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Social work education: current trends and future directions

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This chapter deals with changing patterns of social work education in a rapidly globalising world. Neoliberalism and advances in information technology are creating spaces for cross-border, virtual education as never before. The chapter interrogates the impact of neocolonial, capitalist expansion of higher education as a tradable commodity, and reviews some of the debates around the universal and the particular with regard to cross border virtual education. The universal-particular debate is further probed by reviewing global initiatives of the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), such as the Global Definition, program consultations linked to the Global Standards, and the proposal to form regional centres of excellence. While well-intentioned, neither the processes nor the outcomes of these initiatives are neutral, often reflecting geo-political power, the project of legitimation, hegemonic discourses and neoliberal and new managerialist thrusts towards standard setting, performance appraisals and external reviews within modernist notions of progress and development.

Neoliberalism, fuelled by the profit motive and the exponential rise in the use of information technology in offering cross-border education, has serious implications for social work education where process, relationship building, reflexivity and ethical reasoning and practices are core. Social work education must be underscored by an emancipatory pedagogy, designed to engage students as active social citizens, skilled in the art of truly being there for the other (Bauman 1993). Yet, the offering of whole degrees online is reducing the complexities of teaching and learning to transferable skills to be applied in the labour market (Martin & Peim 2011; Tomusk 2004), and it compromises the ethical imperatives of social work education (Reamer 2012a) and practice (Reamer 2012b). The International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), as global bodies representing social work educators and practitioners, respectively, have been engaging in a number of global initiatives. These include the Global Definition, program reviews linked to the Global Standards for Social Work Education and Training (Sewpaul & Jones 2004 – hereafter referred to as the 'Global Standards'), and proposals to initiate regional centres of excellence. While well-intentioned, neither the

processes nor the outcomes of these initiatives are neutral, often reflecting the complexities of geo-politics, hegemonic discourses and the neoliberal and new managerialist thrusts towards standard setting, performance appraisals and external reviews within modernist notions of progress and development. One of the defining features of neoliberal capitalist expansion is for-profit cross-border online education.

Neoliberalism and cross border education in the digital age

Neoliberalism refers to a combination of socioeconomic and political discourses and policy choices based on the values of an unregulated market, the reification of individual freedom and choice, and faith that market fundamentalism would promote economic growth, efficiency, progress and distributional justice, primarily through trickle-down effects. Neoliberalism, which privileges the market above human wellbeing and welfare (Coburn 2006; Clegg 2011; Harvey 2005; Giroux 2002; Roberts 2009; Shumar 1997; Sewpaul & Hölscher 2004), is underscored by maximising exports, reduced social spending and reorganising 'national economies in order to become parts of a broader regime of transnational economic activity' (Rizvi & Lingard 2000, 423). Higher education has not escaped the impacts of neoliberalism, with educators confronting 'the harsh realities of commodity production: speed-up, routinisation of work, greater work discipline and . . . the insistent managerial pressures to reduce labour costs in order to turn a profit' (Noble 1999, 46), and neglect of the development of critical thinking with managerialist discourses on what works, narrowly defined evidence, throughputs, effectiveness and efficiency (David 2011; Giroux 2002; Sewpaul & Hölscher 2004; Sewpaul 2013a). Neoliberalism has intensified racialised and gender inequality (Clegg 2011; Sewpaul 2013a); reconstructed students into consumers or customers (Noble 1999; Clegg 2011; Shumar 1997) and professors into entrepreneurs with their roles increasingly being mediated by digital technology; and increased surveillance (Lewis 2010; Noble 1999). It has replaced collegiality and trust with contracts, competitiveness, individuality and performance indicators (Roberts 2009). While there is some resistance in response to the corporatisation and commodification of higher education, the danger is that universities are taking on the dominant discourse, treating neoliberalism as inevitable and actively participating in its reproduction by self-consciously embarking on bureaucratic rationalisation (Coburn 2006). Roberts (2009) contends that neoliberalism, through its state apparatus (Althusser 1971), fosters an ideologically compliant, adaptable and technically skilled workforce – unthinking workhorses that serve the needs of the market. Rationalisation of resources; down-sizing of staff; privileging of research, particularly funded research at the expense of teaching; generating third stream funding; and extending university offerings to maximise profits, are becoming naturalised features of universities. These are accompanied by incentives for staff who do comply, and disincentives and/or threats for those who do not. Meyer (2000) argues that 'world society does not simply arise, rather, it is built by agentic state and non-state actors, who (often eagerly) participate in (its) formation' (241, brackets in original).

One of the major agents of the neoliberal agenda is the World Bank (WB). Salmi (2000), a WB educationalist, in valorising the rapid changes in higher education powered by information technology, said:

Imagine a university without classrooms or even a library. Imagine a university 10,000 miles away from its students. Imagine a university without required courses or majors or grades . . . Imagine ranking institutions by their degree of Internet connectivity. Imagine a country whose main export earnings came from the sale of higher education services. Imagine a socialist country that charged full-cost tuition fees in public higher education.
(2)

Linked with the WB is the World Trade Organization (WTO) in the higher education business. Nation states are increasingly engaging in free trade agreements in compliance with WTO obligations of trade in the service sector, including the buying and selling of higher education (Coburn 2006; Knight 2008; Naidoo 2007; Walsch 2009). Educational neo-colonial, capitalist expansion has become consolidated through online distance education and virtual learning environments, with commercial vendors playing a major role (Knight 2008). Education has become a new form of 'academic colonialism' (Tomusk 2004, 156). The US leads the world in educational export, with education being one of its top five service exports, followed by the UK, Australia and New Zealand (Martin and Peim 2011). These countries have become the biggest sellers of education on the international market, especially with the increasing demands from countries such as India, China and Malaysia (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2005). Higher education has become a multimillion-dollar business (Kaur & Manan 2010), with many richer countries becoming dependent on income from fee-paying students from poorer countries (Stanley 2012). It is estimated that the e-learning market will be worth about \$69 billion by 2015 (Martin & Peim 2011). In 2003/2004 education services were worth AUD\$5.9 billion to the Australian economy (a 13% increase from 2002/2003); 95% of this was earned from international students living in Australia, where education is the fastest growing service export (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2005). According to Vincent-Lancrin (2011), in 2010 education became Australia's number one service export item, earning \$17.7 billion. Salmi (2000), the WB educationalist, in the face of all things not being equal, proclaimed a blatant untruth: 'The best universities of any country can reach out across borders by means of the Internet or satellites, effectively competing with any national university on its own territory' (2). Furthermore, as Marginson (2006) avers, 'emerging nations are colonised by the "brain drain" of key personnel and ideas, by foreign research conversations and agendas, and by the in-your-face visibility and robustness of the leading foreign institutions' (20).

Developing countries in Asia and Africa, for various reasons, including increasing domestic demand, poor infrastructure and resources, the ubiquitous devaluing of knowledge that emerges from these contexts, and the valorising of so-called Western knowledge that enables its universalisation, are unable to export education, thus reinforcing unequal power relations and patterns of domination and subordination (David 2011; Naidoo 2007; Shumar 1997; Tomusk 2004). Courses designed in the developed world are exported into developing countries, with the quality of such programs being brought into question (Knight 2008; Naidoo 2007; Noble 1999; Walsch 2009). Tomusk (2004) writes of the immorality of 'making developing countries pay for a random selection of Western trivialities delivered through global distance learning consortia' (147). Cross border education provides a lucrative market for Western course packages and textbooks that are transferred wholesale, e.g. from the US or Australia into China, with nothing changed except translation from English into Chinese. Such academic imperialism ignores local contexts and

cultures (Coburn 2006; Naidoo 2007; Tomusk 2004; Walsch 2009). Cross border offshore and online providers are also more likely to have English as the medium of instruction, while local universities retain the vernacular (Knight 2008; Kaur & Manan 2010). Kaur and Manan (2010), for example, write about this in the context of Malaysia, warning that with transnational private Western providers using English as the medium of instruction while local public providers use the Malay language, ethnic polarisation is likely to ensue. They also warn about potential class conflicts, as highly marketable courses get priced out of the reach of those in low-income brackets. These are inconsistent with the broad objective of education, promoting the public good, and with social work education's particular emphases on social inclusion, human rights, social justice and peaceful co-existence.

While online distance education might have increased access to some, it has, at the same time, contributed to greater inequalities (Altbach 2010; Naidoo 2007; Tomusk 2004). David (2011) asserts that 'the hyper-marketisation of education as a commodity [and] . . . the embeddedness of neoliberal forms of markets, competition and league tables' (160) has seen more entrenched structural inequalities, both within countries and across the global North and the global South. Chau (2010) argues that the range of technologies required in online learning widens the digital divide between the rich and the poor. The growing hype about technology-mediated education masks the reality that not everyone has the resources for it. According to Walsch (2009), in 2006, 98.5% of Africans were without internet. In Brazil access to the Internet reflects the stark difference between the rich and the poor – with 58.7% of the rich and only 5.7% of the poor having Internet access in 2006.

Of particular salience to social work education is neoliberal capitalist engendering of greater inequality, decreased social justice, and the offering of skills training via vocationally oriented curricula rather than knowledge and critical reflexivity (David 2011; Kaur & Manan 2010; Roberts 2009; Sancar & Sancar 2012). The mechanistic use of online learning recasts students as passive consumers of pre-packaged instructional commodities, and deprives teaching and learning of the 'delight of the warm and caring human voice and touch' (Sancar & Sancar 2012, 247). This has implications for emancipatory social work education, where the aim is to have graduates who are critically and actively engaged social citizens who are willing to use their voices in the interests of deepening democracy and social justice. There is a difference between the use of technology to enhance teaching, the use of blended on and off-campus teaching, and the offering of whole qualifications online.

Social work's and social work education's major strength is that it is context specific (Sewpaul & Jones 2004), yet with global shifts, and with online offering of social work degrees, education is becoming de-contextualised. Reamer (2012a), while not eschewing the use of technology in education, raises a number of ethical concerns about the offering of whole social work qualifications online. He asks the following questions: 'Does an online program sufficiently honor social work's longstanding commitment to human relationships?'; 'Can we be assured that online programs provide sufficient quality control?'; 'Are online programs meeting their ethical duty to be forthright in their representations to the public?' On deliberation, these questions are answered in the negative. Reamer points to the deleterious effects of online social work education (2012a) and online social work therapeutic intervention (2012b). The human experience cannot be understood outside of its social context. This applies as much to educators and students and the people whom we educate students to work with. Universalising discourses vis-a-vis contextualisation, and

their link with dominant neoliberal and neocolonial practices, are some of the challenges facing IASSW as it embarks on global processes.

IASSW global processes

It is in the light of the above processes of globalisation, the commodification of higher education and new managerialist practices that the global processes of the IASSW must be understood. The IASSW does not exist in a vacuum. It is embedded within broader societal processes and discourses that have become inscribed into it. The IASSW deals with these global hegemonic discourses with a somewhat uneasy tension: on the one hand developing policies and guidelines that might serve to challenge and contest them, while at the same time adapting to and embracing the perceived inevitability of the global patterns. Like universities and other societal institutions, IASSW, as part of the ideological state apparatus (Althusser 1971) reinforces dominant discourses and patterns, and engages in projects of legitimation. Reflecting the broader schizophrenic world that we live in, IASSW tries to integrate into a coherent whole disparate threads and dichotomies. While the visioning and ideological underpinnings speak to research, knowledge, social development, civic engagement, social inclusion, human rights and social justice, these are juxtaposed against an instantiated geo-political inequality, the cloak of cultural diversity that might work against universal human rights discourses and practice, and new managerialist endeavours favouring global-standards setting, quality assurance and program reviews, and setting up regional centres of excellence and knowledge hubs that are part of the wider neoliberal, competitive agenda.

Setting up of regional hubs of excellence

In facilitating a process and structure wherein institutions compete to become regional hubs in higher education, IASSW inscribes into itself the function of validation and legitimation, as do national governments. Naidoo (2007), for example, writing in relation to the impacts of neoliberalism in higher education, highlights the Malaysian Government's aim to become an Asian hub for higher education, whilst developing partnerships with foreign institutions in Qatar, UAE and Kuwait. These countries are similarly competing to transform themselves into regional centres of excellence for the Middle East. Many countries aspire to host world-class institutions of higher learning. Singapore's education minister, Teo Chee Hean (cited in Altbach 2000), spoke of making Singapore 'the Boston of the East' (7), with world-class universities that are productive, lucrative and globally competitive. Despite Singapore's success, Altbach (2000) warned that this was not easy. What makes it difficult are the 'formidable' structural challenges in relation to geography, history, and the more inflexible governance that influences the epistemological foundations of education, that Singapore experiences relative to Boston's advantages (Altbach 2000, 8). Brezis (2012) attributes the high ranking of US universities primarily to flexibility of governance with minimal state interference – 'the sine qua non of quality and success' (173). He argues for greater public funds for research, while discouraging all other state intervention. These advantages ensure that the US holds prime position in global university rankings. Brezis

(2012) reports that in terms of the Shanghai rankings, among the 50 top ranked universities, 75% are from the US.

By 'endorsing regional centres of excellence (IASSW Social Work Educational Resource Centres)' (www.iassw-aiets.org/uploads/file/20121025_iassw-12-uk.pdf), the IASSW will allow institutions to gain legitimacy, increase their positional goods (Marginson 2006), attract more elite and fee-paying students, reproduce global competition in qualification offerings and 'uni-directional student flows and asymmetrical cultural transformation' (Marginson 2006, 18), as discussed above. Given the criteria set by the IASSW for institutions to become regional hubs, existing patterns of inclusion and exclusion will be reinforced. One can hardly envisage, for example, an institution in Somalia having the infrastructure and the capacity to compete with an institution in South Africa to become a regional hub. Amongst the criteria set by the IASSW are the following:

- Evidence of being an accredited institution, recognised by the local government / professional association, signifying their mandate to offer social work education programs at the postgraduate level and above.
- Strong track record in offering high quality social work education and training programs.
- Commitment to regional development and culturally appropriate practices based on a demonstrable track record of such activities.
- Access to venues and facilities suitable for accommodating capacity-building programs for IASSW member institutions and participants from the region. (IASSW Regional Resource Centres, Operational guidelines for establishing and monitoring Regional Resource Centres, 1 September 2013)

Global standards and program consultations

Similar arguments apply to IASSW program reviews – what has been recast as program consultations. IASSW offers 'a globally diverse team of consultants', 'the use of globally agreed standards' and 'extensive experience, through its membership, in delivering and promoting high quality social work education' (IASSW program consultation, operational guidelines for peer consultations, dated 9 July 2013) to undertake program reviews. This document, which speaks of engaging with host institutions as 'critical friends' in a collaborative manner, represents a radical shift from its earlier version (Operation and guidelines for curriculum review, dated 24 January 2013), where IASSW represented itself as an external agent, doing reviews of institutional programs, with no participation from members of host institutions, except as providers of information. In terms of process, the earlier document read: 'The IASSW team will request meetings with all stakeholders including the management, teaching faculty members, administrators, students in the program, field instructors, other agency representatives and any other/s identified by the university/social work program. These key interest groups will also be invited to give feedback on the review process and findings' (Operation and guidelines for curriculum review, dated 24 January 2013). So normalised was this top-down paradigm that it took much to challenge the gulf between the rhetoric, that spoke to 'peer reviews', 'partnerships' and 'cultural appropriateness', and the operationalising process that reflected a tokenistic view of participation.

In an email dated 5 February 2013, I communicated the following to the board:

I have a problem with the very idea of IA doing audits/reviews. IA does not have any legitimate authority to do so; it is top-down and reflects an assertion of power. Should an institution ask for a review we should encourage them to use national/regional bodies responsible for quality assurance (where they exist). Even in the absence of national/regional structures, we should . . . encourage the institution's staff to engage in a self-assessment exercise . . . Should the institution – via this self-assessment – recognise the need for capacity building with regard to e.g. strengthening of the curricula or research development, they can make a request to IA. This is within our scope and what we can do. In this way we play a facilitative role without the top-down approach. If we do the reviews directly we run risks as we have no control about how our conclusions/judgments/recommendations would be read and interpreted by institutional authorities. Our overarching principle: First do no harm!

Bourdieu (1996) cogently argued that the power and impact of legitimation is proportional to the distance between the legitimating agency and the legitimised. The greater the distance between the legitimating agency and the legitimised, the greater is the power and perceived impact. Thus, scholars and institutions in their home countries are likely to be less validated and validating than those that are external. IASSW, aware of its legitimating power relative to national/regional bodies, persists in its aim to engage directly in program consultations/reviews. Sakaguchi and Sewpaul (2009) indicated how developing countries often enthusiastically and unreservedly accede to the demands of Western professional legitimising. They argued that 'the Global Standards, the international definition and the international code of ethics . . . represent a universalising discourse around what excellent social work ought to be' and they ask: 'If IASSW and IFSW are perceived to be the authorised truths, then might it not become a self-imposition that national endeavours emulate global aspirations?' (Sakaguchi & Sewpaul 2009, 8). Fraser (2008) writes of transnational bodies that are 'apparently emancipatory . . . which may contain elite biases and do not always manage to live up to their democratic aspirations' (140).

In the 9 July 2013 version of the program consultation document, IASSW asserts that it will play no role in 'Higher Education validation processes or to any professional accreditation activities.' While the latter might entail a formalised statutory process and one that IASSW can easily disengage from, the very engagement in the consultation/review process is an act of validation. If institutions are not seeking validation and legitimacy they are unlikely to engage IASSW in program reviews/consultations. With its offering of a globally diverse team of consultants, with extensive experience in promoting high quality social work education, and with benchmarking against globally accepted standards, programs endorsed by IASSW will be, or perceived to be, validated at the highest level. In a recent national program review of the Bachelor of Social Work at the University of KwaZulu Natal (where the author is employed), mileage was gained by reflecting how the BSW was benchmarked against the Global Standards. In a world of audits, accreditation, reviews and evidence-based credibility, programs do and will seek validation that global institutions, documents and processes proffer. It is part of the legitimation game-playing in higher education, as is the game of publishing, rating and rankings for self and institutional preservation and survival in an increasingly commercialising academic environment. The dominant contemporary message is that individuals and institutions have to 'get with it' or 'get left behind'. There is simultaneously external coercion and repression and internal self-regulation, where individuals are coopted as agents of social control (Fraser 2008).

While promoting the ‘development and expansion of social work education’ is an overtly stated objective of program reviews, possible covert legitimization and neoliberal objectives remain unacknowledged. IASSW serves as a consultant for a fee. The operational guidelines reflect that the process will generate huge costs for host institutions that are ‘expected to cover all direct expenses such as air travel, accommodation, meals and local transport for the IASSW Consultation Team members’ with the following fee structure attached to the consultation: for country income of less than US\$2000 per annum – \$200; earning capacity of between \$2001 – \$10 000 per annum a proposed fee range of \$350–\$1000, and for those earning above \$10,000 a fee range of \$500–\$2000. Regional associations are expected to cover a proportion of the consultation fee. The principle underlying the latter proposal is not addressed. Given the structure of IASSW, it is not uncommon for institutions to be fee-paying members of IASSW and not a regional association. Thus, a host institution, which a regional association might be expected to support, might be a member of IASSW but not the regional body.

Apart from validating and legitimating institutions through its global processes, international bodies also engage in their own self-legitimation. Evetts (1995) argued that professions maintain their influence on internationalising processes by placing increased emphasis on the legitimacy and authority of their international bodies. Williams and Sewpaul (2004) acknowledged that the specification of criteria in the Global Standards document, albeit in the form of ideals to be aspired toward, fall within a reductionist, modernist mode of thinking. They asked, ‘Are we in modernist fashion continuing the ‘discourse of legitimation’ (Lyotard 2003, 259) in respect of the status of social work?’ Writing six years after the adoption of the Global Standards, Sewpaul (2010), who was co-chair of the Global Standards Committee and the chief architect of the document, answers this question in the affirmative and addresses her uneasy tension about some of the compromises made in the process and the Western inscriptions into the document. Writing earlier, Sewpaul (2005) acknowledged possible pitfalls in developing the Global Standards. As products of our sociopolitical world, we (I write ‘we’ as I am equally constitutive of the process) are susceptible to ideological hegemony designed to manufacture consent in the interests of capital and the ruling elite. So successfully insidious and embedded is this hegemonic discourse that Sewpaul (2013b) used the metaphor of it being ‘inscribed in our blood.’

Although ideology is false consciousness, it is, according to Althusser (1971), about the only consciousness we have. As products of our world, ‘those who are in ideology believe themselves by definition outside ideology’ (Althusser 1971, 175). Given its non-conscious nature, the ‘accusation of being in ideology only applies to others never to oneself’ (Althusser 1971, 175) – thus we rarely recognise our own collusion in reproducing prejudices, stereotypes and patterns of inclusion/exclusion and inequalities that we so vehemently oppose. It is difficult to think outside the box, but what Althusser offers us is a critical self-consciousness, that might serve as a precursor to change. Supporting the complexity of the relationship between structure and agency, Althusser (1971) points out the paradox implied by the term ‘subject’: it means both a ‘free subjectivity, a centre of initiatives, author of and responsible for its actions’ (182). It also means a ‘subjected being . . . stripped of all freedom except that of freely accepting his submission’ (Althusser 1971, 182); what Sewpaul (2013b) calls ‘the voluntary intellectual imprisonment of the free subject’ (120). Hall (1985) asks the following:

A critical question in developed liberal democracies is precisely how ideology is reproduced in the so-called private institutions of civil society – the theatre of consent . . . How a society allows the relative freedom of civil institutions to operate in the ideological field – day after day, without direction or compulsion by the State. (100)

The normalisation and naturalisation of neoliberalism and new managerialism in social work education and practice is manifest in an increasing production and dissemination of quality standards, codes of ethics, procedural manuals, program reviews and assessment schedules. Thus, global bodies like the IASSW come to serve as ‘the theatre of consent’ in reproducing the ideology of neoliberalism and new managerialism.

Review of the global definition

The unacknowledged and perhaps unrecognised reproduction and pursuit of legitimisation and neocolonialism might underlie the global definition processes and outcomes. Since the adoption of the international definition by the IFSW in 2000 and the IASSW in 2001 there have been criticisms. Despite its popularity, and being one of the most cited definitions, it is a short-lived one. A global definition formulated by the IFSW before this was in 1957, developed by representatives from Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Scotland, Sweden and Switzerland. The 2000/2001 definition is radically different from the conservative thrust and gender-biased language of the 1957 definition. The short-lived nature of the current definition must be viewed positively, reflective of greater inclusivity of different regions of the world, more robust debate and democratic participation made possible by global communication.

On account of the critiques of the current definition, IASSW and IFSW have, for the past few years, jointly engaged in processes of consultation to review it. Given the contextual realities of social work, questions have been raised about the wisdom of having a single definition on a global level. Yet, there is a sense that there must be some unifying characteristics of social work that grant legitimacy to the existence of international bodies such as the IASSW and the IFSW. There is also a sense that there are some shared visions on a global level about what social work is. Even with acceptance, in principle, of the need for a global definition, the consultation processes have generated huge debates about what is included or excluded in a global definition, with every word in the proposed new definition scrutinised, and its relevance for all contexts critiqued.

In an email dated 21 July 2013, a colleague Professor Bruce Hall from Colorado State University made the following observation: ‘when all is said, it is essentially a political process . . . Definitions may be useful at the core, but all fail at the margins’. He referred to the pseudo-scientific

attempt to define in order to assert . . . power and claim to authority . . . ‘The Global Definition’ is a good academic exercise. It may help elaborate the core . . . The exercise, however, has little immediate value for the practice of social work, globally. That practice is besieged by more dangerous challenges . . . Public and political approbation is unlikely to sustain social work unless the profession supports and demonstrates commitment to the claims it already makes.

Notwithstanding the salience of these observations, there are others who believe that definition is of substantive and immediate import. Ioakimidis (2013, 184) asserts that the current definition has ‘informed the practice and aspirations of a great number of frontline social workers . . . who have joined the profession out of a commitment to social justice’. The main criticisms, particularly from the Asia-Pacific region, centred on the 2000/2001 definition representing a Western bias with its emphasis on individual rights and social change, to the exclusion of collective rights and the societal imperatives for continuity, stability and social cohesion. Henrickson (2011), for example, argued that: ‘Social change, empowerment and liberation, social justice and human rights are not concepts that have shared understandings throughout the world. Concepts such as social harmony, interdependence, and collectively are concepts that are more highly valued in many Asian and indigenous Pacific communities’ (4). Sewpaul (2007) has strongly challenged East–West value dichotomies; the world is not either/or. There is a tendency to idealise Asian culture based on collectivism, respect for family, embodying unifying and holistic principles and intuitive functioning as opposed to Western culture which is represented as fragmented, individualised and reductionistic, which must be challenged.

In contrast with the views of some colleagues from the Asia-Pacific is the Latin-American view that the current definition does not sufficiently speak to radical structural changes. What also emerged very strongly from the Asia-Pacific region was the proposal to include ‘indigenous knowledges’ in the definition. This is by no means an un-contentious issue. If, for example, a person who self-defines as indigenous writes and publishes in an internationally recognised ‘Western’ journal, is that knowledge then indigenous or Western? Indigenous peoples have, over the centuries, been making invaluable contributions to knowledge development, which they might not be given credit for. Thus, the dichotomy between indigenous and Western knowledge might be at the peril of indigenous peoples. It might cogently be argued that all knowledge is indigenous to whatever context it originates in. Even where colleagues vehemently argue for culturally appropriate/indigenous social work practices, they often cite Western authors to support their claims – perhaps a reflection of the acceptance of what emerges in the West as authorised truths or the lack of opportunities for non-Western scholars to have their work published. Sen (2005) comments on the ‘dual role of the West: the colonial metropolis supplying ideas and ammunition to postcolonial intellectuals to attack the influence of the colonial metropolis!’ (133). However, as reflected in the commentary to the proposed new definition, Western hegemony does remain a problem. Knowledge that originates in the West becomes valorised and universalised; the voices of indigenous peoples remain marginalised and silenced; and the West often appropriates indigenous knowledge. There are, nevertheless, some who believe that the inclusion of ‘indigenous knowledges’ reflects the growing hegemony of the Asia-Pacific region in the IASSW, and the resurgence of conservatism (Ioakimidis 2013) or perhaps a nostalgic throwback to an ordered and gendered society, underscored by Confucian values and practices (Sewpaul 2007).

The 2000/2001 definition was the first to explicitly endorse the principles of human rights, social justice and the liberation of people, inscribing social work with its political and emancipatory mandate. Ioakimidis (2013) expresses concern about ‘a power struggle that could potentially endanger the achievements of the previous definition’ (184). He refers particularly to the power of China and Japan, ‘whose large membership base in international social work organisations allows them to promote the idea of “harmony and stability” over “social change and justice”’ (Ioakimidis 2013, 195). There is, according to

Ioakimidis, 'a risk of a backward looking socially conservative definition' (184). This also emerged as a major source of tension in the development of the Global Standards. To accommodate the needs of colleagues from the Asia-Pacific region, while not reneging on the human rights and social justice aims of social work, the Global Standards document dealt with the issues by constantly adding qualifiers e.g. 'Enhance stable, harmonious and mutually respectful societies that do not violate people's human rights' and 'Promote respect for traditions, cultures, ideologies, beliefs and religions amongst different ethnic groups and societies, insofar as these do not conflict with the fundamental human rights of people'. It is the awareness of risk of regressing to conservatism that prompted the committee to add qualifiers in the commentary to the proposed new definition, for example, 'insofar as such stability is not used to marginalise, exclude or oppress any particular group of persons'.

Recognising the diversities of contexts, the Joint Global Definition Committee of the IASSW and the IFSW have taken a principled decision to create space for layered definitions at the global, regional and national levels. Colleagues representing the Asia-Pacific spearheaded this decision. In order to accommodate the particularities of different regions and/or nation states, the committee decided to have a brief, concise and aesthetically appealing definition that will be easily translatable into different languages, while encouraging the amplification of the definition at regional and/or national levels. This is a pragmatic solution to addressing the universal-particular conundrum – acknowledging contextual realities while conceptualising social work as a global profession. Despite making this very clear during the consultation processes, what became evident was that many colleagues wanted their views reflected in a global definition. Given Bourdieu's (1996) thesis of legitimacy resting on the distance between the legitimising agency and the legitimised, it is likely that colleagues will place greater premium on a global definition rather than on a national or regional one.

The final round of consultations ended in September 2013, and it is envisaged that IASSW and IFSW would have approved a definition to be put to their membership for adoption at the General Assemblies of IASSW and IFSW in Melbourne in 2014. A major recommendation that emerged during the latest round of consultations, that generated much debate within the Board of the IASSW, was that social work as a discipline is included in the definition. To this end, the committee proposes that the first line begins with: 'Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that facilitates social change' rather than: 'The social work profession facilitates social change'. Yet, Sewpaul (2010) pointed out that reference to social work as a profession is a double-edged sword, with the shift from the earlier version of the Global Standards adopted in Adelaide in 2004 (Sewpaul & Jones 2004) to its final version (Sewpaul & Jones 2005) being one of the sources of disquiet for her.

Whether or not the definition will have substantive impact will depend on the extent to which social workers own it, and whether or not, as Hall above states, 'the profession supports and demonstrates commitment to the claims it already makes'. To this end, global bodies like the IFSW and the IASSW, that serve as substantive and symbolic embodiment of social work, must be all the more cognisant of living up to the goals and ideals reflected in the global definition, rather than capitulate to the imperatives of neoliberalism and new managerialism.

Conclusions

For profit online, virtual education challenges all of the major principles and values underscoring social work and social work education. Successful pedagogy rests on the power of the educator to: stimulate students' thinking and imagination; engender a spirit of love of knowledge; link theoretical knowledge to daily lived experiences; engage students in controversial debate and discussion; provide a sense of hope for the future, and encourage students to challenge injustices at local, national and/or international levels (Palmer 2006; Giroux 2002; Freire 1970; 1973; Sewpaul 2013b). Palmer's (2006) first principle is: 'We teach who we are . . . good teaching cannot be reduced to technique . . . good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher' (6). Online education, driven by neoliberalism, privileges information and vocational instruction, that eschews such constructionist, emancipatory and radical approaches. Clegg (2011) challenges the 'no choice' mantra about adopting new technologies in teaching and asks that we 'puncture the emerging narratives of inevitability and efficiency' (176). Therein might lie an invaluable role for the IASSW.

The commodification of higher education is linked to neocolonial and imperialist capitalist expansion manifested in the language of knowledge/information society, where 'the main beneficiary . . . is the Western supplier of knowledge' (Tomusk 2004, 161). It is also manifested in the way higher education has turned its attention to standards setting; audits and reviews; performance measurement; inputs and outputs; outcomes and targets; and efficiency and effectiveness, conjuring the imagery of excellence and inevitability. Neoliberalism penetrates daily consciousness to the extent that it becomes normalised and naturalised and considered necessary for social order despite the gross race, class, gender and geographic inequalities engendered (Sewpaul 2013a). Haiven (2011) contends that 'we all participate in hierarchies of race, class gender and privilege. No one is a pure victim in this economic system' (1). It is in the light of these processes that universities, and global bodies like the IFSW and the IASSW, must critically reflect on the processes that they adopt and their potential outcomes in reproducing geo-political power and neoliberal and imperialist practices.

As with individuals, global bodies with the benefit of reflexivity have the power to disrupt or to reinforce dominant thinking and taken for granted assumptions. The discourse on legitimation, introduced above, may not in itself be the problem. Reflexivity demands that we question and unmask the veneer of altruism, and the geo-political power that might underlie such legitimation processes. We need to acknowledge both the positive and the possible shadow motivations for our actions, and reflect on our possible complicity in reproducing neoliberalism, neocolonialism and their concomitants. In doing so we might allow the free subject to trump over the subjected being.

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