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Canadian identity: Implications for international social work by Canadians*

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Abstract

This paper is in response to recent calls to conceptualize and articulate Canadian perspectives and experiences in international social work, given that the Canadian standpoint has been lacking in international social work literature. This paper contends that it is imperative, first of all, to critically examine and unpack our 'Canadian' identity in order to practice international work that is socially just and anti-imperialist. Drawing on the work of post-colonial authors, critical race theorists, and those who study national myth-making, this essay revisits Canadian identity because it is this identity that Canadian social workers often carry into their international work.

Introduction

Efforts to internationalize social work education in Canada have expanded substantially in recent years (Drover & Rogers, 2009; Yan, 2007). Globalization has fueled the interest in internationalization of the curriculum and international collaborations: exchange programs, joint research ventures, and study abroad programs have increased considerably over the past decade (Healy, Asamoah, & Hokenstad, 2003). International social work (ISW) has been variously defined ranging from narrow use of the term to refer to social work practice in international

agencies to broader definitions that include any aspect of social work involving two or more nations (Nagy & Falk, 2000).

A much clearer delineation of international social work is provided by Lynne Healy (2001) who defines ISW as “international professional action and the capacity for international action by the social work profession and its members” (p. 7). Healy then delineates four aspects of ISW: (1) internationally related domestic practice which includes refugee and immigrant settlement and international adoptions; (2) professional exchange including hosting students and scholars from other countries, participating in international conferences and in international struggles for environmental and social justice, peace, and women’s movements; (3) international practice undertaken by social workers employed in international relief and development agencies; and (4) international policy development and advocacy where social workers engage in social policy debates across the globe.

With the increasing trend towards global integration of market-based economies, there is a growing sense among social workers about global interdependence. Healy (2001) particularly emphasizes the interconnectedness between what happens at home and abroad. She writes social workers must “monitor the impact of their own nation’s policies on other countries and people’s well-being” (p. 3). The present paper builds upon this imperative of self-examination and exhorts Canadian social workers interested to reach out to other countries and cultures to first scrutinize Canadian policies and practices, often informed by a sense of Canadian national identity, that impact other nations and cultures in varied ways. After a review of Canadian writings in international social work, this paper builds on the existing work by unpacking ‘Canadian’ national identity, followed by implications for Canadian practice, research, and teaching in the arena of international social work. The focus of this essay is on white, European, English-speaking Canadians because, as Mackey (2002) argues in her anthropological study of the construction of Canadian national identity, Canada’s dominant culture, although sensitive to cultural diversity, has tended to subordinate pluralism to its nation-building practices. Mackey writes: “both Aboriginal and ethno-cultural diversity, while superficially acknowledged and affirmed in Canadian nationalist discourse and in state policies, have remained subservient to a national project defined by ‘white and most often British settlers’” (2002, p. 89).

Canadian Perspectives on International Social Work

Canadian social workers and educators have undoubtedly played a leadership role in international development and social policy. Gilchrist, Ramsay, and Drover’s (2009) pioneering book *International Social Work: Canadian Perspectives* provides a much-needed synthesis of the role played by Canadian social workers in international social work. The authors document Canadian contributions to international social work pertaining to social justice, social development, social work practice, and social work education. In the introductory chapter, Drover & Rogers (2009) also note that Canada has been actively involved in International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and the UN Interregional Consultation on Developmental Social Welfare Policies and Programs. Canadian social work educators have played a significant role in IASSW’s international endeavors by serving on important committees and collaborating in research and intervention activities. Canadians have also assisted in locating resources for promoting social

work education and social development in the global South. Recently, Canada has actively participated in the reintroduction of social work in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Canadian leadership role in international organizations is particularly noteworthy, mainly the involvement in founding the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration in 1943, the World Health Organization and United Nations in 1945, and drafting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 (Drover & Rogers, 2009).

Canadian social work schools have played a significant role in internationalizing social work education. Since the 1990s, globalization has propelled the move towards internationalization not only in schools of social work, but more generally in universities in Western countries. Canadian schools of social work are currently involved in several models and forms of international work, with practicum placements abroad for field education being the most common activity. Canadian schools are also contributing to the advancement of social work education around the world. A distinctive Canadian contribution has been the theoretical articulation of structural social work and anti-oppressive practice. Whitmore and Wilson (2005) discuss the use of this approach by social workers in Latin America in their work with social movements that have emerged in response to neoliberal globalization. Canadian schools of social work are also involved in international development projects and multi-partnered international comparative research on various policies and programs. However, as Drover and Rogers (2009) note, infusion of international content throughout Canadian social work curriculum is limited. The University of Calgary has the only accredited MSW international social work specialization in Canada and has done so since 1996. Curriculum policy statements on international knowledge and the emphasis on the global context of social work are not widespread in Canadian schools. As such, understanding the international dimensions of social work and local-global connections does not figure in learning outcomes or core competencies of social work education in many Canadian schools (Drover & Rogers, 2009).

Moreover, as several social work educators have noted international collaboration and exchange programs overlook power issues between the global North and South, while paying little attention to local or indigenous knowledge. For Midgley (1990), the one-way flow of Western social work theories and methods to resource-poor countries in Africa, Asia, and South America is an example of professional imperialism. This unidirectional flow goes further into the area of overseas practica. While there have been several committed efforts to prepare and support Northern students for international exchanges and reflect on these experiences (e.g. Barlow, 2007; Lichtmannegger et al., 2010), few schools have international students coming to Canada as part of the international field program (Drover & Rogers, 2009). Razack (2002) writes internationalization is rooted in colonialism and imperialism, especially when the production of knowledge flows from North to South. Razack reminds us “traces of colonialism and imperialism linger because the flow of information is one-way from industrial to ‘developing’ nations” (2002, p. 255). Razack emphasizes Canadian social workers are not innocent onlookers who are not implicated in the terrible colonial histories and contemporary realities of the Third World. Likewise, Erica Haug (2005) expresses her concern that for Northerners to continue to go overseas to ‘help’ is not only unhelpful but presumptuous, paternalistic, and inherently problematic. She writes:

without critically questioning its place in the historical and contemporary dynamics of colonization, imperialism and Western hegemony, international social work [is] presented as a friendly, apolitical, ahistorical, cozy conversation in which participants merrily engage in mutual exchange, through conferences, journals or international work (in which primarily Western ‘experts’ teach or consult in non-Western countries) (p. 127).

Razack (2002) echoes Northerners are heavily implicated through globalization, transnationalism, and internationalization. As such, it becomes an ethical responsibility of Western social work to evaluate the direct and indirect global effects of local actions and the role that Western countries have played in maintaining poverty and oppression in other countries. In a similar vein, Heron (2007) traces colonial continuities in the recollections of white Canadian women who have worked in Africa. Heron (2007) reveals how the desire for development is about the making of self in terms that are highly raced, classed, and gendered. She exposes the moral core of this self and its perceived necessity to the ‘Other’. This notion of goodness in the construction of white female subjectivity is played out against the backdrop of North-South binary, in which Canada’s national narrative situates Canadians as the “good guys” of the world.

It is this national narrative and the construction of Canadian identity that I seek to further explore in this paper, since Canadian students, practitioners, and researchers carry this identity into their international work. I maintain that international social work would be hypocritical unless it begins with a critical self-examination of one’s own socio-economic location in the contemporary world order. The lens that this article adopts is critical in nature because, as noted writer Arundhati Roy (2004a, 2004b) has demonstrated, critique is a powerful vehicle for positive change – it has the power to move us to work towards a more just and equitable society. To facilitate analysis, I draw from several sources including post-colonial theorists such as Alberto Memmi (1965) and Ella Shohat (1997), critical race scholars such as Sherene Razack (2004), and those who explore national mythmaking such as Daniel Francis (1997) and Sunera Thobani (2007).

Situating Canadian Identity within North-South Relations

While the global North no longer exerts direct political rule, as Shohat (1997) observes, neo-colonial relations between the global North and global South persist in which formal political domination has been supplanted by control over social and economic resources.¹ Memmi (1965) emphasizes that although individuals may reject the implicit and explicit domination of the colonial arrangement, they are inescapably implicated in broader relations and practices from which they are unable to extricate themselves. Memmi’s and Shohat’s reflections on structural privilege of Northerners also apply to contemporary international social workers who are entrenched in globalized economic, citizenship, and bourgeois statuses relative to the

¹ I acknowledge that the dichotomy of global North and South simplifies complex realities such as the existence of pockets of poverty within the global North and the stratum of opulence in the global South. These complexities are the subject of analysis in a subsequent writing. However, I believe the recognition of persistent power inequalities between the global South and North is productive for my current analysis of international social work performed by Canadians, who are not underprivileged for the most part, at least in relation to the Southerners they attempt to ‘do’ social work on/for/with.

places that they practice social work in. The inequalities between the global North and the South not only provide a broad frame within which international social work takes place, but these inequalities make the very practice of international work possible through the resulting normative and institutionalized mobilities.

For instance, why is it that Canadians and Americans can easily practice social work in so-called developing countries and not the other way round? While we do have new immigrants from the global South employed in the field of social work in the so-called First World, seldom is their work recognized under the rubric of 'international social work'. Why is it that many people of color, from the global South who travel to the global North, even today get to hear slurs such as 'go back to where you came from,' whereas Northerners are welcomed, garlanded, almost worshipped for the most part when they travel to the global South? Why is it that while the credentials of Canadian social workers are recognized and looked upon in China, India, the Middle East etc, foreign credentials from these other countries are not recognized in Canada? Again, why do we have a world order where Canadians who travel to, say, India have to pay only one Canadian dollar to get 45 Indian Rupees, whereas a person from India has to pay 45 Rupees to get just one Canadian dollar to travel to Canada? International social work remains embedded in these inequalities of colonialism that continues in a neo-colonial global setting.

The financial capacity of Northerners to travel to the 'Third World' is achieved largely due to unequal relative currencies (Gogia, 2006). These relative currencies are not random – they are a continuation of historical colonial practices that exported raw materials to be resold to colonies at a profit to the colonial power (Sartre, 1964/2001). In contemporary times, the colonial arrangement continues through neo-liberal global markets and the operations of multinational corporations. As such, there is need for some critical analysis whether international social work reproduces structural inequalities by benefiting from unequal capital flows and asymmetrical mobilities.

The colonial legacies that contextualize international social work are not only economic, but also political. One example that affects international mobilities in asymmetrical ways is the unequal access to visas (Gogia, 2006). It is easier for Northerners/Canadians to obtain visas to travel to the global South than it is for Southerners to get required documents to travel to Canada, and more generally to the North. Choules (2006) describes the global privilege that is vested in citizenship, which, although domestically legislated, is exercised at international borders. National boundaries produce the notion of insiders and outsiders to the nation through formal representations of citizenship as well as through national identity-building practices (Choules, 2006; Mackey, 2002). The paper turns next to national identity-building in the Canadian context and implications for international social work by Canadians – an overlooked aspect in extant writings on Canadian international social work.

Deconstructing 'Canadian' National Identity

Benedict Anderson's (1983) famous work *Imagined Communities* reminds us that a nation is a group of people who share common illusions about themselves. Benedict Anderson contended that "the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the images of their

communion” (Anderson, 1983, p. 6). These images of communion are manifest in the stories that citizens of a nation tell about themselves. Investigating these national identity-building stories and practices in the Canadian context is a topic accomplished by few authors, most notably Daniel Francis (1997), Eva Mackey (2002), Sunera Thobani (2007), and Sherene Razack (2004), all of whom examine fundamental beliefs that Canadians hold about themselves. Francis (1997, p. 10) argues that mainstream Canadians spread across a vast land depend on what novelist William Gibson calls, “consensual hallucinations” more than any other nation in the world. Francis observes that mainstream Canadians embrace a civic ideology - a framework of ideas and aspirations that is represented in the adherence to certain public policies and institutions. The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), the social safety net, universal health care, and hockey – are all various elements of the Canadian civic ideology. Since the civic ideology is not a given, such as skin color or language, it is something that has to be constantly reinforced – a task undertaken by historians and history textbooks that explain the origin of our institutions and values. Francis surmises that out of this shared experience or storytelling of the past emerges a national identity that purportedly unites all Canadians and that appears to make them unique and different from, say, the South Africans, the Chinese, and above all, from the Americans.

Both Francis (1997) and Thobani (2007) indicate that national identities are founded upon certain myths. However, myths are not always lies; rather they are important images, stories, and legends that emerge from the nation’s history. Yet, myths can idealize (for instance in Canadian history such idealizations include the Mounties, the transcontinental railway, or the North). On the other hand, myths can also demonize. They can denigrate or marginalize anyone who is perceived to contravene the dominant cultural project – for instance, the native Indians, the communists, the activists, Quebec separatists, and today we might add Muslims, turban-wearing Sikhs, and anyone who appears to be of Middle-Eastern or South Asian descent.

Francis (1997) further observes that the collective memory of national myths is accompanied by its opposite – forgetfulness. He states “[a]s a community, we forget as much as we remember, and what we choose to forget tells as much about us as what we choose to remember” (1997, p. 11). For instance, generations of Canadians have celebrated the Canadian Pacific Railway as a symbol of national unity, forgetting that the railway was built mainly by using Chinese labor on land grabbed for close to nothing from the Indians. Mainstream national memory does not often recall that the successful, peaceful settlement of Canada by European newcomers was possible because vast number of the original inhabitants were wiped out by terrible plagues, while those who survived were forced onto the reserves and their children into residential schools (Loiselle, 2006). This holocaust is the most important piece of Canadian history because, after all, the Canadian state was built on the genocide of First Nations people (Thobani, 2007). Yet, most of us pay more attention to Canadian ‘peacekeeping,’ our uniqueness compared to the United States (U.S.), the official multicultural policy, and ‘aid’ to other countries rather than the apartheid and Holocaust on our own soil in terms of treatment of indigenous women, men, and children.

Canadians describe themselves as a ‘salad bowl’ – an all-inclusive cultural mosaic, forgetting that racism was and continues to be at the core of Canadian culture and institutions (McNally, 2006; Razack, 2004; Thobani, 2007). For one, as Mackey (2002) notes, the discourse

and policies of Canadian multiculturalism frame diverse cultures mainly as colorful marginal difference, which adds flavor to the larger society while also testifying to the tolerance that seemingly differentiates Canada from the U.S. However, in fact, official multiculturalism policy enables the dominant culture to remain unmarked as a de-ethnicized norm against which all other practices are marked as ‘cultural.’ Besides, the shift towards so-called multiculturalism, notes Sherene Razack (2004, p.134) “discourage[s] a more self-critical, historical approach and it limit[s] accountability” – accountability for the racial hierarchies that undergirds Canadian national mythology. The same racism that permeated Canadian attitudes towards First Nations people influences the treatment of almost anyone who does not belong to the white, Christian mainstream. Although many Canadians today may not believe in the myth of the master race, it has nonetheless left its indelible stamp that is evident in Canadian institutions and society.

Secondly, as Thobani (2007) observes, although the Canadian nation-state continues to portray itself to the world as a model multicultural society, the *September 11 Attacks*, exposed the limits of this particular self-exaltation (also see Fisk, 2006). The discourse of ‘terrorism’ in the media, as well as border control measures, racializes and dehumanizes the categories of ‘Muslim’ and ‘immigrant.’ In effect, this means that people of color that ‘look like Muslims’ – whether they are Arabs, Middle Easterners, or South Asians – are being constituted as ‘threats to national security,’ regardless of their legal status. The suspicions directed by nationals against all immigrants have been amplified - those who are black and brown-skinned, particularly males, are seen as unwanted aliens, threats and suspects; in various parts of Canada, they face ongoing hostility, sometimes envy, often hatred, and occasionally even hate crimes (Thobani, 2007).

Unfortunately, the famous Maher Arar case has been treated as an isolated incident where the RCMP got the ‘wrong’ man. Not surprisingly, the state and the media failed to interrogate their own complicity in the demonization of Maher Arar and subsequent cases. As Thobani (2007, p. 246) asserts, “[s]ensationalized reporting continues unabated, while unsubstantiated charges and anonymous allegations are repeated with an irresponsibility bordering on malice.” Unfortunately, Canadian social work, akin to much of Western feminism, has largely ignored these realities. While the Maher Arar case gained much publicity and led to a finale where he was rightfully compensated, those less eloquent or with less money and limited access to high-profile lawyers do not always see such endings to their trauma of police or state abuse and persecution. Most of the victims of police repression are new immigrants of color, and their experiences are not of much interest to mainstream Canadians, anyway, more so in an increasingly hostile climate to new immigrants.

Another profound myth in the Canadian national identity is that Canada is the ‘peacekeeper’ of the world. However, Sherene Razack (2004) puts forth a compelling and unsettling analysis of Canadian peacekeeping that is mired in racist violence and imperialism. Peacekeeping, writes Razack, imagines the international as a space where ‘civilized’ peoples from the North go to the South to fight with ‘evil’. Rooted in the colonial project, contemporary peacekeeping for many Westerners is Rudyard Kipling’s ‘white man’s burden’ that exhorts white men “to take up the thankless burden of meeting the needs of their ‘new-caught sullen peoples, / Half devil and half child’ (Razack, 2004, p. 4). Without reflecting on their implication in the terrible histories of the ‘Third World,’ Northerners view themselves as innocent parties carrying the white man’s burden of instructing and civilizing the natives. Razack mentions Canadians

have a deep sense of self as “the nicest people on earth, as [belonging to] a peacekeeping nation, and as modest, self-deprecating individual[s] who [are] able to gently teach Third World Others about civility” (2004, p. 9).

This national identity precludes, for instance, any introspection of Canadian military intervention in Afghanistan. While the rhetoric in North America is that the American and Canadian forces are emancipating Afghan women, one-sided North American media coverage has ignored that by mid-October 2001 more than 7.5 million Afghan civilians faced hunger and starvation (Carastathis, 2006). Carastathis also informs that by July 2006 the war had created 2.2 million refugees, 153,000 internally displaced people, and the deaths of more than 25,000 civilians. Indeed so-called ‘peacekeeping’ has regressed into war-making (Dobbin, 2008). Kolhatkar and Ingalls (2006) express outrage that Afghan women have not experienced better times and today many of the feared warlords occupy high offices in Afghanistan’s government that benefit from U.S. and Canadian aid.

As Sherene Razack (2004) suggests, the myths of ‘peacekeeping’ and ‘humanitarian’ efforts by Northerners coddle their sense of self as “civilized beings who inhabit ordered democracies, citizens who are called upon to look after... the uncivilized Other” (p. 155). Such activities allow us to maintain our sense of superiority. The notion of ‘peacekeeping’ hides the historical implications of colonialism or contemporary Western, including Canadian, support for policies of the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the World Trade Organization that have further impoverished the ‘Third World.’ McNally (2006) underscores that global debt and IMF/World Bank’s structural adjustment programs “have been enormous imperial hoses, siphoning wealth from the poorest nations to the richest. As a former director of the World Bank declared, ‘[n]ot since the conquistadors plundered Latin America has the world experienced a flow in the direction we see today’” (McNally, 2006, p. 229). Even most North American foreign ‘aid’ is a form of economic raid of the recipient countries (Podur, 2004; Walia, 2006). Much of Canadian foreign development aid has been termed “phantom aid” – aid that does not improve the lives it intends to – and includes spending on expensive technical assistance and tied aid. The latter – tied aid – is aid that must be spent in the donor country, thereby providing an indirect subsidy to Canadian corporations. Phantom aid accounts for over 50% of Canada’s aid spending and 47% of Canadian phantom aid is tied to spending in Canada (Walia, 2006). Critics have long noted that tied aid is part of the larger project of neo-liberalization and private sector development (Ahmed, 2006; Gough & Sharma, 1973). For instance, in a multilateral global effort, Canada pushed Bangladesh to set up Export Processing Zones (EPZs) in 1978. EPZs allow sweatshops to operate outside the realm of national labor laws. Funding from the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) facilitated partnerships between local private enterprises and foreign businesses, which gave multinational corporations access to Bangladesh’s burgeoning garment markets at the expense of local small-scale industries (Walia, 2006).

The story about the First World assisting the Third World, whether through peacekeeping or aid, serves to conceal the link between racism and First World dominance. While racism was initially used to control bonded labor in the plantations, it later became the underlying ideology of classical imperialism, legitimizing violence and plunder of the colonies on an unprecedented scale (McNally, 2006). Today, racism still undergirds the corporate plunder of Third World

resources and flooding of Third World markets by western goods that go by the name of 'development' and 'globalization' (see Bracking, 2007; George, 1997). In this backdrop, instances of trans-border harm abound. Canadian registered mining companies have long been involved in numerous mining operations in Africa, Asia, and Latin America that have led to gross violations of human rights and plundering of minerals and other resources (Arsenault, 2006; Gordon & Webber, 2008; Lindsay, 2006; Paley, 2007a, 2007b; Razack, 2004; Russell, 2007). Southern countries are seen as dumping grounds for toxic wastes, hazardous chemicals and fertilizers, and even contraceptives that are banned in the North (Bidwai, 1995; Shah, 2005; Stebbins, 1992). Poor women in 'developing countries' continue to be used as guinea pigs in contraceptive and other medical experiments that are often funded by the North (Hans, 2006).

Implications for Canadian International Social Work Education, Research, and Practice

If international social work is to adhere to the principles of socio-economic justice and anti-oppression, it cannot overlook the injustices that stem from its own country or region of origin. This is not to say the global South is innocent or free of corruption and other malaise; however, a more critical and balanced analysis of cross-national social problems is required than has hitherto taken place.

Like any other nationality, Canadians bring their own ideologies, values, and beliefs to international social work. Most Canadians/westerners, who embark upon international social work, view themselves as compassionate people living in one of the best places on earth who are out to 'help' others less privileged. While these intentions are laudable, we cannot overlook that most international social work practice, research, and education occurs within the broader context of power inequalities between the North and the South and deep-seated (often sub-conscious) Western worldviews of racial superiority and beliefs in the 'civilizing mission'.

As international social workers, ignoring unjust and inhumane policies and practices that originate on our own soil would be antithetical to Social Work Code of Ethics. Social work in the international arena must be as much about our own process of examining and unlearning historical myths that we carry within ourselves. Whenever I have challenged some North American/Canadian ways of thinking in classroom settings, students have mentioned they are taught since childhood that the 'North American way is the best way'! As educators, I contend it is our responsibility to use what some have referred to as the 'reverse mission' approach (Abram & Cruce, 2007), to enable our students to self-examine their national and regional fantasies first before they view other countries and cultures through the lens of these constructed myths.

A good first step in this direction is critical analysis of Canadian identity, national narratives and worldviews that most mainstream Canadian students bring to social work classrooms. Likewise, Canadian faculty and researchers, who proclaim the mission of social justice, must begin with a critical self-examination of what it means to be a Canadian and ask uncomfortable questions about how their own lifestyles, as well as Canadian government and corporate policies and actions, continue to affect the global South, particularly the livelihoods, health, and environment of various communities. It is heartening to note that there is increasing awareness and sensitivity about such issues; yet Canadian social workers have immense scope to translate good intentions into meaningful actions such as lobbying, networking, and advocacy at

local, national, regional, and supranational levels to prevent and redress trans-border harm and to promote global socio-economic justice.

Concluding Thoughts

Undoubtedly, in ways more than one, the global North continues to benefit from the knowledge, cultural, and economic resources of the global South. Historically, international relations have been characterized by an alarming level of exclusion, disenfranchisement, and socio-economic injustices that continue to the present day (see Hiranandani, 2007; McNally, 2006). The pressing question, then, that Canadian social workers can no longer overlook is when, how, and in what ways will they address power differential between the South and the North.

This manuscript has contended that international social workers from Canada (and, for that matter, from any nation) must engage in a deeper analysis of the construction of their own national identity and nation-building practices before embarking upon global social justice work. It is imperative that we set our own house in order first and connect the dots between our own ideologies, domestic, and foreign policies, and the fate of the 'Third World' if we wish to make a lasting impact on poverty and injustice around the globe.

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