

European Identities and Social Work Education

Dr. Liz Frost
Principal Lecturer, Faculty of Health and
Social Care,
University of The West of England,
Bristol, UK.

Content

- highlight the contextualising dimensions of the commonalities and differences debate,
- consider the cultural roots of difference and its impact on how social workers are educated
- discuss what kind of social work identities that produces,
- raise some of the complex questions of 'European' social work identity

Identity

- Sociological v. psychological versions
- Social context in which we live
- Professional identity of social work, e.g. ethics, knowledge, behaviours etc. is also socially constructed.
- 'National' identity and 'European' identity, and National and/or European identities *of social work* contain ambiguities and contradictions.

Contradictory Themes in European identity

The denial of notions of 'National' Identity

- Ex-colonial countries
- Histories of wars and oppression
- Lands and peoples lost and re-named
- Involvement with historical movements and politics that are now discredited.

Problems in verbalisation and linguistic construction –‘political correctness’

- Contemporary issues from which we wish to distance ourselves

If histories form part of our cultures, can we simply put the past away and leave it out of our identity?

Valuing ‘National’ identities

- Remembering the past and building it into the present
- Revaluing of ‘cultural’/country/regional identities
- ‘Roots’ reconnected to the present.
- Knowing who you are?

- Many more people classify themselves as minorities
- A new respect for minorities?
- Multi-culturalism is being valued in some places?
- Giving back voices to those from whom they were taken: - more self government and autonomy?

- If cultures are more than just a set of historical traditions they must be valued as part of identity?
- Will produce differences, which are important for notions of interchangeability and Europeaness.
- Different cultures = different social work?: function, delivery, problems and how people should inhabit a social work identity

- Are we all so post-modern we can just dispose of all this
- Can social workers simply learn a little new law and policy? Does task centred case work fit everyone from Iceland to Cyprus and Ireland to Romania?
- Social problems are culturally constructed too?
- cultural identity as an important part of self identity? What should be social work's response?

The Cultural Context of Social Work Education

Institutional locations for social work vary-

- countries that have entrusted sw to the University sector
- countries that have (also) developed learning routes in higher private institutes.
- simultaneous presence of various contexts (Poland and Lithuania).
- where the church has significant involvement (Hungary and Romania)

- Other kinds of belief systems, eg. scientific medicine (Denmark). The first two schools of in Copenhagen during the 1930s were based in the hospital system.
- Backgrounds of science or religion effect practice and understanding: the sw meaning system in a particular country, e.g. issues such as morality and ethics.

Curriculum Content

- Connection between the history and present of institutional emergence and the content and structure of curricula.
- Indirect influences have impacted on notion of appropriate social workers knowledge
- Generally, sociology, psychology and pedagogy, social policy and legal studies,
- But also distinct temporal and regional differences. 'Freud and the Northern Europeans' is a useful example.

- mixed pictures of post-structuralist and postmodern thinking, critical theory, psychosocial perspectives, behavioural psychology, humanist philosophy and so on: a mixture of the old and the new.
- Eg. Spain- social ecology, system's theory and social constructivism
- more complex and multidimensional, responsive to changes in social theory and subject to regular revision and change.

- Regional and national differences still remain eg. 'church social work' (Lithuania Hungary)
- The traditional humanist doctrines in some parts of Europe (Czech Republic stresses ethics and philosophy, Cyprus emphasise human rights).
- The curriculum, then, resonates with the past as it tries to serve the present, and has an eye to the future. (IT skills, English language teaching)

- Overall the very definition of sw is symbiotically connected to curriculum issues. Emphases on various disciplines leads to different roles and contributes to professional differentiation.
- Even more pronounced in the *practice* within the curriculum
- The variation across Europe is considerable: number of hours dedicated to practice skills/methods teaching; actual supervised practice undertaken; the kinds of contexts within which training is carried out.

The Status of Social Work in The Academy

Status is a difficult concept to quantify.

Connects to:

- the duration and academic level of the educational period.
- the type of education offered is strictly connected both to the history of social work and to the relevance and meaning attributed to formative institutions in the various nations.

The insertion into the university rather than in other educational contexts:

- produces an increased legitimization
- demonstrates a struggle for legitimacy

Research

- The issue of research, and its connection to academic (and more general) status, again shows considerable European variation.
- A developing rhetoric of research cultures, and a belief that research should be incorporated into social work ?
- Despite this requirement, this aspect is slow to develop.

- social research and publications are important as a fundamental challenge for the future of social work.
- relationships with other academic disciplines may also be destabilised and realigned by a research culture and disciplinary autonomy
- the the academic structure to support social work education through to doctoral level *within* a specific country links to status?

Concluding thoughts

- Social workers across Europe then – high status or low status, academic or practical, philosophers, psychologists, health workers, financial advisers, community workers, radicals, government officials, spiritual healers? How can these different social work identities be reconciled, and indeed should they?
- A greater understanding of each other is an important first step in a process which both respects diversity and values commonality.

- Similarly to social work and social workers, service users inhabit histories and cultures, ideologies and faiths, and experiences of calm and struggle in diverse ways.
- But are there similarities in trying to exist in the most deprived sections of society?
- Being homeless or abused or sick or lonely feels pretty much the same anywhere, and produces and supports the same kind of identities?

- This would suggest that social work across Europe is quite fundamentally about the same thing – the attempt to alleviate these problems.
- A commonality, perhaps, that far outweighs any differences of (national) culture and identity
- ??????????????

