did not examine these problems from an international perspective. In other words, they focused on the problems within their countries rather than placing the problems in a context of internationally related domestic practice, professional exchange, international practice, or international policy development.
4. *The international association representing social workers will continue to devote a not insubstantial amount of its efforts toward its own organizational maintenance.* This is because the IFSW Action Plan has more than half of its organizational goals devoted to these issues.

This forecast is based on the empirical evidence derived from the methods described earlier. Naturally, these methods do not provide a complete picture. For example, since the review of journal articles was limited to the past decade, there remains the possibility that some meaningful change in article content has occurred in the past decade in relation to earlier ones. It is also possible that practitioners within countries do indeed make practice decisions that are informed by social work in other countries, but if so, these experiences are not widely documented in the literature that was accessed. Finally, it is also possible that the observed focus on educational and professional issues has been a necessary precur-

sor to real social work action, which will now occur.

### VALUE BASE: WHAT SHOULD OCCUR

In contrast to what is likely to occur, well-established social work values of human rights and social justice as articulated and advocated by the IFSW dictate that social workers should take direct actions to address global social problems. The definition of social work recently adopted by IFSW (2000) states that, "The social work profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being.... Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work" (p. 1). From this it follows that the purpose of social work is to improve social problems; therefore, global social work should have as its primary aim the alleviation of global problems, rather than the current apparent aims as previously described – i.e., issues of professional education, identity, and maintenance. Further, since human rights violations and social injustices are global, rather than local, problems, all social workers should consider the international dimensions of their practice. Thus, the following are some actions that should occur in the future of global social work:

1. *A global perspective should inform all social work practice.* It should be evident that social problems in one country have their counterparts, causes, and/or effects elsewhere in the world. Practice that is informed by events elsewhere is more likely to be effective than practice conducted in isolation. For example, consider a social worker addressing the problem of disproportionately high rates of HIV infection among Black women in the United States. Certainly, this scenario has its counterparts elsewhere in the world, such as Africa. Social technologies for decreasing infection within these two regions would provide useful lessons to each other, if for no other reason than not to reinvent the wheel. Further, the problem clearly has global causes and effects. Among one of the causes is the use of illicit intravenous drugs among these women's male sex partners. These drugs, in turn, are imported from other world regions, which in turn export these products in order to generate revenue for their economies, which in turn are constrained from development by policies and practices of intergovernmental organizations and multinational corporations, and so on. Among the global effects of the problem is lost productivity among these women, which affects the local economy and in turn the global one. Thus, failure to target interventions to any of these multiple inputs and outputs would be tantamount to failure to address the problem at all, since the cycle would be perpetuated. An analogous scenario of interconnected causes and effects can be constructed for virtually any social problem faced by any nation.
2. *The professional organizations and professional literature should focus on developing solutions to the world's major social problems, particularly the fourteen topics identified in the IFSW policy statements.* As noted, much of the reviewed literature focused on peripheral issues rather than direct action to improve social problems. If global social work is to undertake more direct work, it seems reasonable to begin by focusing on those areas that have al-



ready been identified as important by the profession's elected global leaders. As well, any casual perusal of any newspaper will reveal that the fourteen identified topics pose significant social concerns facing the world.

3. *Social workers who utilize knowledge from other countries should document the process and outcomes of their work, in easily accessible forums (e.g., a centralized Internet resource).* As previously noted, it is possible, and indeed seems likely, that much global social work is occurring but is either not documented or not readily accessible. Thus, all social workers should heed the ethical mandate, present in some national codes of ethics, to contribute to the knowledge base. For example, the U.S. National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics (2005) states that "Social workers should promote and facilitate evaluation and research to contribute to the development of knowledge" (Sec. 5.02b). Production of knowledge is only one part of its adoption, however; it must also be easily accessible. For example, the IFSW publishes "Social Work Around the World" (2004d), which appears to be a potentially rich information resource. However, the text is not available in an on-line format, nor is it available in the authors' institutional libraries. Thus, access to the knowledge therein would require a personal expenditure and a wait (likely several weeks) for delivery. While this would not cause a hardship for the present authors, it almost certainly would for many other social workers around the world. Thus, a centralized Internet resource would solve some (although certainly not all) knowledge accessibility barriers.
4. *Social work researchers should focus more on determining what interventions (macro, meso, and micro) work for whom under what conditions, through methods of policy, program, and practice evaluation.* Since direct action to improve social problems is the primary aim of social work, clearly knowledge is needed about how best to do so. Yet, only 2% of the articles reviewed herein were program evaluations, and none were policy or practice evaluations. The need for more evidence-based knowledge is evident.

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