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Reflections on International Social Work in Contexts of Forced Migration

Katharina Heilmann and Ralf Roßkopf

1 Introduction

From a historical perspective, Social Work services in the very beginning have been established locally as a result and as a response to social changes, in order to alleviate the effects of poverty and unemployment on site (Kniephoff-Knebel 2015). This might be one of several reasons why ‘International’ Social Work is often still considered as a particular subarea or even deviation in contrast to what is commonly understood as ‘traditional’ Social Work (Kruse 2017). Nevertheless, it is common sense in academic discourses that mutual *inter*-national exchange of theories, methods as well as social workers themselves around the globe have strongly shaped the historical emergence and development of Social Work as a profession (Dominelli 2014: 258).

In “the age of migration” (Castles 2013), individuals worldwide are increasingly mobile and are becoming inter- and transnationally interconnected. Human mobility in general transforms the traditional world order in a historically unprecedented way (Oltmer 2017) and, of course, does have effects on Social Work. ‘Traditional’ Social Work settings, previously linked to concrete local or national spaces, are becoming more and more dispersive: As Graßhoff et al. (2016: 148) state, the global entanglement of social and individual issues in Social Work services has long since become reality. In light of those developments, academic discourses about an internationally oriented Social Work, its understanding and its potentials for science and practice have been gaining more and more importance during the last years (Wagner 2018; Danso 2016: 1743; Cyrus/Treichler 2004: 20).

Nevertheless, Social Work scholars criticise that necessary cross-border or international perspectives on Social Work clients, their lifeworld and their resources as well as on social issues in general are still at the very beginning (e.g. Scherr 2017; Hugman 2010). They argue that it is caused by the fact that many Social Work services are still strongly connected to local (national) spaces (see Lorenz 2004). This observation becomes particularly apparent, *inter alia*, in the field of

forced migration, where not only Social Work clients but also relevant politics are inter- and transnationally connected. Beside all internationally oriented developments, Social Work here still is not actively involved in many of the current academic discourses on global mobility processes yet and is rather lacking a visible position and reputation in international fields so far (crit. Healy 2008).

Against this backdrop, we are now going to discuss understandings of International Social Work developed by different scholars and to depict its connections to Social Work with Refugees¹. Our article is based on secondary sources such as books and articles and takes up several academic discourses on International Social Work and Social Work with Refugees. It focuses circumstances, structures and dilemmas within the profession. It therefore is about reflecting existing academic debates. We thereby intend to raise questions on the significance of international perspectives while dealing with Refugees in times of increasing migration flows and restrictive migration policies. After briefly introducing current discourses on ‘Social Work with Refugees’ and ‘International Social Work’, we are going to outline potentials for enhancing relevant debates and perspectives. We use the concept of ‘borders’ as theoretical framework and argue that particularly dealing with migration may not only be considered as challenging but also as invigorating to debates on the concept of an ‘International Social Work’.

2 Social Work with Refugees: “Homelessness” in International Contexts?

Forced migration flows are one of various and diverse global migration movements in the present time (Oltmer 2017; Castles 2013). Forced migration in Social Work has never before been as challenging as today: Social workers worldwide are currently confronted with enormous challenges in responding to the needs of people in contexts of forced migration – even though the migration phenomenon is as old as mankind, and refugees always have been one of Social Work’s target group (e.g. Rehklau 2017; Melter 2014).

1 In this chapter related to social sciences, we use the term “refugee” synonymously with forced migrants, although we are aware of various highly legal definitions such as the Geneva Refugee Convention and several national asylum laws. Furthermore, we don’t consider ‘the refugees’ as a homogenous group of people but rather as single individuals, each with her/his own experiences, life realities, needs, wishes and resources. For a comprehensive reading, however, we initially rather refer to all individuals who are fleeing from war, conflicts or disasters and might be addressed by Social Work.

While exploring existing research on Social Work practice with refugees, several authors picture that professional action is limited to a very high extent by social, legal or political boundaries (e.g. Prasad et al. 2016: 2). Social workers have to deal with highly precarious circumstances not only on individual but also on structural and political levels (Scherr 2017). Maurer (2018: 117), thus, concludes that, in light of human trafficking, inequality, violence, abuse, traumatisation and many other (mainly) invisible issues, social workers operate in a conflict zone demarcated on one side by what is professionally and ethically required and, on the other side, what is practically feasible.

Despite coping with individual needs or inhuman circumstances, several authors point out one of the various structural challenges Social Work is currently facing: Social Work services address people in settings which are still strongly connected to local or national spaces and Social Work services *mainly* concentrate on a one-dimensional ‘local integration’ into national spaces (e.g. Scherr 2017; Hugman 2010): Social workers are performing strategical support measures to overcome social or structural (institutional) disadvantages in concrete local spaces, mainly within nation states (see also second chapter in this book). Other scholars furthermore criticize that local professional actors leave little voice or power in global contexts on a structural level, while remaining in national and regional spaces (e.g. Graßhoff et al. 2016: 7; Borrmann 2007: 9) – although an international positioning would be necessary in regard to global migration politics (Bommes/Scherr 2012: 152).

There is, however, no doubt that assistance and support to refugees in local or national spaces are highly important in order to alleviate the greatest need and to improve immense and precarious circumstances on site. At the same time, as *inter alia* Healy (2008: 5) states, Social Work services run the risk that they are hiding the diversity, agency and individual lifeworld of ‘the refugees’ who are also embedded in trans- and inter-national contexts. Hugman et al (2010: 635), thus, conclude that current settings and focus of Social Work with refugees therefore show clearly that national boundaries rather limit necessary cross-border and international perspectives on Social Work clients, their lifeworld and their resources.

The example on Social Work with Refugees therefore shows that Social Work profession itself is, as Lorenz (2004: 50) argues, entangled in national or regional projects and rather “homeless” in international contexts. At the same time, it shows the need for exploring and discussing local and individual problems as well as the Social Work profession, itself, in extended global interrelations (Hugman 2010: 84–85; Healy 2008: xiii; Ife 2001). But what might the attribute ‘international’ add to the ‘traditional’ understanding of Social Work?

3 *Inter-national Social Work – Innovation or Tradition?*

Social Work scholars agree that mutual inter-national exchange around the globe have had a significant influence on the development of Social Work as a profession (e.g. Dominelli 2014: 258; Thimmel/Friesenhahn 2012: 389). Already in the mid-nineteenth century, issues of social and public welfare have been discussed at international congresses, e.g. in Brussels/Belgium, Frankfurt/Germany or London/UK (Kniephoff-Knebel 2015). In 1928, international exchange has been institutionalised by newly founded associations such as ‚International Council on Social Welfare‘ (ICSW) or ‚International Association of Schools of Social Work‘ (IASSW) (Kruse 2017). Furthermore, methods and concepts that were developed in different countries have been detected and applied for the ‘own’ (‘national’) field of action.² Up to the present time, continuous exchanges and collaborations of social workers worldwide have been crucial features of the profession (Payne/Askeland 2008: 1; Lyons/Huegler 2012: 223; Midgley 2001).³ Not least, by ratifying „Global Standards for Education and Training of the Social Work Profession” (IASSW 2014) a cross-border basis for Social Work education and qualification of experts was developed and universities more and more incorporate international aspects in Social Work study programmes (Kruse 2017; crit. Crisp 2016).

In the course of increasing inter-national developments, Social Work research more and more focussed in comparing perspectives from the global south and global north on social issues such as poverty, religion, social inequality, gender issues, humanitarian aid, conflict management or violence (e.g. Sousa/Marshall 2015; Askeland/Dohlie 2013; Healy/Link 2012; Jordan 2008; Payne/Askeland 2008). Other studies, in turn, analysed or even critically discussed Social Work traditions and developments in individual countries or regions (e.g. Ornellas et al. 2018; Spitzer 2017; Carranza 2016; Al-Makhamreh/Sullivan 2013; Midgley 1981; Resnick 1976). At the same time, upcoming academic debates, for example on postcolonialism (Said 1978; Spivak 1988), as well as paradigm shifts in social sciences, such as ‚Methodological Nationalism‘ (Glick-Schiller/Basch/Blanc-Szanton 1992) or ‚Transnationalism‘ (Pries 2010; Vertovec 2001), also were transferred to Social Work: Concepts such as “Transnational Social Work” (e.g. Schwarzer et al. 2016; Homfeldt et al. 2008), “Postcolonial Social Work” (e.g. Kleibl et al. 2019; Gray 2013) or “International Social Work” (e.g. Wagner

2 Amongst others, ‘streetwork’ or supervision, common methods of Social Work in Germany, have been both developed in USA (Kniephoff-Knebel 2015: 9)

3 Existing international associations, such as “International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW)”, “Asociación Latinoamericana de Escuelas de Trabajo Social”, “Asia and Pacific Association for Social Work Education (APASWE)” or “European Association of Schools of Social Work (EASSW)” for example show the ongoing diversity of cross-border activities and the profession’s inter-national networks.

et al. 2018; Payne/Askeland 2008; Cox/Pawar 2013; Healy/Link 2012; Hugman et al. 2010) gained in importance.

When analysing current academic debates, it becomes clear that contents and objects of International Social Work are controversially discussed and diversely understood by different scholars. International Social Work is considered as a multidimensional concept, which attempts to combine a number of different ‘international’ elements: Relevant definitions either refer to mechanisms of *exchange* of Social Work knowledge and practice by cross-border activities and collaborations or, on the other hand, focus on a *comparison* of different Social Work methods, theories or region-specific developments. Not least, subjects concerning international issues such as social justice, social change, inequality and human rights became constitutive for the concept (Cox/Pawar 2013: 20; Healy 2012: 12; Hugman et al. 2010: 361; Payne/Askeland 2008: 3).

Due to many features and properties, the concept of ‘International Social Work’ still remains a little blurry, especially for practice, and cannot be answered satisfactorily with universal significance. For this reason, our examination goes one step back first. We decided to turn to the fundamental idea of ‘crossing borders’ that all plural definitions do have in common in order to understand some of International Social Works’ mechanisms and following to discuss its interrelations to ‘Social Work with Refugees’.

4 Reconsidering the Idea of ‘Borders’

Looking at existing scientific discourses about inter-national Social Work, it is striking that a priori the idea of crossing (nation) borders is one of the most important and common elements of its definitions (see above). Several suggestions already have been made to discuss the (international) Social Work profession by implicitly or explicitly referring to the phenomenon of borders (e.g. Wagner et al. 2018; Hugman et al. 2010). However, discussing ‘borders’ in Social Work it is not only about territorial or visible structures of protection and security. Moreover, borders include symbolical arrangements and social demarcations between individuals and societies. This perspective is based on the assumption that individuals and societies negotiate and produce social and cultural realities. The production of reality, in turn, requires drawing symbolical borders in order to define identities, groups and, what people consider to be “different” to them (*othering*) (e.g. Mecheril/Ploesser 2011). Individuals and societies for example use borders in the form of certain social categories, such as gender, race, class, ethnicity, sex or religion to establish differences between groups or individuals. As a result of

social differentiations (or social and individual boundaries), people are classified, in- or excluded – mechanisms which in the end allocate privileges and rights in societies (Kommission Sozialpädagogik 2015).

According to the concept of the German authors Kessl and Maurer (2010), dealing with borders and boundaries is also a core topic of Social Work: Social workers not only work with people who have crossed territorial borders or frontiers. It is rather a day-to-day task in every area of Social Work to deal with differences and otherness constituted by virtual, individual or social boundaries. Due to their professional mandate, social workers work with people who often do not meet the presumed ‘normal image’ of a citizen, they aim to enhance the participation of (excluded) people in societies or they work with discriminated groups. Lorenz (1994: 136) widens the perspective on social boundaries by highlighting the fact that “social workers deal with people who potentially do not belong [...]”.

The perspective on social workers as actors who are “dealing with borders” (Kessl/Maurer 2010) therefore refers to the fact that professionals try to handle in- and exclusion and (non-)membership of individuals or to deal with diversity in societies by challenging, questioning and transforming socially constructed borders and boundaries. Many scholars highlight the need for professional skills in order to identify differences and boundaries as conditions of societies, and, at the same time, to be critical about *who* in societies might be able to define ‘normality’ and *what* might be understood as ‘normality’ (Payne/Askeland 2008: 6; Graßhoff et al. 2016: 148; Mecheril/Ploesser 2011). Social workers therefore have to examine ideas of belonging by questioning *why* certain groups are defined as ‘others’ and *which* consequences it might have for them and for societies. Not least, they have to reflect *how* differentiations reproduce power structures in societies in order to counteract these powerful and disadvantaging relationships (Höblich et al. 2015: 107; Graßhoff et al. 2016: 18; Lyons/Huegler 2012: 223; Healy 2008: 36; Ife 2001). For a closer discussion of ‘borders’ in Social Work, we are now going to apply the concept of ‘borders’ to the example on Social Work in fields of forced migration.

5 Intersections of ‘Borders’, Flight and Social Work

It seems to be almost obvious that ‘borders’ are immanent to (forced) migration. However, borders, as already mentioned, not only refer to individuals crossing national state borders, they rather become visible in spaces, practices and institutions in migration societies. Looking at the field of (forced) migration, it