

Working with differences and diversities: From discrimination to dignity

Patrick O’Leary & Ming-sum Tsui

As the editors of the *International Social Work* Journal, another step for us to revisit the nature of social work is to examine the context for practicing social work globally. As advocated by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW) and International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW), the four pillars of the global agenda are to promote (1) social and economic equalities, (2) the dignity and worth of peoples, (3) environmental and community sustainability and (4) human relationships (Jones and Truell, 2012). With the faith of our profession and the above global agenda, we believe that people are born to be free, equal, but different. Social workers have the mandate to connect people from different parts of the world and strive for their well-being with hope and dignity in a sustainable manner.

Terrorism events in New Zealand and Sri Lanka are distressing and cause great sadness to us all, because they are not only attacks on individuals and the community but also attacks on humanity and freedom. This prompts us all to reflect on the frailty of the human condition but also our collective strength and responsibility across the international social work community to work towards peace and equity. As reminded by Tsui and Cheung (2003), ‘... the mission of social work is to safeguard human rights and social justice; not only for us but also for everyone. If we believe human beings can change and improve, and if social work is an international profession, we should serve to bridge the differences’ (p. 557). Following this line of thought, social work can be perceived as a bridge between people with differences.

There is no need to be afraid of differences if we take the diversities as natural and beautiful. Different people come from different geographic, political, economic,

social and cultural contexts. We are by definition different, this explains why we always emphasize individualization and self-determination in our professional practice. However, we should not allow society to become divided. During the intervention process, regardless of whether we are caring angels or change agents, we should make every effort to eliminate, or at least, reduce stigma and discrimination.

However, we social workers, are also human beings. We also have our own history and background, including biases and prejudices. When we handle differences, there may be some measures we need to take. First, we have to identify our own blind spots in terms of fear and stigma, that is, what we call 'self-awareness'. Second, we need to keep our mind and eyes open, self-reflection and co-reflection may help. This requires us to be able to critique our practice and epistemologies. Third, we need to revisit, reexamine and revitalize the basic principles of social work. Sometimes, professional peers can play a vital role in consolidating our resilience and determination. Developing evidence-based practice through an interchange of research and experience is a critical way in which to improve our practice and build our profession. Fourth, we have to listen to the voice of our clients and their caregivers, touch their hearts, and build our empathetic understanding. After all, social work is a values and relational-based profession. Fifth, we need emotional support from our beliefs, families, friends, colleagues, volunteers and clients. As helpers, we need to know how to seek help when we are in need.

As social workers, we have to face difficulties with faith, handle differences as diversities, and strive for dignity with determination. As the angels and agents to connect people in a harmonious way, we need to be humorous and humanistic.

References

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