

CONCEPTUALISING SOCIAL WORK THROUGH THE LENS OF TRANSNATIONALISM: *Challenges and Ways Ahead*

Abstract

Professional social work was established and expanded in a historical moment marked by intense nation-building; it was organized along and in parallel with other welfare state services which functioned to strengthen the nation-state. Today social work is at practice in a society marked by intensified globalisation; social needs and social problems that social workers are confronted with in their professional practice are sometimes transnational in their dynamics and cannot adequately be understood when limited to a local or national context. Drawing on insights from the transnational perspective, this article identifies challenges and ways ahead in the development of social work practice and theory with relevance for the globalised society. It argues that the transnational perspective can contribute to the dissolving of binaries between both 'here' and 'there', and 'us' and 'them' in social work, and pave the way for approaching social problems from a relational viewpoint beyond 'given' territorial and ethnocultural lenses.

Keywords

Professional Social Work • Transnationalism • Urban Social Work • Cultural Competence • International Migration

Received 10 August 2017; Accepted: 21 September 2018

Introduction

Professional social work is organised along and in parallel with other welfare state services, both of which build on and function to strengthen the nation-state. However, social work takes place in contexts marked by intensified globalisation, and many of the social problems that social workers are confronted with in their professional practice are transnational in their dynamics and cannot be adequately understood when limited to local or nation-state contexts. The discrepancy between the state-boundedness of social work and the transnational dynamics of the social problems it encounters calls for an 'unbounding' of how social work is theorised. The development of the transnational paradigm in the social sciences has proved to be indispensable for this unbounding process, enabling conceptualisations of social work with more accuracy for social vulnerabilities and protection needs in contemporary societies. In this article, I set out to describe and discuss the shifting understandings of social work in view of the transnational paradigm.

On a general level, the transnational paradigm addresses migration as an enduring and multidirectional process that involves both migrants and non-migrants in translocal settings. It comprises a fundamental critique of sedentarist assumptions about societies and that the nation-state is a 'natural' and given bounded space. The development of the transnational perspective started in the late

Erica Righard*

Department of Social Work and Malmö Institute for Studies of Migration, Diversity and Welfare (MIM), Malmö University, Malmö, Sweden

1980s and has since then both proliferated and matured. The book *Nations Unbound* (Basch, Glick Schiller & Szanton Blanc 1994) is a seminal contribution to this development. While this epistemological debate, often formulated as a critique of methodological nationalism, by now has been around for approximately three decades in migration studies, it is only more recently and within a more limited scope that it has begun to get a foothold in social work.

Social work is an academic discipline and a professional practice. The practice is not simply a field studied by the discipline; rather, the practice is expected to build on the knowledge produced by research, as research is expected to contribute to the improvement of the practice. Consequently, ontologies of population mobility, nation-states, and identities have tended to frame research and practice in feedback loops. Today, debates about social work with mobile populations are prominent in both research and practice, for instance in regard to refugees, unaccompanied minors, and irregular migrants. These debates are, however, far from new; rather, they were also central for the founding pioneers of social work in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the USA (Abbott 1917; Addams 1905). The contribution of the transnational paradigm lies in how social work practice and research are approached.

Professional social work was founded as part of, as well as in contrast to, existing charity and philanthropic work; it was part of the 'scientific solution' to the social turmoil caused by the urbanisation

* E-mail: erica.righard@mau.se

and industrialisation that Western societies underwent towards the turn of the last century. Whereas ontologies of sedentarism in, and integration into, a single nation-state were not necessarily inherent to professional social work in its very early phase, they grew strong with the expansion of the welfare state in Western societies, principally during the first half of the twentieth century. As I argue in this article, the transnational paradigm functions to unbound these ontologies; it enables social work to respond to social problems as they are manifest in the everyday experiences of individuals and groups beyond the territorial and cultural lenses of nation-states.

Based on a review of social work literature, I outline how binary constructions of territorial and ethnocultural belonging were established and expanded and show how the transnational perspective functions to advance social work theory beyond these binaries. In order to pursue this, I first set out to show how the professionalisation of social work was tied up with the development of the social sciences and the expansion of nation-states' social responsibility. Following this and drawing on the critique of methodological nationalism, I juxtapose professional nationalism with professional transnationalism, two concepts I use in order to describe and discuss the contribution of the transnational perspective to social work theory developments in the next two sections. In the first section, I detail the shifting understandings of territoriality, while in the second that of culture in social work theory. The article concludes with a discussion that summarises how the transnational paradigm contributes to the unbounding of social work.

Situating professional social work

Social work is a constantly contested concept. Meanings and definitions are place and time dependent. The debate on what social work is started in the late nineteenth century at the same time as it emerged. These original attempts to define social work revolved around how social work was distinct from charity and philanthropic work, and they were shaped by developments in Western societies. Later, starting in the 1960s and as a reaction to the diffusion of professional social work from the USA and Europe to other parts of the world, its Western bias was critiqued. This debate is continuously contentious, and the global definition of social work approved by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) General Meeting and the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) General Assembly was last revised in 2014. The relation of social work to nation-state building and the emergence of the social sciences in industrialising societies during the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are of particular relevance for the discussion in this section.

The social question and the social sciences

Following industrialisation and urbanisation in the late nineteenth century, social problems and social sciences were tied up with each other. This nurtured a wide-ranging debate, often referred to as the *social question* (also *la question sociale* in French and *die soziale Frage* in German). At this time, the social question referred to a set of social problems, such as poverty, housing, health, education, to name just a few. Polanyi (1944) has described this societal development in terms of the great transformation and as a quest for how the responsibility for the social turmoil that followed urbanisation and industrialisation was to be divided between different societal

spheres, namely, the state, the market, and the family. The national economy and the role of the state were central in the unfolding of the social question. As shown by Esping-Andersen (1990) in his well-known work on welfare state regimes, states took on varying degrees of social responsibility in the course of welfare state expansion after the Second World War. The production of scientific knowledge within the social field from the nineteenth century and later the formation of the social sciences also played an important role in this development. Scientific knowledge was expected to function in order to prevent social evils and safeguard the rational and enlightened development of societies. This involved a growth in the social sciences with a commitment to the improvement of public policy and services (Wagner et al. 1991).

The social question and the establishment and development of the social sciences played a significant role in the professionalisation of social work as well. The process of professionalisation refers to a process aimed at achieving recognition and legitimacy for social work as an independent profession. The foundation of professional social work is in scientific knowledge, which made it distinct from charity and philanthropic work. During a transitional period, it was in fact named 'scientific charity' and 'scientific philanthropy' (Thyer 2006). Several conferences related to social work were direct off-shots of the American Social Science Association (ASSA) established in 1865, for instance the Conference on Charities (1879) and its successor, the National Conference on Charities and Correction (NCCC) (1884), and the National Conference on Social Work (1917) (Haskell 1977, also see Thyer 2006).

In Sweden, following developments in the USA and other European countries, the close connection between science and practice was reflected in the development of the Lorénian Foundation (*Lorénska stifelsen*) and the National Association of Social Work (*Centralförbundet för socialt arbete, CSA*). Established after the death of Viktor Lorén in 1885, the Lorénian Foundation was a privately funded and scientifically oriented foundation that contributed to knowledge production within the social field during the late nineteenth century. Several of the first university professors contributing to knowledge production within the field were in fact economically dependent on this foundation. In 1903, inspired by the Association for Social Policy (*Verein für Sozialpolitik*) in Germany and the Fabian Society in the UK, the Swedish National Association of Social Work was founded by representatives from philanthropic and welfare associations with the purpose of impacting social policy. The National Association of Social Work was also, in 1921, the founder of the first Social Institute for Social Policy and Municipal Education and Research (*Socialinstitutet för socialpolitisk och kommunal utbildning och forskning, SOPIS*), which provided the first social work education in Sweden (Wisselgren 2000).

This shows how social services were tied up with social sciences. This historical development also meant that social services came to be viewed as the responsibility of the state, though, as already pointed out, in varying degrees and forms in different countries. In the Nordic countries generally, and in Sweden particularly, the state took on a high degree of responsibility (see Lorenz 1994 for a model of country-specific variations of social work practice building on Esping-Andersen's welfare regime approach). This development also meant that the social services became secularised in the US context and beyond, though the tension between faith-based and secular services has remained (Thyer 2006).

In this early development, including the development of social work, there are no clear boundaries between social science, social policy, and social work. Instead, it has been argued, the overarching

goal of targeting the social question was at the fore (Wisselgren 2000). Crucial to the argument being made in this article is that the unfolding of the social question into social policy and social work was framed by methodological nationalism. The national framing became the quintessence of the social sciences in state-oriented countries such as the Nordics and, in particular, Sweden; in Sweden, the early history of social sciences has even been described as a history of its Official Reports of the Swedish Government (*Statens offentliga utredningar, SOU*) (Allardt 1987: 246-48). The development of welfare states, including social policy and social services and their outreach to the population, has been described as a social dimension of the nation-state; it not only tied up and anchored people's life chances within the nation-state (Ferrera 2005) but also fostered certain 'ways of life' with regard to, for instance, family formation and the working life trajectory of women and men (Daly & Rake 2003). Sedentarism within the nation-state and national belonging to one nation-state are inherent to this way of maintaining and developing social work practice and research. This is also how we can understand the inertia of merging the transnational perspective with social work practice and research.

The added value of the transnational paradigm for social work

As the transnational paradigm emerged towards the end of the 1980s, it did not, at least not primarily, add new empirical findings to migration studies. Rather, and as argued in *Nations Unbound*, it introduced a new conceptual toolkit to describe and analyse empirical knowledge on migration; it offered new understandings that did not assume the national framing of the social. In this way, it paved the way for new methodological approaches to the migration process, identities of belonging, and migrant agency. Within the transnational paradigm, the social is unbound from the nation-state frame; the social is instead left as an empirical question of social relations varying across time and place. This is not to claim that the social is unstructured and 'liquid'; on the contrary, it is permeated by social hierarchies and power relations. The claim is rather that societies are not necessarily, though they at some occasions might be, the same as nation-states, and it has been formulated as a critique of methodological nationalism. While the critique of methodological nationalism was already highlighted by Basch, Glick Schiller & Szanton Blanc (1994) in *Nations Unbound*, over time, this vein of critique has developed.

In its early articulations, the critique of methodological nationalism was focussed on the study of international migration (Wimmer & Glick Schiller 2002, 2003). In parallel, a more general critique of taken-for-granted assumptions about the ontologies of sedentarism and mobility in the social sciences was developed (Beck 2000; Urry 2000). This more general critique was later developed into what has been termed the 'mobility turn' in the social sciences (Sheller & Urry 2006), and it has been argued that the transnational perspective reflects this development in migration studies (Faist 2013). In view of this, *Nations Unbound* is an early contribution to what today might be regarded a paradigmatic shift in the Kuhnian sense (Kuhn 1962).

Methodological nationalism is critiqued for its use of nation-states and ethnocultural groups, often related to a common country of birth, as primary units of analysis. This "disregards both social and cultural divisions within each nation-state, as well as the experiences, norms and values migrants and natives share because they are

embedded in social, economic and political networks, movements and institutions that exists both within and across state borders" (Glick Schiller and Çağlar (2009). Glick Schiller and Çağlar (2009) have proposed a comparative method of locality as a possible way forward. Drawing on insights from urban studies, the authors argue that localities, be these "a neighbourhood, a city, a conglomerate or a region" (p. 179), are being reconstituted within global restructurings of capital, with far-reaching consequences for migrant incorporation in the local context. This holds true for social work as well. Social problems and their management vary between localities, also within the same country (Kazepov 2010). The aim of this article was to review the theorisation of territoriality and culture in view of the critique of methodological nationalism within social work. For this purpose, I rely on the concepts of 'professional nationalism' and 'professional transnationalism'.

Professional nationalism and professional transnationalism

Similar to methodological nationalism, professional nationalism in social work assumes that the social corresponds with the nation-state. This means that social work practice and research builds on, and reproduces, dichotomised understandings of place and belonging. Consequently, when social work intervenes into a family, it is assumed that 'the social' is contained within a nation-state frame. This has implications as regards both territoriality and culture. It is family members and/or other significant others 'here' who are regarded; disruptions from sedentarism are considered deviant. While those considered as belonging to the nation-state are 'natural', 'others' are deviant. Professional nationalism in social work, as well as in other welfare services, has meant that migration and migrants were regarded as temporary deviations and exceptions. Looking at the example of social services in Sweden, in the context of refugee reception in the aftermath of the Second World War, migrant background was compared with physical disability and denoted a 'social disability' to be overcome after some time of settlement in Sweden (Montesino 2012). Such framing of the social has hampered social work's ability to respond to social vulnerabilities and promote welfare among individuals and groups who live their life anchored in, and who foster identities of belonging to, places in two or more countries, even though this is the reality of many whom social work encounters in practice and research.

Professional transnationalism, by contrast, refers to social work practice and research that are unbound from the nation-state frame and do not assume 'here' and 'us' as natural and 'there' and 'them' as deviant but are instead positioned beyond such dichotomies. As I argue in the following, it typically depends on an unbounding or a de-centring of the nation-state frame and a focus on social problems as they unfold in the local and/or translocal context of families and other groups that social work encounters.

Debates on the implications of the transnational paradigm to social work have, generally speaking, not yet found their way to mainstream social work theory. They are typically dealt with within the area of *international social work*, and I have elsewhere argued that the incorporation of the transnational perspective to social work theory can be regarded as the third round of theoretical development within this area (Righard 2013). International social work refers to an area of social work that was established in the 1940s and has grown over the last decades, not least in education. It is also an area in lack of a coherent definition. Its central themes include social

work within international organisations, social work with national and immigrated minorities, international comparisons, and professional and student exchanges (Healy & Link 2012; Lyons et al. 2012). It is within this literature that the relevant references for a review of shifting understandings of territoriality and ethnicity are found. Drawing on this set of literature in the two following sections, I outline the shifting understandings of, first, territoriality and, second, culture in social work theory.

Social work and the un-/bounding of its territorial frames

Social work with groups without propinquity, most commonly families, has always been part of social work, as noted above and described by the pioneers of social work. In view of this, it is plausible to assume that social work has frequently encountered that “the lives of their ‘subjects’ [or, for the argument made here: *clients*] did not fit into the existing categories of ‘immigrants’ and those ‘remaining behind’” (Basch, Glick Schiller & Szanton Blanc 1994: 5). Yet, as ‘here’ and ‘there’ began to be theorised, they were theorised as a dichotomy. While professional nationalism generally has meant that social interventions, directly or indirectly, have functioned to strengthen the nation, in relation to social work with migrants, it has meant that interventions were expected to lead to assimilation in the new country and that the ones left behind were not to be considered. While this dichotomy has proved to be both hegemonic and persistent, it is rather recently, and building on the transnational paradigm, that a conceptualisation of social work beyond the binary of ‘here’ and ‘there’ has emerged, which is what we can describe as transnational practices in social work. In the following, I first outline ‘here’ and ‘there’ as a persistent dichotomy and then how the connection between them has been enabled by the transnational paradigm.

‘Here’ and ‘there’ as a persistent dichotomy

Social work that in its practice stretches out across national borders was initially brought to the fore in relation to situations of war and international population mobility, and it was labelled as ‘international social work’. While the first mentioning of international social work has been dated to a speech by Eglantyne Jebb at the first international conference of social work in 1928 in Paris (Healy 2008), the first definitions occurred in the aftermath of the Second World War. International organisations such as the Red Cross/Red Crescent and UN organs took on a leading role in dealing with the refugee situation. In 1943, while the war was still taking place, the United Nation Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) was founded. Social work came to play a central role within the UNRRA, in principal within their welfare division that was established in 1946 (Healy 2008). It was in this environment that the initial definition of international social work consolidated. Based on Western understandings of social work established a couple of decades earlier, it was defined as social work within international organisations (Healy & Thomas 2007; Midgley 2001). Following on this, the early post-war period involved a diffusion of the Western model of social work to non-Western parts of the world (Hugman 2010; Midgley 1983). Here, the conceptual development of international social work came closer to international development aid than to transnational practices in social work. Instead of social work with clients who live their lives

across borders or who in any other way experience social problems that span state borders, the focus here is on the social worker that goes from one country to another in order to intervene, in the first case in relation to refugees and in the second case in the so-called developing countries. Social work was tied up with nation-states and an understanding of ‘here’ and ‘there’ as dichotomised.

With the political radicalisation of the 1960s, it was questioned whether the Western model of social work, based on casework, was adequate in poor countries with massive deprivation, i.e. if it had any relevance in contexts where individual interventions obviously could not end problems related to the structural problems of, for instance, poverty, inadequate housing, and malnutrition. The criticism developed into a critique of *professional imperialism*, pointing to how Western models were imposed on non-Western societies where Western ‘solutions’ did not lead to improvements (Midgley 1983). The critique of professional imperialism led to the recognition of the need for contextualised knowledge as well as different models of social work, and during the 1970s, an interest in international comparisons of social work grew. In this way, the conceptualisation of international social work was expanded to include an additional dimension: international comparison. The comparative approach encapsulated both state borders and cultural boundaries; it included both comparison of social work in different countries and with different groups such as national ethnic minorities, refugees, and other immigrants in comparison to what was referred to as majority populations (Healy & Thomas 2007). Even if the comparative approach was aimed at replacing imperialism with a kind of relativism built on mutual understanding, the dichotomy of ‘here’ and ‘there’ was, as I have also argued elsewhere (Righard 2013), maintained.

From the 1990s on, the globalisation concept, together with a variety of understandings of it, entered social work theorisation. On a general level, this literature regards how social problems are internationalised in the sense that what occurs in one place results in problems in another place due to, for instance, population mobility that follows upon war, catastrophes, and environmental devastation (Dominelli 2010; Khan & Dominelli 2000; Lyons, Manion & Carlsen 2006). While this literature brings up important and relevant issues, it does not mark a shift from earlier dichotomies of territoriality. Instead of considering how ‘there’ and ‘here’ are interlinked and connected in one social field, it regards how a situation or phenomenon (e.g. war) ‘there’ causes something (e.g. refugees) ‘here’ in a unidirectional way. For social work theorisation to connect ‘here’ with ‘there’, the transnational perspective is imperative.

Social work across borders

Social work theorisation that regards the connection between ‘here’ and ‘there’ originates from understandings of the transnational dynamics of everyday life in families and communities; in how transnational dynamics impact social relations locally and translocally. There is no unitary definition of transnationalism (Khagram & Levitt 2008), and as in the literature on transnationalism, the discussion in social work pulls in a variety of directions (Chambon, Schröder & Schwegge 2011). More narrow definitions typically regard individuals and groups that uphold strong and enduring social ties across state borders, for instance families in which family members live in two or more countries and maintain responsibilities and intimate ties across state borders. Wider definitions tend to include individuals and groups of migrants and non-migrants alike, who live their lives oriented towards and have identities of belonging to places in two or more

countries. Despite varying conceptualisations of transnationalism, the application of the perspective to social work theorisation means taking a stance in social work practices that transcends state borders as the focal point of analysis (Chambon, Schröer & Schweppe 2011).

The edited book *Transnational Social Work Practice* (Negi & Furman 2010) is notable in this development. The introductory chapter frames 'transnational social work' as fields of practice that: (a) are designed to serve transnational populations; (b) operate across nation-state boundaries, whether physically or through new technologies; and (c) are informed by and address complex transnational problems and dilemmas (Furman, Negi & Salvador 2010). The proposition builds on, at least partly, studies of social work with Latino populations in the USA (Furman & Negi 2007; Furman et al. 2008, 2009). More specifically, the authors propose a 'wraparound model' for social work practice spanning state borders. This refers to programs that coordinate social interventions into families and other groups with members located in two or more countries. It might, for instance, mean that the father, mother, aunt, or any other significant other can be involved with and have an influence on how social interventions in relation to a child are planned and implemented despite residing in a country other than where the child lives. While this often appears to be a relevant approach, it has not yet made its way into mainstream social work, including in the Nordic countries. However, in spite of the scarce existence of programs that coordinate social work interventions around single cases in two or more countries, transnational approaches to social problems do exist.

I have elsewhere proposed a theoretical model for understanding transnationalism in social work practice (Righard & Boccagni 2015). This is based on a review of the literature and integrates varying degrees of transnationalism with varying degrees by which transnational practices are institutionalised into social interventions at an organisational level. To explain the model, I focus here on one example that is, also in the Nordic context, highly topical, namely, social work with unaccompanied minors. Generally speaking, social work with unaccompanied minors tends to be focussed on integration into the host country and largely ignores the minors' social relations with people and connections to places in countries other than the host country. This is very surprising, since social work theory widely acknowledges that maintaining social relations with significant others is crucial for the well-being of children. However, since the unaccompanied minors' significant others are often in countries other than the host country, these social relations seem to be regarded as ruined and lost.

While transnational approaches in social work with these children are not integrated into mainstream social work, such examples do exist. They vary due to the degree of transnationalism and degree of its institutionalisation. A low degree of transnationalism refers to situations in which social workers and other social service providers ask about and consider social relations and places outside of the host country that are of relevance for the child. This can, for instance, involve questions about parents, siblings, and other significant others outside of the host country, people that the child sometimes is in continuous contact with. This low degree of transnationalism has, in an empirical study in Belgium, been called 'transnational awareness' among social workers (Schrooten et al. 2016; Withaecx, Schrooten & Geldof 2017). An intermediate degree of transnationalism refers to, for instance, situations in which significant others in places outside the host country are involved in the interventions, for instance via Skype and other information and communication tools (ICT). Finally, a strong degree of transnationalism refers to situations in which the child, typically together with a social worker or any other social

service provider, goes to meet with significant others in places outside the host country. Higher degrees of transnationalism among social workers have, in contrast to 'transnational awareness', been described as situations in which the social worker is a 'transnational player' (Withaecx, Schrooten & Geldof 2017). These approaches, however, have higher thresholds due to costs, practical and legal circumstances, time, and sometimes language barriers (for empirical examples collected in Sweden, see Melander 2015).

The degree of institutionalisation refers to the extent to which the transnational practices are integrated at the organisational level of the social work or social service provider and to what extent they are *ad hoc* depending on the individual social worker or service provider. Hence, a low degree of institutionalisation refers to transnational practices performed by the individual social worker while not being established as a general practice within the organisation. This can, for instance, involve situations in which social workers initiate contacts with family members in countries other than the host country. An intermediate degree of institutionalisation refers to transnational social work practices of varying kinds that are not mandatory or a part of the organisation's intervention programs but have become a general practice among the social workers and other social service providers. A high degree of institutionalisation refers to situations in which the transnational practice is an integrated strategy of social work in a specific organisation.

The contribution of the transnational paradigm to social work theory is that it offers tools for conceptualising and developing social work practices and research across borders, across taken-for-granted boundaries of social work, and beyond national and cross-national comparative approaches. This involves the rescaling of place and a focus on social problems within families and communities who live their lives anchored in places in two or more countries. It also involves a break with understandings of associating 'there' with 'then' and 'here' with 'now'. The transnational paradigm puts focus on simultaneity across transnational social fields (Levitt & Glick Schiller 2004), which here means that to the extent social problems are anchored in places both 'here' and 'there', social interventions should also be. As a limitation, it does not, however, deliver any straightforward ways of how to apply these tools in research and practice. Instead, it is up to social work research and practice to work this out. Social work education is crucial for this development, in that it can prepare students for social work with families and other groups without propinquity.

Social work and the un-/bounding of its ethnocultural frames

The concepts of ethnicity and culture have been integrated into social work theory since the 1960s, primarily in the field of international social work as this was extended to embrace social work with national and immigrated minority clients 'here'. Initially, this theoretical development was based on a critique of Western hegemony in social work, aligned with the critique of professional imperialism and nurtured by the black civil rights and women's movements in the USA and beyond. However, and as outlined in the following, 'cultural competence' has not led to an unbounding of 'us' and 'them', rather the contrary. Instead of focussing on the 'cultural competence' as an entry point for social work practice and research, this article proposes a reframing of social work to the city level, towards what is sometimes called urban social work, as a venue for the unbounding of the ethnocultural lens and the professional nationalism it is built on.

'Us' and 'them' as a persistent dichotomy

The critique of social work that assumes majority culture values in relation to non-majority populations, which began in the 1960s, has meant that concepts such as 'culturally competent', 'multicultural', and 'culturally sensitive' social work were introduced. Kohli, Huber & Faul (2010) have shown how terminology and theoretical understandings have evolved over time in the USA and beyond. The assimilation and melting pot paradigm that was initially assumed, was followed by the emergence of ethnic-minority perspectives in the 1960s and 1970s, cultural pluralism in the 1980s and 1990s, and constructivist ethnocultural frameworks from the early 2000s and onwards. Both terminology and meanings are shifting; they are contested and have been much debated (Azzopardi & McNeill 2016; Ben-Ari & Stier 2010; Dean 2001; Iglehart & Becerra 2007). In this article, I cannot review all aspects of the debate. Instead, I rely on 'culture competence' as an overarching notion and limit the discussion to varying understandings of 'culture' and varying locations of 'competence' in cultural competence.

How social workers expect to learn and practice cultural competence is one contested issue. In early articulations of cultural competence particularly, which value cultural diversity as something positive, the focus is on the knowledge that social workers need about clients' cultures in order to intervene in relevant ways in diverse contexts. Culture is here understood as something that a social worker can become an expert in and be knowledgeable about. This way of framing cultural competence assumes that social workers need cultural competence in relation to clients belonging to minority cultures and that social workers themselves neutrally belong to the majority culture. Unsurprisingly, such a framing has been critiqued on several grounds.

This approach has been critiqued for its holistic and essential conceptualisation of culture, which assumes that each ethnocultural group shares a homogenous, timeless, and traditional culture. The reliance on this conceptualisation of culture has, for instance, involved guidelines of how to intervene in specific ways with certain minority families, such as African American, Asian, or Native American families, and it has been critiqued for its reductionist approach and stereotypical overgeneralisations (Azzopardi & McNeill 2016; Ben-Ari & Stier 2010; Johnson & Munch 2009). The reified framing of cultural competence has included an assumption that the majority culture is also homogenous, so that working with families from the majority culture does not require any 'special' competence from the social worker, who is also assumed to be from the majority culture. This unidirectional focus of cultural competence with the dividing line of cultural difference located at the boundary between majority and minority groups creates boundaries between 'us' and 'them' (Harrison & Turner 2011). Its assumptions reflect and reproduce professional nationalism. Although the concept of diversity was broadened to include gender, class, sexuality, age, and more, often by way of introducing the concept of intersectionality (Yuval-Davis 2006), this did not necessarily bring practitioners who spoke of cultural competence beyond essentialist notions of group identities (Ben-Ari & Stier 2010). When constructivist conceptualisations of culture entered the debate on cultural competence, the question arose of how social workers could learn about something that is constantly changing (Dean 2001).

At a more fundamental level, those who questioned social work practices based on this constructivist concepts of culture and diversity critiqued it for assuming social groups as bounded communities. According to this critique, to speak of knowledge about the other

(be it in terms of culture, sexuality, or anything else) is to assume totalised group identities (Ben-Ari & Stier 2010). This insight has made several writers propose a focus on the knowledge the clients have about themselves and accept that social workers cannot have *a priori* knowledge of clients and their cultural contexts (Ben-Ari & Stier 2010; Dean 2001; Harrison & Turner 2011; Johnson & Munch 2009). While this opens up for an approach to culturally competent social work beyond essentialist and holistic conceptualisations of culture, it does not *per se* take cultural competence beyond its national framing. In addition, the social constructivist approach to cultural competence reproduces 'them'; it is just that the social worker does not know who 'they' are until they themselves tell it. The rescaling of cultural belonging and cultural competence, away from its national framing and towards its local contexts, seems to represent a more fruitful approach.

Social work in local contexts

The professional social work that emerged towards the end of nineteenth century was situated in cities. While the growth of state-led Keynesianism in the first half of twentieth century provided professional nationalism with nutritious ground, the neo-liberal restructuring of it has meant the opposite. Today, we see a renewed interest in social work in cities, sometimes named urban social work (Williams 2016). This renewed interest is not directly related to the transnational perspective but relies on related developments in the social sciences. In particular, two research directions are found relevant for the discussion of the unbounding of 'us' and 'them', one focussing on the rescaling of social policy and welfare provisions and the other focussing on social work in the context of super-diversity.

Social policy has become increasingly decentralised from the state. At the same time, the impact of supra-state governance, such as the European Union, has increased. This development started at different points in time in different countries, and it has had varying outcomes due to variations in context and the interaction between various scales. In social work, this has led to a growing research interest in the rescaling of social policy and social work in a comparative perspective (Kazepov 2010). A general conclusion is that social work should be perceived as a product of its locale, and the national welfare state is only one out of several factors influencing it (also see Williams 2016). This vein of social work research is rather disconnected from the transnational perspective but relies, at least partly, on the same theoretical development within the social sciences and is, in fact, arguing in a similar way for a strengthened research focus on the local context in a comparative way (see Glick Schiller & Çağlar 2011; Kazepov 2010; Williams 2016). In addition, in the debate grounded in the transnational perspective, this implies a questioning of the 'ethnic lens' (see Glick Schiller & Çağlar 2006).

The renewed interest in urban social work is, besides the restructuring of social policy and welfare services, also based on a concern about increasing inequalities in cities and how these overlap with residential segregation based on inhabitants' country of birth, levels of education, and health status. Foreign-born people are overrepresented among the poor with bad health and poor schooling performance, and they tend to cluster in certain neighbourhoods. Social work research has tended to combine the critique of methodological nationalism with the concept of super-diversity. Super-diversity puts focus on the diversity within diversity. It is concerned with migration-induced diversity, paying attention not only to the increasing number of countries of origin but also to

languages, religion, migration channels, migrant legal statuses, and the intensity of transnational connections (Vertovec 2007). In social work literature, it is argued that the perspective of super-diversity functions to de-essentialise the migrant category based on nationality and/or ethnicity among social work clients (see, e.g. Boccagni 2015; Geldof 2016; Phillimore 2015; Van Robaeys, van Ewijk & Dierckx 2018). However, from the perspective of methodological nationalism, it has been argued that the concept of super-diversity does not question the ethnic lens *per se* (Glick Schiller, Çağlar & Gulbrandsen 2006: 613); while acknowledging that diversity within diversity is urgently relevant, the concept does not lend itself to a critique of the divide between the migrant and non-migrant as an *a priori* assumption. Hence, from a transnational perspective, it bears the danger of reproducing the methodological nationalism that it aims at dissolving. Instead, the transnational paradigm proposes to regard the relevance of such divisions as an empirical question, at least in the line of argumentation that originates from *Nations Unbound*.

Hence, taking the call of going beyond the 'ethnic lens' seriously would incline social work theory to, in the first place, disregard ethnocultural diversity as an *a priori* issue. This is, of course, more easily said than done, and it gives rise to a whole new set of questions about social work as a normative field of practice and research. Take, for example, the very common institution of the family, as normative as it is contentious in relation to social work interventions. On the one extreme, the family as an institution can be anything as long someone is prepared to argue that it is 'our' culture, and on the other extreme, it is confined to the norms and laws of the host country. The strength of the issue should not be underestimated. The family as an institution is place and time dependent; it is also fundamental to social work. Such kinds of contentious issues are one of the reasons why social work itself is also a contested concept. While the social work literature on the family is extensive (for an overview, see, e.g. Righard 2009), it tends to be more based on normative analyses than on empirical analyses of social work practices in diverse cities. At least some evidence indicates that social work could go beyond the ethnic lens and start from 'sameness' instead of binaries (see Van Robaeys, van Ewijk & Dierckx 2018).

The relevance of the local context has always been at the core of social work theory, focussing on the individual in its context. When put to the fore in relation to ethnocultural diversity and in principal when synergised with the critique of methodological nationalism, the potential for social work beyond the ethnic lens emerges. It should, however, also be mentioned that this unbounding of social work from the national frame is indeed challenging, not least since many interventions rely on regulatory and legal systems that are essentially national. This is also why social work must be scrutinised and developed at multiple levels by considering, when relevant, the national framing, global inequalities, and the local and translocal contexts.

Unbounding social work: a conclusive discussion

Professional social work was institutionalised at a time of intense nation-state building and therefore shaped by, and contributed to, methodological nationalism. Today's population mobility and cross-border lifestyles challenge such framing of social problems and social interventions. The transnational paradigm has the potential of providing the relevant theoretical tools and perspectives for the unbounding of social work.

The concept of transnational professionalism refers to social work beyond the frame of methodological nationalism. This involves cross-border practices and research on social problems and social interventions, primarily with reference to social work with families and communities without propinquity. It also involves not just a de-essentialising of ethnocultural identities and practices among social work clients, but primarily a de-centring of professional nationalism by way of reframing social work to the trans-/local context, often the city.

The incorporation of cross-border dynamics into social work theory clearly draws on concepts and perspectives from the transnational paradigm; the rescaling of social work to the local level is only in part drawing on insights from the transnational perspective. The theoretical development of urban social work (Williams 2016) and the multi-scalar approach to welfare services (Kazepov 2010) do not draw directly on the transnational perspective; it rather draws on the debates on inequality in the city (e.g. David Harvey) and multi-scalar governance (e.g. Neil Brenner) that also are central to the development of the transnational perspective.

The theoretical development that provides social work with the concepts and tools for the development of professional transnationalism, partly draws on transnational paradigm, but it is also part of a general development in the social sciences. Nevertheless, what is particular to social work theory, in research as in practice, is the task of social work itself. While the development of conceptual tools for a discussion of social work across borders seems more feasible, the development of conceptual tools beyond the ethnocultural lens seems much more challenging, at least judging from what is accessible in the literature. At the same time, it is obvious that more empirical research on the actual meaning of diversity and culture in practice is needed.

References

- Abbott, G 1917, *The immigrant and the community*, The Century Co., New York.
- Addams, J 1905, 'Immigration. A field neglected by the scholar', *Commons*, vol. 10, pp. 9-19.
- Allardt, E 1987, 'Svensk sociologi i ett nordiskt perspektiv', in *Om svensk sociologi. Historia, problem och perspektiv*, ed K Fridjónsdóttir, Carlssons förlag, Stockholm, pp. 235-249.
- Azzopardi, C & McNeill, T 2016, 'From cultural competence to cultural consciousness. Transitioning to a critical approach to working across differences in social work', *Journal of Ethnic & Cultural Diversity in Social Work*, vol. 25, no. 4, pp. 282-99, DOI:10.1080/15313204.2016.1206494.
- Basch, L, Glick Schiller, N & Szanton Blanc, C 1994, *Nations unbound. Transnational projects, postcolonial predicaments, and deterritorialized nation-states*, Gordon and Breach, Basel.

- Beck, U 2000, 'The cosmopolitan perspective. Sociology of the second age of modernity', *The British Journal of Sociology*, vol. 51, no. 1, pp. 79-105, DOI:10.1111/j.1468-4446.2000.00079.x.
- Ben-Ari, A & Stier, R 2010, 'Rethinking cultural competence. What can we learn from Levinas?', *British Journal of Social Work*, vol. 40, no. 7, pp. 2155-2167, DOI:10.1093/bjsw/bcp153.
- Boccagni, P 2015, '(Super)diversity and the migration-social work nexus. A new lens on the field of access and inclusion?', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 38, no. 4, pp. 608-20, DOI:10.1080/01419870.2015.980291.
- Chambon, AS, Schröer, W & Schweppe, C 2011, 'Introduction', in *Transnational social support*, eds AS Chambon, W Schröer & C Schweppe, Routledge, London, pp. 1-10.
- Daly, M & Rake, K 2003, *Gender and the welfare state. Care, work, and welfare in Europe and the USA*, Polity Press, Cambridge.
- Dean, RG 2001, 'The myth of cross-cultural competence', *Families in Society. The Journal of Contemporary Human Services*, vol. 82, no. 6, pp. 623-630.
- Dominelli, L 2010, 'Globalization, contemporary challenges and social work practice', *International Social Work*, vol. 53, no. 5, pp. 599-612, DOI:10.1177/0020872810371201.
- Esping-Andersen, G 1990, *The three worlds of welfare capitalism*, Polity Press, Cambridge.
- Faist, T 2013, 'Debates and developments: the mobility turn. A new paradigm for the social sciences?', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 36, no. 11, pp. 1637-1646, DOI:10.1080/01419870.2013.812229.
- Ferrera, M 2005, *The boundaries of welfare. European integration and the new spatial politics of social protection*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Furman, R & Negi NJ 2007, 'Social work practice with transnational Latino populations', *International Social Work*, vol. 50, no. 1, pp. 107-112, DOI:10.1177/0020872807072500.
- Furman, R, Negi, NJ, Iwamoto, DK, Rowan, D, Shukraft, A & Gragg, J 2009, 'Social work practice with Latinos. Key issues for social workers', *Social Work*, vol. 54, no. 2, pp. 167-174, DOI:10.1093/sw/54.2.167.
- Furman, R, Negi, NJ & Salvador, R 2010, 'An Introduction to Transnational Social Work', in *Transnational social work practice*, eds NJ Negi & R Furman, Columbia University Press, New York, pp. 3-19.
- Furman, R, Negi, NJ, Schatz, MCS & Jones, S 2008, 'Transnational social work. Using a wraparound model', *Global Networks*, vol. 8, no. 4, pp. 496-503, DOI:10.1111/j.1471-0374.2008.00236.x.
- Geldof, D 2011, 'New challenges for urban social work and urban social work research', *European Journal of Social Work*, vol. 14, no. 1, pp. 27-39, DOI:10.1080/13691457.2010.516621.
- Geldof, D 2016, *Superdiversity in the heart of Europe*, Acco, Leuven.
- Glick Schiller, N & Çağlar, A 2009, 'Towards a comparative theory of locality in migration studies. Migrant incorporation and city scale', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, vol. 35, no. 2, pp. 177-202, DOI:10.1080/13691830802586179.
- Glick Schiller, N & Çağlar A (eds.) 2011, *Locating migration. Rescaling cities and migrants*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, N.Y.
- Glick Schiller, N, Çağlar, A, & Gulbrandsen, TC 2006, 'Beyond the ethnic lens. Locality, globality, and born-again incorporation', *American Ethnologist*, vol. 33, no. 4, pp. 612-633, DOI:10.1525/ae.2006.33.4.612.
- Harrison, G & Turner, R 2011, 'Being a 'cultural competent' social worker. Making sense of a murky concept in practice', *British Journal of Social Work*, vol. 41, no. 2, pp. 330-350, DOI:10.1093/bjsw/bcq101.
- Haskell, TL 1977, *The emergence of professional social science. The American social science association and the nineteenth century crisis of authority*, University of Illinois, Urbana.
- Healy, LM 2008, *International social work. Professional action in an interdependent world*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Healy, LM & Link, RJ 2012, *Handbook of international social work. Human rights, development, and the global profession*, Oxford University Press, New York.
- Healy, LM & Thomas, RL 2007, 'International social work. A retrospective in the 50th year', *International Social Work*, vol. 50, no. 5, pp. 581-596, DOI:10.1177/0020872807079916.
- Hugram, R 2010, *Understanding international social work. A critical analysis*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke.
- Iglehart, AP & Becerra, RM 2007, 'Ethnic-sensitive practice. Contradictions and recommendations', *Journal of Ethnic & Cultural Diversity in Social Work*, vol. 16, no. 3, pp. 43-63, DOI:10.1300/J051v16n03_04.
- Johnson, YM & Munch S 2009, 'Fundamental contradictions in cultural competence', *Social Work*, vol. 54, no. 3, pp. 220-231, DOI:10.1093/sw/54.3.220.
- Kazepov, Y (ed.) 2010, *Rescaling social policies. Towards multilevel governance in Europe*, Ashgate, Farnham.
- Khagram, S & Levitt, P (eds.) 2008, *The transnational studies reader. Intersections and innovations*, Routledge, New York.
- Khan, P & Dominelli, L 2000, 'The impact of globalization on social work in the UK', *European Journal of Social Work*, vol. 3, no. 2, pp. 95-108, DOI:10.1080/714052817.
- Kohli, HK, Huber, R & Faul, AC 2010, 'Historical and theoretical development of culturally competent social work practice', *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, vol. 30, no. 3, pp. 252-271, DOI:10.1080/08841233.2010.499091.
- Kuhn, T 1962, *The structure of scientific revolutions*, University of Chicago, Chicago.
- Levitt, P & Glick Schiller, N 2004, 'Conceptualizing simultaneity. A transnational social field perspective on society', *International Migration Review*, vol. 38, no. 3, pp. 1002-1040, DOI:10.1111/j.1747-7379.2004.tb00227.x.
- Lorenz, W 1994, *Social work in a changing Europe*, Routledge, London.
- Lyons, K, Manion, K & Carlsen, M 2006, *International perspectives on social work. Global conditions and local practice*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke.
- Lyons, K, Hokenstad, T, Manohar Pawar, M, Huegler, N & Hall, N (eds.) 2012, *The Sage handbook of international social work*, Sage, London.
- Melander, C 2015, 'Ensamkommande barn och transnationellt socialt arbete', in *Socialt arbete och migration*, eds N Montesino & E Righard, Gleerups, Malmö, pp. 147-165.
- Midgley, J 1983, *Professional imperialism. Social work in the third world*, Heinemann, London.
- Midgley, J 2001, 'Issues in international social work. Resolving critical debates in the profession', *Journal of Social Work*, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 21-35, DOI:10.1177/146801730100100103.
- Montesino, N 2012, 'Social disability. Roma and refugees in Swedish welfare', *International Journal of Migration, Health and Social Care*, vol. 8, no. 3, pp. 134-145, DOI:10.1108/17479891211267320.
- Negi, NJ & Furman, R (eds.) 2010, *Transnational social work practice*, Columbia University Press, New York.
- Phillimore, J 2015, 'Delivering maternity services in an era of superdiversity. The challenges of novelty and newness', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 38, no. 4, pp. 568-582, DOI:10.1080/01419870.2015.980288.

- Polanyi, K 1944, *The great transformation. The political and economic origins of our time*, Beacon Press, Boston.
- Righard, E , 2009, 'The family as a nation-state project in a global context. Implications for »social citizenship« and social welfare', *Zeitschrift für Sozialpädagogik*, vol. 7, no. 4, pp. 373-390, DOI:10.3262/ZFSP0904373.
- Righard, E 2013, 'Internationellt socialt arbete. Definitioner och perspektiv i historisk belysning', *Socialvetenskaplig tidskrift*, vol. 20, no. 2, pp. 127-146.
- Righard, E & Boccagni, P 2015, 'Mapping the theoretical foundations of the social work–migration nexus', *Journal of Immigrant and Refugee Studies*, vol. 13, no. 3, pp. 229-244, DOI:10.1068/15562948.2015.1035473.
- Schrooten, M, Withaechx, S, Geldof, G & Lavent, M 2016, *Transmigration. Social work in a world of superdiversity*, ACCO, Leuven.
- Sheller, M & Urry, J 2006, 'The new mobilities paradigm', *Environment and Planning A*, vol. 38, pp. 207-226, DOI:10.1068/a37268.
- Thyer, BA 2006, 'Faith-based programs and the role of empirical research', *Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Social Work. Social Thought*, vol. 25, no. 3-4, pp. 63-82, DOI:10.1300/J377v25n03_05.
- Urry, J 2000, *Sociology beyond societies. Mobilities for the twenty-first century*, Routledge, London.
- Van Robaeys, B, van Ewijk, H & Dierckx, D 2018, 'The challenge of superdiversity for the identity of the social work profession. Experiences of social workers in 'De Sloop' in Ghent, Belgium', *International Social Work*, vol. 61, no. 2, pp. 274-288, DOI:10.1177/0020872816631600.
- Vertovec, S 2007, 'Super-diversity and its implications', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 30, no. 6, pp. 1024-1054, DOI:10.1080/01419870701599465.
- Wagner, P, Hirschon, WC, Wittrock, B & Wollmann, H (eds.) 1991, *Social sciences and modern states. National experiences and theoretical crossroads*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Williams, C (ed.) 2016, *Social work and the city. Urban themes in 21st-century social work*, Palgrave Macmillan, London.
- Wimmer, A & Glick Schiller, N 2002, 'Methodological nationalism and beyond. Nation-state building, migration and the social sciences', *Global Networks*, vol. 2, no. 4, pp. 301-334, DOI:10.1111/1471-0374.00043.
- Wimmer, A & Glick Schiller, N 2003, 'Methodological nationalism, the social sciences, and the study of migration. An essay in historical epistemology', *International Migration Review*, vol. 37, no. 3, pp. 576-610, DOI:10.1111/j.1747-7379.2003.tb00151.x.
- Wisselgren, P 2000, *Samhällets kartläggare. Lorénska stiftelsen, den sociala frågan och samhällsvetenskapens formering i Sverige 1830–1920*, Symposium, Stehag.
- Withaechx, S, Schrooten, M & Geldof, D 2017, 'Thinking and acting globally and locally. Developing transnational social work practices in Belgium', *Transnational Social Review. A Social Work Journal*, vol. 7, no. 2, pp. 143-157, DOI:10.1080/21931674.2017.1317198.
- Yuval-Davis, N 2006, 'Intersectionality and feminist politics', *European Journal of Women's Studies*, vol. 13, no. 3, pp. 193-209, DOI:10.1177/1350506806065752.