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Readiness and regulation: perspectives of Canadian stakeholders on the labour mobility of internationally educated social workers

Marion Brown, Annie Pullen Sansfaçon and Kate Matheson

Background

While the scholarly literature is sparse on data and analyses from social work employers in Canada, anecdotal accounts suggest that they are eager to hire social workers who come to the field of practice as seasoned professionals in both substantive content and contextual knowledge. They cite the fast pace of the work environment, the narrowing of service provision to only the most complex situations and dynamics, and the volume of the work as the driving forces behind needing new hires to ‘hit the ground running’ (Newberry-Koroluk, 2014). There is little time or energy for an accompanying adaptation process. These stories are not surprising given that, over the past 35 years, Canadian social work has been restructured to parallel the capitalist premises that good social welfare policy and programming is that which is productive and cost-efficient, with a focus on individualism and autonomy not only for service recipients, but also for employees. The joint ideologies of neoliberalism and economic rationalism prioritise productivity and deliverables, documentation, and external accountability. This is the context in which social work employers govern agency work, and into which internationally educated social workers enter when they arrive in Canada seeking to work in the field.

Similarly, there is little documentation on the experiences of regulators of the profession, those charged under legislation to enact the social work statutes in every province of Canada. As a self-regulating profession, the primary obligation is the protection of the public,

which rationalises the driver for the uniformity of expectation and measurement of competence. In this chapter, we present data from both employers and regulators and seek to bring together their priorities and needs relative to the adaptation processes of internationally educated social workers.

Method

As part of a four-year federally funded study, Canadian researchers Pullen Sansfaçon et al engaged in qualitative interviews with 66 internationally educated social workers and held two Knowledge Exchange Fora (KEF), in Montreal and Halifax, respectively (Pullen Sansfaçon et al, 2012, 2014; Brown et al, 2015; Fulton et al, 2016). The KEF gathered social workers, both internationally and domestically educated, social work supervisors and employers, and representatives from the Quebec and Nova Scotia regulatory bodies. Data were collected via individual written reflections and focus group discussions. Focus group discussions were transcribed and analysed as components of the full data.

Twenty-nine participants attended the Montreal KEF and 23 participants attended in Halifax. Social workers, social work supervisors and employers represented government and non-governmental social welfare agencies, ranging in size from small, community-based, not-for-profit agencies with four employees to large governmental departments. This chapter presents data from these fora, where the findings of the four-year study were shared, and subsequently responded to, by KEF participants. The KEF were designed as a method for both disseminating data and analysis resulting from the individual interviews, and collecting data from employers, regulators and internationally educated social workers. Dialogue at the KEF began with the current Canadian social work practice context, and then prioritised the knowledge, values and skills transfer, cultural adaptations, and understanding of the Canadian social welfare system of the internationally educated social workers. These themes align with many of the concerns of migrant social workers themselves (Pullen Sansfaçon et al, 2014); however, the perspective is distinct, born as it is from distinct positioning relative to the issues.

The context: Canadian social welfare and social work today

The profession of social work is grounded in and committed to advocating for equitable social structures and responses to people and communities in need; these are the aspirations of the profession. However, in Canada, given the prevailing ideology of neoliberalism, the context of social service delivery has shifted over the past 35 years to prioritise economic rationalism, privatisation and the overall retrenchment of the welfare state. This contextual analysis is well documented in Canadian social work literature (Carniol, 2005; Baines, 2006; Smith, 2007; Mullaly, 2008; Wilson et al, 2011; Weinberg and Taylor, 2014), where social work scholars have been writing for years about the socio-political threats to the fundamental value base of the profession of social work. The political allegiance of Ronald Reagan in the US, Margaret Thatcher in Great Britain, Brian Mulroney in Canada, Malcolm Fraser in Australia and Roger Douglas in New Zealand solidified the principles and practices of economic rationalism, the essence of which is that good policy is that which meets economic priorities. It is upheld by commitment to capitalism's free market and the conviction that maximising individual economic freedom and minimising overt regulation should lead the way for all policy. Inequality is accepted as par for the course, government spending is considered a risk to economic health and government spending on social welfare is seen as a particular threat to productivity and profit.

This review of the socio-political context is required because social welfare is always the product of a particular time and place, underscored by the prevailing values and beliefs of the influential classes. In Canada, social welfare has shifted because these prevailing values and beliefs have shifted. Far different from the post-war expansion of government services and income supports, which saw the introduction of Medicare, unemployment insurance and the Canada Pension Plan, among other welfare policies, for 35 years, we have been living under a federal commitment to transnational corporations, capitalism, free trade and multilateral agreements. Concern for the welfare of people, equity and the accessibility and availability of resources conflict with global economic priorities, which consider all decisions in financial terms. Social welfare is seen as an impediment to sound economic policy.

This is the shifted sociocultural, political and economic context in Canada within which social work clients live, and in which social workers – those educated within Canada and beyond – do their work. Social work supervisors and employers who attended the KEF spoke

about these changes to social service organisations over the course of their careers. The focus on efficiency has led to standardisation in orientation, which leaves little room for adjusted timelines to assist the internationally educated social worker, often a newcomer to Canada, in the adaptation process. In short, workers are expected to arrive already versed in culture and context, legislation and language:

“I know it’s tough on people from away who come to work at [the agency]. But I have no time to help them along, to help them figure it out. They have to figure it out, like all of us do. I know there’s more to figure out for them, being new to Canada and all. But we need them to just get to work.” (Social work employer)

Social work supervisors similarly report increased focus on accountability measures and the disappearance of clinical supervision. Studies corroborate that these lead to an increase in workloads and supervisory scrutiny (Aronson and Sammon, 2000). Part-time and contractual positions and reliance on volunteers have increased, contributing to heightened job insecurity and decreased salaries and benefits (Smith, 2007; Wilson et al, 2011). These changes have eroded relationships among staff members and knowledge transfer between veteran and newer social workers (Baines, 2006). Our data align with these findings:

“There was a time when I would meet with the social workers in my unit and go over all their cases – what was happening, how they felt about it, what we thought the plan should be. Now it’s only high risk cases we go over, and in the team. There’s a risk assessment tool we use, so we don’t talk about it in the same way either. Things are rated on scales more than talked about. And there’s no time for talking about the regular cases.” (Social work supervisor)

This tightening of focus, combined with increased complexity of need and often decreasing resources, emphasises productivity and the meeting of outcomes. Participants in the KEF noted a distinct shift in the language of the workplace as a result:

“I remember about five or six years ago when we started using a logic model – I didn’t know what it was. Someone had gone to some training and came back wanting us to

put all these things into a logic model. There were sections for deliverables and outcome measures. And I just thought, ‘Am I in the right place? This is social work!’.” (Social work supervisor)

This participant is calling attention not only to shifts in context, but also to how they connect to ideological shifts. Here, we can see the insidious infiltration of neoliberal priorities into the very foundations of a profession founded upon social justice, not surprising, perhaps, given that neoliberalism organises economic, political and social life in most Western societies. Given that its economic tenets are free markets, free trade and a non-interventionist state, governments that adopt its ideology scale back any institutions, programmes and services that function at the expense of market freedom (Wilson et al, 2011). For several decades, a top priority of Canada’s federal government has been to decrease its deficit, a common concern under neoliberalism. Methods are both covert and overt: politicians commit rhetorically to quality-of-life improvements for their constituents while dismantling what remains of federal social welfare programmes. Provincial governments follow suit in their jurisdictions, ramping up efforts to get people off income assistance, cut disability benefits and cut back or eliminate special diet, transportation and employment-related benefits. Countrywide, the social safety net has shrunk, and distributions of wealth and resources have become polarised. An intersectional understanding of oppression reminds us that the colluding forces of white privilege, capitalism and patriarchy make these cuts more devastating for some than for others (Mananzala and Spade, 2008).

The internationally educated social workers engaged in our study, new to Canada in the past 10 years, do not have this historical comparison of the working conditions within the social welfare system, nor the understanding of the socio-political shifts. Indeed, most compared Canada favourably to their country of origin, in particular, noting the availability of resources and the broad terms of engagement for social workers. One social worker from Lebanon said:

“Well, this situation [of a trans youth seeking services] would not happen at home because it is illegal. People would help, but not out in the open. Here, it is so much better. The youth can come talk to social workers openly, and not get in trouble with the governments.” (Internationally educated social worker)

Knowledge, values and skills transfer

The transfer of knowledge, values and skills across international borders is a central concern for employers and regulators of social work, who are eager to hire seasoned social workers who have expertise. Through three phases of data collection in our study, we queried the knowledge bases of internationally educated social workers: the theoretical foundations, the core social work values and the practice skills of the profession. With little variation, participants self-reported competence in knowing social work fundamentals and confidence in their applicability across contexts. Provincial regulatory body personnel who participated in our KEF did not disagree. However, regulatory bodies require applicants for licensing to have their internationally earned academic credentials assessed, an appraisal most often undertaken by the Canadian Association of Social Work (CASW). This process includes a review of degree requirements, including course syllabi and transcripts. If, in this review, there is a gap identified between the degree requirements of the country of origin and a Canadian social work degree, the provincial regulatory body identifies this as a concern regarding equivalence and may deny the social work licence:

“Like, if we hear from CASW that the person doesn’t have a social work policy course in their BSW [Bachelor of Social Work degree], then they don’t have equivalent to a Canadian BSW, and they aren’t eligible for a licence in [province] if they don’t have equivalent to a Canadian BSW. That’s the end of it. They may know everything about how to be good to people, be a good social worker with people, but their degree isn’t recognised, so that’s the end of it.” (Provincial regulator)

Congruent with the interviews conducted with internationally educated social workers, employers and regulators at each KEF cited knowledge of local, provincial and federal laws as essential for competent practice. In Montreal, participants added “notions of national and provincial history”, which may be particular to Quebec and its unique, contemporary and historical separatist movement. Further, practical knowledge related to technology and Robert’s Rules of Order were cited by participants in Halifax as gaps in knowledge for migrant social workers.

Employers and regulators in both Montreal and Halifax expressed positive perspectives on the foundational social work knowledge

and skills of migrant social workers. However, a significant gap was identified in migrants' "knowledge of secularist approaches in the government context". One supervisor said:

"Sometimes, I find that newcomers who come from a country that is really religious can't accept that we can't bring that stuff to work. I can't talk with clients about God and praying. Or I can't talk about clients as 'all God's children'. I can talk about compassion and empathy, but not because we're all God's children. We can't talk like that. We have to be neutral." (Social work supervisor)

The weaving of knowledge and values is clear here, and the move into the belief systems of employers and employees proves murky indeed. The CASW's (2005) 'Code of ethics' forms the basis for the values and ethics of the profession in Canada, and it inherently supports a secularist approach to practice. Supervisors and employers expect allegiance with the code and attest that they, indeed, find this to be the case with internationally educated social workers. Internationally educated social workers themselves cited no challenge to the transferability of these values and ethical standards across national borders. Our research evidences that the broad aspirations of the social work profession to uphold the dignity and worth of all persons, to act with integrity and competence, to hold client information confidential, and to pursue causes of social justice (CASW, 2005) do, indeed, form the foundation for social work across international contexts. At the Halifax KEF, a collection of internationally educated social workers, employers and regulators shared a joint statement that "It's a matter of knowing the laws and ethics and how to respect confidentiality".

As we know, however, there are nuances to values and ethics, and a range of interpretations thereof. In Montreal, participants discussed varied opinions on how much personal information a practitioner should disclose and how much physical contact is appropriate. In Halifax, a social worker raised the concern that the provincial regulatory body was itself not aligned with the value of the pursuit of social justice in its treatment of internationally educated social workers: "The things they put us through – it's just not right. The cost, the waiting for answers, the runaround. And this is an organisation of social workers?" (internationally educated social worker).

Cultural adaptations

In Halifax, employers and regulators highlighted the benefits of diverse cultural adaptations and the lived experience of migrant social workers, noting that they bring unique perspectives precisely as a result of their lived experiences. One employer noted: “Internationally educated social workers bring their own practice experiences and unique worldviews to practice in Canada. Their lived experiences and diversity in culture could be seen as allowing them to work from a more culturally experienced lens” (social work employer).

Stakeholders in Montreal added that the personal attributes of internationally educated social workers reflect those they want to hire into their workplaces. Attributes such as “flexibility, perseverance, resourcefulness, self-confidence, courage to give one’s opinions, initiative, optimism, the capacity to adapt, curiosity [and] patience” were thought to be not only required, but often found, in social workers new to Canada.

These data are a point of divergence from the experiences of some internationally educated social workers themselves, who reported feeling undervalued through their experiences of bureaucracy with credential recognition and licensing, and discrimination in job seeking (Brown et al, 2015). One participant at the Halifax KEF shared her view that employers lack understanding of cultural differences, which may manifest in professional practice; for example, she felt pressure to adapt to the Canadian norm of smiling as an expression of friendliness:

“It is different if you come from Ukraine, you don’t just smile at everyone. Some cultures don’t smile and believe smiling is a sign of stupidity. You can do something that is normal in your culture and seen as really mean from a Canadian.” (Internationally educated social worker)

Unique to Montreal’s experience of social work migration is an agreement of labour mobility and credential recognition between Quebec and France. Due to shared culture and history, and this legislated agreement, there is an assumption of ease in transition between these two countries. Most internationally educated social workers did, indeed, find this to be the case; however, one talked about the difficulty adjusting his documentation style and learning the nuanced language of psychosocial reports in his new practice environment.

At both the Montreal and Halifax KEF, adapting to and integrating cultural practices was cited as critical for newcomer social workers. In Montreal, employers and stakeholders expressed the importance of migrant social workers understanding that indigenous people and people of African descent are members of unique groups with important histories that must be known. In Halifax, participants suggested that more education in local cultures be made available to newcomers. However, this was not a significant theme among internationally educated social workers themselves. Only a few spoke of needing to build awareness and understanding regarding populations and histories new to them; all others continued to cite the foundational values and ethics of the profession as assisting in adaptations to particular client groups. One social worker from the US explicitly named his comfort in working with Hispanic populations and ‘American Indians’, but that he was aware in moving to Canada that he needed to pay particular attention to the history of First Nations peoples in Canada. Migrant social workers themselves come from a range of countries, each with their own historical and contemporary experiences of colonialism. As Canada takes reconciliation action to change relationships, processes and systems between settlers and indigenous people (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015), migrant social workers who have experience with colonialism and post-colonial dynamics can bring wisdom to the cultural adaptations under way.

Understanding of the Canadian social welfare system

The final substantive area of focus for employers and regulators in considering the readiness of internationally educated social workers was the need for understanding of the Canadian social welfare system. As with knowing the jurisdictional laws for the relevant field of practice, being oriented to federal policies of health care and justice, as well as provincial systems of education and child welfare, is considered critical. One supervisor said:

“There are these things that you just have to know about, like how health care works in Canada and the child welfare laws of the province. Lots of us know it because of growing up here, or we learn it early on. All social workers have to know about those things. We always talk about context – well, this is like the political and legislative context, or parts of it anyway.” (Social work supervisor)

Internationally educated social workers similarly named this factor as critical to their successful adaptation. Aligned with the previous quote, social workers know that context is important, both in understanding clients' lives and in understanding the role and scope of social work practice. Social workers from the Global North, notably, the US and the UK, experienced the fewest barriers in coming to understand the socio-political context.

Where there is a need to become oriented to the Canadian social welfare system, a representative from the regulatory body in Nova Scotia called on the School of Social Work at Dalhousie University to play a role:

“The person might have taken a policy course, which is required to be equivalent to the Canadian degree, but that doesn't mean they know the Canadian policies. I think the School of Social Work should offer courses to newcomer social workers to help bridge. That's what [a particular school of social work] does.” (Social work regulator)

Discussion

Readiness for practice comprises a nexus of factors among the internationally educated social worker, the site of social work practice and the regulation of the profession. Our research has clearly evidenced that adaptation is not solely a personally rooted and individually held phenomenon (Pullen Sansfaçon et al, 2014; Brown et al, 2015; Fulton et al, 2016). While complicated, the interaction of the efforts and intentions of employers, supervisors, colleagues and regulators, as well as the social workers themselves, is a necessary site of facilitation because each position rests upon the others in the ultimate aim of expanding the possibilities of social workers finding their place in Canadian social work practice. Indeed, one discussion group at the Halifax KEF squared the onus of social worker adaptation on the receiving province and local context rather than on the migrating practitioner, saying: “Very often we train immigrants to adapt to Canada. Perhaps we should change Canadians to adapt to immigrants”. Another participant suggested that cultural competency education begin in public schools so that children unlearn the xenophobia for which, sadly, Nova Scotia is known. This shift in perspective and responsibility suggests a consciousness of removing barriers.

This example illustrates the need for the concepts of readiness and adaptation to broaden and include examination of the sociocultural

and ideological context. This brings our analysis around again to neoliberalism, for the neoliberal tenets of self-sufficiency, personal responsibility, competition and merit underscore not only Canadian immigration policy (Shapaizman, 2010; Root et al, 2014), but also the nature and process of foreign credentials and experience assessment: equivalence with Canadian experience and Canadian education is the benchmark and neoliberal meritocracy upholds the illusion that this standard is equally available to all. Those who succeed do so because they deserve to, and those who do not succeed are personally responsible for their failing. This meritocracy masks the racism and xenophobia that are woven into the Canadian societal fabric, and the stories of internationally educated social workers substantiate that speculation about who is 'like us' and who is 'not like us' is always in operation. A participant from Nigeria sensed that employers viewed him with suspicion because of his foreign credentials; a social worker from Israel said, "I know it's very sad that I'm saying that, but ... I was lucky that I'm Caucasian. It's very sad for me to tell this. I know that that's a factor in the ability to get a job". These accounts connect migration, racism and neoliberalism. They are not surprising given that operations of the market – both labour markets and trade markets – are always underpinned by operations of material and discursive power. In the Canadian context, the white coloniser, wrapped in a cloak of neoliberalism, drives the machinery of who belongs.

Neoliberal federal and provincial social welfare policies have discontinued or reduced social spending, leading agencies to scale back resources and cut programmes, which increases the psychological and emotional toll on the practitioner (Baines, 2006; Smith, 2007; Wilson et al, 2011). Practitioners facing concurrent challenges like immigration, the assessment of foreign credentials and securing a licence are further pressured by demands at work and at home, creating a disconnect between what is required of migrating social workers in order to obtain employment and what is realistic. Bauder (2003, p 702) finds that 'rigorous certification systems favour individuals with Canadian education, training and experience, and disadvantage immigrants' across professions. Creese and Wiebe (2012) assert that this discrepancy is a strategic method of exclusion on the part of employers and professional associations, and assert that employers and professional associations are implicated in the deskilling and marginalisation of professionals who migrate to Canada. The authors cite Grace-Edward Galabuzi (2006) in naming this systemic marginalisation as 'economic apartheid' (Creese and Wiebe, 2012, p 58). This systemic discrimination is echoed by internationally educated social workers in our study (see

Brown et al, 2015). However, in contrast, Fouché et al (2014) found that migrant social workers in New Zealand are perceived positively by employers given the diversity of experience, knowledge and skills that they bring to their new professional context.

Internationally educated social workers in our study were clear that their adaptation to Canadian social work would be facilitated if there was a coordinated system wherein employers, regulators and educators in social work understand each other's roles and work together to streamline information and processes that build towards employment. In Halifax, such a consortium was, indeed, established – the International Social Workers Stakeholder Group – organised with administrative support from the Immigrant Settlement Association of Nova Scotia (see: www.isans.ca). The group has representation from the Dalhousie University School of Social Work, the Nova Scotia College of Social Workers and several large employers, government included, with guest membership from the CASW and Citizenship and Immigration Canada. The group is currently developing a proposal to the Dalhousie University School of Social Work for a 'bridging programme' to educate in the areas assessed by the CASW as lacking in the migrant social worker's degree from the country of origin. The group's genesis and momentum grew from the KEF held in Halifax. A different platform (but a similar initiative) is the website developed as a result of the Pullen Sansfaçon et al study during 2012–15 (available at: www.socialworkmigration.ca). The website serves as a portal for internationally educated social workers, employers, regulators and educators to learn about the other positions relative to the issues and to communicate with one another in an effort to ease adaptation to social work in Canada.

It is clear that internationally educated social workers, employers and regulators are bound together in this matrix of credentialing, licensing and employment. Along with all practising social workers, educators, researchers and scholars, service users, and the specifics of contexts of practice, all are engaged in constructing and refining definitions and expressions of social work practice (Beddoe et al, 2012). As social workers continue to work amid the constraints of neoliberal ideology and policy, we need to actively build collaboration among the stakeholders to not only remove barriers to licensing and employment, but strive to achieve the aspirations of the profession as set out by the CASW (2005) and the Canadian Association for Social Work Education, grounded in the 'Global standards for social work practice' developed jointly by the International Federation of Social

Workers (2012, 2014a, 2014b) and the International Association of Schools of Social Work.

Conclusion

This chapter presented data from employers, supervisors and regulators of social work, along with internationally educated social workers, which was generated through KEF held in Montreal, Quebec, and Halifax, Nova Scotia, at the end of a four-year study exploring the adaptation processes of migrant social workers. There are many shared priorities among these stakeholders. At the same time, there is a call for increased collaboration among stakeholders to facilitate the adaptation of internationally educated social workers and assist their integration into the profession. Partnership generated among employers and regulators, internationally educated social workers and other practitioners, educators, researchers, and service users can resist the material and discursive manifestations of neoliberalism. Together, we can reach for the social justice aspirations of the profession, not only in direct client and community practice, but in its workforce as well.

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