Risks and Benefits of Convergences in Social Work Education: A Post-colonial Analysis of Malaysia and the UK

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INTRODUCTION

Social work education globally has a diverse history with much influenced in its earlier growth by the Global North (Frampton, 2018; Gray, Coates, & Yellow Bird, 2010, 2013). This has skewed the development of social work thought and privileged certain discourses which may remain unspoken or may have created in appropriate forms of social work and welfare education. In this chapter, we are looking at social work education in the UK, which has a long history as developer and colonial exporter/influencer, and Malaysia, which has a shorter history of development, has been influenced by past colonial imports, and new assumed ideas whilst striving to develop an indigenous model within a neo-global context.

ISOMORPHIC CONVERGENCES

DiMaggio and Powell (1983) outlined a neo-Weberian organisational theory that identified some of the ways in which organisations display a tendency to adopt the strategies and structures of the powerful and successful. The approach outlines three ways in which organisations act to maintain their positions. These include coercive, mimetic, and normative processes

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employed by organisations to bring themselves in line with the assumed 'right ways of working'. This involves convergence across structures, processes, and practices.

The coercive processes concern those policies and procedures that derive from legislation or accepted standards within a particular profession. These processes must be followed and the organisations involved may suffer sanctions if they do not follow them. They represent the explicit external forces influencing a profession or organisation. Mimetic processes, on the other hand, concern the internal drivers of compliance: a wish to emulate or copy the practices of those organisations and/or professionals who represent the epitome of that group. Practices are adopted that follow those venerated organisations and professions and are gradually embedded within the copying organisation. These two processes have similarities to Bourdieu's concept of the *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1977). The external coercive behavioural drivers are *structuring structures*. They exert a pressure to conform to certain accepted standards which alter the culture and forms of the organisation or profession. Mimetic processes are perhaps more akin to Bourdieu's *structured structures*; those practices and organising behaviours which are moulded and shaped by copying those of an esteemed other.

The third isomorphic process occurs when the practices and behaviours become unspoken and assumed. They become the ways in which the practice is undertaken and any deviation from these normative standards is seen as bad practice or practice that is to be avoided. This normativity constructs a sense of belonging and a distinction from those professional organisations that do not conform.

These three processes can be identified in most professional organisations as they strive for recognition, acceptance as part of a larger entity and a seat at the table of influence. It is a process of convergence towards similar forms. There are a number of problems with isomorphic convergence. Firstly, it suggests that a one-size-fits-all approach is possible and desirable. For instance, standards in social work practice and education have been developed to ensure that those who use our services are protected, offered the very best practices and are not subject to differential treatment. These are laudable aims. However, social work is a human, relational profession that requires critical reflexivity and continual questioning of contexts and practices and a consideration of processes as much as outcomes, the latter of which may reflect professional rather than service user vested interests (Blom & Morén, 2019). Social work must be adaptable and plastic rather than rigidly adhering to prescribed standards. Therefore, understanding the model of isomorphic convergences allows social workers to weigh up the value of standard against the need for individual and localised plasticity. Adopting a situation ethic will help in which the rules of the game or standards are accepted as generally benign but need not be complied with where the contextual and individual needs are greater (Fletcher, 1966). This is something that is captured within

the International Federation of Social Workers' (IFSW) revised definition of social work, which allows adaptation to local and indigenous conditions (IFSW, 2014).

Secondly, the normative aspects of isomorphic convergence in social work education suggest there is a correct way of doing it and that not conforming to these accepted practices implies deviance and lesser quality. The hidden imperialist tendencies within such an approach betray some of the history of social work education in its often (neo)-colonial transfer across countries (Frampton, 2018; Parker et al., 2014). Indeed, the models and standards that are copied, required, and become accepted have often derived from progenitors of social work education in the Global North, notably the UK and USA, although also including other European nations. This reinforces an unspoken assumption of hierarchy in education standards.

Allied to the point above is that being a structured structure, influenced by the lure of accepted standards, may prevent the development of appropriate indigenous and contextual approaches to social work practice and education (Ling, 2007). In turn, this may result in the development of a system of practice and education which fails to address the needs of local people.

In our analysis of social work education in the UK and Malaysia, these models provide a useful framework for understanding, and for recognising risk.

Social Work Education in the UK and Malaysia

Change and Reform in the UK

Change has permeated the development and delivery of social work education throughout its long history (over 100 years) within universities (Baron & McLaughlin, 2017; Parker, 2005, 2019). The Local Authority and Social Services Act in 1971 and subsequent formation of the Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work (CCETSW), however, heralded a more standardised and regulated qualifying education across the UK (Jones, 2006).

There were positive elements to this more organised approach to education standards. In the late 1980s, CCETSW emphasised political activism within qualifying education. However, a political backlash led to revisions to the qualification, which then sat at a sub-degree level, and a shift towards privileging employer needs. Whilst qualification levels increased from sub-degree to degree level from 2003, it also gave rise to enhanced surveillance and control, which instrumentalised social work education. Employer needs became paramount whilst relational and critical social work was diminished. Over time social work education shifted towards greater curricular prescription which, in turn, prevented universities from offering many of their specialist courses based on research expertise (Parker, 2019). The rationale for increased standardisation was to prevent tragedies such as high profile

deaths of children. The insidious outcome, however, was to define social work as a 'state-sponsored' activity, located within local government in Britain whilst relegating community and radical aspects of social work that aligned with other international approaches. We have argued elsewhere that it also allowed social workers to be blamed when things went wrong and to suggest social work education and training was inadequate (Parker, 2019). The protective and social regulatory functions began to assume precedence in social work within a new context of mandatory registration with the professional body—at the time the General Social Care Council (GSCC) (see s.61 Care Standards Act 2000).

The pace of change increased under the New Labour Government (1997–2010), underpinned by the concept of New Public Management perspective (Jordan & Drakeford, 2012). The introduction of a minimum bachelor degree qualifying level allowed policy makers to introduce greater prescription into the curriculum and thereby influence the pedagogy underpinning it. The publication of the inquiry into the high profile death of 17-month old Peter Connelly in 2009 led to a growth in surveillance and scrutiny and education was again targeted with a great deal of curricula and pedagogical control being transferred to social work employers and policy makers (Balls, 2008; Jones, 2014; Shoesmith, 2016; Social Work Task Force, 2009). A Social Work Reform Board was developed that scrutinised practices in student selection, education, practice learning, and partnerships with practice agencies amongst other matters (Department for Education, 2010, 2012; Jones, 2014). This resulted in greater direction and reform for social work education (Higgins, 2016; Higgins & Goodyer, 2015). The power of the employer voice was clearly exemplified by some employer groups suggesting, even before the first cohort of students taking the 2003 programme in England had graduated, that student social workers were being failed by universities and not prepared adequately for practice (Evaluation of Social Work Degree Qualification in England Team, 2008). Perhaps this was not surprising given the metamorphosis of social work from a person-centred, social justice, and human rights-based entity to one concerned almost exclusively, at management and government directional level, with social regulation and protective function that had occurred almost by stealth as control and regulation became normalised (Parker, 2017; Parker & Ashencaen Crabtree, 2018a, 2018b). Reform and calls for reform have continued (Croisdale-Appleby, 2014; Narey, 2014; Maxwell et al., 2016; Smith, Stepanova, Venn, Carpenter, & Patsios, 2018).

The competency approach to social work education permeated the early qualifications and the qualifying degree was underpinned by National Occupational Standards in social work (BASW, 2003). This approach attracted many critics and an unholy alliance between government departments and educators led to change. The Social Work Reform Board envisaged social work as a life-long or career-long learning process that

developed in breadth and depth of knowledge, skills, and practice and began with a student's initial application to an education programme. This was known as the Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF), a nine-domain overview of what were considered to represent the central characteristics of English social work (BASW, 2018; Higgins, 2016). Underpinning this conception was the capability approach (see Nussbaum, 2011; Sen 1999). However, as I have argued elsewhere the PCF to a large extent describes contemporary social work including national and international aspects in normative terms that reflect an instrumental, homogenised view of social work rather than offering a critical narrative on which one can reflexively develop (Parker, 2019).

As reform became ingrained within social work education, social work in England lost its professional and regulatory body the General Social Care Council with whom student social workers were registered. Responsibility for regulating social work was transferred to the Health Care Professions Council (HCPC). This led to social work education requiring students to meet key professional standards (Standards of Proficiency) (HCPC, 2012) revised in 2016 but no longer to be registered as students. The standards seemed to homogenise and replicate neoliberal concerns of performance measurement, targets, and outputs or productivity as well as an attempt to enhance the quality of the work. Regulation under the HCPC also relegated social work to a sub-set of health and the social science base became increasingly threatened. The reforms have also led to the development of core subject areas in qualifying social work education that creates a discourse outlining what social work means and what it is. The increasing focus on protection or 'safeguarding' and the legislative, regulatory aspects of social work are privileged whilst the campaigning, political, social justice, and relational elements are minimised however much lip-service is paid to them. A new regulatory body is planned for the end of 2019—Social Work England—which would realign social work in England with the other three countries in the UK in having a separate regulatory body. However, it also suggests that further changes in standards and requirements may also be coming in the near future. Further evidence suggesting this may be taken from the production of Knowledge and Skills Statements for both children and families and adult (Department of Education, 2014; Department of Health, 2015), and uncertainties for social work education in the light of the UK's planned withdrawal from the European Union (Parker, 2019).

These changes herald a definition of social work as a statutory service, as part of the state's organisational systems for the regulation of social and family life; social work is functional and functionary and students are being trained rather than educated into maintaining the practices of this system in a taken-for-granted manner (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). This approach favours redistributing the power base towards employer organisations which have political as well as professional mandates to achieve.

The concept and practice of social work as an international entity are contested (Hugman, 2010; Hutchings & Taylor, 2007). Indeed, its social-historical-political construction leads to different morphologies and practices across the world. However, in an attempt to connect social work across the globe excellent work has been completed by the International Federation of Social Workers and the International Association of Schools of Social Work to reach agreement on a global definition (IASSW/IFSW, 2014). In turn, this has promoted the development of non-binding, yet important, global educational standards for social work (IFSW/IASSW, 2012). This is something of a 'double-edged sword'; however, it has both potential benefits and potential drawbacks. It provides a set of standards that social work educators in all countries can aspire to and can campaign to achieve within their universities, professional bodies, and policy-making bodies. It also has the potential to homogenise social work education around global isomorphs that may privilege certain countries more than others. Therefore, a critical eye has to be kept on the meanings that these standards create within each country and educational establishment and within social work organisations. However, if we approach these standards reflexively and critically, we can avoid their coercive and normative power and use these to campaign for an internationalised approach that preserves the central characteristics of social work and education—social justice and human rights—as the UK moves into a more insular and isolated approach to social work.

Malaysian Social Work Education

Social work, in Malaysia, is associated with its colonial past. Formal welfare services were developed, as in Britain, in the early twentieth century as a means of supporting the colonial economy (Parker et al., 2016). The first Department of Social Welfare was established in 1946 which was elevated to the Ministry of Social Welfare in 1964. In 1985, the Ministry was reduced again to departmental status under the Ministry of National Unity and Community Development, which was renamed in 2004 as the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development (MWFCD). The MWFCD oversees four agencies—the Department for Development of Women (JPW), the Department of Social Welfare, Malaysia (JKM), the National Population and Family Development Board (LPPKN), and the Social Institute of Malaysia (ISM). The Department of Social Welfare (JKM) provides social services and implements government welfare policies. Services include casework, foster care and adoption, youth probation and parole, protective services for older people, and child protection. It is the largest government agency and employer of social workers in the country (Baba, 2002).

Social work education is offered at a number of universities in Malaysia, a middle-income country, where it is popular discipline and attracts high

student numbers. However, compared with high-income countries, social work, as a regulated profession, remains an aspiration.

A two-year social welfare officer training course was offered by the London School of Economics following World War II; the majority of graduates during this period were British (Baba, 1998; Mair, 1944). Following *Merdeka* (independence) in 1963, social work education replicated its colonial heritage with many Malaysian social workers trained at the National University of Singapore, then known as the University of Malaya (Baba, 2002). Other social workers studied in Indonesia, the Philippines, India, and the UK, Australia and the USA. However, socio-economic, cultural, and political factors strongly encouraged the establishment of national social work education programmes. In 1973, the professional body, the Malaysian Association of Social Workers (MASW), was formed. Its main objective is to promote and maintain standards of social work in Malaysia. MASW has made a major contribution towards the development of the first social work education programmes in Malaysia.

The first social work undergraduate programme in Malaysia began at the Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) in 1975. It was established by the Ministry of Social Welfare following the 1968 United Nations Conference of Ministers Responsible for Social Welfare and advice of the United Nation Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP), owing to a recognised need for more professionally trained social and community workers (Ali, 1988; Baba, 1992, 2002).

In its first four years, the USM programme selected students via a special intake programme for staff at the Ministry of Social Welfare. The programme was opened to the staff of other relevant ministries as well and began to take in baccalaureate students in 2011. The student population is relatively small, no more than sixty students per intake, along with ten places for special intake students. However, both a masters and doctoral degree in Social Work was introduced in 1975. USM became the social work training hub for the many local and regional social work educators, especially those serving the other six HEI's that offering social work degree and like many other programmes across the world, programmes are located in the social sciences to give it a rigorous disciplinary base (Gray et al., 2008; Parker, 2007).

In the 1980s, social problems, such as HIV/AIDS and substance misuse, emerged in the context of a shortage of trained government-employed social work staff necessitating the development of further social work programmes. The changing social situation also provided an important social indicator that Malaysia needed to develop better services for its people. This need contributed towards the development of new social work education programmes in Malaysia in the 1990s (Baba, 1992; Cho & Salleh, 1992). Between 1993 and 2002 seven HEIs introduced their own social work education programmes, primarily at bachelor level.

The Professionalisation of Social Work in Malaysia and Implications
for Education

Schools of social work globally have based their social work education on the criteria developed by the International Association of Schools of Social Work that also allows indigenous interpretation and application (IFSW/IASSW, 2012). The international standards for social work education developed by IASSW have been instrumental in developing Malaysian social work education (IFSW/IASSW, 2012). Evaluation of programmes is normally based on the philosophy of social work education and the global social work education criteria as laid down by IASSW (Hokenhead & Kendall, 1995; International Federation of Social Workers/International Association of Schools of Social Work, 2012).

The MASW, social work educators, practitioners, government, and non-government agencies who are concerned about the future of professional social work in Malaysia have debated regulation, standards, and professionalisation for four decades (MASW, n.d.). In order to maintain its standards, MASW set down specific criteria for candidates seeking full membership. To be a full member a candidate requires a social work degree (undergraduate or graduate) from a recognised or accredited HEI or social work education programme. However, Malaysia does not yet have an accreditation body that scrutinises professional issues, such as accreditation, standards, quality, and needs. Since there is no implemented Social Workers Act in Malaysia, accreditation standards of social work education has been primarily left to each respective institution offering social work education. This has resulted in a drive towards standardisation which, at times, is accepted simply as a 'received' good or panacea. These developments require critique and analysis, however, and a commitment to adopting the best local traditions in the context of global standards if they are to be authentic to the Malaysian context rather than replicating what is accepted, and often unquestioned practice in other countries.

A degree-level qualification has been promoted reflecting normative convergent approaches across the world. Whilst this has been tempered in Malaysia to include volunteers and existing practitioners, it shows the need to standardise has been accepted tacitly at least and explicates some of the pressures of conformity that need to be debated and understood. UNICEF, JKM, and MASW have collaborated in promoting an accredited system of appropriate education, training and qualifications for social work, particularly in working with children population. The premise was that creating a system of qualifying education based around accepted international competencies for social workers would bring Malaysian social work into line with other systems around the world, would protect the public by licensing, regulating and professionalising practice and provide the best social work services, in the end, for all (Parker et al., 2016).

Understanding the context is important when considering standardisation and regulation. It demonstrates the different contexts in the UK and Malaysia. For instance, social work is poorly understood amongst the

general public in Malaysia and many of those employed in social work posts are unqualified as a result. Social work education programmes in Malaysia vary across universities. Most Malaysian universities offering social work education focus on undergraduate social work, with the exception of two universities where a masters programme is offered through course work and research. The majority of undergraduate students are aged between 19 and 21 and have very little experience of life and there is a wish to increase numbers of mature students. Some programmes still lack lecturers who are qualified social workers which are assumed to affect the standards and quality of social work education in the university-setting and also in understanding the centrality of practice or field education. In 2010, the majority of social work educators in Malaysia had no formal training or professional experience in social work prior to entering HEIs (Baba, Ashencaen Crabtree, & Parker, 2011). There are high student/staff ratios, stretching staff capacity, which further affects the quality of social work education and research. For these reasons, Baba et al. (2011) argued that Malaysia needs a unified, strong professional body, such as a council on social work education but adapted to Malaysian needs and an accreditation body that can monitor quality and standards for the profession (Baba, 2002).

Previously, we suggested a number of areas which need attention if social work education in Malaysia is to move forward (Parker et al., 2016). However, these must be seen in the context of risks, dangers, and unintended consequences of uncritically accepting normative standards and positionalities and ignoring or reducing the centrality of local indigenised needs.

Consistent standards are needed to guide the development of social work education. Some universities have used IASSW guidelines, but this has not been ubiquitous and a professional accrediting body could help in ensuring consistency. It is important that Malaysia develops locally specific standards which accord with IASSW's global guidelines. The experiences of other countries continue to hold important resonances for Malaysia; but these experiences should be looked at critically and lessons learned where stultification and over-prescription have resulted from the desire to professionalise. The potential problems of isomorphic convergence are stark within this call and for Malaysian social work to continue to develop its unique aspects awareness and reflexivity are key.

Universities need to increase qualified social work teaching staff to meet future needs in social work education and reduce reliance on overseas postgraduate education by developing masters and doctorate level programmes nationally (Desai, 1991). This may help in developing teaching and research capacity that focuses on Malaysian issues.

A central role of the MASW will be to work towards the complex identification of specific social work roles and tasks. Universities need to lobby government and non-government agencies to hire more qualified social workers.

International and intra-national staff exchanges should be encouraged, particularly between more experienced social work education programmes and those that are newly established. This would encourage closer working partnerships across institutions and promote good practice in social work education.

Traditional emphases on respect and deference for rank and hierarchy may hamper the acquisition and promotion of critical thinking skills and challenging. However, the development of professionalised education demands a sceptical approach to standards and competences and recognises the potential for instrumental political control of social work services as opposed to human-focused, fluid, and intuitive practice wisdom. Importantly, whilst the colonial legacy cannot all be seen in a negative light, Malaysia must develop its own unique approaches to social work education in the context of a post-colonial legacy and the development of global structures (Hew & Ashencaen Crabtree, 2012). Midgely (1990) condemned the transference of Western social work models, particularly US ones, to developing countries as a form of cultural imperialism. There has since been a body of literature discussing the question of the incongruence between the so-called Western focus on the cult of the individual as opposed to the interdependency and collective perspective prevalent in Asian societies (Fulcher, 2003; Ling, 2004; Ngai, 1996; Tsang, 1997, 2001).

Two particular social work paradigms have been identified as having emerged in countries of the Global South in order to meet local needs and thus diverge from the US-British models. These are 'indigenisation', which has adapted Westernised models to fit the local context, and 'authenticisation', which is fundamentally grounded in the cultural schema and knowledge base of ethnic groups (Ling, 2007). Due to the hegemony of professional literature, which continues to be dominated by Western authors and publishers, both indigenisation and authenticisation are primarily grass-roots phenomena, rather than regularly debated and analysed in social work curricula within developing countries (Ashencaen Crabtree, 2008; Parker et al., 2016).

Given the transitional state of social work education in Malaysia and the sociopolitical context in which it is practised, there are many challenges, but also many opportunities. Importantly, social work education and social work practice should reflect an authentic and appropriately indigenised approach befitting Malaysian society and its contemporary context.

Isomorphic Convergences and a Post-colonial Lens: Re-imaging Social Work Education Futures

The UK has a history as an exporter-coloniser in social work education whilst Malaysia's history is of an importer-colonised position. This has influenced the development and trajectory of social work education in each country respectively as we have seen above. Also, the historical needs to be set within the global turn; the drive towards internationalisation in professional

and organisational matters in social work that has a rich and complex history from the early twentieth century onwards. It is important to recognise that practices are exported laden with values that may influence the construction of standards that assume policy or even quasi-legal and legal status. These are interpreted through the value lens of the importer country which may be influenced by assumptions of normalcy and 'rightness'. These values require exposure so that normative and mimetic forces can be seen and questioned for their appropriateness to the country wishing to adopt such education practices. For instance, moves towards professionalisation in Malaysian social work education and practice have sought to adapt a competence-based approach to assessment which builds upon Western normative practice which itself is fraught with questions and resistance. Asking the question 'why' we may want to do this is important if we are to remove modern-day professional imperialism and ensure adaptation to local circumstances.

Where there are such standards that must be complied with it is also imperative that social work, as a reflexive practice, interrogates the rationale behind them and challenges when they fail to meet needs. Social workers in the UK have a responsibility not to present practices simply as something to be copied, parrot-fashion but to be offered and adapted and the underlying normative discourses continually questioned. In Malaysia, questions of indigenity and authenticity are paramount.

Being aware of the underlying discourses that affect the assumptions we make of what is appropriate in social work education is important if we are to guard against a neo-colonial orthodoxy and to preserve a developing authenticity in both importer and exporter countries. Reflexivity, continual questioning of ourselves and our assumptions may also protect education from Merton's laws of unintended consequences that require us to consider whether we have adequate knowledge of the impact of adopting and adapting our social work education practices; to question potential errors of judgement; to consider long as well as short-term aspects in planning; to question normative and prescriptive demands and their consequences; and to recognise how predicting future practices and behaviours may set the conditions for that future.

Indeed, Merton's laws may help UK social work educators to challenge the unthinking politicisation of social work education that has potentially damaged its quality and adequacy. We must resist the political errors in re-positioning power towards employers who are, in the main, part of the state apparatus and therefore fundamentally politicised in their policies, guidance, and practice. The longer-term implications of changes in social work education have led to a focus on safeguarding practices and a rejection of the campaigning aspects of social work and education and service provision are now attuned to this residual approach. Recognising these problems and resisting them may help guard against an unquestioning adoption of assumed 'good' practices and a clear focus on the appropriateness and authenticity of social work education in all countries.

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