Social work geographic: International, local, cultural, political, or personal?

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Geographic social work refers to ‘where’ social work practice belongs. This is the platform for social work practice. It determines the framework of the context and content of social work practice. To put it simply, it is not only the house, but also the home for social work practice. This extends across international, local, cultural, political and personal domains of our profession.

International

A profession is by nature international as it involves a distinct set of core values, knowledge, and skills for solving social problems in order to pursue the well-being of the people from remedial, preventive, and developmental perspectives. It goes beyond the individual effort of particular nations or regions. This explains why organizations of professions are international, for example, in the cases of medical doctors, lawyers, teachers, and social workers. In this regard, we assume that there are some common needs among different peoples, regardless of race, color, ethnicity, age, identity and gender, to be fulfilled in different parts of the world. For certain social problems, we may also need collaboration among professionals from different parts of the world, for example to tackle natural disasters, human trafficking, substance abuse, and refugees. In fact, one of the indicators of a profession’s maturity is its history and level of international collaboration.

Local and cultural

Professional values are common, but the practice can be different when the context and content of our professional practice depend on the people, environment, institutions, and cultures. Regarding social work practice, understanding the
societal culture and sub-culture of our service targets is a must for effective practice. Otherwise, we social workers cannot communicate with our clients and build up mutually trustful relationships for meaningful practice. Social work, based on its essence, is an international profession with local practice. Even within a society, there could be different practice in localities based on their characteristics in terms of socio-economic status and geographic locations. As social workers, we need to be culturally sensitive in working with the stakeholders in our localities. This enables and enhances our professional practice in a smooth and smart manner.

**Political**

Social work is inevitably political as it aims at upholding and advocating humanistic values in our society (Chu et al., 2009). Social workers are obliged to participate in different levels of advocacy, from individuals and families to social and political structures. Social reform and empowerment of our clients are the mandates for social workers. The process affects power balance, resource distribution, and the existing interest structure. In our intervention, social work practice involves decision-making and distribution of service resources. Whether we like it or not, unavoidably it touches policies and politics at different levels. In fact, social work practice itself is a political practice in which the social worker plays the roles and fulfills the functions of an agent in empowering our clients and advocating for the rights of the minorities and the underprivileged. Of course, there may be complaints and resistance from some of the stakeholders – social workers are not always popular even though we think we are doing something good. Silence in the face of injustice is also a political act, social work has a role to break silences to create change. A competing-values but contingent approach may provide direction for our daily practice.
Personal

Social work is by nature social as it involves interpersonal relationships and social functioning. Appropriate use of self is a must in our practice. Personality, practice experience, and practice wisdom always help us enter, engage, enable, enhance, educate, empower, evaluate, and then exchange. However, excessive use of self will make us self-centered. This is why we always need to bear in mind the three essential qualities of our practice: (1) individualization; (2) self-awareness; and (3) empathy. It reminds us that every client is different; we need to keep our mind clear with critical reflection. This requires social workers to understand situations and emotions of our clients and communities.

Let us go home together with a clear direction.

Reference