Editorial

Positive boundary-crossing in social work

Welcome to the annual edition of *Sociální Práce/ Sociálna Práca*, the Czech and Slovak Journal of Social Work in English. Each year, the Journal publishes a number of papers in English in a special edition like this, and in its quarterly editions. If you want to propose a paper for this edition in 2014, you send an abstract to the editors by 30th June. Most of the papers report research and scholarship by Czech and Slovak writers about social work practice and research in their countries, and by writers from other countries discussing material of interest to Czech and Slovak social workers and researchers. In doing so, the authors are communicating across cultural, linguistic and national boundaries affecting social work, but they are also crossing boundaries in other ways. In doing so, their work symbolises the need to think flexibly in social work practice and policy. In this editorial, I explore the purpose and role of positive boundary-crossing in social work, illustrated by the contribution that papers in this edition make to our thinking.

Most contributions to professional and academic journals are written in a particular administrative, legal and social context and within particular cultural and professional traditions. A reader outside those contexts and traditions makes a cultural transfer to their own context and tradition, and writers may facilitate or hinder that transfer (Payne and Askeland, 2008). Writers can specify the particular cultural, professional and social factors characteristics that colour the particular forms of social work and social provision in their setting. In doing this, they alert readers to think: how is that different from experience in the cultural and social setting where I practise?

Aware of the requirement to make translations, readers can seek out in papers potential restrictions in cultural transfer to alert them to the need to translate a paper to their own context. The wise writer and reader will approach material from a different cultural and national context with caution, recognising that limitations may be hidden. It is considered good research practice to explain how the limitations of the methods used in a piece of research will affect the extent to which we may generalise from their findings. In the same way, since social work is a field of research and practice that depends strongly on cultural and social setting, it should be considered good practice to describe the limitations of that setting on the findings.

The analysis by Horák, Horáková and Sirovátko of recent trends and changes in Czech social services in the European context using comparative material on social care services for children and older people is an explicitly cross-national comparison. Its comparative focus suggests that social workers need to look in the provision of other nations to understand potential alternatives in social provision in their own. But wider boundary-crossing is also an important possibility. The message to practitioners is that they must cross the boundary from their
everyday practice with children or older people to incorporate awareness and responsiveness to the funding and management of their services. It is easy to say that another country provides more resources for a particular client group and press for change to level up to that standard of provision. Or we can say that it organises services in a different way, allowing us to assert the need for new priorities. But we can also ask how funding and management interact, and whether they need to. How far do expenditure trends and policy pressures support each other? Or are they in tension? And is there a further tension with practice needs? Positive boundary-crossing can increase our opportunities to draw implications and guidance from the papers presented here to extend our thinking. In dealing with two usually separated client groups, this paper raises further questions. How far does our society set children and older people against each other in a battle for resources? Or can improved practice or policies for children’s services generate ideas that may be transferred to improve practice and services for older people too?

We can seek opportunities for positive boundary-crossing in other papers presented in this special edition. Vontorová’s paper on the self-sufficiency of older people on discharge from hospital identifies several boundaries. One is the professional boundary between a healthcare speciality, geriatrics, and social work. It also refers to the institutional boundary between hospital and social care; different but perhaps related. Another issue arises as people move away from self-sufficiency towards dependence on public services. This movement is solidified by shifts in the use of services: from family or community support to formal services, from healthcare to social care provision, from the particular of medical diagnosis and treatment to the generality of social responsiveness.

One way of understanding this has been the development of integrated care pathways as part of our services (Schrijvers, van Hoorn, and Huiskes, 2012) In this model of interagency practice, a typical journey of a client through the care system is identified, and the role of agencies at each point specified. We can see clients as progressing through a series of gateways, with a particular professional or agency responsible for assessing and deciding on access to the next element of the service. But is such an arrangement too linear? It neglects the reality that frail older people usually have multiple health conditions, so that seeing their needs as following one pathway may mean that we do not see them as whole people, whose differing health and social care needs interact. It also assumes that the older person will only experience decline in their lives, rather than improvement and development. Are all our pathways for older people assumed to be towards frailty?

On the other hand, do we value self-sufficiency too much? And why is this? Perhaps the focus on maintaining self-sufficiency does not value mutual dependence between mothers and daughters or between spouses. Or perhaps we focus on self-sufficiency because we do not want to pay the full social costs of the health and social decline that older people may experience. And perhaps our rejection of decline reflects our own ambivalence about aging. In adult life, we want to remain independent and avoid dependence on others, so we demand that older people should struggle for independence, rather than allow us to value supportive and caring relationships in our society.

Seeing related papers from different sources emphasises that concerns may be shared across boundaries and also helps us to look at the same topic through different cultural lenses. Two papers, one from the USA and one from Ružomberok in northern Slovakia, explore different aspects of ‘moral work’ in social work. Many social workers do not consider ‘moral work’ as part of their professional function, yet making moral decisions is often seen as integral to social work actions in public perception and social policy. This is because social work decisions that do not connect with wider social perceptions of moral appropriateness may lead to social work being seen as misguided (Payne, 1999). Bibus, an American social work teacher, reviews the relevance of ideas from virtue ethics in Applying approaches from moral philosophy, especially virtue ethics, when facing ethical dilemmas in social work. He shows how striking ideas can be relevant to social workers in different nations, and his case study demonstrates how commonplace experiences as we practise social work can speak to us from a distant country. Lajčiaková’s
research into ‘moral competence’ reported in her paper Social work students’ moral judgement competence draws out the relevance of moral judgment to competent social work practice and demonstrates both the possibility and the need to explore this in social work education and practice, when perhaps doing moral work would have been outside readers’ assumptions about the role of social work.

Pešáková, in her paper on Violence against Men also challenges an assumptive boundary: when looking at intimate partner violence, we take it for granted that it is men who are the violent ones, and women the oppressed. There is evidence, which perhaps has been underplayed, that men are subjected to violence, too. And if this happens when everyone assumes that it is usually men who are violent, Pešáková asks what this may mean for them. Is it harder to believe that men are oppressed in intimate relationships because they are often physically bigger and more muscular than women? If men are assumed to be more prone to an aggressive temperament, what does this mean for men whose temperament is otherwise? More broadly, do we focus only on some forms of violence, neglecting others? What are assumptions about the way intimate relationships should be?

Matulayová and Pešatová, writing about Social Workers in Schools also raise questions more widely than their apparently restricted focus. Social workers in schools are working in a secondary setting, that is, social work is not the leading profession and its objectives are not the main purpose of a school; it contributes in the support of educational objectives. This is true of social work in many other settings, in hospitals, clinics, prisons, housing services and social security, and working with many other professions. It may even be true of social work more generally. Is social provision secondary to the main roles of government services? Is social work secondary to providing broader social services, such as housing or social security? Is social provision secondary to private sector services that people pay for in the market?

Social work practitioners can therefore ask themselves: what can we learn in our secondary setting from how school social workers deal with their secondary position in schools? And we can ask about schools (and other secondary settings):

are the apparently clear main educational objectives hiding social aims such as promoting social cohesion and social justice which should be drawn out and made clear? A school that creates social divisions and conflicts among its students in the cause of academic achievement does not contribute to wider educational aims of encouraging social cooperation and respect. Social workers in secondary settings often personify hidden social objectives and their engagement in the life of a secondary agency signifies a commitment to those aims.

A healthcare service contributes to an unhealthy society if it treats illness in isolation from the social needs of the sick person’s family and community. Employing social workers accepts the responsibility of specialist services to have a concern for the social. If social work accepts such roles, it is important to understand and make real this aspect of carrying out its role through exploration of the implications of social work practice in every practice setting.

Positive boundary-crossing, as well as comparative material, then shows how contributions to knowledge that are apparently specialist can stimulate us to think more widely and inform a more flexible and critical practice and knowledge base in social work.

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Bibliography