Australian social workers’ understanding and meaning of their international social work practice.

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Social work definition

‘The social work profession is committed to the pursuit of social justice, the enhancement of the quality of life and the development of the full potential of each individual, group and community in society. Social Workers work at the interface between people and their environments, utilising theories of human behaviour and social systems.’ (Australian Association of Social Work Education and Accreditation Standards 2008)
‘Social work practice is informed by professional education on an analysis and understanding of human behaviour and of complex social processes. It accepts a commitment to working within a staged value position and code of ethics. An integral part of the education of each social worker is the demonstration in practice setting of this analysis, understanding and commitment’. (Australian Association of Social Work Education and Accreditation Standards 2008)
Social work grew out of humanitarian and democratic ideals, and its values are based on respect for the equality, worth, and dignity of all people. Since its beginnings over a century ago, social work practice has focused on meeting human needs and developing human potential. Human rights and social justice serve as the motivation and justification for social work action. In solidarity with those who are disadvantaged, the profession strives to alleviate poverty and to liberate vulnerable and oppressed people in order to promote social inclusion. Social work values are embodied in the profession’s national and international code of ethics.’ (IFSW 2000)
“The social work profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Utilising theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at the point where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work.’ (IFSW 2000)
International social work - definition

‘International social work is defined as international professional practice and the capacity for international action by the social work profession and its members. International action has four dimensions; internationally related domestic practice and advocacy, professional exchange, international practice, and international policy development and advocacy.’ (Healy 2001)
International social work needs to be understood in terms of education and practice and of interdependence between the two, resulting in diversity that is nonetheless held together by the four integrated perspectives geared essentially to the promotion of individuals and collective well-being. (Cox & Pawar 2006)
“Recent debates have highlighted the social work practice tensions between universal values and those values that are culturally relative. On the one side we have arguments that values such as human rights and social justice apply to everyone in all circumstances, while against this, others assert that these values represent particular cultural perspectives and are not relevant in every context.” (Hugman 2010 pg 328)
Why research?

• We simply don’t know how many Australian social workers are working internationally, and there is limited literature available about Australian international social work experiences, their effectiveness and ethical practice responses.

• Currently we do not even have basic quantitative data about the numbers and location of these workers.
Why research?

- Currently there are approximately 20,000 Australia social workers, only approx 6,000 AASW members.

- The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) requires ethical conduct by all Australian social workers (AASW Code of Conduct).

Why research?

- As an Australian international social work consultant, I experienced complexities, barriers, dilemma’s and difficulties of working internationally, eg ethical accountability, language, organisational, structural, health.

- As an international consultant, I also witnessed other Australian Social workers struggle with complex and difficult ethic issues within their social work practice eg worker’s inability to act professionally and ethically at times.

- Current literature research identifies international social work practice tensions, (universal verses cultural relativism) between the North and the South.
International accountable social work practice

- **Problem**- Where there may be a lack of understanding by practitioners, there could be can be outcomes, which could be/are antagonistic, (complisate, oppressive, discriminatory, unjust practice) to social work values and to ‘others’.

- **Question**- How do Australian social worker’s practice internationally? and how can they ‘better understand’ the nature of their international practice?

- How ‘effective’ is their international practice when working with ‘others’?

- Who are practitioner’s accountable for their ethical practice?
Premise

• There is no premise to work from, we simply don’t know how many Australian social workers are currently working internationally. Simply don’t know how ‘effective’ their practice is and what ‘guides’ their international ethical practice response.

• Limited data regarding Australian social worker’s international practice experiences.

• Gap identified- clarity for practitioner’s accountable international ethical practice response.
Research-Qualitative

‘Qualitative research aims to understand the richness and complexity of social experience by attending closely to the actions, interactions, and social contexts of everyday life. It involves systematically, ‘watching people in their own territory’’ (Kirk and Miller, 1986, p. 9) or speaking with them in depth about their thoughts and feelings. In some instances, this will lead to descriptions of multilayered and intricate worlds of experience. In other cases, the researcher may show how everyday experience is meaningfully constructed in social interaction’. (Holstein, James; Gubrium, Jaber, 2002)
‘There is no objective truth waiting for us to discover it. Truth, or meaning, comes into existence in and out of our engagement with the realities in our world. There is no meaning without a mind. Meaning is not discovered but constructed.’ (Crotty 1998; 8)

-Knowledge building through a process of social constructionism

-Social construction theory
Theoretical perspective - Critical Inquiry

- Interpretivist - ‘that is interpretation or the act of making sense out of social interaction (Glesne and Peshkin, 1992). Use of the ‘thick description’ (Geertz 1973)

- Fundamentally mediated by power relations that are social in nature and historically constituted. (Kincheloe and McLaren 1994)

- Critical forms of research call current ideology into question and initiates action in the cause of social justice –

1. issues of power and oppression

2. critical inquiry keeps the spotlight on power relationships with society so as to expose the forces of hegemony and injustice.
Theoretical perspective-Critical Theory

‘Critical theory takes analysis beyond the more deterministic Marxism and brings in analytical lenses which are congruent with social work concerns, oppression, liberation, exploitation.’ (Tesoriero 2009).
International practice questions

- How do I justify my international practice?
- How insightful am I regarding my international practice?
- How true am I to my virtues, values and ethics?
- How does my social work practice link to the context I work in?
- Can I adapt to local conditions?
Practice questions

(Cont)

- How do I understand the “otherness”, (world view as seen by ‘others)? How useful is my international practice to others?
- How do I understand the context of my international practice?
- Who benefits and who loses from my international practice?

*Question we need to ask ourselves-* How can I help?
Methodology - Qualitative, exploratory, critical, life-story inquiry

Schutz, argued that reality is socially constructed rather than ‘out there’ for us to observe, people describe their world not ‘as it is’ but ‘as they make sense of it’. (1970, cited in Crotty, 2007: 294). Exploratory life story provides a research approach empowering participants to construct meaning and make sense of their practice experiences, effectiveness and development of their ethical knowledge, in relation to their international practice.
Methods-Narrative

- **Primary and Secondary interviews** conducted with 12-15 participants (face to face, Online).

  Participant to ‘focus on uncovering the implicit assumptions, and structures in social life, to place it in context, and to construct meaning from their experiences’. (Payne, 2005).

- **Secondary interviews will continue** to occur until information saturation

- Researcher to undertake a self-reflective diary, (data collection and analysis process).
Participant recruitment

- The participant’s will be Australian qualified social worker’s, currently working or have worked internationally within the past two years and, who are eligible for AASW membership. Their practice roles can be as varied as indicated in the definition. It is anticipated that between 12-15 social workers will be included in the study, (eg Project workers, volunteers, those workers who carry out organisational contracted consultancies, ‘In kind workers’- working for Australian organisation who work overseas but not paid, employed social workers with long or short term fixed appointments).
Participant recruitment

1. Recruitment of participants via personal and professional contacts.

2. Participant’s personal/professional contacts with other relevant and appropriate colleagues, (snowballing method)

3. Advertisement in AASW Bulletin

4. Conference presentations/search

5. Recruitment will be voluntary

6. Recruitment will be local, national and international context.

7. Recruitment with professional Australian social workers
Ethical considerations

- Ethics clearance, submit to the Ethics Review Committee, following approval following Confirmation.

- All participants are voluntary and able to withdraw at any time.

- All participants are professional Australian trained social workers (graduated and non graduated).
Relevance and Importance of Study

- The research will provide evidence of Australian social worker’s practice experience, effectiveness, and ethical response, to their international practice.

- To identify the barriers, tensions and issues facing Australian international social worker’s practice.

- Identify/explore strategies which may assist worker’s to ‘better understand’ their international practice.
Relevance and Importance of Study

• Contribute to the field of international practice, education and research.

• Assist in policy and systems formulation in support of identifying key relevant ethical accountable bodies and agencies, in support of Australian social worker international practice.

• Support and strengthen international NGO welfare agencies/Govt/religious agencies’ employment requirements, (ie, greater clarification of both agency and worker’s role/position descriptions, agencies codes of conduct, through evidence based ethical documentation).
Relevance and Importance of Study

- Practitioner’s provided with greater clarity/ transparency of ethical practice response accountability.
- Capacity build social worker’s cross-cultural indigenous knowledge and skills (local and international)
- Recommendations for Best Practice in international social work practice.