International social work education: the Canadian context

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In this chapter I analyse themes that emerge from scholarship on international social work education in the Canadian context. I focus on international student exchanges in my analysis through a centring of the multicultural/settler identity of Canadian society. I reflect on the definition of global oppression, student outcomes and the Canadian liberal welfare state, through the lens of the multicultural/settler identity of Canadian society, which serves to collapse the binary that exists between national and international as the basic assumption within which international social work education normatively operates. It also highlights different motivations present when minority students undertake international social work exchanges. It emphasises the geo-political nature of space and boundary crossing and makes explicit the colonial nature of power relationships that divide the world into a global north and south.

International social work education has rapidly become a desired educational objective in many schools of social work throughout Canada, largely through student/educator exchange programs (Tiessen 2012; Heron 2006; Lyons et al. 2012). This is the case for many reasons such as: the growing awareness of the global nature of social issues (Caragata & Sanchez 2002); neoliberal globalisation of the economy and university participation in it; and a long history of international social work practice by professionals in the global north working in the global south (Healy 2008).

According to Midgley (2001), international social work education is concerned with four broad categories:

1. impact of globalisation
2. impact of globalisation on social work practice
3. comparative enquiry and
4. professional collaboration and international exchanges.

In this chapter I will be focusing my analysis on the phenomena of Canadian student international social work practica as a part of a reciprocal exchange with countries in the global south or as a one-way placement of Canadian students in the south. International student exchanges are the predominant form within which internationalisation of social work edu-
cation takes place, particularly in light of government support for such programs (Tiessen 2012). Moreover, a discussion on Canadian student international practica also serves as an entry point for analysis of the other aspects of international social work education identified by Midgley.

In this chapter, I centre the settler/multicultural nature of Canadian society in the existing scholarship and discussions of Canadian international social work education. My intention in doing so is twofold: firstly, to highlight racialised and Indigenous students’ experiences and knowledge as subjects of international social work exchange programs. As Razack and Badwall (2006) have pointed out, much of the literature on social justice perspectives of social work focuses on the white subject as the learner; secondly, to contextualise Canadian international social work education through a discussion of critical social work theory and practice. Centring the multicultural/settler character of Canadian society in theorisations of international social work education adds considerably to present scholarship. For example, it results in recognising the heterogeneity of Canadian society generally and the Canadian student population that participates in international social work education more specifically. It challenges the national/international binary within which analysis of international social work is conducted by presuming the national to be ‘here’ and international within a geographical space of ‘there’. Canadian immigrant presence is built on a transnational identity with multinational ties that cannot easily be dichotomised as national and international (George & Delarosa 2009). It brings a geopolitical analysis of colonial oppression that is manifest within a neoliberal international economic order and at the local level of nation-state boundaries, and it recognises the voices, experiences and subject positions of racialised and Indigenous Canadian students and scholars.

I begin my analysis by summarising the neoliberal, social justice and critical/postcolonial frameworks within which international education gets contested. I then focus on an analysis of the implications of a critical/postcolonial understanding of international social work education through a centring of the discussion on its multicultural/settler reality. I undertake this analysis by discussing three aspects of Canadian international social work education: 1) definition of global oppression; 2) student outcomes envisaged through participation in international social work education; and 3) globalisation and the neoliberal Canadian welfare nation-state.

Neoliberal, social justice and critical/postcolonial perspectives on international education

The impetus for internationalisation of education comes from many sources including students themselves who wish to enrich their learning through travel and work abroad programs of education (Tiessen & Epprecht 2012; Tiessen 2012; Heron 2011). There are also government funded initiatives for Canadian youth such as the Association for Universities and Colleges in Canada (AUCC) who have been promoting internationalisation of education in order to encourage students to become ‘responsible and engaged global citizens’ (Tiessen 2012, Tiessen and Epprecht 2012; Heron 2011). Another source for internationalisation of education in Canada is the Students for Development Program (SFD) that provides opportunities for students to participate in international education. This federally funded program has provided more than 1000 students opportunities for practicum
placements since 2005. In 2010, it significantly expanded its scope (AUCC 2010). Other Canadian governmental and non-governmental organisations are also active in promoting international education, in tandem with the AUCC, in the name of encouraging Canadian citizens to take up the role of being ‘global citizens’ (Tiessen 2012).

Internationalisation of education, particularly as it is linked to the idea of the global citizen, can be understood in three ways, all of which are present, directly or otherwise, in the literature within the Canadian context. The first and predominant view can be characterised as a neoliberal perspective of international education. Within this perspective, international education is understood in instrumental terms as a means to promote globalised and corporatised education that can allow students from the global north a competitive advantage to benefit from global capitalism (Jorgenson & Shultz 2012). Post-secondary institutions see their particular role as being that of ensuring that students are linked to the knowledge economy, which forms an important basis to the running of globalised economies (Tiessen 2012; Heron 2011). Its neoliberal character is apparent in its instrumental view of education as a means to pursuing individual self-interest rather than as a means of pursuing collective notions of social justice (Rhoads & Szelényi 2011). Knowledge is viewed as a commodity and students as human capital studying within educational institutions that are aligned with the government’s mandate of readying generations of Canadians to participate in a global marketplace (Jorgenson & Shultz 2012; Tiessen 2012).

The second is a social justice perspective that has its roots in international development theories often reflective of the philosophical orientations of non-governmental organisations from the global north engaged in social justice projects in the global south (Choudry 2010). The social justice perspective is concerned with an examination of the unequal power relations that characterise global relationships. In particular it criticises the role of transnational corporations and powerful governments like the US as engines of neoliberalism and proposes a greater strengthening of social democratic governance locally (Choudry 2010). Within this critical perspective, structural programs and the capitalist economic system are identified as resulting in global injustices (Heron 2006). An example of the structures in place that maintain global injustices are the structural adjustment debt programs and the various free trade agreements that privilege countries of the global north and maintain a north–south divide. Social democratic governance within countries of the global north is found to be lacking due to the neoliberalisation of the welfare state that is seen to have moved away from the heyday of social welfarism that was the liberal welfare state (Choudry 2010).

A third perspective, a critical postcolonial analysis of international education, builds on the social justice perspective by looking at both structural as well as a socio-historical-cultural analysis of the push to internationalise education (Jorgenson & Shultz 2012). In so doing, insights from the writings of postcolonial intellectuals are used to point out that internationalisation of education through exchange programs of students from the global north going to countries in the global south have to take into consideration that all these countries are former colonies (Heron 2006). Globalisation, as the context for the internationalisation of education itself is both a capitalist and a colonial project (Choudry 2010; Ife & Tesoriero 2006). As Heron (2006) points out, globalisation is defined as ‘the integration processes of global economy that began with European exploration five centuries ago and that operate today to maintain the North/South divide’. Postcolonial theorists Androtto and De Souza suggest that international education needs to be ‘other wise’, by which
they mean that critical examination of the genealogies of production and the effects of unequal relations of power and privilege have to be recognised (cited in Jorgenson & Shultz 2012). The damage of colonialism needs to be taken into account into the present as well as the new face of colonialism through the spread of the capitalist market economy and the global social injustices that result in its wake (Heron 2005). Having historical awareness, for example, results in critiquing social justice perspectives on international education for being nostalgic about a liberal social welfare state when in fact it was always exclusionary, and continues to be oppressive in relation to Indigenous people's welfare as well as those of racialised citizens in Canada (Choudry 2010).

Several scholars have spelled out the implications of a critical postcolonial analysis of international education as being the following: engaging in international education in ways that are widely inclusive of institutions in the global south; including a historical and sociocultural analysis of oppression (Rhoads & Szélényi 2011); and understanding the global nature of social issues as they relate to local ones (Jorgenson & Shultz 2012). Heron (2011) adds that a postcolonial analysis must not only be aware of the history of colonialism but also that of debt and mechanisms like the structural adjustment program and 'free trade' that keep the global south in a subjugated position relative to the global north. She points out that there is a direct relationship between the impoverishment of the south and the economic base of the middle class in the global north. According to Tiessen and Epprecht (2012), having this awareness means, amongst other things, that a mutuality of benefits must accrue as a result of international education exchanges and not a one-way benefit for students living in the global north, as is the case at present within neoliberal practices of international education.

I will examine the implications of critical postcolonial perspectives of international education in terms of social work education in the next section. I will do so through an examination of its definition of oppression, student outcomes and the neoliberal welfare state.

**Global oppression and international social work education**

A beginning entry point into understanding global oppression and the role of social work in it would be to clarify the relationship of social work to that of the Canadian nation-state. Social work as a profession is both nationalist in its practices and part of the liberal nation-building project in all Western welfare states including Canada (Moosa-Mitha, forthcoming). As an arm of the state, Canadian social workers are mandated to practice in line with state policies that have historically excluded racialised bodies on the basis of their precarious citizenship status and continue to do so. The nationalist basis of social work practices can be made clear to social work students, using postcolonial theoretical insights, by challenging the notion of space as being neutral (Razack & Badwall 2009). The geo-politisation of space can be undertaken by undertaking a historical examination of the colonising practices of the Canadian nation-state in relation to the Indigenous peoples of Canada and social work's role in it (Razack 2012, 2009). It is important that Canada's settler identity is made clear to social work students as an example of global capitalist practices that have a long history and are intimately connected with the nation-building project. Similarly a history of the Canadian nation-state's exclusionary practices in relation to immigrants arriving from countries from the global south must also be included.
as an example of the international dimension of the geo-politics of space. Understanding global oppression as the politisation of space in historical terms can also explain present day injustices as a legacy of colonialism, both locally and in relation to countries of the global south. Politisation of space can also explain injustices that occur presently such as the fortification of welfare states that increasingly seek to exclude immigrants and refugees fleeing from war and famine; itself a sign of the effects of globalisation. It can also make students aware of the rise of securitisation states that treat Muslims and Arab-looking people as suspect and are treated by social workers as such (Razack & Badwall 2006).

Aside from understanding the politics of geographical space and social workers’ role in it as part of the nationalist project, postcolonial understandings of oppression will challenge social workers’ perceptions of social problems in the global south as though they simply exist without any historical antecedents (Heron 2011). Rather than becoming objects of study by social workers from the global north studying in the south, it will help turn social work students’ gaze to take on a more reflexive stance because it will help make clearer the complicity of social workers as a profession that enacts nation-states’ exclusionary policies of social care and as people from the privileged north (Heron 2011; Tiessen 2012). Understanding the processes of colonisation of space will also make it easier for students to see the global dimensions of local issues.

Centring the multicultural/settler reality of Canada can also unsettle homogeneous and fixed understanding of global oppression. The narratives of indigenous peoples in relation to colonisation are multiple and changing as they resist and have continued to resist its many effects. Similarly countries of the global south have their own individual histories of oppression and colonisation that take on shifting contemporary manifestations. Razack (2012) reminds us that racialised students from Indigenous as well as other immigrant communities will have very different experiences of interlocking oppression that cannot be ‘known’ in advance with any degree of certainty. Critiques of international social work education have long noted the universalising tendencies of consultant social work educators from the global north advising on the development of social work education to universities located in the global south (Midgley 1981; Bogo & Herington 1988). Haug (2005) provides a pointed critique of social work educator exchanges when he accuses educators of conducting ‘professional imperialism under which the dominant model of social work has been disseminated around the world where . . . primarily Western “experts” teach or consult in non-Western countries, while ignoring power differences between them’ (127).

What postcolonial analysis does provide for is a framework that is rooted in critical examination of relations of power, both locally and globally, that results in social injustices. It undertakes this analysis by recognising the historically derived nature of such injustices and the ‘materially linked interlocking systems of oppression’ (Tiessen & Heron 2012). It also means that the diversity of ways by which colonisation has occurred and continues to occur is not being acknowledged.

Centring the multicultural/settler nature of Canadian society also results in breaking down the binary of national/international in other ways. Immigration, which is largely defined in unilateral terms as the movement of people from one country to another, in fact represents a far more complicated reality. Immigrants who arrive from the global south into countries in the global north, for example, often move back to their countries of origin for periods of time, or may move to a third place, before re-settling into their host countries (Stasilius 2008). Their participation in their countries of origin may be more than superficial. For example, countries like India and Turkey have special status for non-
resident Indian and Turkish people by allowing them voting and investment rights that recognise them as being transnational (Stasilius 2008). Moreover, many people around the world identify in ways that are not contained by nation-state boundaries. This is true of many Catholics, Jews, Muslims and Indigenous peoples. The world is in fact far more transnational than assumed in the literature on international social work.

**Student outcomes when undertaking international social work education**

Understanding the motivation behind undertaking international social work education projects is crucial to the pedagogical experiences that students will experience. George and Delarosa (2009) point out that international social work education could be undertaken for the sake of getting on the bandwagon of government sponsored programs in order to benefit from resources attached to such programs. Tiessen (2012) and Epprecht (2004) similarly question the motivations of students and educators who want to participate in international volunteer opportunities and student placements. A study examining the benefits that agencies in the global south accrue from the presence of students from the global north suggests that while the agencies were positive about student presence and felt that they brought in new ideas and had a greater knowledge of information technology, their contributions were rather superficial, particularly if their stay was under three month, as is generally the case (Tiessen 2012). This and other studies (Heron 2011) concluded that the benefits to the individual student from the global north were more likely greater in terms of greater appreciation of global realities and enhancement of resumes than it was to the agencies in the global south.

Using a postcolonial point of view Tiessen and Epprecht (2012) suggest that it is imperative for international student exchanges to be of mutual benefit and there be a mutuality of exchange of both benefits and burdens that come with globalisation. This translates into students becoming more aware of their own responsibilities as students coming from a privileged background as well as additional resources for social work agencies placing students in the global south. While there are some cases of students from the global south going to do their practica in the global north, by far the predominant model is of a one-way direction with students from the global north exceeding the number of students participating in an international student exchange (Razack 2009).

Examining motivations of students from the global north for undertaking international social work education is revealing. For most students the motivation is that it is an interesting way to travel, to get cross-cultural skills and to help countries that are perceived as being poorer and experiencing a lot of social problems (Heron 2011). Upon their return, Canadian students largely report feeling that the educational experience was a good one and cite increased global awareness of social issues, friendships with people from another part of the world and having a sense of adventure as some of the indicators of a successful international exchange program (Heron 2011; Razack 2009; Tiessen 2012). The motivations of students from the global north going to undertake international social work experiences or arriving from there are largely 'me'-centred (Heron 2011). In spite of the fact that some students talk about the desire to go for their practicum in the global south in order to 'help', it's a form of altruism that also tends to centre themselves rather than the other. This is largely the case because students tend to take an uncomplicated position vis-a-vis helping the other to produce a subject position of the social work helper who is
innocent of the unequal power relations that result in social injustices in the first place (Heron 2011; Razack 2009).

One of the motivations cited most often by students interested in undertaking international social work practica is learning cross-cultural skills by immersing themselves in cultures that are foreign to them (Tiessen 2012). If we were to centre the multicultural/settler reality of Canada, then the possibility of working across cultures can exist locally. Moreover, such a desire needs to be interrogated to understand it further. Neoliberal discourses on internationalisation of education also tend to use cross-cultural competency as a desired outcome of international education. In their case, having a cross-cultural aptitude puts students in the best position to compete within a global market by enabling them to move around a borderless world with relative ease (Jorgenson & Shultz 2012). The geo-political nature of nation-state boundaries is not simply about cultural differences but rather of racialised processes of colonisation.

Heron (2006) and Tiessen (2012) critique students’ desire for cross-cultural skills on the basis of its consumerist orientation to learning. According to them, students perceive international social work education through the exchange program as consisting of the gaining of an ‘authentic’ experience of learning in exchange for the time and money students pay to receive it. Upon returning from an international exchange, they find that students still explain their learning in similar terms as when they left such as ‘development of cross cultural skills’ and ‘increase in cultural understanding’. Aside from the fact that this learning is still couched in self-oriented terms, they find naïve the view, implicit in such articulations, that encountering difference is the same as knowing difference. They remark on the neoliberalism implicit in the view of social work students to acquire something that is couched largely in self-referential terms and is understood as being undertaken for instrumental reasons such as student enhancement of their resumes.

There has been a concerted attempt by social work educators intent on tapping the potential of international social work education to raise students’ critical consciousness about global injustices in ways that are more than superficial (Fairchild et al. 2006). Larson and Allen (2006) did in fact set out to work with students to undertake international social work education with the explicit purpose of increasing their level of conscientisation – loosely defined as raising critical awareness of the structures of oppression that permeate globally. Having undertaken a preparatory program prior to undertaking their placement where students were exposed to the structural and historical reasons that keep Mexico (the destination for Canadian student placements) at a certain level of poverty, students were then placed with community development projects in Mexico. Larson and Allen (2006) found that there was indeed a rise in awareness of the global structural nature of oppression and a clear sense of implication of their own role in it. However, the real marker for having achieved conscientisation was theorised in terms of behavioural changes, and in their study Larson and Allen found that while there was some indication of behavioural change, it faded over time. Other studies (Tiessen 2012; Heron 2011; Razack 2011, 2009) have found that over time there is limited active engagement with issues of global social justice once students come back from their practica. George and Delarosa’s study (2009) is an anomaly as it found that students remained actively engaged with issues of global injustice having come back from their practica in India. It is possible that these were students of colour with previous ties to India; although George and Delarosa do not make that explicit in their article. Suffice it to say that if the intention of educators is to ensure that students achieve a level of critical consciousness of the structural nature of oppression and privilege
and can see their role in it through taking an activist stance in resisting global injustices locally, the evidence is dubious that this outcome is achieved, particularly over time.

Basing discussions on desired student outcomes as a result of undertaking international social work education adds to the critical perspective already present in the scholarship in a significant way. There is a propensity in relevant literature to assume that the students engaging in international social work education are white (Razack & Badwall 2006). As George and Delarosa point out, students of colour, particularly those who undertake international exchanges by visiting their countries of origin (or that of their parents), do not necessarily regard visiting these countries as ‘international’ but rather as ‘national’. For example, South Asian-Canadian students, the case in point for George and Delarosa’s analysis, consider engaging with agencies in India as an extension of their national identity; insofar as they identify both as Indians as well as Canadians. This of course does not mean that South Asian students should not need to understand their own privileged position in relation to residents of countries in the global south, but it does mean that their motivations for going may be very different and have not really been captured adequately.

To a degree it is possible to generalise from the evidence that we have regarding immigrant contributions and sense of responsibility towards their countries of origin. We know that countries like India greatly benefit from the patriotic sense of responsibility that results in Indian non-residents going back for a period of time to contribute to the knowledge base of such countries, particularly in relation to information technology (Stasilius 2008). Thus, much of the discussion on the neoliberalism embedded in ‘I’-oriented student motivations may actually not bear relevance to students from immigrant backgrounds precisely because of their sense of responsibility to give back to the society from which they first arrived into Canada; and this desire cannot easily be critiqued as arising from a sense of entitlement to ‘help elsewhere’ (See Heron 2006). Perhaps these students are engaging in international social work as an instantiation of engaged and responsible global citizens that Canadian Government agencies have identified as being the goal behind their support of internationalisation of education.

There are other ways that geo-politics can affect students from immigrant backgrounds. At the moment one such issue is the long-running war on terror that Canada as an ally of the US has been involved in. International exchanges for students of Middle-Eastern backgrounds or who are Muslims have a wholly different set of concerns that they engage in if they decide to undertake international exchanges in their countries of origin. Firstly, it is harder to organise such international exchanges, as governments do need to be working collaboratively at some level for such exchanges to be resourced. Secondly, the multinational identity that Canadian Muslims hold makes it hard to be representatives of two nation-states when the states themselves are in conflict with each other.

If the popular imagery of Canada is white, it is also non-native. The motivations and desired outcomes of Indigenous students are even less analysed or examined. Indigenous students crossing nation-state boundaries through international education programs have a different geo-political relationship to this border crossing than white settler students. It is not a movement from a colonial country to a former colon; rather, it is that of a colonised people going to a formerly colonised one, or if the exchange is latitudinal then to another colonial power. Pflanz (2011), an Indigenous Metis student who undertook an international student exchange practica from Canada to Denmark, reflected on the privileges that such a move carried precisely because of the fact that her own Indigenous status was often
overlooked from both the sending and the receiving country and the resulting treatment of her as any other ‘white’ student.

In the end, recognising the realities of students of colour and Indigenous students engaged in international education exchanges may well be to recognise the difficulties that nation-states have with truly global identities that transcend nation-border states. Owning multiple national identities or indeed identities that have statehood boundaries imposed on them as a result of colonisation may prove to challenge the very notion of the international and hence of international social work education as it is currently defined.

The neoliberal welfare state

In considering the issue of internationalisation of social work education, it is important to ground it within both the profession of social work and the nature of the welfare state within which social workers in countries of the global north practice. The social justice perspective of international social work education, particularly due to the international development context within which it formulates its vision, tends to idealise liberal welfare states of the 1970s and 80s (see Choudry 2010). In doing so it ignores the nature of exclusions that resulted from the practices of the Canadian welfare state, particularly in relation to Indigenous and racial minority communities. This not only means that transposing the ideals of liberal welfare states in other parts of the world is another form of colonisation; it also means that the narratives of an idealised past itself need interrogating.

International social work education must also take into consideration that the neoliberalisation of welfare states such as Canada is itself linked to globalisation. The Canadian state acts within a global arena to purchase social services, such as certain health care services, at a cheaper rate within a marketisation discourse of welfare states (Stasilius 2008). Another example of globalisation and its link to the neoliberalisation of the welfare state is the fast tracking of Filipino nannies who come to Canada to do care work for young children and the elderly to address the gap created by a retreating welfare state in Canada, resulting in care provision for those families who can afford to purchase it (Stasilius 2008). In the case of social work, globalisation is as much about disengagement of the responsibilities the state has towards its citizens as it is about citizens becoming more responsible for their own care by purchasing care within a global market.

Recognising not only the postcolonial reality of globalisation but also its increasingly neoliberal character, particularly in countries of the global north, facilitates student learning as a result of exchanges where alternative notions of care, such as community development models of care, help teach students from the global north other ways of doing social work (Larson & Allen 2006). Self-reflexivity about the drawbacks and absence of welfare states in the global north should facilitate the treatment of countries of the global south as viable resources for teaching alternative ways of undertaking social care. This is precisely what some educators from Canada have aimed to do when organising international exchanges for their students (see Larson & Allen 2006).

Moreover, social work, as I have already discussed, is an arm of the liberal welfare state in countries of the global north, and as such it is constituted by and within the nation-building project of colonial Canada. This is not the case only in historical terms, but continues to be so within ‘postcolonial’ Canada. Internationalisation of social work education must take into considerations the restrictions and barriers that social workers
encounter when working with refugees, immigrants or generally anyone with a precarious citizenship status. Social workers themselves carry some of the biases against the presence of immigrants and refugees that emanate from the social policy context of liberal welfare states in the global north (Park & Bhuyan 2012). This hierarchical nature of citizenship as experienced by minority Canadians in their own society also has a bearing on how students of colour and Indigenous students understand their own sense of national belonging. It is important therefore that scholarship on international social work education does not treat Canadian students as constituting a homogenous group even within critical perspectives on international social work education by assuming that the basic aim of undertaking such education is to interrogate their own sense of ‘innocence’ and privilege in relation to countries of the global south. While this is true in some ways, differential citizenship claims and social exclusions experienced on the basis of race and indigeneity must also be recognised when undertaking preparation for international social work education exchanges.

Conclusions

In this chapter I have undertaken an analysis of some of the main themes that emerge within the scholarship on international social work education in the Canadian context. I have done so by focusing on one aspect of international social work education, namely international student exchanges from the global north to the global south. My thesis has been to insert and centralise the multicultural/settler identity of Canadian society in the scholarship on Canadian international social work student exchange programs in order to highlight some of the significant ways in which it adds to critical analysis on this topic.

Focusing on definition of global oppression, student outcomes and the Canadian liberal welfare state, I have suggested that centralising the multicultural/settler identity of Canadian society serves to collapse the binary that exists between national and international as the basic assumption within which international social work education normatively operates. I have also brought attention to the very different motivations and dynamics present when minority students undertake international social work exchanges. By examining the differential nature of experiences of Canadian citizenship based on students’ social identity location, I have suggested that the scholarship on international social work education must treat Canadian students as a heterogeneous group.

Lastly I have argued that centralising the multicultural/settler identity of Canada brings to the forefront the geo-political nature of space and boundary crossing. Taking this seriously makes the historical and contemporaneous reality of the colonial nature of power relationships that divide the world into a global north and south more apparent.

References


Global social work


