



Transnational social workers in statutory child welfare: A scoping review



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ABSTRACT

Internationally, child welfare services experience chronic workforce shortages and high rates of staff turnover. One strategy adopted to fill critical workforce gaps is the international recruitment of social workers. Child welfare employers in Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom have a shared tradition of recruiting transnational social workers to address ongoing labour shortages in the Northern and Southern Hemisphere. This raises questions about the impact of this practice for those migrating social workers and about practice with indigenous populations. This paper scoped publications to identify emerging themes about social work movement between these countries, with a focus on knowledge that can prepare transnational social workers for the unique Australian context, including working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. The review found that international recruitment to statutory child welfare in Australia is not well researched, with limited evidence about the profile of recruits, the effectiveness of this strategy and retention rates. The demographics and experiences of overseas qualified social workers in child welfare over the past 40 years in the various Australian jurisdictions remain relatively unknown. There are major gaps in knowledge about the ways international recruitment affects outcomes for children, and their families, in Australia's statutory child welfare services delivery.

1. Introduction

1.1. Child welfare workforce challenges

For decades, research across continents has reported challenging workforce demands in child welfare. Some countries experience chronic difficulty in attracting and retaining qualified professionals in what is known to be a complex and emotionally demanding field of social work practice (Hunt, Goddard, Cooper, Littlechild, & Wild, 2016; Littlechild et al., 2016; Lizano & Mor Barak, 2012; Travis, Lizano, & Mor Barak, 2016). The literature suggests that high staff turnover has an impact on response to the needs of those children and families that depend on a competent and stable workforce (Burns & Christie, 2013; Dickinson & Painter, 2009; Gibbs, 2009; Gomez, Travis, Ayers-Lopez, & Schwab, 2010; LaFa Agbényiga, 2009; Madden, Scannapieco, & Painter, 2014; Mor Barak, Levin, Nissly, & Lane, 2006; Tham & Meagher, 2009). These issues in statutory child welfare are evident in Australia, where a career in child protection is not attractive to sufficient social workers. Australian research illustrates that child welfare departments across the nation face challenges in recruiting and retaining qualified staff, particularly in remote and regional areas

(Bromfield & Holzer, 2008; Hansen & Ainsworth, 2013; Healy & Lonne, 2010; Lonne, Harries, & Lantz, 2012; McArthur, Thomson, Barker, Winkworth, & Campus, 2012; Scott, 2010).

1.2. The Australian context

Australia is a federation of states without a national approach to statutory child welfare. Each state and territory has its own child welfare legislation and service provision approach (Healy & Oltedal, 2010). Social work in Australia has no formal licensing arrangement and is currently a self-regulated profession, as such it is not subject to government regulation unlike the United Kingdom (UK) and New Zealand (Lonne & Duke, 2008; Martin & Healy, 2010; Tilbury, Hughes, Bigby, & Osmond, 2015). The community service sector, a key site for employment of social workers in Australia, is a large and growing sector. Despite its importance to the citizens, relatively little detail is known about the social work workforce and the challenges it is facing (Healy & Lonne, 2010). It is noted that for child welfare service delivery, the least experienced workers hold responsibility for the demanding and complex task to assess the risk of child abuse (Healy, Meagher, & Cullin, 2009).

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In Australia's history, social workers were the executors and arbitrators of racist policies affecting the Indigenous people of Australia from the late 19th century to the 1970s. Social workers played a role in the implementation of government policies, such as assimilationist policies, which resulted in what are now referred to as the Stolen Generations. The Stolen Generations are the children of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who were forcibly removed from their families and communities from the late 1800s to the 1970s (Briskman, 2007). This history has resulted in a deep sense of dislocation and loss of cultural connection with land and family for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and may result in social workers being mistrusted by them (Bennett, 2015; Bennett, Zubrzycki, & Bacon, 2011; Briskman, 2007). In Australia high rates of racial disparity continue, with indigenous children seven times more likely to receive a child welfare service than non-indigenous children (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2017; Delfabbro, Hirte, Rogers, & Wilson, 2010).

1.3. Social work mobility

Social work mobility is a worldwide phenomenon reflecting demand from employer organisations experiencing workforce shortages. This mobility offers opportunities for working abroad, adventure and an international social work career (Lyons & Heugler, 2012). Professional social work migration appears to be common between the UK, New Zealand and Australia, relying on historic links of colonialization, a shared language, pre-existing social and familial networks (Evans, Huxley, & Munroe, 2006; Hanna & Lyons, 2016; Hussein, Manthorpe, & Stevens, 2010). A similar trend is evident in Europe (Hanna & Lyons, 2011; Simpson, 2009; Zanca & Misca, 2016) and Canada (Pullen-Sansfaçon, Brown, & Graham, 2012; Sansfaçon, Brown, Graham, & Michaud, 2014). Qualified and experienced staff are recruited across national borders by these countries to protect the most vulnerable in society; children who are at risk of abuse and neglect (Fouche, Beddoe, Bartley, & de Haan, 2013; Hanna & Lyons, 2014; Lyons, 2006; Welbourne, Harrison, & Ford, 2007; Zubrzycki, Thomson, & Trevithick, 2008).

The Australian Government Job Outlook forecasts a strong, above average growth in demand for social workers by 2020 (Australian Government, 2017). There exists an undersupply of professionally qualified social workers to meet current growth and the existing workforce is aging (Healy & Lonne, 2010). The Australian Association of Social Work (AASW) is experiencing a steady increase of overseas qualification assessments, most commonly for social workers trained in the UK and New Zealand. The increased number of social workers seeking AASW membership eligibility can be seen as a further indication that internationally qualified social workers are in demand in Australia (Australian Association of Social Workers, 2010b). At least four of Australia's eight states and territories use the strategy of overseas recruitment to a greater or lesser extent (McArthur et al., 2012). Despite this use of overseas recruitment across Australia, there is little research investigating the effectiveness of this approach (Zubrzycki et al., 2008), including its impact on retention and quality benchmarks and the return on investment of this costly strategy (Cummins, Scott, & Scales, 2012; Healy et al., 2009; Martin & Healy, 2010; McArthur et al., 2012).

1.4. The western foundation of social work practice

Working in a new country requires sociocultural transitioning and an understanding of the social structure and welfare system of the host country, including the service network and organisational context (Fouché, Beddoe, Bartley, & Parkes, 2015). The AASW Code of Ethics states that social workers will participate in developing and implementing not only culturally competent but also culturally safe and sensitive practice (Australian Association of Social Workers, 2010b, p. 8). Practice in the Australian child welfare context calls for social

workers to have awareness and understanding of Australian indigenous communities past and present. Applying for recognition of overseas qualifications or professional licensing, however, is not required for social work practice in Australia. In contrast, in New Zealand competence to practice with Maori people is part of the required assessment and registration process (Social Work Registration Board, 2016).

The impact of colonisation reverberates across generations of indigenous peoples worldwide. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples continue to experience denial of their culture and identity as well disproportionate level of child protection intervention in their communities (Bamblett, Harrison, & Lewis, 2010). In Australia, racism towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is a reality, even if unintentional (Muller, 2016). Social work derives its knowledge from western philosophical traditions, valuing humanism, rationalism and objectivism as universal. With the spread of social work internationally, other ways of knowing may have been unrecognised, ignored or oppressed (Young & Zubrzycki, 2011). The dominant discourse within social work appears to take for granted western foundations and fails to acknowledge other philosophical traditions and indigenous knowledge (Webbi, Parada, George, & Lessa, 2014; Young & Zubrzycki, 2011).

1.5. Current study

This paper reports a scoping study of the current literature on transnational social workers practicing in child welfare, defined as professionals who have been trained outside the country they work in and utilise their social work training across borders (Hussein, 2014). Social work mobility is evident across the globe and in Australia, New Zealand and the UK, recruitment of internationally qualified social workers has become a strategy to meet staffing demands in statutory services (Bartley, Beddoe, Fouché, & Harington, 2012; Hanna & Lyons, 2016; Hussein, Stevens, Manthorpe, & Moriarty, 2011; McArthur et al., 2012; Zubrzycki et al., 2008). Scoping studies are useful when considering a broad topic that has not been comprehensively researched by analysing a wide range of research. It is anticipated that this will lead to a greater conceptual clarity to inform practice and provide direction for future research in the emerging area of transnational social work practice (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005; Colquhoun et al., 2014; Davis, Drey, & Gould, 2009).

1.6. Research questions

In reporting on the results of the scoping review on transnational social work practice, we aim to increase knowledge about this phenomenon and apply this to the Australian context. The review focused on peer reviewed publications to address the following questions:

1. What are the personal and professional experiences of transnational social workers migrating between Australia, New Zealand and the UK? How can this knowledge be applied to the Australian child welfare workforce?
2. In what ways are transnational social workers ready to practice with indigenous communities?

2. Methods

The approach taken is a scoping review, mapping existing knowledge to issues relevant for transnational social work experience and the Australian context of child welfare practice. This scoping literature review is based on the framework proposed by Arksey and O'Malley (2005), and consisted of five stages: (1) identifying the research question, (2) identifying relevant studies, (3) study selection, (4) charting the data and (5) collating, summarising and reporting results. The method of a narrative synthesis is suited to the appraisals of qualitative studies, utilising an iterative and conceptual approach that emphasises the importance of developing a critique based on credibility and

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