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Social work in Pakistan

Preliminary insights

● John R. Graham, Alean Al-Krenawi and Sara Zaidi

At the turn of the 20th century, the social work profession emerged in Western Europe and North America (hereafter the North), and during the interwar period the profession was transplanted in colonized countries (hereafter the South). In the period after the Second World War the profession was globalized, as schools of social work proliferated across the South, invariably with cultural assumptions originating in the North (Healy, 1999; Midgley, 1981). The profession's growth has been characterized as 'academic colonialization' (Atal, 1981), mirroring political and scientific colonization (Clews, 1999; Ragab, 1990, 1995). As a result, scholarship now widely agrees that social work in much of the South is incompatible with cultural, economic, political and social realities (Healy, 2001; Lyons, 1999; Midgley, 1981, 1997; Ragab, 1990).

The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) acknowledges the role of local knowledge, and emphasizes the understanding of local and cultural context in relation to social work practice (IFSW, 2000a). From this definition a widespread discourse has erupted from scholars throughout the world regarding the ability for universal definitions of social work to be generated along with the promotion of the localization of social work knowledge within indigenous contexts (Gray and Fook, 2004; Tsang and Yan, 2001; Wong, 2002). Gray (2005) presents this dilemma as a triangle of debate among indigenization, universalism and imperialism. These

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debates revolve around the theoretical underpinnings that help conceptualize the terms 'localization' and 'universalization'. And while these are necessary in conceptualizing this terminology, they are limited in their ability to provide an understanding of how social work is practically applied through the framework of these ideas. It is therefore imperative to focus attention on practical instances of how social work is rendered relevant to the local communities in which it occurs in the South (Al-Krenawi and Graham, 2000a, 2000b, 2003a, 2003b; Ragab, 1990). But our knowledge of these disparate efforts worldwide is scattered (Nagpaul, 1996; Osei, 1996) and many communities' experiences have not been disseminated.

With the exception of a recent book on the history of Pakistan's social welfare structures (Rehmatullah, 2002), little is known about current efforts there to make social work culturally responsive to the communities it serves, and only a cursory body of scholarship examines such contextual forces as child labour (Ahmed, 1991; Pakistan, 1984). As a corrective, this article provides insight from interviews with seven social work practitioners who have long-standing practice and experience in Pakistan.

In Pakistan, the First In Service Training Course, sponsored by the Government of Pakistan and the United Nations Technical Assistance Administration (UNCTAA), trained its first 65 Pakistani social workers in 1953 (Rehmatullah, 2002: 1). During that time, the social work curriculum 'tended to follow the traditional pattern of Western social work education' (Rehmatullah, 2002: 14). To one observer, the originators of social work in Pakistan had always intended that practices would develop in such a way that they would become 'appropriate for training of social workers in the cultural and social environment of Pakistan' (Rehmatullah, 2002: 176). Likewise, 'the teaching of Western-based methodologies of social work was to be discouraged and replaced by indigenous methods evolved from practice in Pakistan' (Rehmatullah, 2002: 176). To that end, 'the task of developing Pakistani methods of social work, and producing Pakistani literature would be undertaken and introduced in universities across Pakistan' (Rehmatullah, 2002: 176). According to Rehmatullah, the objectives of social work's founding mothers and fathers 'has never been done' (2002: 177). Indeed, 'very little social work literature has been produced, and social work methodology of "group work" and "case work" is still being taught in the same manner as in 1954' (Rehmatullah, 2002: 177). Late 2005 website research indicated that social work programmes are carried out at three Pakistani universities: Punjab

University (www.pu.edu.pk), Karachi University (www.ku.edu.pk) and Peshawar University (www.upesh.edu.pk). Further research identified that the Pakistan Association of Social Workers had their membership revoked by the IFSW in 2000 for the following reason: 'This decision was based upon available information that the organisation in provisional membership does not have a membership of professional social workers (as defined by IFSW), but mainly is an organisation of social welfare volunteers.' (IFSW, 2000b).

A purposive sampling of seven social work practitioners was identified by social work agency directors, professors and other Pakistani key informants as outstanding in their field. Selection was restricted to those working in Islamabad, Pakistan for at least five years. Care was taken to have a representative sample on the basis of sex, academic credential, agency mandate (child welfare, mental health, income security) and auspice (public or private). Two were women, five were men; four had advanced training in social work, two in allied fields, and one did not specify. Three worked in local non-governmental organizations (NGOs), one in a university, one in a medical setting and two in government. Areas of practice and expertise included community economic development, family violence, health, public education and literacy development, social advocacy and social welfare services. Typical of this type of qualitative research, the study is exploratory and preliminary, with limited basis for the sort of generalizations that subsequent larger data sets might provide. Data collection occurred in 2003 and early 2004, and followed standard ethnographic techniques, employing an active interview process that would be dialogical (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995; Stewart, 1998). An interview protocol was developed in conjunction with a Pakistani PhD social work scholar who interviewed each respondent twice. The second interview, which was either by telephone or in person, had two purposes: it allowed respondents and researcher to pick up on any remaining questions not covered in the first interview; and it gained feedback from the research participants on the information that was collected and the hypotheses that were developing from the data analysis stage. Following a widely accepted semi-structured, open-ended approach, the interview protocol was incrementally revised from one client to the next, pending input from previous participants (Coulon, 1995). Most of the interview protocol focused on how practitioners localize their approach to social work knowledge.

Data were transcribed and analyzed using qualitative methods. Analytic induction and constant comparison strategies were utilized in order to detect patterns of behaviour, interactions, strategies, and resources in the family associated with success or failure. Analytic induction is carried out by scanning data for common themes, developing categories and combining the categories into typologies (Ben-David and Lavee, 1994; Goetz and LeCompte, 1984; Moon et al., 1990). Constant comparison involves combining inductive categories with a simultaneous comparison of all observed cases (Glasser and Strauss, 1967). Specifically, first, the researchers read through all the transcribed material with the objective of identifying common themes; second, the themes were coded; third, data were searched for similar instances of the same phenomenon, so categories of behavioural and interaction patterns could be identified; and fourth, data were translated into working hypotheses that were refined continuously until all instances of contradictions, similarities and differences were explained (thus increasing the dependability of the findings). All members of the research team worked collaboratively on this stage of the research, providing peer review and reflection on the findings. This effort by the researchers, combined with the process of member checking in stage two of the interview process, were undertaken to maintain the credibility criteria of the study. Furthermore, confirmability was monitored throughout this peer review process and the third author, who conducted the interviews, maintained strict practices to monitor, by documentation, their own biases throughout the process of changing the interview guide.

The data revealed five themes: the definition of social work as culturally grounded to Pakistani society; the primacy of family and community in service provision; the problems created by social and economic exclusion; the innovative and locally based approaches to intervention; and the instruments of practice, or social structures needed to carry out effective intervention.

Five themes

First theme: definition of social work

Respondents commonly defined social work in relation to helping others. All insisted that the methods of helping and the specifics of who should be helped were not universal. Northern methods of social work (sometimes expressed negatively, sometimes positively)

were consistently described as a foundation for societal change and improvement. The need for an explicitly Pakistani approach to the profession was held by all respondents; but means to that end were not always coherently clear. One respondent remarked:

Good social work must be without any external support, it must be indigenous, which can be solved internally and having no competition in it.

Most social workers we spoke to stressed the country's Muslim faith was an important anchor. This insight confirms findings in other Muslim communities that orient social work to Muslim faith (Al-Krenawi and Graham, 2000a, 2003b). In the words of one respondent:

But I think the main purpose of social welfare is to help others. Our people are used to helping others in the specific tones of *Zakat* or *Fitrana* (religious charity) etc., but social work is to help the poor and deserving people. The concept of helping others in our society is by charity or donation. Islam mentions the rights of widows, orphans, and neighbours etc. but unfortunately, we've made this concept a western concept. Scientific social work is actually the study of people whether they deserve it or not.

As Lyons emphasizes, social work in diverse settings integrates local community culture with its approach to social welfare (Lyons, 1999). Respondents consistently referred to a Pakistani tradition of community helping.

One of the old concepts of social work is to help the poor person or community. But if we look upon the proper subject, being a social worker must develop a spirit in people to solve their problems themselves.

The primary notion of helping is that of *Zakat*, or the Muslim notion of charitable giving. As Rehmatullah (2002: 155–6) notes,

Pakistanis have been long and effectively dedicated to charity-oriented social work. Moreover, Pakistan is heir to a culture which urges social welfare. Few, if any, religions are so rich in explicit counsels of charity and social conscience as is Islam The mandate in the *Zakat* system is the source of a social security system second to none in the world. The curriculum for the first in-service training course thus had a solid base.

Our respondents argued that *Zakat* must be approached carefully, because traditionally it may be thought of as giving to the deserving poor. Many times, social workers must ask that charity be given to

the undeserving, which can pose problems. When it contributes well to social development, respondents argued, *Zakat* is an excellent source of funding that incorporates social work with traditional Pakistan values.

I organized Patient Welfare Society. It had a good system of *Zakat* distribution for poor patients. It provided them free medicine, free treatment, and solutions for their physical needs, and their social, psychosocial and economic problems etc.

The wider Pakistani society is always referenced to social service development. There may be expatriate economic forces with positive influence:

The expatriate Pakistanis want to bring about a change. They think that it is their responsibility and they owe it to their own country. They are very positive about the social changes and of course they have the money to give us.

But internal structures, anchored to Islamic theology, were consistently viewed as determining. As one respondent summarized her situation:

The people of these provinces are living under a 'feudal system'; they want their citizens to be unaware of their rights. Islam is actually based on *Haqooq-ul-ibad* (i.e., rights of human beings). God may forgive us for not fulfilling His rights (*Haqooq Allah*) but He will not forgive us for not taking care of human rights (*Haqooq-ul-ibad*). Our organization is convincing people on the name of Islam but our Muslim scholars are using it for their own welfare.

Second theme: family

Our data reveals that successful intervention rested with the situating of practice within a collectivist Pakistan value system. Distinctions between individual and family intervention are not nearly as clear as what exists in Northern-based training assumptions:

When a single patient comes to us we study his whole history. He tells and shares each and every problem (i.e., economic or social problem), and our institution tries to solve not only the patient's problem but we also try to make solutions for his family as much as our institution can solve.

Patriarchal social structures are a clear theme in all respondents' answers. Some professionals locate their practice as in conflict between traditional patriarchy and the culture that Pakistan could become:

Our main war is between men and women, and we cannot solve our problems without the participation of men, this is the reason why there is a gender balance on our committees.

A central notion to expanding the role and rights of women in Pakistani society is to increase their decision-making power, on several different levels. One way to empower women in Pakistan is to have them actively involved in the issues that directly affect their lives. This is an incredibly difficult feat given the cultural restrictions placed on women.

We are basically working for women's rights. This is so that the women come to know about their rights as well as the limits of their social rights; because the majority of our women population are completely unaware of their basic rights.

Third theme: social inclusion/exclusion

A third theme relates closely to the notion of social inclusion/exclusion, which is an important component of international social work (Healy, 2001; Lyons, 1999). Pakistani social differentiation determines how social service structures are implemented, and what delivery goals might look like. These are perpetuated in community educational structures and persist throughout the lives of individuals and families:

The differentiations in our educational system are a killer of our humanity. Different class systems are developing social and economic differentiations. It will cause an inferiority complex in lower-class people and our society will be prone to exploitation. It will cause a great danger for the integrity of our country.

Illiteracy is an issue of social exclusion and seen as a hindrance to social development: it is a fundamental cause of poverty. Several respondents argued that if the educational system were to improve to the point where the majority of people could read, it is thought that the percentage of the population living in poverty would decrease dramatically. As one respondent remarked:

A good job is only possible if one has a good education. Only good education can bring you out of the circle of poverty.

Yet this remains a serious problem for social workers, as they tend to focus their attention on the literate because they are able to make the most progress with those who can read and have a previous basic

understanding of their rights. Clearly, this remains a dilemma, as they are unable to help those who most need it.

We mostly target the sensible people who are literate and have basic knowledge of the awareness program. We receive a lot of problems in convincing unaware and illiterate people of the basic knowledge of the awareness program.

Class also determines other service provisions. The upper class receives better health and medical treatments than the poor, who often live in rural areas a great distance from facilities. Even those who live in urban centres cannot afford adequate care. This is a vital cause for which the social workers fight, although it remains impossible without the help of the medical institutions themselves.

Shifa is a very prestigious institute and it is my opinion that part of Shifa should be utilized for poor people. It is a right of the poor to get those medical facilities that are being taken by rich people.

One of the problems at play may be the inadequacies of translating social inclusion into the country's social welfare structures. According to Rehmatullah (2002: 33), at the outset of social work in Pakistan, United Nations advisers who helped form social welfare legislation 'recognized the Islamic values and injunctions pertaining to social welfare in the lifestyle of the people, but they did not see any of these concepts translated into a policy document which would guide the development of the programmes or plans in any scientific manner, nor did they see any practical implementation machinery for dealing with the pressing problems which the country was facing then'.

Fourth theme: approaches to practice

The literature emphasizes the social change that social work could bring about, acting as an instrument of social consciousness-raising and social activism. Some observers see this as a potential role (Rehmatullah, 2002); our respondents, in contrast, tended to see it as a realized role. As one pointed out:

I think social work is playing a great role in Pakistan as it is providing awareness and counselling not only to lower-class families but also the higher-class families. Our institution is running special schools of social work to educate the citizens on their rights.

Social work's place as an instrument of citizens' motivation and participation is particularly relevant to Pakistani culture:

We concentrate and focus on people who understand us easily and clearly. Their participation is key to breaking the ice with the community. These people help us to motivate other people.

Rehmatullah (2002: 457) sees social development in Pakistan as a lighthouse that has become very dim. Our respondents seemed somewhat more optimistic. Several saw social welfare as a hindrance, contributing to social problems in so far as it creates dependency, and as a short-term solution to entrenched social problems. Most argued that for lasting solutions to social issues the focus should be on social development, which would mean seeking preventative measures over reparative ones, and would result in enduring social changes rendering social welfare largely unnecessary (except in cases requiring urgent aid, such as natural disasters and other emergencies).

Our social welfare is completely floating on emergencies and relief. If we add long-term perspective in our social welfare sector we can extend it to social development. So we have to change the approach and we must add some new ideas in social welfare for the country to progress.

To these ends, and with a view also to culturally grounded service delivery, several concluding sub-principles were identified, including evaluation, computer literacy, and staff monitoring and motivation. Some spoke of the ability to create and sustain a helping alliance in terms of personality. An affable personality is seen as central to success as a social worker because it will increase the likelihood that a community will listen and respond to suggestions.

This leads to the notion of trust-building and reciprocal respect between the community and the social worker. As all respondents pointed out, the social worker must respect the culture and traditions of the community that is served. In turn, by showing such consideration, the community will respect the provider, a vital factor in providing social services. The people must not suspect an agenda on the part of the social worker, or no progress will result. The trust builds on this foundation and eventually allows for the community to be motivated for change.

Yes, we should not do anything against the community's will, against their cultural setup or their values. We must learn their language to let them know

about our aims and objectives. Through the process of trust building we must motivate them.

The art and skill of community liaison go hand in glove with these attributes. As one respondent put it:

the skills we definitely require are, liaison with community, community involvement with social organizations and social mobilization – all these things require that I meet with all kinds of people with flexibility and in an open way.

Linguistic ability is of no small importance in a country as diverse as Pakistan. One worker described her situation in these terms:

But we have to learn international languages more than our national and local languages. I am using my mother tongue outside the area but three languages can cause problems for us at the national level. And the language problem will remain with us for ever as our four provinces have four entirely different languages.

Fifth theme: instruments of practice

Broader social structures are key to the delivery of social services. Instrumental needs such as safety from family violence or crime, access to affordable and accessible housing and health care, to jobs that could enhance household capital, and other instrumental concerns came to the fore. These bear emphasis, and ought to be the subject of future, fuller research. Such a basic necessity as safe drinking water underscores the instrumental nature of much community need:

These days we are basically focusing on safe drinking water, which is the main issue in Pakistan, and especially in rural areas. Availability of water is not a great issue because people can get dirty water easily but the need is to provide them with good-quality water.

Many professionals spoke of the need for a National Council of Professional Social Workers. An ability to remain accountable is important in a society that many respondents described as having limited trust in leaders and limited public accountability. A formal organization was also seen as holding social workers responsible for the actions they take and serving to increase the trust the average citizen can place in the social services.

In our society social work has no organization. It is necessary to establish an organization like national council of professional social workers. That will be the council to fight for the cause of professionals.

Conclusion

A theme that consistently appeared among respondents was that of community trust. How do social workers create and sustain community credibility and trust? These questions are particularly salient in a community that has experienced considerable political changes, which have undermined trust by the process of colonialization and political regime change. Much of the sub-text of our interviews struck us as political. And on some level, positive changes in the Pakistani polity, as well as positive changes in the country's relationship to the North and to globalizing economic structures, could be positively associated with social work's domestic status. These inferences are provisional, and merit further research.

Rehmatullah (2002: xiv) describes the country's 50-year history with social work as one of lost promise. The profession 'started [in the 1950s] with high idealism and a desire to practice new unconventional methods'. But it 'became victim of political and bureaucratic designs of the powers that be at a given period in time. In the process, some of its programmes and services survived, others fell by the wayside.' The profession continues to have 'western oriented methods of problem solving' (Rehmatullah, 2002: 180). And 'it still falls short of the original ideal of developing indigenous social work literature of our own and developing Pakistani methodology' (Rehmatullah, 2002: 180). It must, in short, 'rise again into a scientific programme, to review the achievements as well as its failures, and inject new blood into it [and it must] reshape the practice of social work in the context of our strong family system as advised by the first UN advisors who came to Pakistan fifty years ago' (Rehmatullah, 2002: xiv).

Whether the ideals that this author refers to are as strong as she claims remains a matter of academic dispute and a worthy topic for future research. For the present time, our research confirms Rehmatullah's lament over the state of social work in Pakistan. But the respondents we interviewed tended to provide evidence of greater indigenization of social work than what she imagined, of greater cultural sensitivity and inclusion, and collaboration with cultural and religious norms and values. Perhaps the greatest single imperative, as Rehmatullah and our respondents might agree, is

the need for social work to develop an authentically Pakistani approach to social work, centring on the country's religious heritage, concepts of family and cultural diversities. In the end, the practitioners we interviewed provided evidence that their everyday practice tended to bridge the gap between two worlds: the world of the communities they work in, and the world of social work which they learned. Social work practice, in this sense, is an act of cultural mediation (Al-Krenawi and Graham, 2001, 2003a, 2003b), bridging the gap between global knowledge bases, such as social work, and local knowledge bases. There are dilemmas in this intersection, which future research could usefully examine. Often, as workers told us, these dilemmas may be an intersection between notions of social justice and social equality and resistance to these principles, which may be situated in patriarchy, in local communities, in domestic or political politics, or in broader structures of economic globalization. Strategies for responding to these intersections merit further, more comprehensive research beyond the present insights.

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