Dilemmas of international social work: Paradoxical processes in indigenisation, universalism and imperialism

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Abstract
This paper explores current paradoxical processes in international social work concerning the global diffusion of the social work profession’s principles, values and practice methods or approaches. Some criticise these activities on the grounds that they are imperialistic. Others advocate strongly for the indigenisation of social work. Yet others believe in social work’s universality. This paper attempts to stimulate debate on, and promote greater understanding of, and mutual respect for, divergent views on these critical questions. It puts forward the notion that culture is an important consideration that enables indigenisation, retains universals yet avoids imperialism.

International social work is on the horns of a three-pronged dilemma. The dilemma arises from the paradoxical directions or contradictory processes surrounding indigenisation, universalism and imperialism in social work. Crosscultural dialogue and exchange is moulding and shaping new forms of social work (indigenisation) while social work is, at the same time, trying to hold onto some form of common identity (universalism). This is taking place at the same time as efforts toward internationalising social work raise the spectre of westernisation and imperialism. Put another way, indigenisation raises challenges for universalisation and the challenges are compounded by international efforts which can quickly become imperialistic depending on what is proposed as ‘universal’ in social work. In this paper, it is suggested that culture can play an important role in enabling indigenisation and retaining universals while avoiding imperialism. The dilemmas raised by Tsang and Yan (2001) in relation to the development of social work in China provide an example of the way in which
considerations about culture can promote universality in social work while avoiding imperialistic applications of western notions of social work.

*Indigenisation* essentially refers to the extent to which social work practice fits local contexts. Social work practice is, in turn, shaped by the extent to which local social, political, economic, historical, and cultural factors, as well as local voices, mould and shape social work responses. *Universalism* refers to trends within social work to find commonalities across divergent contexts such that it is possible to talk about a profession of social work with shared values and goals wherever it is practised. *Imperialism* refers to trends within social work promoting the dominance of western worldviews over diverse local and indigenous cultural perspectives. *International social work* is about the spread of social work across the globe to extend the reach of the profession as widely as possible. It also refers to the practice of and education for social work by members of one context, say North America, in another context, such as China or Eastern Europe. Parallels can be drawn with international agencies offering aid such that they become known as ‘international aid agencies’ and people working within them are said to be ‘international aid workers’. To begin the discussion of the ‘dilemmas of international social work encapsulated in the paradoxical processes of indigenisation, universalism and imperialism’ the author’s understanding of the inter-relationship between indigenising, universalising and imperialising forces within international social work is outlined.

**Indigenisation**

Universalising processes within the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) to find a global definition of social work and global standards for social work education are once again raising questions about indigenisation and imperialising forces within international social work. Indigenisation challenges universal knowledge and the cultural hegemony of dominant discourses globally and locally (Wong, 2002). As such it is an effort to bring out multiple voices and ways of knowing *situated in particular socio-historical and cultural locations* so as to establish a solid foundation for meaningful cross-cultural communication in international encounters. There is no doubt that it is a postmodern
notion wherein monolithic, static definitions of local culture, and of western social work for that matter, are being deconstructed to make way for the fluid and shifting nature of culture and knowledge processes intensified by globalising forces and international exchanges. In such a world there is no such thing as a pure culture. Indigenisation is also conceived as not only as a professional concern with the relevance and socio-cultural appropriateness of imported knowledge, but also as ‘a political position that asserts the intellectual and professional autonomy of … social work academics and practitioners’ (Tsang & Yan, 2001, p. 435) in particular contexts.

Gray proposed that indigenisation was essentially about culture whether it be articulating local cultures and the way in which they differed from western cultures or reclaiming culture and possibly also tradition (Gray & Allegritti, 2002; Allegritti & Gray, 2003). In this sense indigenisation can be seen as cross-cultural practice. Given the international social work literature on cultural diversity and culturally sensitive social work practice which privileges local cultures, universalising trends might seem out of place in social work for ‘indigenisation refers to the idea that the theories, values, and philosophies that underlie practice must be influenced by local factors including local cultures’ (Osei-Hwedie, 2001, text in italics added). So context bound is social work that Tsang and Wong (2001) stated that ‘any universal claim regarding the nature, purpose and method of the profession must be regarded with caution’ (p. 448) (emphasis added). Hessle (2004) proposes that acceptance of the context-bound nature of social work is a universal. Hence definitions of social work might vary at different times in history and in various regions since the form and shape social work takes is shaped by socio-cultural contexts. Thus he notes that the international definition of social work formulated by the IFSW and IASSW could be considered as a framework guiding practice for differences across diverse contexts are, in part, moulded by variations in welfare policy and social work’s relationship to state welfare programs. For example, Hessle (2004) notes that when the state takes full responsibility for the welfare of its citizens, as is the case in Sweden, then social work has a recognised role in social reform and in ensuring citizens’ rights are fulfilled. However, where the state does not want to intrude on the privacy of citizens, as in the USA, then the role of social work becomes one of diagnosing the vulnerability of those unable to adjust to social norms. One might add that in neoliberal systems, such as Australia and the UK, social
work becomes *inter alia* a contracted arm of government to deliver state-determined and sanctioned welfare programs.

Certainly there are many countries where social work has been moulded and shaped by colonial influences, such as most countries where social work is practised in post-colonial Africa and Asia. For social workers in post-colonial situations, universalisation (and possibly globalisation) is seen as a new form of colonisation and indigenisation as a *reactivation of tradition*. Could it be that indigenisation is itself an international movement taking shape in different parts of the world as a reaction against globalisation? As such might it be a reaction, within social work, against colonisation now in the guise of globalisation and universalisation?

**Universalisation**

Gray and Fook (2004) suggested possible approaches to finding a flexible framework for universal social work which allowed for differences yet provided for accountability, responsiveness and connectivity. In so doing, they articulated the dilemmas surrounding the notion of universal social work as follows:

1. The *globalisation-localisation* debate grapples with the dilemma that, alongside the process of globalisation, there is a counter tendency towards the development of locally based solutions and the privileging of local cultures.
2. The *westernisation-indigenisation* debate concerns the relevance of Western social work to third world or developing contexts, such as Africa, Eastern Europe and Asia.
3. The *multicultural-universalisation* debate concerns the ‘implications of built-in cultural biases’ (Goldstein, 1986, p. 149) within social work’s multicultural or culturally sensitive perspective. The notion that its values are universalisable creates potential conflict with non-Western and traditional cultures with collectivist values based *inter alia* on kinship, community networks and the extended family system.
4. The *universal-local standards* debate may or may not be relevant to the notion of ‘universal social work’ since it might be acceptable to think philosophically about an international orientation without necessarily attempting to attain
universal agreement on definitions of, or standards for, professional social work education and practice.

What then are the universals in social work and why do we need them? Gray and Fook (2004) take ‘universal social work’ to mean those elements that transcend national boundaries and which give ‘social work a global face such that there are commonalities in theory and practice across widely divergent contexts’ (p. 627). As well as increasing our knowledge and understanding of human problems, strengthening practice and raising the profession’s profile (Midgley, 1992), an ‘emphasis on shared social work aims and activities can serve political ends in raising standards and expectations of good service, especially in countries less inclined to value social services’ (p. 637). However, professional preservation and universalising values aside, we need to find ways to ‘best achieve the goals of social justice and of making the world a better place for those who suffer as a result of widespread injustice and poverty’ (p. 638). Gray and Fook (2004) see the issues involved as being ‘less about imposing a unified conception of social work, and more about a ground up collaborative process for finding and developing commonalities to fight a common cause’ (p. 638). Lorenz (2001) draws attention to the tensions inherent in professionalised social work trying to commandeer areas of activity which have long been the realm of volunteers or paraprofessionals and self-help groups. Hessle (2004) thus questions whether ‘social work can claim the status of a proper profession’ (p. 8) when it carries out activities long fulfilled by volunteers.

For Hessle (2004), and for Gray and Fook (2004), the essential question is ‘how can we become more accountable and responsive to our different contexts, and at the same time become more connected with one another’s work, so that together we can develop ways in which our practice becomes more transferable across contexts?’ Gray and Fook (2004) suggest a grounded approach where we celebrate and recognise commonalities while at the same time valuing and including differences; an expansive approach to professional definition rather than a self-protective stance; the relevance of a social development response to poverty and injustice; social work as contextual practice, that is, not only working with people in contexts but also working with whole contexts; and valuing dialogical processes within local contexts which does not exclude honouring existing social work knowledge.
Hessle (2004) proposed acceptance of social work as context-bound (as already discussed); as dependent on external influences, like natural disasters, globalisation and migration; as directing attention towards marginalised people in society, such as the poor and vulnerable; as multidisciplinary; as practice-oriented; and as focusing on at least three levels of analysis, namely, the structural, organisational or group, and family and individual levels. Likewise Gray (1993) proposed that social workers, at the very least, agreed on an ecological approach wherein the constant interplay of the person-in-environment remained the focus, and the achievement of social justice was an overriding goal. Within this holistic, ecological perspective there was place for a multiplicity of goals and levels of activity in social work in its quest for social justice. Coates (2003) proposed a social ecology model as best suited to a holistic understanding of the interrelatedness and connectedness of all life forms, human and non-human. Secondly, Gray (1993) proposed agreement that social workers promoted the welfare and interests of people in society. Thirdly social workers were committed to the achievement of social justice and hence took human rights seriously. She believed that an egalitarian, humanistic and democratic conception of social justice prevailed to give expression to social work's central values of self-determination, respect for persons, equality, and the recognition of basic human rights. Fourthly, she maintained that there was acceptance that social workers adopted a critically, reflective approach to practice.

Gray and Fook (2004) might well ask whether these are ‘shared areas of understanding and … commonalities in social work education, practice and research … which provide common ground for discussion and debate’ (p. 626). Historically we have been united by the notion of our shared humanity and our ‘common human needs’ (Towle, 1965) and problems (Perlman, 1957). There is some agreement that we are ‘united by shared human rights and social justice goals’ (p. 627). Of necessity, the ‘universals’ in social work can only refer to generalities since the form social work’s mission takes will vary greatly in different countries given diverse social, economic, political, historical, and cultural circumstances.

Imperialisation
Given its central focus of privileging the local indigenisation seeks to resist ‘universalising forces’ and the ‘cultural imperialism’ of western social work. No-one
puts this better than Tsang and Yan (2001) writing about the struggle in China ‘to find a balance between importing social work knowledge and methods and the need to develop indigenous conceptual frameworks and structures for organizing social work principles and practices’ (p. 435). They illustrate the paradoxes giving rise to the dilemmas in international social work. Since culture is central to the solutions herein proposed, it is also necessary to review current understanding of culture and of international social work.

Upon reviewing the literature on indigenisation (and cultural imperialism), it became increasingly apparent that there was a need to review related literature on the connection between indigenous social work and ecology, spirituality, religion, cross-cultural social work and culturally sensitive social work practice as well as international social work. For the most part it seemed that many authors were saying that indigenous voices had been silenced by western social work. However, in this related literature there is evidence that indigenous cultures are enriching and adding to new discourses in social work beyond the conventional, radical and postmodern; they are opening up new ways of thinking about social work in tune with indigenous ways. Perhaps the extent to which these discourses were influencing social work discourse might reflect the extent of interaction between western and indigenous cultures. The literature on ecology and spirituality seemed to reflect indigenous voices. They appeared not as knowledges for particular contexts but as knowledges with wider application and in this they seemed to differ from the social work literature on cross-cultural and culturally sensitive practice.

The central role of culture in the indigenisation-universalism-imperialism debate
Allegritti and Gray (2003) stressed the importance of cross-cultural or inter-cultural understanding within indigenising processes and noted current definitions of culture as relating to, *inter alia*, a system of beliefs and practices which is articulated at several levels wherein art, morals, rules and norms constitute ‘societal culture’. They noted that cultural identities were continually changing and evolving, and the internal variations existed even within specific cultures. They drew attention to the political dimension of culture which was seen to be constituted through contested practices, and was also often used as a synonym for ‘a nation’ or ‘a people’. Thus while there might be such a thing as a dominant Australian, African, European, and North American culture, in truth these
comprise a host of minority cultures which may or may not conform to the dominant culture or, if they do, there are varying degrees of conformity and harmony between cultures. The reality is that most of us live in multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, multi-racial, and multi-class societies (Dean, 2001).

Given that culture is central to indigenising, universalising and imperialising processes, we need to examine the definition of culture we are using in the context of these paradoxical processes. Are we seeing culture as a context specific and ‘historically created system of meanings and significance’ (Parekh, 2000, p. 143) relating to basic activities and social relationships that remain fairly static, such as ‘how one mourns and disposes of the dead and how one treats one’s parents, children, wife, neighbours and strangers’ (Parekh, 2000, p. 144)? Or are we seeing it in postmodern terms as ‘continually changing and evolving’ (Dean, 2001, p. 625)? Do we agree that ‘every culture is internally varied, speaks in several voices, and its range of interpretive possibilities is often indeterminate’ (Parekh, 2000, p. 144)? Do we share Tully’s (1995) idea that cultures ‘are continuously contested, imagined, reimagined, transformed, and negotiated both by their members and through their interaction with others’ (p. 11) or are we using culture to refer to ‘a nation’ or ‘a people’ and do we agree that most nations have a dominant culture and ‘a relatively small number of minority cultures’ (p. 32)? Do we agree that there are injustices within cultures and that ‘political movements … concern themselves with … the preservation of culture … (and in this sense that culture is) about trying to implement and/or maintain a set of power relationships in a contemporary context’ (p. 7)?

Clearly our understanding of culture affects the way in which we view universalising trends within social work. This tension is ably demonstrated by Tsang and Yan (2001) when they raise the perplexing question of ‘which type of social work do we want to adopt in China?’ However, before taking a closer look at the dilemmas they raise, a note on the nature of international social work is needed in order to fully outline the complexities of the paradoxes under discussion.

**International social work**

International social work has long been defined as collaborative, comparative, exchange or dialogue (Dominelli & Bernard, 2003; Healy, 2001; Healy, Asamoah & Hokenstad,
Barker (1995) in the *Social Work Dictionary* defines international social work as ‘the transfer between countries of methods or knowledge about social work’ (p. 194) and Midgley (1992) asserts that ‘the most frequently identified sources of ideas and innovations are Great Britain and the United States’ (p. 23). An important aspect of this international social work exchange is its focus on professional practice in different parts of the world (Hokenstad, Khinduka & Midgley, 1992) and the development of social work ‘as a profession is a primary objective of international social work’ (Midgley, 1992, p. 23). Since ‘social work remains a profession with a largely local orientation’ (p. 1), it is surprising that despite its ‘growing involvement in international activities, no systematic attempt has been made to examine the common characteristics and diverse forms of the profession, and the challenges it faces from an international perspective’ (Hokenstad et al, 1992, p. 3).

International social work is also described as a direct practice activity that takes place through international humanitarian organisations. Through the efforts of these ‘international development agencies aided by private organisations and western schools of social work’ (Midgley, 1981, p. 57) social work education - based on the Western professional and scientific model of social work with academic training of several years’ duration - spread from Britain and North America to widely divergent social, political, historical, economic, and cultural contexts in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The United Nations (UN) with ‘its many commissions and allied agencies’ has played a key role in the transfer of Western social work to so-called developing countries ‘through seminars, technical assistance, and exchange schemes’ (Nagpaul, 1993, p. 216).

Critiques of this neutral transfer perspective on international social work are found in the indigenisation literature. Thus a balanced study of international social work requires that one also examine the indigenous social work literature. Healy (2001) describes an ‘era of indigenization’ in the 1970s when ‘intense … consultation, transplantation, and borrowing’ of Western models was met with resistance and appeals for ‘an indigenous form of social work’ (p. 35). She attributes this to ‘strong anti-(North) American feelings developed along with a rejection of the process of borrowing and using models from the industrialized countries’ (p. 37-38). However, as Kendall (1998) noted, ‘there was no one to gainsay (Western social workers) … in countries
where social work, if it existed at all, was the prerogative of a leisure class intent on performing what it regarded as its moral obligations to the poor’ (p. 23). Thus driven by altruistic intentions social work was promoted with a kind of missionary zeal in colonial and post-colonial situations where inherent power imbalances and the relevance of Western models went unquestioned. As a consequence UN surveys of social work training repeatedly revealed the ‘limited applicability of the US model’ suggesting ‘the need to promote indigenous methods, curricula and study material’. Despite findings of this nature most ‘UN publications and personnel … tacitly assumed … that the US social work philosophy (was) somewhat superior’ to that of the developing context concerned, and that the principles and methods of North American social work had ‘universal applicability’ (Nagpaul, 1993, p. 216).

Underpinning this ‘professional imperialism’ was the implicit assumption that developing countries were incapable of finding their own models. Thus diverse, indigenous forms of social care, which were unique to their specific cultural contexts, were ‘silenced, devalued, displaced, ignored, made invisible, and disqualified’ (Haug, 2001, p. 49) as inferior to Western social work knowledge and practice. Concerns about the relevance of and the search for indigenous models persist today with valid reason despite Dominelli’s (2003) dislike of the term ‘indigenous’. In many countries Indigenous people self-identify as such and are proud of their indigenous heritage. The cross-cultural and indigenous social work literature is giving rise to constructive dialogue about the way in which indigenous and local solutions can inform global perspectives on social work. As Midgley (1992) argued, ‘it is time to challenge the one-way international flow of ideas and practices and to learn from the Third World’ (p. 300).

Despite greater awareness of the need for an understanding of international social work in this globalising era, ‘most social workers have limited, if any, exposure to programs or practice beyond the boundaries of their own countries’ (Hokenstad et al, 1992, p. 2). Hokenstad et al (1997) noted that it was ‘essential for social workers to have an international perspective and understanding to be effective practitioners in today’s world’ (p. 4) where the cross-cultural nature of international exchanges is increasingly recognised. Thus Midgley (1990) notes that the term ‘international social work’ is now widely (although imprecisely) used to denote the exchanges that take
place between social workers from different societies and cultures’ (p. 295). Rather than a static body of knowledge, international social work should be seen as an emerging discourse - a moveable feast with Eastern, Western and Indigenous cuisine – to which new flavours might be added and in which new combinations might be made to produce deliciously edible and highly desirable new dishes! Harris (1990) referred to it as a ‘moving target’ (p. 211), as something that was changing even as we were attempting to understand it. As we embark on international changes not only do we change our ideas and perspectives but we add to understanding of the complex issues inherent in cross-cultural contexts. Thus learning about international social work is not just preparation for social work academics and students to study or practice abroad. International practice enables social workers to develop a critical understanding of the way in which international development works. It is not a neutral process and even though the Grameen Bank might have done a lot of good (see Healy, 2001, p. 11), it has yet to be proven that it has succeeded in substantially altering the position of women in the societies in which it operates (Rozario, 2001). Development, like social work, is not a neutral activity. Unless we have the insight and ability to step outside of our Western paradigms and to view international situations through a cultural lens and to approach them with humility, we run the danger of perpetuating professional imperialism.

Thus, given the paradox of diversity and commonality across contexts, ‘social work should be aware of the dangers of overstandardization … The tendency toward standardization can inhibit the profession’s ability to respond effectively to local needs and impede the goals of professional development’ (Midgley, 1992, p. 24). Instead cross-cultural exchange and dialogue, networking or working through or with international organisations are means through which we might express solidarity with global or local causes, make connections and work to transform and reshape the world. As Lyons (1999) points out, internationalising social work is not just about the mobility of professionals but also ‘a way of viewing and understanding individual societies and the global environment in order to develop practices which are responsive to identified and emerging needs, and which include (exchanging) comparative perspectives or cross-national (or cross-cultural) activity, or which contribute to international policy change, as appropriate’ (p. 162).
Thus international social work is not just about the spread of professional social work across the globe but it is also about the development of practices which are relevant in local contexts. As such, different forms of social work emerge and take hold, moulded and shaped by the social, political, economic circumstances, the history and culture of particular contexts, as well as prevailing social work knowledge and values. It might be more useful to think about ‘social works’ rather than a single monolithic entity given the vast diversity of the world in which we live and the countries within it. There is much of value in western thinking about social work but this must not stifle the wisdom and experience of local cultures. However, in light of the ‘universals’ proposed above, social work clearly has a goal to change unjust cultural practices which do not value human rights.

International social work is not just about internationalising social work if that means spreading a single type of social work as conceived in the west. Universalising trends like global educational standards and international definitions can only serve as guides and would smack of cultural imperialism if used mainly to promote western social work for, even within and across western regions, different types of social work are practised. There is diversity even within western social work and the social, political, economic, and cultural contexts within many of these regions are driving social work towards what Australians call an ‘economic rationalist’ or managerial model of social work which is overly obsessed with standards and definitions because of the demands being placed on social work to prove its worth in economic terms, that is, its efficiency and effectiveness. It is within this context that notions of evidence-based practice have arisen. This is often a vastly different context than that found in countries where social work is only now being introduced, such as in Eastern Europe and China, for example. In other countries, like South Africa, where social work has a history almost as long as that in the UK and USA, social work is being transformed to meet a changed social, political and economic situation where issues of culture, expressed in calls for indigenous social work practice, have called into question western social work models like casework. What is evolving is something akin to a ‘development practitioner’ as social work has embraced a developmental focus so as to respond to widespread poverty, unemployment, crime, and HIV and AIDS occurring on a scale, especially in rural areas, which is incomprehensible in a developed world.
International social work, in being responsive to diverse contexts and sensitive to local cultures, must, of necessity, be a flexible entity, open to new forms of social work evolving as it responds to local problems and needs in culturally appropriate and sensitive ways. This requires a different type of seeing and responding when social workers from the west enter into new terrain to advise on the type of social work needed. It requires us to pay attention to local cultures (Dean, 2001; Gray & Allegritti, 2002). We need to find ways of appealing to common human needs and values in countries and local communities divided by seemingly irreconcilable differences. What answers do we have for people who have suffered years of victimisation and oppression at the hands of their oppressors? How can we expel deep-seated fear and hatred in a world which is becoming increasingly fearful and divided? We need to tread lightly, to learn to listen and to tune into culture lest we too quickly impose our culture on others and hence stand guilty of imperialism.

Further we need to internationalise our curricula in western schools of social work and read international literature so that we learn about cultures and contexts other than our own. At a recent gathering of North American social workers, most of whose work was well-published and familiar to me, it was surprising to learn that none of them read the international literature. While there are many social workers across the globe engaged in international exchanges, their work is not widely read and would appear to be known by a minority interested in, engaging in and writing about social work in contexts other than their own.

Furthermore we need to engage in debates about internationalising trends in social work, such as global education standards and international definitions. Too few schools of social work belong to international social work organisations and most faculty members are totally unaware of them or the work that they are doing. As noted by Tsang, Yan and Shera (2000), the social work education agenda cannot be dictated by foreign or domestic experts, but must be ‘grounded in the realities of the practitioners and educators coming from diverse geographical and social locations’ (p. 156). Writing about a China-Canada collaborative project, they note that the ‘models of social work practice and education that emerge … may not, and need not, be totally
compatible with the established standards and conventions of Western social work’ (p.158).

**China as an illustration of the paradoxical processes in indigenisation, imperialism and universalism**

In China indigenisation is seen as a ‘political position’ to assert ‘the intellectual and professional autonomy of Chinese social work academics and practitioners’ (Tsang & Yan, 2001, p. 435). It is interesting to note that issues surrounding the development of social work in China in the 2000s relate very much to those that faced social work as it spread across the western world in the early decades of the 1900s. In both cases social work was closely tied to government welfare provision and thus ‘most social work functions are (were) directly operated and monitored by the state’ (p. 441). For example, in South Africa the development of social work was inextricably linked with service provision along racial lines within the apartheid system. It is one of the few countries where a professional regulatory body was written into welfare legislation such that social workers could not practice if they were not registered with the Council for Social Work (Gray, 2000; McKendrick, 1990). Perhaps there are parallels between the authoritarian nature of South Africa under apartheid and the emergent modern Chinese state.

Interestingly Tsang and Yan (2001) grapple with ‘what type of social work’ China should import showing quite clearly that western social work is definitely ‘not a monolithic entity with a coherent set of ideologies, teleologies, epistemologies and technologies’ (p. 447). They note how debates on cultural pluralism raise questions about the universality of social work values. Surely this drives a stake into the very heart of western thinking on social work values. Further, they note the extent to which ‘the ideology of social work is anchored to a belief in the welfare state’ (p. 437) which has a strong tie with democratic socialism when ‘western welfare states have never had a coherent set of ideologies that nurtures the humanistic values embraced by the social work profession’ (p. 438). Is the social work profession out of step with reality? Its values can’t be universal yet it says they should be. It strives for the ideal of the welfare state which no longer exists in the ‘Beveridgian’ sense anywhere in the world. Even the core concept of the person-in-environment is open to dispute between those who see the
purpose of social work as primarily to help people to adjust to their environment and those who see it as being to change the environment to eliminate the structural causes of human suffering. The former is complicated by social control functions within individual helping for social work is surely ‘an effective social apparatus to control the poor’ (p. 440) especially given the way governments exploit the expertise of professionals.

Similar critiques have been made about development and the way in which national governments and international aid agencies control the poor (Rozario, 2001). What then of the therapeutic model? ‘China has not gone through a period of psychologization and widespread adoption of the language of mental health and therapy as the West has’ (p. 441) so this model won’t fit either. Nor will empowerment or social action approaches for, ‘In China, the government has stated clearly that the major social assignment for the social work profession is to remedy any social problems caused by economic reform and modernization’ (p. 441). In other words the Chinese government wants social work to go back to its roots! It seems then that Chinese social work might favour a technocratic approach which ‘assumes that through professional education and training social workers can acquire the expert knowledge needed to solve individual and community problems’ (p. 445). Tsang and Wong (2001) note the massive opportunity for creativity and innovation in designing Chinese social work and the potential benefit of this for everyone. There is no clear, unquestioned type of social work worth importing but there are ideas worth considering. If the stimulus might be western, the response will definitely be Chinese!

Conclusion

This paper has examined some issues implicit in the ongoing internationalisation-indigenisation debate within social work arguing for an approach which consciously avoids the cultural imperialism characteristic of colonial social work. It is tentatively proposed that there is an indigenous movement within social work in contexts where people are trying to reclaim and protect local cultures from both nationalising and globalising forces more broadly and from universalising trends within social work. The possibility is also proposed that Indigenous voices are being expressed in mainstream social work (or the dominant western social work discourse) through the literature on
cultural sensitivity, spirituality and eco social work and that this is possibly due to the interaction of western and indigenous social workers – even in western contexts – where cultural sensitivity and appropriateness necessarily become pivotal to ongoing dialogue between western and indigenous social workers. Gray and Allegritti (2002) expressed wariness about the notion of cultural competence and the idea that you can learn about other cultures attaining some sort of cultural knowledge and skill which you then apply in cross-cultural interactions (see also Dean, 2001). This approach implies that we learn something which we do to others who are different from us. A dialogical approach is preferred wherein we have conversations about our cultures – and their differences and similarities – which we approach with an attitude of humility and curiosity – with the mind of a learner rather than an expert (despite our considerable knowledge about social work). Culture is a flexible entity, moulded and shaped by inter alia history, politics, religion, social change, and economic systems (Allegritti & Gray, 2003). It is not a fixed and stable entity. Through conversation and dialogue, and social interaction, new cultures can emerge or, at least, we might learn to honour, value and learn from cultures other than our own. Culture then is central to questions about international social work. Given the diversity of cultures it might be better to talk about multiple local ‘social works’ as constitutive of international social work rather than of international social work as a tabula rasa to be handed down to, imposed upon or spread with missionary zeal to newly evolving contexts for social work education and practice.

References


