

Editorial Journal

1/06

Dear Reader

Welcome to the first edition of our *Journal: Comparative Social Work*. The aim of this journal is to draw attention to the field of comparative social work. We consider this important in order to shed light on global challenges in social work and to increase our understanding of the contextual nature of social work practice.

The journal will provide a medium for researchers, lecturers, practitioners and students involved in social work. We will publish two issues each year. Each number will contain three parts: 1) A student corner – in which we publish material written by students at master and PhD level. 2) Book reviews. 3) Reviewed articles. These articles have been anonymously reviewed by two of the academic staff on the advisory board.

What is Comparative Social Work? To look into this question we will focus on social work in a contextual perspective. We have asked Elena Iarskaia Smirnova, a Russian member of the advisory board, the following question: What do you consider to be the key issues in social work in your context? Her answer focuses on the development of social work as a profession, and, for example, the problem of inadequate wage policies for qualified social workers which in fact reinforces societal assumptions regarding cheap women's labour:

“Post-Soviet society is undergoing deep transformation. During the transition period in Russia, social services emerged and evolved quickly. Social work as a profession has been developing in Russia since 1991. Ever since then social service administrators have struggled with high levels of staff turnover, and the fact that most people working in this field do not possess formal qualifications to carry out social work. Given the 70 year Soviet era when social protection was highly centralised, the organisational culture of the new social services sometimes reproduces old pattern of bureaucracy and employees lack professional education.”

Anne Ryen, a Norwegian member of the advisory board, focuses on a particular challenge for comparative social work research through her discussion of the following methodological issue: *the quality of qualitative research*:

“One problem refers to the difference between describing and analysing data, and the risk of never moving from the descriptive – to the crucial analytic level. At best, the link is often weak.”

The second refers to the researcher getting lost in his or her own research. The risk in some cross-contextual research in particular, but not solely, is that the researcher him- or herself fixes a rigid border around the category the researched is defined within. In this case the researcher actively does the categorisation work he or she is to research. This is what I have elsewhere termed “colonial research”.

Both illustrations point to dilemmas also inherent in comparative research.

We owe the researched (and our financial sources) high quality work. This is the best way to improve practice.”

These two reflections about social work underline that it is important to conduct qualitatively good research and to be aware of the societal possession and challenges for the profession. To strengthen the profile of comparative social work, it is important to develop the ability to analyse, critically assess and develop social work practice through a comparative approach to welfare provision in different societies, emphasising the contextual and relational nature of social work. The social workers' different mandates and their different roles in implementing welfare policy in different countries will also be of value in this approach. To study how social work in different countries is legitimised and compare how different countries comprehend and treat social problems, ethical issues, human rights, the relationship between social work and other welfare professions, voluntary and political work are all of importance.

Crossing borders and travelling to foreign countries and cultures increasingly influence study, work and everyday life. We do not just travel as "adventure seekers", but also to learn about other cultures. During these meetings, saturated with contrasts and complexity, it is also possible to develop solidarity, enhance cross-cultural understanding and contribute to consciousness-awakening concerning human rights in a global perspective. But we can also pose critical questions about the lack of contextual sensitivity, power inequality and differences in material resources resulting in a lack of problem communication.

Contextual sensitivity may be described as tacit and implicit communication, while social work knowledge normally has to be verbally accounted for. Both aspects of understanding are crucial for keeping everyday life going. Social work may be described as professional performance based on everyday expertise. Social workers have to learn how this knowledge is created and sustained in order to be able to help people gain a worthy life.

I would like to put it this way: the heart of doing comparative social work is to embark on the journey of learning from one another and being more aware of your own cultural heritage within social work, by crossing borders between classes, ethnic groups, cultures, gender, states, communities or regions.

Editor for April 2006 edition

Siv Oltedal

Associate professor (PhD), Bodø University College, Norway

e-mail: siv.oltedal@hibo.no

NOTICE; Deadline for material next number:

The journal will be published electronically, however a printed version will be made available for those unable to receive the journal by e.mail. Send articles to the editors on the e-mail address: editor@comparativesocialwork.org within 1st of August 2006

Editor for November number 2006: Professor (PhD) Steven Shardlow, part-time position Bodø University College, Norway, e-mail: Steven.shardlow@hibo.no