# Reflections and challenges of international social work research.

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# article

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This article seeks to critically reflect on the experience and challenges of international social work research within a 10-country consortium of social work researchers examining the impact of neoliberalism on civil society and social work, under the auspices of a European Union, Framework 7, Marie Curie Action bid. The study enabled us to debate and examine the impact of neoliberalism on social work, to develop theory and perspectives, and to promote further debate on social work's responses. We aim to critically explore the nature and growth of social work research collaboration, while reconnoitring the contextual difficulties for international social work research, along with the research trials, to enable collaborative research to be reflective, concerted and facilitative.

**key words** neoliberalism • international research • international collaboration
• social development

## Introduction

Internationalisation and globalisation have become dominant discourses of modern professional and personal lives, with direct and indirect influences on societal functioning, academic research and social policy. Universities, particularly in the Global North, view internationalisation as an increasingly core aspect of their business models, with corresponding pressures exerted throughout institutions to promote international teaching and research, and having a global footprint (Deem, 2001). For social workers, international social work research is promoted by the Social Work Global Agenda (IFSW, 2014) and changes to the International Definition of Social Work (IFSW, 2014), both of which recognise the profession as an academic discipline, having a role in developing the profession's understanding, reflectiveness, knowledge and solidarity.

This article seeks to critically reflect on the experience and challenges of international social work research within a 10-country consortium of social work researchers examining the impact of neoliberalism on civil society and social work,

under the auspices of a European Union (EU), Framework 7, Marie Curie Action bid. The countries involved in this bid included the UK, Italy, Spain, Portugal and Turkey (although not part of the EU, it contributes to EU research funding and is counted as part of the EU for the purposes of the funders) and five countries that make up the so-called 'BRICS' (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa). The study enabled us to debate and examine the impact of neoliberalism on social work, to develop theory and perspectives, and to promote further debate on social work's responses. We aim to critically explore the nature and growth of social work research collaboration, while reconnoitring the contextual difficulties for international social work research, along with the research trials, to enable collaborative research to be reflective, concerted and facilitative. We hope that this article will support the development of professional debate, as well as promote consideration of the research skills necessary for social work to understand complex global contexts, including the systems, history, processes and socioeconomic and political environment of social welfare. It is within this context that we would seek to promote debate, and to question and share insights on the challenges of undertaking international social work research.

## International research and collaboration: contextual overview

The growth of international social work collaboration (Das and Anand, 2012, 2014; Jones and Truell, 2012; Kreitzer et al, 2012; Taylor and Sharland, 2015) highlights the importance and the efforts being made to engage with this important development. Thus, the topic of international social work is a fertile and necessary area of social work literature (Healy and Thomas, 2007; Dominelli, 2010; Hugman et al, 2010; Nadkarni, 2013; Spolander et al, 2014). Beyond professional calls for international social work, research activities have become increasingly prioritised due to international research being seen as an opportunity to promote pioneering research results (Watkins, 2008; Gray and Coates, 2010; Yunong and Xiong, 2012), support comparative approaches (Payne, 2006), promote improved evidence to enable practice (Kirk and Reid, 2002; Sheldon and Chilvers, 2000; Thyer and Kazi, 2004) or even to reposition the profession and its standing in the global marketplace (Davis, 2011). The language of the marketplace has thus framed and increased the pressure for 'internationalisation' as a result of the rise of neoliberal policy and market-bordered research competition (Kim, 2009). This is also resulting in a change to the nature of academic social work, resulting in quantitative business evaluation processes that focus less on the content of academic outputs and more on where it is published and the number of citations it collects (Engwall, 2008). This provides the institutional milieu within which individual social work researchers increasingly find themselves while embarking on international research. In reflecting on the project's journey in this area, the authors have also sought to reflect more broadly on the context in which such international collaboration is undertaken, as well as their own experience (theoretically and practically) in the project.

From an epistemological perspective (historical, social and psychological circumstances that lead to the creation and sharing of knowledge), the project emerged from countries bedevilled by austerity, such as the UK, in collaboration with decaying semi-centres (Spain, Portugal and Italy), one ex-core (Russia) and rising semi-peripheries (Brazil, China, India, South Africa and Turkey). As a result, the team represents a variety of societies embedded in the current globalised

economy – a world system marked by the mobility of social positions, in a moment of bifurcation that marks the end of American hegemony at the end of globalised capitalism (Wallerstein, 2004). It is beyond the scope of this article to further explore the theoretical context of Wallerstein's work, other than to indicate how the motivation and object of the study (the effects on social welfare and implications for polarisation between and within societies) is an indicator of this change cycle. We recognise that, historically, capitalism has sought to solve its structural crisis (inequality and polarisation) by extending into new territories, and therefore order is determined by the breakdown of the accumulation rate, the driving element of capitalism (Wallerstein, 2004). Reducing the costs to capitalism has therefore been a key driver for the search for new labour and now, as capitalism has to some degree covered the entire planet, changes are needed to solve this structural crisis. This has included the increased implementation of neoliberal policy, with reductions to wages, the increased precariousness of work and a lowering of welfare support to encourage cheaper labour across so-called developed countries. It is within this context that the researchers sought to explore and understand the impacts, development and linkages between civil society and social work.

## Reflections of a 10-country research project

The successful award of the project provided an opportunity to explore and research macro-contexts for social work alongside the development and sharing of research skills across multiple and global professional contexts. While the sheer scale of managing a 10-country consortium brought considerable and multiple complexities, in terms of managing such a large project with about 35 researchers, we felt rather than reflect on the practical concerns for future social work research, a useful consideration was of the 'softer' or the less visible challenges that we as a team needed to engage with. While recognising the multitude of perspectives and issues that we could have explored, we considered epistemological debates, research processes, contexts and governance, and the complexities of language and meaning to be topics that have not been directly or widely acknowledged in current research undertakings. We have thus sought to highlight these before exploring the social work dialectic and the role of critical theory in international social work research.

### Forming the research team: epistemological and socio-political contexts

The challenges for international research collaboration commence with the development and establishment of a consortium of like-minded and committed researchers, willing and able to undertake this research journey. Enthusiasm for the research topic is often identified as a crucial element (Savaya and Gardner, 2012). Often, forming a research team is the initial challenge in developing an international collaborative consortium, utilising informal and formal relationships between institutions, individual researchers or possibly old students. The international research process is expensive, time-consuming, complicated and inevitably raises a range of anxieties for individual researchers and their institutions. Within social work, literature to help and support this process of international research is limited (Lombe et al, 2013). Additional challenges include funding and methodological difficulties (Savaya and Gardner, 2012; Lombe et al, 2013). Despite this lack of international publication

support, it is necessary for the profession to seek to meet the broader aims of the Global Agenda in order to 'to strengthen the profile and visibility of social work, to develop new partnerships to boost the confidence of social workers to make a stronger contribution to policy development' (Jones and Truell, 2012: 455–6), while recognising the potential dangers of such initiatives (Gray and Webb, 2013, 2014; Spolander et al, 2014).

## The research and collaborative process

The researchers (with different languages and ontological positions) are therefore required to undertake a process of triple decoding: first, interpreting the research proposal from the institution that promotes and leads the proposal; second, an internal process of decoding the multinational team itself; and, third, decoding the research partners and their social work contexts. This is required as part of a constant and challenging process of developing research consensus, using different theoretical and ontological social work frameworks. This requires a consideration of cultural hegemony (exploring notions of unidirectional economic and social development from 'developed' to so-called 'developing countries', overcoming the idea of the separation between the subject and object of knowledge [collecting the experiences of social work and civil society]) (Kiely, 2005; Keaney, 2015) and observing the stated ideology implicit in the Framework 7 funding objectives that knowledge is key to the EU's Lisbon Strategy to become a competitive knowledge economy (EU, 2011).

Our purpose in writing this article was not only to share our experience, but also to contribute to the development of international social work research methodology and to prompt further debate in international research projects. For us, as individual researchers, the prospect of international cooperation provided an opportunity to share understanding and explore the international boundaries of social work through a process of, to reputedly paraphrase Shakespeare, 'we know what we are, but not what we might be'. Thus, the process enables us to gather different researchers (as well as their cultures and historical backgrounds) and their research approaches and theoretical contexts face to face in a collaborative process, the end of which will leave us all different and promote a new generation of international social work researchers.

## Structure matters

Structure matters in shaping systems and processes in neoliberal times, in part, as its governance formation surrounds and frames the development and implementation of policy on the basis of economic rather than democratic relations (Harris, 2003, 2014; Cardy, 2010; Garrett, 2013; Spolander et al, 2015). Educational scholars have already sought to highlight the linkage between individual values and the practices of educational leaders being shaped by the values implicit in policy and systems (Stevenson and Tooms, 2015). While recognising that the complex deliberations of structure, in contrast to agency, also contain within them debates and relativities, they highlight the importance of understanding in what way structure and agency interact to form and limit individual actions, while acknowledging that as individuals, we simultaneously may be free agents or have no agency (Stevenson and Tooms, 2015). While we seek to acknowledge these debates, we believe that it is also critical

to highlight the importance of political economy in seeking to help understand the complexity contained within these debates.

We would therefore be remiss by not discussing the context of seconded project researchers, particularly as many of their employers might be considered to embody the spirit, if not the body, of the neoliberal university and the additional pressures that this places on individuals, teams and the creation of knowledge artefacts. Universities have not been excluded from neoliberal trends such as globalised markets, deregulation, privatisation, competition, workforce casualisation and reduced public expenditure (Deakin, 2001; Watson et al, 2003; Canaan and Shumar, 2008; Ball, 2015a). Within neoliberal systems, social costs are increasingly shifted from the state and the private sector to individuals and markets, with labour markets being made flexible, alongside attacks on unions and changes to wages, tenure and employment conditions. This has been accompanied by the state extricating itself from many social and public domains and services, such as education, alongside social welfare being increasingly marketised (Davies et al, 2006).

Progressively, universities (as with social work programmes) are required to service a knowledge economy with a focus on job-ready graduates able to join the workforce on graduation, often resulting in critical theory being de-emphasised in favour of the teaching of applied knowledge (Thornton, 2014). Academics are therefore required to be productive and to reinvent themselves, producing world-class research to enhance the status of their university, and this was felt as a pressure for funder expectations of the research, as well as for many of the researchers' host institutions (Ball, 2012, 2015a). Thus, it is important that researchers recognise that neoliberalism 'is in here' as well as 'out there' (Peck, 2003). Neoliberalism is therefore simultaneously an object for research 'out there' and has a more insidious impact within the team (our minds and souls), affecting our relationships to each other (Ball, 2012), the demands and how we seek to accommodate personal, professional and employment conflict as part of the team (Ball, 2015a). Indeed, we should always bear in mind that higher education has previously been attendant in transitions of capitalism and the resultant incoherence between policy and regulation (Ball, 2012). Similar concerns and reflections may also apply to the social work profession. Thus, for individuals and the team (regional differences should be noted), pressure to create artefacts and to disseminate them would result from professional obligation or the need to demonstrate units of performance and output so that they could be audited (Shore and Wright, 1999; Shore, 2008; Engelbrecht et al, 2014). The complexity of language, culture and personal and organisational expectations are therefore significant pressures within and across the team, requiring debate and consideration.

The process of internationalisation pressurises social work for a number of reasons, which include: the impact of globalisation on populations, societies and economies (Jones and Truell, 2012); the profession itself (Pullen-Sansfaçon et al, 2011); the need for increasing student numbers (Ball, 2012); and the institutional drive to internationalise (Altbach and Knight, 2007; Knight, 2008; Turner and Robson, 2008; Caruana, 2009). Thus, the imperative for the project and the profession was to understand the process and outcomes that are reforming and shaping society, in addition to the profession's role within it, all within a context of neoliberal policy and economic implementation.

Social work, as a discipline, seeks to engage critically with the rise, development, articulation and implementation of neoliberalism and globalisation, not only due to the

implications for society, but also for the health of the profession and those who work within it (Garrett, 2003, 2012; Ferguson, 2004, 2007; Mohan, 2008; Dominelli, 2010; Spolander et al, 2015). It is within this context, along with the need for social work to strengthen its knowledge base, that academics and practitioners find themselves being driven and seeking to increase research outputs, including international research efforts. However, it is necessary for this dedication and resolution to include debates regarding the purpose, nature and utilisation of such endeavours, as there are a variety of ongoing debates in the profession regarding the focus of its work and the role and politics of initiatives such as the Global Agenda for Social Work (Gray and Webb, 2014). Furthermore, practical difficulties for social work research, at least in the UK, and possibly in other countries, include the lack of time, staff skills and resources, and reservations and opposition on the part of educators, students and practitioners to engage with research (MacIntyre and Paul, 2013). Additionally, the profession has struggled with a variety of dialectics, including whether its focus should be on individuals or social actions (Gitterman, 2014), which is an important issue and one that we explored along with its implications within research, and our project in particular. More recent debates about the profession needing a wider range of interventions in macro and political social work appears to be increasing (Ferguson, 2006; Lorenz, 2008; Gray and Webb, 2009, 2013; Wallace and Pease, 2011; Harington and Beddoe, 2013; McKendrick and Webb, 2014; Miljenović and Knežević, 2015).

## Collaboration, language, frameworks and meaning

Reflecting on our experience (theoretically and practically) of inclusion in the project, substantial effort was necessary to analyse and seek a path through multiple barriers, including language, culture (national and organisational), context of their practice and the process of research. This included questioning the challenge of different language codes (English, Portuguese, Italian, Russian, Finnish, Afrikaans, Mandarin, Hindi, Tamil, Turkish and Spanish), different theoretical frameworks of social science and differences in the meaning of language. The latter included both common and technical language (neoliberalism, social policy, context), as well as being part of a new international team seeking to understand a complex social phenomenon that is socially, politically, economically, historically and culturally bounded. The terms civil society and social services may each have different meanings in the researchers' own language and this be compounded by the ambiguities of the profession in Europe, which aims to 'make a difference at the social level, by intervening in the personal and local' (Payne, 2006: 122). Similar to a kaleidoscope, the researchers are faced with geographical and institutional challenges, along with those already highlighted, but also the social construction of the experience of different professionals and the variety of social work models and policy frameworks. The constant temptation when faced by this complexity is to resort to a comparison of social work systems, rather than the complexity of underlying theoretical models, and exploring narratives around the role of the profession. This has been a persistent challenge for the research process as the team sought to balance the needs of funders and the skills and comfort zones of the team, along with the quest to explore challenging theoretical concepts and ideologies.

   Thus, the joy of a successful European bid soon gave way to the practicality, anxiety and trial of mutual understanding, faced with questioning our own, as well as understanding others', theoretical and practice orientations. We needed to recognise

that words were not neutral, transparent signs, but rather located within historical and social conflicts and, as a result, steeped in their voices, values and desires (Bakthin, 2002). Our reflections therefore need to explore the link which is necessary, but not always observed or imposed, on the simplification of international collective work within a theoretical abstraction process. This abstraction requires understanding language as a social fact, whose existence is based on the needs of communication, and which enhances speech, enunciation, and is therefore ideologically social in its nature (Bakthin, 2002).

As a writing process, this initial text was initiated by one author, others later contributed to the arguments and debates, thus forming a process of reflection, critical debate and writing. The challenge of language also extended to the expression of these ideas through writing partners (Brazilian, British and Spanish), with the use of language posing a barrier as part of a two-way process and the practical challenges of communicating meaning, in addition to the obvious different cultural, historical, social, economic and political contexts, as well as theoretical orientations.

## Social work dialectic

Globally, social work is being challenged by the infiltration of global economic policy, with the imposition of markets and neoliberal thinking gaining popularity across many countries in the world (Harris, 2003; Ferguson, 2006; Dominelli, 2010; Ioakimidis et al, 2014; Singh and Cowden, 2015). This can be referred to as 'neoliberal globalisation', which provides an indication of the extent of this infiltration into economic, political, social, cultural and international interaction and relations (Harvey, 2005). The growth and implementation of these policies, which includes reductions to the welfare state, the promotion of workfare and labour casualisation, and the marketisation and privatisation of care, have already had an enormous impact on societies, individuals and social welfare services (Dominelli, 2002; Hay, 2002; Harvey, 2005; Garrett, 2009). Awareness of these challenges is not sufficient in itself; efforts were made in the methodology and the construction of knowledge artefacts to address the risks of cultural, political and economic hegemony.

The task was therefore to develop understanding, as well as to promote rules and processes, that enabled the successful exploration of the research problem and encouraged understanding of the terms and concepts used in the project in order to enable researchers to link their kaleidoscope of senses, knowledge and skills. The primary form of communication and dialogue for the team was through the use of site visits to appropriate social welfare services, where the team was able to access the information and contextualise questions raised from the literature. This access was complemented by the team debate, enabling an observation of what has been discussed by country experts (members of the research team) and the literature. The presence of a translator, normally a host team member, was helpful on many occasions. The fact that, for most of the study, a large proportion of potential agencies had knowledge of English (especially in urban environments and subjects with high or medium qualifications, eg, experts, social workers, politicians, etc) solved some communication problems. Longer research visits were helpful in increasing linguistic (and cultural) understanding in the visited country. Meetings and webinars were used to create and consolidate knowledge artefacts, with meetings being held to: coordinate and evaluate progress and achievements; synchronise project-related

interactions among partners; and evaluate the progress of project plans. In contrast, webinars enabled the exploration of ideas, content and artefacts. As a result, initial work was a combination of the development and maintenance of the first face-to-face relationship, while later work was mediated by the Internet and six-monthly symposiums (alternating between EU and non-EU countries).

Using management terminology for bureaucratic discussion is very consistent with the standardisation offered by English as a language medium. In terms of knowledge content, standardisation is not so obvious, although the researcher's scientific language can present a problem when the content exposition is done in English at a webinar. Obviously, this analytical separation of management tasks and research tasks is not radical and so it is sufficient to say that in real situations of interaction, just one of the two planes predominates (management or research). However, face-to-face debates (which were usually accompanied by a greater availability of time) broadened the spectrum of issues that could be treated (from research issues to personal issues) and facilitated the strengthening of affective ties between members. Mediated communication (even with the addition of video images) presented obstacles that slowed and reduced the feedback and made the negotiation of meaning difficult. The experience of frequent contact between co-workers by email, while not discussed earlier, is essential, but can also result in misunderstanding. Consequently, the means by which we communicate largely determines what we can or cannot express, enriching or impoverishing the content of what we communicate and the relationships we build.

## Social work: language and reflexivity

The original research proposal was reflective in its nature; thus, an early proposition in the research process was that the research team was studying the same social sphere to which they already belonged, and thus the researchers were required to undertake an interpretation of themselves. This reflectivity was more challenging in that its objectives required a study of social work and civil society, forming challenges for positivistic research models due to the need to create distance (ethically and politically) between the subject and the object of knowledge. In addition, the lead European partners of the research were mostly former colonial countries, but with different cultures and being at different economic levels. The challenge for social workers reflecting on their work, involvement and location in the complex cultural porridge is confusing (Polanyi, 1944), along with the intended separation between the market (trade in goods and services), state (polity) and civil society that created liberalism as geoculture (Wallerstein, 1991; Rozov, 2012). Dialectically, systems-level social scientists could ask whether we contribute to increased autonomy and societal freedom, or whether our intellectual and professional practices contribute to Durkheim's perspective of social control and the maintenance of systemic inequality. We acknowledged that social work professional practice is profoundly affected by political economy and the relationships between social classes, and that this impedes social reproduction across multiple dimensions (material, spiritual, subjective), all of which impact on the living conditions of society, in particular, those most vulnerable (Yazbek, 2014).

## Promotion of critical theory and discussion

Critical theory provided a useful framework for the project team to understand the impacts of globalisation (Harvey, 2010), changes to employment (Ritzer, 2010; Hafford-Letchfield et al, 2014), workfare and prisonfare (Wacquant, 2010), and the commodification of labour (Bourdieu, 1993). Additionally, it was recognised that many Western democracies are often highly unequal societies, with significant socio-economic inequality and discrimination, that the reproduction of this state of affairs (seemingly normal and inevitable in those societies) is often through dominant ideology and that the use of critical theory is necessary to help understand and then change this status quo (Horkheimer, 1995). Thus, seeking to understand dynamics and theoretical positions is helpful in the context of the working of the team as 'human capital' (Bourdieu, 1993). The workplace for the team was often their own employing institutions, which masked a variety of calls on their time, expectations and commitment, and the understanding through critical theories perspectives of commodification, alienation and objectification, in which workers can turn their research and outputs into 'objects' for the market (Marx, 1887; Bourdieu, 1993). The importance of the researcher's context within neoliberal institutions has implications for power and ideology and how these might work symbiotically (Foucault, 1980). The task for team working required exploring and recognising how to either avoid the import or the creation of feelings of alienation that might result from the commodification of interpersonal and team communication (Habermas, 1990). This presented a constant tension, alongside the debate as to whether the value of work needed to be commoditised for the funder and employing institutions (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1972).

The creation of a research project comprising 10 countries across the world facilitated the exploration of power relationships and 'ideological state apparatuses' in each of the countries, along with the mechanisms to disseminate dominant ideology (Althusser, 1969, 1971) in addition to debates on how individuals develop mechanisms to support the status quo and work against their own best interests (Gramsci, 1971). The use of disciplinary power (Foucault, 1980), alongside how we discipline and exercise power on ourselves through conduct and thought (Ball, 2015b), could also be discussed and explored in the context of international visits, neoliberal policy development and social work responses. In particular, the profession's moral and ethical dialectic challenge of whether the focus should be on individuals or larger macro-interventions often results in one-dimensional considerations of trying to make the situation better (Marcuse, 1964). Debates in which there was a significant diversity of views and traditions needed to be considered as to whether they represented 'repressive tolerance' (Marcuse, 1965), so that a wide diversity of ideas could be explored and presented, and whether the conclusion of those discussions underpinned governing ideology. The dominance of neoliberal thinking and ideology provides a dominant framework and thus structures alternative or oppositional perspectives as being on a continuum of more extreme from the natural accepted centre of perspectives.

The nature of the research therefore required the team to develop a culture and commitment to explore 'dominant ideology', namely, those beliefs or practices that frame how we understand our experiences and lives (Marx and Engels, 1970). The opportunities for discussion enabled these debates, but it was difficult to explore, as the very debate is embedded in language and culture and thus impacts on how

we understand and interact with the world. Therefore, while these dialogues might sometimes be considered 'common sense', the core of beliefs may also be beliefs spread by dominant forces such as the media to support the interests of power in societies (Fromm, 1968). In this regard, the understanding of this process in supporting minority positions, while seeming to advance the interests of all (Marx and Engels, 1970), was an area of debate in terms of national and international policy development. Furthermore, we noted that international social work research might be considered useful by many as long as it did not 'problematise' our own privilege, disturb the socio-political order or challenge our consideration of social reconstruction.

## Conclusion

The research project, while providing an enormous learning opportunity for both researchers and their academic institutions, has provided an excellent opportunity for detailed exploration of social work within different contexts. The importance of the profession in seeking theoretical models to support the understanding of complexity, reflectiveness, solidarity and knowledge is an increasing priority for a profession that finds itself at the sharp end of neoliberal reform. While a variety of pressures are exerted on individual researchers for tangible and 'productive' outcomes, these need to be balanced with the opportunity to explore and theorise the complex systems, histories, processes and socioeconomic and political environments and structures that shape social welfare. Without the development and use of theory to understand this complexity, the profession may be tempted, as indeed we were, to seek simplistic comparisons of complex systems because this was more comfortable. However, it is only by exploring the impacts of power, structure, ideology and language that we as a profession may hope to begin to critically reflect on the professional in a global context, seek and gain solidarity, and develop reflexive models of practice.

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