
research article

International social work research: transfer of knowledge or promotion of dialogue beyond borders?

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Social work has developed unevenly within Europe and globally, with differences in terms of its recognition, training, professionalisation and academisation. This is mirrored in an unbalance in reciprocal influence, particularly vis-a-vis knowledge production, and the origin of tensions between importing/exporting 'ready-made' ideas from stronger social work communities and efforts towards indigenisation and locally rooted knowledge production. Structurally embedded in these tensions, we consider the role of international associations and attendant events in promoting internationalisation processes that reflect cultural dominance or, conversely, balance tensions between universalism and localism. To develop a reflection on these issues, we analysed materials used for launching the European Conference for Social Work Research conferences. Two meaningful aspects emerged: efforts at maintaining an all-embracing profile without privileging specific approaches; and the identification of shared open themes to enable mutual understanding of differences. Social work professional identity, the socio-political dimensions of social work and comparing research methodologies constituted starting points for international conversations. Arguably, nurturing such dialogues can have a significant, if indirect, function in the development of an international language and shared conceptualisations, or, at least, an awareness of different conceptualisations vis-a-vis practices of knowledge co-construction.

Key words knowledge production • universalism/localism • international social work • cultural dominance • indigenisation • European Conference for Social Work Research

To cite this article: Bertotti, T. and Fargion, S. (2023) International social work research: transfer of knowledge or promotion of dialogue beyond borders?, *European Social Work Research*, 1(1): 21–35, DOI: 10.1332/JZLT8735

Introduction

Social work as a profession has developed unevenly within Europe, as well as across the world. Differences, in part, stemming from variations in social policy, have been identified in the way the profession has established itself and been recognised, both in terms of the organisation of training and particularly in terms of its academisation. This unbalance in development is reflected in an unbalance in reciprocal influence,

particularly vis-a-vis knowledge production. Countries where social work has been recognised as an academic discipline and research has been funded and well developed have more impact and influence than others where research is weaker, having developed in the shadow of more established disciplines, such as sociology, psychology or social pedagogy. In several European countries, this imbalance has been the origin of a tension between, on the one hand, importing/exporting 'ready-made' ideas and theoretical models from stronger social work communities, and, on the other, efforts towards indigenisation and promoting knowledge production rooted in the local context, thus acknowledging local cultures, as well as needs and pressures. In a sense, many countries where academic social work is underdeveloped waver between excluding any external influences in order to foster autonomous development and needing to welcome international dialogue, thus risking cultural dominance by countries perceived as more advanced. In such contexts, internationalisation may be seen as merely importing knowledge and values from different cultures.

This article reflects on the centrality of knowledge production and research, and on the role that international social work organisations, particularly through the events they organise, can play in promoting internationalisation processes that reflect cultural dominance or, conversely, balance different tensions. How knowledge is used internationally is a complex process entailing controversial fluxes (Harris et al, 2015), leading to our main endeavour here: to understand what conditions enable each local reality to widen its perspectives, while eschewing closure, as well as developing an ability to connect critically with research and knowledge from different countries. Thus, while – in this phase of social work development across Europe – the search for universal values could awaken the ghost of colonisation, the dialogues that develop in international arenas appear crucial in inspiring local research and simultaneously reinforcing the international community. For instance, Harris et al (2015) underline a process whereby local values are transformed into global, as exemplified through what has been termed the process of 'Americanisation'.

Looking at specific examples of the European Social Work Research Association (ESWRA) and the European Conference for Social Work Research (ECSWR), we will show the endeavours and obstacles inherent in forwarding an idea of internationalisation that is not equated with affirming global values and standards often reflecting cultural dominance. A possible alternative is to see internationalisation as a process that occurs through dialogues, recognising diversity and plurality across Europe, while being aware of the risks of automatic knowledge transfer. Such perspectives on processes of internationalisation will be illustrated through analysing the documentation on how the 11 ECSWRs have been introduced and presented. We will identify a number of threads, in particular, three recurrent strands, that appear crucial in designing the conferences.

The first section of this article aims to identify the main debates surrounding international social work and the role of knowledge fluxes in it. The second reflects on how the tensions outlined earlier are embodied in the activities of international organisations. The following sections consider the ECSWRs over the last decade and analyse how these were organised and thematised to involve the international research community.

The analysis prompts suggestions vis-a-vis the conditions that enable international conferences to enhance awareness of the specificities of local cultures and pluralism in social work knowledge, while simultaneously providing new stimuli and nurturing

critical reflection on local practices. The analysis thus leads to a shared conceptualising of social work knowledge and terms.

Debates on international social work

The development of international social work has characterised the field since its inception (Askeland and Payne, 2008; Healy and Link, 2011). The emphasis on internationalisation connects with many features of the present world and has been accentuated over the last few decades by the promotion of human rights in social work and the intensified movements towards globalisation that have substantially impacted economies, social policies and cultures globally. The issue of human rights, as most maintain, cannot be tackled at a national level. It has, in fact, been significantly affected by globalisation, widely impacting social work practices. Already in 1997, Walter Lorenz (1997) emphasised how transcending local and national dimensions in the current political and social environment could not be the prerogative of specialists, and how it involved all those working in the social field.

What is intriguing, though, is that among the many definitions of international social work, the knowledge and research dimensions seem largely neglected. After reviewing historical definitions and highlighting their limitations because of their narrow focus on practices abroad, Healy (2001: 10) proposes a broader definition that focuses on practices, without, however, mentioning research: 'international social work is defined as international professional action and the capacity for international action by the social work profession and its members. International action has four dimensions: internationally related domestic practice and advocacy, professional exchange, international practice, and international policy development and advocacy.' This is one of the most frequently employed definitions that emphasises interventions and social work practice (Palattiyil et al, 2019). Palattiyil et al (2019) highlight the importance of globally affirming the specificities of social work intervention and knowledge; however, this raises questions that have so far been less addressed. First, what kinds of knowledge do we refer to? Additionally, how do social work knowledge and research relate to international social work?

It may thus be more appropriate to discuss the processes of social work internationalisation, as well as pathways for the construction of an international social work, together with the outcomes of this process. In this regard, the research and knowledge-production dimensions acquire added significance. Moreover, the issue of knowledge is connected to dimensions of internationalisation on several grounds. On the one hand, transcending local dimensions appears a necessary feature in the attainment of scientific status for social work; indeed, gaining certified and objective knowledge with universal validity represents an aspiration of at least one of the great social work narratives (Lorenz, 2017), with the development of research in a profession rooted in modernity unavoidably grappling with the myth of universal scientific knowledge. On the other hand, it is precisely the question of knowledge, to be illustrated in the following paragraphs, that is key to understanding many of the tensions and debates concerning the meaning and processes of international social work. Indeed, this issue can illuminate important aspects of the controversies around international social work, as it is in processes of knowledge exchange that cultural dominance can be reproduced: 'social work scholars and students should be sensitive not only to the need for knowledge exchange between countries but also

to issues involved in obtaining and utilizing such international knowledge' (Tripodi and Potocky-Tripodi, 2009: 4).

In fact, just as there has been a growth of interest in international social work, a number of critical voices have emerged to highlight the inconsistencies and problematic nature of what it entails. First, whenever globalisation processes have been considered a reason for the development of international social work, several scholars have underlined the tension between the identification of universal values and standards, and the peculiarities of local cultures and policies (Lyons and May-Chahal, 2017). Some scholars go as far as to link internationalisation processes to movements towards globalisation and the obliteration of local differences – movements that have a great impact on homogenising social work practices (Garrett and Bertotti, 2017). In particular, Martinez-Brawley and Zorita (2016: 650) assert that in the context of globalisation processes, efforts towards international social work have been distorted, thus leading towards the homogenisation and standardisation of professional models, and a withering away of local cultures:

globalization in social work has changed the direction of former efforts at internationalization, which were designed primarily to develop cross-national perspectives on human experiences. After a review of current trends in globalization, the authors offer cautionary words about well-intended efforts that can easily become educational frameworks imposed from the outside, with the power of disrupting cultures.

The risk that several authors identify is that internationalisation understood as the establishment of universal standards and knowledge represents a step on the road to the destruction of one of the fundamental aspects of the profession, namely, its rootedness in the local communities where it operates.

The issue of the relationship between international dimensions and local realities should also be read vis-a-vis the power imbalances and inequalities between the North and South of the world, and has often been identified with processes of cultural colonisation, as indicated by Razack (2009: 10): 'It is also critical to be mindful of whose voices continue to be privileged in such discourse and to be cognizant of how to make connections between the global and the local.' In discussing issues of cultural colonisation, we often refer to realities that have historically been colonies, while processes of indigenisation refer to the recognition of the knowledge and cultures of their indigenous peoples. Roche and Flynn (2020) maintain that social work knowledge and research are dominated by Anglo-American epistemologies, with research conducted in the Global South ignored and obscured. However, not all the Western world or the Global North can be identified with the Anglo-American world; when referring to cultural colonisation as acritical knowledge transfer, this can be understood much more broadly. Here, reference is made to processes of cultural dominance that can be grasped far beyond political imperialism or the divide between Global North and South, and that are connected with power relations between nations. Specifically, we refer to the imbalance in the development of social work across the Western world (Midgley, 2001). Indeed, social work has developed unevenly even within Europe itself, where processes of cultural dominance are identifiable, in particular, regarding the development of research. In some cases, such as in Northern European countries, the social work profession developed spontaneously, mainly in

the early 1900s, and was recognised very early as an academic discipline, albeit with debates and controversies. Elsewhere, for example, in former Soviet Union countries, it developed after the 1980s. In other countries, such as Italy, Spain or Greece, social work was recognised as a profession earlier but only became an academic discipline after the 1980s. In the absence of resources for research and knowledge production, knowledge was mainly imported from the Anglo-American world; in this regard, the case of Italy is emblematic and by no means unique. In Italy, professional social work could be described as ‘imported’ from international and particularly US aid programmes after the Second World War. In the first social work schools in 1948, all training programmes were imported from US universities, which would send delegations to train social work teachers and arrange translations of textbooks and training materials (Ferrario, 1984).

In this context, it is evident how imbalances in the development of the profession are reflected in imbalances in the development of research. Despite their best intentions, we can see cases of cultural dominance through the transfer of knowledge from stronger social work communities, namely, ones with more research resources and support available, to newly developed ones (Ferrario, 1984; Fargion, 2009). We thus think that the risk of cultural dominance remains an issue; intriguingly, the few contributions that address the topic of research in internationalisation processes do not address the unequal development of research in different local realities (see Tripodi and Potocky-Tripodi, 2009; Harris et al, 2015). Conversely, the reaction of, for example, Italian social work in the mid-1960s – which consisted in Italy closing itself off from international influences to promote a process of ‘indigenisation’ of its culture – is equally risky. Mythologising local cultures and development within national borders potentially disregards the power imbalances and oppressive dynamics present in local realities themselves (Gray, 2005) through perceiving them as if they were homogeneous (Heite et al, 2012) and ignoring the interdependence of phenomena that characterises current globalisation processes. As Olivier-Mensah et al (2017: 123) underline, this leads to ‘focusing on social process within the nation-state and its institutions as a natural unit of analysis and equating society with the nation-state’.

Exchanges at an international and European level provide stimuli for innovation and critical reflection. The still-open issues relate to opportunities for maintaining what is fruitful and generative of critical thinking in international research – without encouraging cultural dominance – while cherishing differences.

The role of international organisations

International associations and gatherings have played a relevant role in such dynamics and in the way controversies on internationalisation have developed. In fact, international associations constitute interesting forums where the dialectic between local and global, that is, between the protection of differences and the identification of universal standards and values, becomes visible and takes shape. It is thus interesting to explore how dialogues between the two tensions unfold in international activities. On the one hand, coherently with a search for universal values, associations shape a sense of belonging to wider communities and aspirations for a common identity, portraying a public representation of social work. The more international (and renowned) the association is, the greater its public recognition will be. On the other hand, each local community aspires to recognition of its specificity and to freedom of expression, as well as welcoming stimuli for reflection and improvement.

International associations like the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), and their regional branches, play a relevant role in the construction of international social work and of arenas for discourses about international social work to take place. In engaging with such tensions, social work associations produce joint documents and statements, through which they strive to articulate a common vision and reference points. In doing so, associations navigate concretely the hotly debated terrains of colonisation and cultural imperialism.

An example of such tensions was seen when, after the approval by the IFSW and IASSW in 2020 of the ‘Global standards for social work education and training’, the establishment of a global commission with responsibility for accrediting curricula at local levels was discussed. After a heated debate, the proposal was rejected on the grounds that local situations needed to be respected in their specific capacities and cultures; a task force was then created by the IASSW to support the development of curricula and capacity-building projects locally.

The discussion around the revision of the ‘Global definition of social work’ also exemplifies the effort of maintaining the aspiration to homogenise, together with the tensions arising from a demand for recognition by groups from the Global South and East. To arrive at a global definition, the IASSW and IFSW established a joint task force and promoted an intensive process of global consultations, including a worldwide survey translated into several languages. The challenges of defining social work globally were dealt with only by recognising the high variability of the contexts and by realising that it was essential to ‘navigate highly varied national and cultural contexts, and negotiate often competing and sometimes entirely opposing views’ (Sewpaul and Henrickson, 2019: 1470). The revision in itself is the consequence of increasing criticisms from the Global South and East regarding the Western world. For instance, the delegates from Latin America wanted a more explicit mention of the Marxist roots of social work in their region, while the Asian Pacific delegates criticised the exclusion of collective rights and social precepts like social cohesion, harmony and stability (Straub, 2016). In consequence, the final definition states that it ‘may be amplified at national and/or regional levels’ and is accompanied by a six-page commentary for the elaboration of key concepts (IASSW and IFSW, 2014). Acknowledging the current implausibility of globally valid definitions is an important step for international social work relations: ‘the debates within the Task Force taught us enough humility to appreciate that no single understanding of social work could be conclusively applicable to all regions and countries of the world’ (Sewpaul and Henrickson, 2019: 1470). Similar negotiations and quests for solutions occurred vis-à-vis the definition of the ‘Global social work statement of ethical principles’, resulting in the statement being approved in two different versions: a briefer one by the IFSW and a longer one by the IASSW. Thus, we can see how processes of negotiation strive to achieve common definitions, while respecting diverse positions.

Intriguingly, in such discussions, reference to social work research remains in the shadows. It is thematised as the question of ‘Whose voice is being heard?’ (Straub, 2016) and the need to give voice to those who are unheard; however, issues relating to ‘how’ such testimonies may be collected and how the knowledge of those unheard is constructed and recognised are not tackled. An exception is the adoption, in 2014, of an official statement on social work research by the IASSW. Due to such prior omissions, the idea of creating a space at the European level to be specifically devoted

to social work research took shape in the first decade of the 21st century. At that time, similar initiatives did, in fact, already exist, originating in some universities or professional associations, or involving all the diverse European associations. The aim of holding conferences focusing solely on this aspect originated from a group of scholars inspired by the North American Society for Social Work Research and led to the first ECSWR in Oxford in 2011. Its aim was to ‘foster the development of a high level of innovatory and interdisciplinary social work and social care research across the European community of nations’ (Höjer and Taylor, 2012: 429). It was followed by others on an annual basis; in 2014, the ESWRA was also established, with the task of promoting social work research in Europe (Taylor and Sharland, 2015). Its establishment was not uncontroversial because of the risk of overlapping with other European conferences, such as those of the European Association of Schools of Social Work (EASSW) and the European section of the IFSW, and due to the creation of competition and possible rifts, thus potentially increasing divisions in social work, instead of promoting alliances (Höjer and Taylor, 2012). Nevertheless, the promoters believed in the value of social work research and its positive contributions to social work beyond national boundaries.

Exploring the processes of knowledge exchanges in international social work: the case of the ECSWRs

In order to explore how international associations and their conferences provide stimuli for international social work and deal with the tensions outlined earlier, with a focus on knowledge exchange and research, we identified the ECSWRs as a specific example. ECSWRs represent an interesting example because the striving for balanced internationalisation is evident, though with a simultaneous high risk of automatic knowledge transfer. The effort towards avoiding cultural dominance is manifest in the composition of the panel of reviewers, as organisers seek to recruit people from different countries, thus fostering quality and ensuring that standards for the selection of abstracts are evenly used. More significantly, such efforts can be seen in the mechanism designed for collaboration between local organisers and the association board to ensure that conferences are international projects, while still guaranteeing that high standards are enacted by regulating the participation of both the board and the local committee in the organisation of the conference. As mentioned on the website: ‘the Board recognises that every conference has its own unique characteristics, “flavour”, distinctive themes and shape to reflect where it is being held, and that this is a key strength of ECSWR’.¹ Thus, negotiations on conference themes and the selection of keynote speakers engage the board in honouring the diverse European and international dimensions.

Despite determined efforts to achieve a balanced internationalisation, the risk of cultural dominance is quite strong because of the previously mentioned unbalanced development and uneven recognition of academic social work across Europe. For instance, such a risk is evidenced by the uneven participation in conferences: most participants and keynote speakers still come from countries where social work is better academically established, such as English-speaking and Nordic countries.

Having identified an example to support a more specific analysis, we chose to focus on the themes that launched the conferences, as we hypothesised that they were emblematic of the main issues the organisers saw as worthy of consideration by the

social work community. Therefore, we collected the materials where these contents were made explicit, such as invitation letters and welcome speeches. From 2011, 1 ECSWRs were held annually (in 2020, the conference was suspended because of the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic). We then collected the conference materials available online: conference titles, invitation flyers and the welcome and opening speeches published in the book of abstracts. We also considered the editorials of the special issues that followed six conferences, published in the *European Journal of Social Work*. Here, the conference organisers reported and commented on the main outcomes of the conference, and aired their views on how the declared themes were developed. In total, we collected and thematically analysed 33 texts with the support of the qualitative software NVivo.

In examining the conference presentations, we were interested in grasping how the international event was communicated to the social work community in order to promote sharing and engagement. We particularly looked for common themes and for rhetorical devices dealing with the local–global tension. The authors of this article performed an independent analysis of the themes and compared the outcomes, reaching an agreement on the three themes presented in the following sections.

Three emerging themes: identities, political dimension and research methods

From the analysis of conference materials, we identified three overarching themes: professional identity and processes of professionalisation; the socio-political dimensions of social work; and methods and approaches for producing knowledge. Such themes are recurrent in the debate on social work. However, each conference emphasised specific issues, with different interpretations and intensities, according to local, academic and historical sensitivities. In the following sections, we will describe how these themes appear in the 11 ECSWRs.

Social work research for strengthening the profession and its legitimisation

The theme relating to professional identity, processes of professionalisation and legitimisation is widespread in international debates. It frequently appears in conference presentations, with emphasis on social work professionalisation and accountability, achievable through strengthening the scientific basis underpinning practice. The very first conference on social work research itself stems from the aim of supporting the profession through research: ‘the process of professionalization in social work demands building practice on research and developing a proper knowledge base for the discipline’ (Höjer and Taylor, 2012: 429). The emphasis is placed ‘on the use of empirical research to inform social work practice and policy’ (Höjer and Taylor, 2012: 430).

In 2016, the Lisbon conference adopted a similar theme, but highlighted – as evinced by the title – the two distinctive elements of social work, namely, the reflective dimension and the connection between practice and research. Confirming the value of connections, the title also emphasises the ‘crossed dialogue to find new pathways’. In the opening speeches, the vice-rector and chair of the local committee raised the issue of the legitimisation of the social work discipline fostered through increasing the public visibility of its scientific community and through holding an international

conference in a country with a relatively young history of social work. The chair of ESWRA posited how the legitimisation of social work research lay in the ‘systematic knowledge on how services are delivered, in the micro–macro connections’, and underlined the importance of the sense of identity of the social science community (ECSWR, 2016).

Historical perspectives were the key message of the Edinburgh conference as a further dimension of identity; that conference was linked to the celebrations of the 100th anniversary of social work in the hosting university, thus affirming its long-lasting academisation. Such perspectives were also proposed by one of the keynote speakers, Susan Kemp (New Zealand), showing how historical roots enable a ‘social work in transition ... [to meet] challenges in a changing local and global world’, as mentioned in the conference title.²

Social work research supporting socio-political positioning

Several conferences foregrounded wider changes in society and the related role of social work. This too is a common thread rooted in the constitutive elements of social work. It refers to the shared notion, variously articulated across cultures, of working with the person in the environment and ‘engaging people and structures to address life challenges and enhance well-being’ (IASSW and IFSW, 2014). Therefore, unsurprisingly, six conferences out of 11 featured overarching themes highlighting the changes happening in the wider social context.

The call for the scholars’ community appears twofold: to develop knowledge, thus gaining a deeper understanding of the impact of changes; and to search for new social work approaches to counteracting policies and practices that betray social work values. These conferences explicitly aimed at contrasting the risks of social work depoliticisation that stemmed from decades of neoliberalism and supporting a stronger engagement of social work in social change and social justice (Reisch and Jani, 2012).

Two conferences, one in Jyväskylä (Finland) in 2013 and one in Bolzano (Italy) in 2014, focused on transformations in the welfare system and tackled the negative impacts of neoliberal and managerial policies. In their invitation letter, the organisers of the Jyväskylä conference denounced the policy of ‘retrenchment, privatization and outsourcing’ that impacted on ‘everyday lives and social rights of citizens, bringing ... inequality, marginalization and poverty’.³ They explicitly mentioned the need for the research community, ‘across Europe and internationally’, to exchange ‘research ideas, findings, developments, and applications’, thus becoming an inspiration for ‘shaping the development of social work’.⁴

Similarly, the Bolzano conference addressed welfare changes but, referring to the position of social work at the critical juncture where ‘private troubles [become] public issues’, as W. Lorenz pointed out when choosing the title of the conference, called for a stronger connection with the core mission of social work: ‘When the very idea of the welfare state is undermined, researchers, scholars, practitioners in social work are challenged to connect their endeavours to the core of social work mission and the support of social solidarity’.⁵

Two later conferences, one in Ljubljana (Slovenia) in 2015 and one in Leuven (Belgium) in 2019, expanded their view and focused on wider social changes that worsened social inequalities, such as forced migrations, racist and discriminatory policies, and environmental disasters that infringe human rights and undermine

social justice. Here, the call was for a stronger and more political positioning of social work, and for its critical re-visioning in highlighting ‘the diversity of unfolding social tensions and widening societal inequities, the transformation of social intimacies and collective relationships, and the political grammar of social protests’.⁶ From this perspective, in facing ‘a world and Europe with it, [which] has become politically, socially and environmentally an even more unjust and dangerous place’, the aim was:

to give voice to those social work academics who are looking for new perspectives with both a sense of urgency and an acute analytical propensity, and are in quest for effective, inclusive and ethically just social work services ... and an internationally oriented social work as a human rights profession. (Zaviršek, 2017: 791)

Four years later, the organisers of the Leuven conference also took up the issue of human rights and social work as a human rights profession. Underlining that ‘social work operates in the context of changing welfare state paradigms stressing individual responsibility, marketization and conditionality and of strong societal pressures, such as increasing poverty, inequality, social exclusion and super-diversity’, the conference organisers called for attention to ‘how core values of human rights and social justice can be embodied and realized’.⁷

We also position the last two conferences in this strand, which were held during and after the pandemic: one (online) in Bucharest (Romania) in 2021 and one in Amsterdam (the Netherlands) in 2022. Both, unavoidably, focused on the massive changes brought by the pandemic and related challenges for social work.

The Bucharest conference organisers decided to focus on the theme of innovation – a term that is repeatedly cited in the invitations, probably with the intent of finding some positive developments in the turmoil of the pandemic. The social work community was invited to ponder: ‘how does this variety prompt different approaches to possibilities, implementation and effectiveness of innovation, and how different social work research contributions to innovation can be multiplied and disseminated across diverse cultures/regions’.⁸

In contrast, the theme of social inequalities was recalled at the 2022 Amsterdam conference. Here, beyond the emphasis on the return to in-person meetings, the accent is on social inclusion, which is ‘more important than ever’, and on the increase in inequalities, themselves aggravated by the pandemic. The call to the social work community is to deploy ‘social work research to address relevant societal challenges and to contribute to solutions for these challenges’.⁹

The relevance of methodological and epistemological challenges in international social work research

The third strand refers to methods and the transfer of knowledge. As mentioned earlier, social work research is a field of tensions and debates, with crucial issues including how knowledge is produced, with whom, for whom and for what reasons, and which knowledge is considered valuable and worthy of being drawn on. However, intriguingly, only two conferences dedicated their overarching theme to the

methodological challenges arising in social work research: one in Basel (Switzerland) in 2012 and one in Aalborg (Denmark) in 2017.

The organisers of the Basel conference emphasised the challenges of international collaboration in ‘comparison and generalization’.¹⁰ They opened such questions as: the transferability and generalisation of research results; the challenges in collaborating across regional and national boundaries; the exchange of good practice; and the dissemination and utilisation of research. However, one of the main challenges for international collaboration, deriving from the use of English as a ‘lingua franca’, was not explicitly mentioned. The issue was interestingly posed later by Tarija Pösö in her keynote at the Jyväskylä conference. Referring to the field of child protection, she showed how the Finnish translation of ‘child protection’ has radically different meanings from those assumed by English researchers and practitioners, and drew attention to what happens in the translation process. She argued that in this process, ‘the knowledge is transformed in the terms set by the language into which it is translated’ (Pösö, 2014: 618). Tarija Pösö went on to refer to work carried out by Larkin and colleagues (2007) in pointing out how different languages construct different ways of seeing social life and in warning about the methodological and epistemological questions that arise in cross-national comparisons.

The organisers of the Aalborg conference in 2017, coming from a strong tradition of practice research approaches, spotlighted the ‘diversity of interests and stakeholders’ that structurally inhabits social work research.¹¹ Such a diversity – and stakeholders with different powers – is closely ‘linked to the complex world of social work’ and raises a ‘range of challenges ... in the form of controversies, barriers and dilemmas’¹²: ‘Social work can in a very broad sense be considered embedded in a field of power relations stemming from a diversity of interests: political, economic and administrative interests, as well as interests related to knowledge production, the development of social work practice and service users’ (Engen et al, 2019: 735).

The research process is defined as a ‘melting pot of which researchers are part’, and, in its claim, the conference intended to foster awareness and enhance competencies that enable active participation in this process. The issue of the co-construction of knowledge, already present in other conferences, was here made explicit and widely thematised, both theoretically and methodologically. In this light, the conference organisers recognised the importance and the methodological challenges of giving voice to people ‘who are subject to social changes, welfare reforms and changes in social work practices, encouraging them to give words to their experiences’ (Engen et al, 2019: 735).

Admittedly pre-existing themes of participation, service user involvement and the co-construction of knowledge were further emphasised at the Aalborg conference, with interest in such topics progressively increasing. This means that social work research is more and more cognisant of the multiplicity of subjects, and has legitimated the presence of different perspectives on knowledge.

In general, we perceive that all conferences seek to welcome exchange and dialogue: the words used in the presentations commonly recognise the diversity of models and approaches, the multidisciplinary nature of social work knowledge, and its contextual embeddedness. Moreover, presentations underline the aim for each conference to be a ‘showcase’ of research, rather than endorsing one model above others, as in the colonisations of knowledge, thus endeavouring to reduce the risks of cultural dominance (Gray, 2005).

Outlining and proposing common themes would seem to us central in designing shared spaces for exchanges. Arguably, it was crucial to propose themes as open questions, as opposed to predefined issues. In fact, proposing themes as problems and open questions enables each participant to present and share their specific (and partial) perspectives, describing how such issues were studied and researched, thus allowing comparisons with others' views. It is indeed through the identification of differences and their mutual recognition that it becomes possible to find similarities and convergences. In turn, these would constitute the basis for shared knowledge as the outcomes of the process and not its starting points. According to Gray (2005: 231): 'finding commonalities across divergent contexts [makes it] possible to talk about a profession of social work with shared values and goals'.

Final remarks

Starting from considerations regarding how international social work is structurally embedded in tensions and searching for a balance between aspirations to universal and common standards, values and knowledge bases, and an appreciation and cherishing of locally situated knowledge, this article has explored how international associations and their events contribute to tackling such contradictory strands. As a basis for our reflection, we analysed the materials used to launch the ECSWRs, as well as a range of attendant organisational issues, as loci where the aims of, and calls to, the social work scholar community are made explicit.

What we have highlighted is the central role of research and knowledge dissemination in the construction of an international social work that may eschew the risk of cultural dominance on the part of realities with a more consistent academic history. Relatedly, it currently seems more relevant to investigate internationalisation processes, rather than the results of international social work. The evident effort we have seen in the organisation and promotion of ECSWRs relates to fostering negotiation processes between local conference organisers and association boards. The aim, however, is not to identify contents or methods of social work; on the contrary, great energy is devoted to leaving the field open so as not to privilege specific approaches or models, and thus to maintaining an inclusive, all-embracing profile. The main aim, therefore, seems to be the identification of common ground for every local culture to find its place so as to engender comparisons between, and an understanding of, differences. With respect to this aim, the identity of the social work profession, the relationship of the profession with politics and policies, and the comparison of research methodologies all represent fertile ground for the development of international conversations. Such dialogues allow everyone to see their own realities with new eyes, discovering aspects that would otherwise remain invisible, and enable a critical look at specific realities and practices. One intriguing aspect of this process is that, in recent years, it has brought the question of language to the fore. We are not referring here to the age-old problem of the difficulty many have in dealing with a language that is not their own and the imbalances this creates – an issue that currently appears intractable. Instead, we are referring to different ways of conceptualising social work phenomena and practices. As already mentioned, this is an issue focused on by Pösö in particular, who underlined the impossibility of automatically translating such concepts as child protection or child welfare. It therefore seems to us that the construction of dialogue can have a very relevant, if indirect, function in the development of an international language and shared conceptualisations, as well as an awareness of different

conceptualisations of practices of the co-construction of knowledge: 'The challenges of accommodating diversity within a wider internationally shared value system can only be met when the profession as a whole makes a commitment to discuss and understand the issues involved' (Midgley, 2001: 32).

Notes

- ¹ See: https://eswra.org/conference_main.php
- ² See: <https://eswra.org/documents/ECSWR2018.pdf>
- ³ See: www.eswra.org/conference/2013/Invitation%20ECSWR2013.pdf
- ⁴ See: www.eswra.org/conference/2013/Invitation%20ECSWR2013.pdf
- ⁵ See: www.eswra.org/conference/2014/Invitation%20letter%20ECSWR%202014.pdf
- ⁶ See: www.eswra.org/conference/2015/Ljubljana2015flyer.pdf
- ⁷ See: <https://kuleuvencongres.be/ecswr2019>
- ⁸ See: <https://ecswr2020.org/en/default.asp>
- ⁹ See: www.ecswr2022.org
- ¹⁰ See: www.eswra.org/conference/2012/Basel%202012%20Flyer.pdf
- ¹¹ See: www.ecswr2017.dk/
- ¹² See: www.ecswr2017.dk/

Acknowledgements

We wish to express our thanks to the anonymous reviewers whose careful comments helped us to improve this article and clarify our reasoning. We also want to thank Claire Prater (the executive administrator of ESWRA), who helpfully provided very useful information regarding the ECSWRs.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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