Going home: Social work across and about borders

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Abstract
This article explores the idea of returning home to the South to practise social work. Through our experiences as members of diasporic communities living in the North, we examine how we are implicated in the tensions that surround social work practice and research as efforts to internationalize continue to grow. Specifically, we explore the following themes: the neo-managerial underpinnings of the internationalization of social work; neocolonialism embedded in occupying the role of the reluctant expert; and what we carry with us to help us negotiate the tensions that we experience in navigating our practices across borders.

Keywords
Borders, diasporic communities, internationalization, neocolonialism, neo-managerialism

Introduction: Entering the space of reflection
This article began as a film project entitled “Going Home” about international social work and our experiences of ‘going home’ to our countries of origin or cultural belonging to practise or conduct research. Developed by the first author, the film included reflections on her own experiences as well as interviews with the other co-authors of this article. Working on this film together provided...
the impetus to write about the themes that emerged from our conversations about our experiences with international social work. As the project developed, we found ourselves discussing topics that we have not yet found fully developed in the international social work scholarship. Namely, our discussions revolved around the themes of being academics working in the global North but being originally from the global South and going home, in a literal or metaphorical sense, to engage in ‘international social work’. In this article, we focus on the internationalization of social work and the accordant tensions we negotiate as members of diasporic communities. We bring our past and present practice, teaching and research experiences in contexts such as Argentina, Brazil, Cuba, Dominican Republic, India, Lebanon and Nicaragua to bear on the topic.

While the scholarship is replete with discussions of international social work conducted by Northern academics and practitioners, there is very little sharing of the experiences of academics originally from the global South living in the North (Hugman et al., 2010; Razack, 2005). The extensive international social work book scholarship is dominated by voices of academics from the global North. While this may not be an issue in and of itself, it is time to bring forth into the discussion the voices of academics who can add to the diversity of experiences of working internationally. The issues we face as practitioners, researchers and educators are shaped and informed by our diasporic subjectivities and how these link to histories of colonialisms and their relevance for social work. As Razack (2009) notes in her exploration of international social work, her experiences and those of students and practitioners are intricately bound by racism and being from a diasporic community. In this article, we understand members of diasporas not to be ‘disembodied individuals’ (Esman, 2009: 21), but members of translocal and ‘transnational migrant communities that maintain material or sentimental attachment to their country of origin (their home country) while adapting to the limitations and opportunities available in their host country’ (Esman, 2009: 20). As such, members of diasporic communities are involved in relationships with their country of origin, their host country and their diasporic community. Both Esman (2009) and Falzon (2003) note that these communities are rife with internal tensions and diversity and cannot be assumed to form a homogenous whole as the aforementioned set of relationships is rendered complex by ethnic, racial and class belonging. However, a key common underlying concept is the creation of hybrid identities that transcend a specific place and that shape diasporic communities’ relationships within and across borders (Esman, 2009; Falzon, 2003; Gottowik, 2010; Mandaville, 1999).

We agree with Razack (2009) that it is time to bring the experiences of academics and practitioners from diasporic communities into the discussion of international social work if we are to challenge the Eurocentrism and Westernization inherent in dominant discourses. Our hope in writing this article is to add our voices to those engaged in thinking critically about international social work and to encourage reflection about similar experiences. In this article, we engage in this reflection by exploring three main themes: the neo-managerial underpinnings of the internationalization of social work; occupying the role of the reluctant expert and the process and dilemmas involved in relinquishing expertise; and what we pack in our bags literally or metaphorically to help us negotiate the tensions that we experience in navigating our practices across borders. Throughout this discussion, we focus on how these themes intersect with our experiences as members of diasporic communities.

**International social work as neo-managerial practice**

While the international social work scholarship is replete with discussions of social development and social justice, much less attention has been accorded to the neoliberal shifts that our academic institutions are undergoing in the global North. More specifically, we argue in this article that international social work within such a context has become a ‘business proposition’. Brydon (2011)
notes that education has become a ‘market service driven by purchasers and customers’ and that a ‘key aspect of these developments has been the move towards internationalising higher education’ (pp. 382–3). In our own experiences of conducting international research and projects and in developing social work curricula, we found ourselves in positions where accountability criteria set by funders had to be thoroughly negotiated and adapted in order to be relevant to the communities with whom we were working.

Our own international projects were set in an accountability framework that allows the funder to monitor us at a distance (Rose, 1999). Great emphasis was placed on logical models, results-based management, project implementation, performance measurement frameworks, performance reporting, deliverables, and risk management. The emphasis on control and outcome constitutes standard procedures of international funders (Australian Government, 2011; Ortengren, 2004; Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, 2005). Many of our international projects dealing with human components do not permit this kind of discourse as a way of understanding the realities as experienced by those living in the global South. Smith (1990) argues that much of the time of human services professionals – social workers both nationally and internationally – is spent in textually transforming the realities of those we are supposed to work with. Perhaps the clearest example of this textual transformation is the ‘Logic Model’ of reporting. What this document requests (outcomes, outputs, activities and goals) is a neo-managerial technique of control that can be utilized within institutions to justify their own processes. As a result, we experience a ‘disjunction’ between what we would like to achieve with our collaborators in the global South and how we need to present the ideas in acceptable institutional language (Smith, 2005). In the experience of one of the co-authors, demands from the funder to adhere to the Logic Model went as far as sending back a report to the researcher because the numbering system relied upon was not the one adopted by the agency! In other words, while the substantive content of the report should have satisfied the funder, the Logic Model took a life of its own as even its technical aspects took precedence over not only the content of the report but ultimately the accomplishments of the project.

Indeed, the sense we have in these types of situations is that the funding imperatives and requirements began to dictate how the project should be run as opposed to direct community input and participation. These situations may be overt or implicit and may occur at various levels of intensity. While sufficiently problematic on their own, these types of imposed imperatives create specific tensions for us as academics from diasporic communities. We are reminded in these instances of the impacts of colonialism and how easy it is to slip into reproducing locally the wishes of foreign funders and their administrators. We find ourselves caught in between the expectations of our Northern funders and those of our Southern partners who may be members of our own communities of origin. These communities often construct us in our diasporic identities as trusted allies and place in us a confidence which is rarely reproduced in regard to international social workers of Northern identities. This special trust demands of us particular attention and awareness, an extra responsibility for the trust that our identity incited in the local partners.

In an example from the experiences of one of the co-authors, partners from the global South often approached her to discuss ways to handle her colleagues from the global North and to ask her support to understand what was behind certain objectives or components. In other words, while any academic or practitioner who is critical about being caught between funders’ goals and communities’ interests may find such situations problematic and thought-worthy, what is different for us is that the local communities expect that we are on their side. They demand a certain allegiance that at times places us in very contradictory positions, and places upon us an extra responsibility.

However, it is important to note that trust is not always accorded easily simply because we are members of diasporic communities. Indeed, in the experiences of the first author, the opposite has at times been the case, especially considering her positionality as a Lebanese mughitaribé, a person...
who has immigrated out of her country of origin. This identity has become, among other things, a marker that separates those who stayed during the long and drawn out war and those who left at any point to establish their lives in diaspora. To return after many years is no automatic guarantee of trustworthiness; a process of proving commitment to community of origin, reflecting on privilege (e.g. being able to navigate multiple worlds of here and there or of being foreign-educated) becomes a necessary rite of passage. However, once this trust is established or gained to a certain measure, we are again in a position to field expectations and to be held accountable and responsible to our partners in the global South, as noted earlier.

In addition, the message conveyed by university bodies such as offices of international affairs or development is that gaining access to funding for international projects is an imperative in order to ‘internationalize the university’. Once more, we are caught in neo-managerial practices and face contradictory tensions. While we believe that getting these grants may in fact be beneficial for our communities, we see the strings that are attached to this funding. Such conditional funding may reproduce practices of ‘plunder’ where once more the flow of resources is in fact from global South to North and not the opposite (Kapoor, 2008; Manion, 2005; Polack, 2004; Sogge, 2002). As the history of trade and debt practices has shown us, the idea of the North giving generously to the global South with no gains in return is part of a longstanding mythology of charity that needs to be dismantled. Indeed, while our individual partners could benefit from the funds they may receive through immersion programs, exchange projects, or research grants, the overall global picture remains one of unbalanced power relations where the North gains at the expense of the global South. Put differently, any short-term gains cannot compensate, reverse or erase the imbalance of historical and contemporary colonial, imperial and neocolonial relations.

Yet, refusing to participate in this reproduction of colonial relations is ill-received by administrators bent on making a name for their universities and staking a claim in the market of internationalization. Should we refuse to apply for this type of funding, we are perceived as not making an effort to ‘internationalize’, even though our diasporic identities make us in the eyes of administrators natural internationalization agents. Compounding this problem is the fact that our partners in the global South are also facing similar pressures from their own institutions as they attempt to join this lucrative market. For example, in a study conducted by one of the co-authors in Lebanon with activists in a grassroots disability organization, they lamented what they saw as the sudden influx of large amounts of foreign funding during the war with Israel (Webbi, 2011). While this funding provided needed resources to support emergency relief, it came with strings attached. Specifically, conditions were imposed by international funders to hire foreign consultants or to replace existing activists with professionally trained, English-speaking workers who can communicate with the funders but who largely had no investment or background in disability rights activism. The activists who refused these impositions were shut out of the organization, replaced by ‘experts’, a role we discuss in more detail next.

The reluctant expert

If international social work has become a business-guided imperative, our role within it has become that of the reluctant expert. We have often found ourselves in problematic situations where we were seen as the experts or expected to play that role either by our partners in the global South or by funders of our research or development projects. Yet, in being posited as the expert, we were aware of our part in reproducing neocolonialism. Dominelli (2005) cautions against an over-reliance on foreign consultants to play the role of expert in community development projects. She argues that relying on this foreign expertise under-utilizes available local human resources, is costly and
reproduces a sort of professional imperialism. In fact, the international social work scholarship abounds with cautionary tales and provisos aimed at white Northern students, practitioners and academics wishing to practice in the global South (Beecher et al., 2010; Gray, 2005; Haug, 2005; Heron, 2005). One of the main arguments centres on the need to develop an indigenous form of social work practice knowledge as opposed to the wholesale reliance on foreign (read Northern) expertise and theories (Gray and Coates, 2010; Gray and Webb, 2008; Sewpaul, 2007).

But what if the ‘foreign’ expert is not so foreign, in the sense that the country in the global South where they have returned to practise is their country of origin? For us this has created a dilemma that has contributed to our reluctance to assume the role of expert. On the one hand, we became involved in international social work in our countries of origin or in the global South because we felt we could give something back to our communities and, as well, open opportunities for our communities of origin to interact with and contribute to those in the North. For example, we could contrast different knowledges and act as the initial elements of a bridge or a conduit to the emergence of an alternative way to do social work which is less dominated by ideas from the North. Indeed, for some of us, there was an expectation that now that we have foreign credentials (e.g. degrees, academic positions, etc.), it was time to return home to share what we have learned. In fact, we were told that failure to do so would amount to us ‘abandoning’ our home countries.

On the other hand, actually being in a position to ‘give back’ brings with it strings such as funder expectations, and the expectation of our partners that we will behave in ways consistent with ideas of ‘expertise’. As an example, we were expected to assume a leadership role in the management of research or development projects. Yet to do so would go against the idea of working in partnership with colleagues in a way that recognizes the validity of local knowledge and the need for it to be at the centre of any such projects. If we are to avoid reproducing the imposition of Northern values, theories and knowledge, we actually need to decentre these in favour of a collaborative rebuilding of knowledge from the ground up taking into account local realities and imperatives. On many occasions listening to local expertise, building a project from the ground up, adopting facilitation techniques that use local songs or stories make partners from the global South exclaim: ‘Can’t you show us what you do there?’ ‘There’ means the mythical North, a site of development, wealth and knowledge. The expectation is that the consultants from the North hold technologies and advanced mechanisms of working and implementing projects. Rather than a sign of naïveté, this comment reflects a demand that the North actualize its claims of superiority and development.

Being thrust into the role of the expert does not allow for the process of revaluing of local knowledge. Instead of assuming such a role, which comes with the imposition of Western models, theories and values, we favour an approach that facilitates shared knowledge building while not abdicating our own potential to use our own expertise as scholars and practitioners (Chataika, 2012). For example, one of the co-authors is bringing a graduate research course that she had developed in Canada to India in an effort to sow the seeds of questioning Western and Eurocentric positivist research. Her hope is that this course will facilitate a critical reflection and lead to decolonizing epistemologies, methodologies and methods that are indigenous in the Indian context. In doing so she is using her ‘expertise’ strategically to challenge expectations about her role.

Indeed, it is important to emphasize here that we have been under this type of pressure and expectation to play the role of the expert within project leadership not only as a requirement by our funders (e.g. our academic institutions, bilateral aid providers or research funders), but also at the behest of our partners in the global South. Dealing with these dual pressures has placed us in a position of mediating between the neocolonial impulses of Northern funders that drive the act of giving (Kapoor, 2008) and postcolonial vestiges that seek to legitimate foreign expertise in the eyes of the global South. It is these same vestiges that contribute to what we call
the phenomenon of ‘putting on the show’. This is particularly evident when those institutions’ representatives visit projects in the global South (university deans and presidents, international organizations executive directors and funder evaluators). Tremendous effort, time and organization are used to demonstrate that the funds are doing what they are supposed to be doing. It is common to hear members of communities make statements such as ‘the Canadians or the Americans, or Europeans are coming so we better organize ourselves to show how well we are performing’. Energy is divested from actual project work to presenting ‘progress’ in ways that speak to the funders in their own language.

Packing our bags: What helps us navigate tensions?

Considering the above noted issues, dilemmas and challenges, our reflections also included thinking about what has assisted us in navigating the tensions of shifting between contexts. In our discussions, we used the metaphor of packing our bags to explore what we carry with us when engaged in international social work. Interestingly, we all agreed that our starting point for what we pack is our desire to not give in to neocolonialism. In order to do so, we ‘pack’ humility, the importance of theory, as well as an acceptance of our ‘mitigated foreignness’ and our translocal identities.

Humility for us implies recognizing the need to shift beyond discourses of expertise and imported/ imposed knowledge to understanding that we are also learners. Humility should not be confused with ‘naivety’ – which can be another way to run to innocence and refuse to take responsibility for replicating neocolonial practices (Kapoor, 2008; Razack, 2001). Humility in this sense implies that our knowledge production needs to take into account an understanding of Southern experiences including socioeconomic living conditions. Contrary to cultural competency and cross-cultural learning models of international social work, we do not accept the contention that books, manuals and trainings on understanding the culture of the other hold the answer to engaging in ‘culturally-relevant’ or sensitive social work. In addition to the extant critiques about the positivist nature of such models and resulting resources (i.e. books, journal articles, trainings, etc.) that are premised on fixed and hegemonic understandings of culture (Gottowik, 2010; Pon, 2009; Williams, 2006), we find such models problematic because they typically assume a white Northern readership. As such, a great limitation of these resources lies in their starting point in terms of their audience: But what if the reader were the ‘other’?

As a journal article reviewer, one of the co-authors is often in a position to peer review articles on international social work, with an increasing number about social work in Arab countries. Typically, such articles reproduce Orientalist discourses and envision a role for social work as the bringer of modernization; one of the enduring neocolonial discourses posits a cultural divide between the traditionalism of the East and the modernism of the West (with the latter being preferable). A similar situation is experienced when reviewing articles from Latin America, particularly those published in English-speaking journals. The re-authoring of realities of the global South for the consumption of the North becomes evident. Without delving into a full critique of such discourses here, suffice it to say that when we engage in international social work as members of diasporic communities with a critical awareness of our potential to reproduce neocolonialism, we do not experience ourselves as bringers of modernization. We believe we continually have much to learn about inclusion, participation, and the grounded dynamics of engagement with communities in the global South.

A word of caution is in order here: we are not referring to a problematic relinquishing of responsibility or to a denial of our expertise in specific areas of scholarship or research. We do not ascribe to the often repeated incantation of ‘I’m not there to teach, I have so much to learn’ which we see
as a facile response to charges of professional imperialism. Instead, we believe in a shared process of coming to terms with our responsibility to learn and teach, to question what we know and to deepen our understanding of what we can contribute. To assist in doing so, we find the process of returning to theory to be essential. We understand this ‘return to theory’ as the process of engaging with voices from the south – diverse as they are – to understand their own realities. It is not only a matter of understanding what has been written about particular realities and contexts but also to understand who is doing the talking and theorizing. For example, who is talking about Latin American realities? Even when it is Latin Americans themselves, it is important to recognize the diversity of voices (i.e. Afro-Latin American, Indigenous).

Also important in negotiating the shift in contexts when we practise international social work is affirming our translocal identities. In doing so, we accept that our ‘foreignness’, while present, is actually mitigated by being from here and there simultaneously, or what Keshmirishekan (2011) refers to as having an ‘unfixed and negotiable’ identity (p. 147). Razack (2005) notes that this experience is imbued with ‘feelings of belonging and not belonging’ (p. 97) that members of diasporic communities experience when they engage in international social work. To mitigate this foreignness, we pack two seemingly contradictory items that symbolize our approaches to dealing with our translocal subjectivities. On the one hand, we take with us the clothes that we wear that symbolize our cultural belonging. Some of us negotiate this translocal identity through clothing as a marker of our allegiance to the global South, our home. Our clothing serves as a constant reminder to us as well as those from the global North we work with about our priorities, values and stance. Therefore, instead of navigating different contexts with different clothes some of us choose to use the same clothes in different contexts as a form of resistance as well as a reminder of our cultural belonging. On the other hand, we pack with us our foreign attire, along with an acceptance that we may not know what would be most appropriate for the context, considering that cultures are in a continuous state of change. Packing our foreignness is at once an acknowledgement and an acceptance of our translocal subjectivity.

Conclusion

Today we are at a crossroads as a profession interested in engaging in international work: we can either continue believing that our task is to help the global South and be in solidarity with its people’s struggles, or we can shift our understanding to conceptions of responsibility. This shift would necessitate an acknowledgement of our complicity as scholars and practitioners in perpetuating neocolonial relations. A critical examination of the nature of our involvement in research and development work is an important starting point towards deconstructing what we believe our role should be in international work. Relinquishing the role of expert without abdicating responsibility is no easy endeavour considering pressures from our institutions as well as partners in the global South. Yet, it is this same difficult task that can ground us in the realities of our partners in the global South and help us move closer to a social justice vision of our profession. For those of us from diasporic communities who deal with these selfsame challenges when we are drawn into the business of international social work, our practice can be further complicated by our awareness of the compromised nature of our efforts and the need/desire/pressures to give back to our communities of origin. How we navigate these tensions can be a lifelong challenge but one we must contend with if we ever wish to return home.

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Notes
1. http://youtu.be/yCIWrtDsPNo
2. In this article we rely on the terms global North and South to denote economic and power divisions and not purely geographic ones as we are aware that this classification does make some broad geographic generalizations but is widely used in the international development and social work scholarship (see Prashad, 2013; Stubbs, 1999).

References


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