

Lunch Time Talk: Research messages from Singapore: Social Work and Social Issues



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Reflecting



- I must express my appreciation from the outset:
 - To SSTI (of course).
 - To the SASW (I am a member).
 - To our students (I really enjoy them).
 - To our tutors (who are just terrific).
 - To the Singaporean research respondents (they made the research possible).

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This Presentation

- Overview of the BSW Singapore
- Summary of literature
- Overview of the research methodology
- Presenting the findings from the research
- Suggesting some implications for:
 - Social work in Singapore
 - The nature of social issues in Singapore.

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Beginnings

- I had made a few visits to Singapore mainly as a traveler 'in transit'.
- Singapore was a great place for a stopover.
- But I knew little of its history and its people; and even less about its social issues and social work.

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The BSW Programme

- The origins rest in an approach from Government in 2001.
- The first students commenced their studies in late 2003 and the degree programme commenced in 2004.
- Our first students course completed in 2005 and formally graduated in 2006.
- Honours was introduced in 2007.

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The BSW Programme

- The degree is fully accredited by both the AASW and the SASW – a ‘first’ for an Australian social work education programme.
- The course equips graduates for practice in a wide range of contexts.
- The decision to introduce the Monash programme was not without its controversies, the nature of which go to the heart of debates about international social work.

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The Research

- I undertook PhD studies broadly to review the programme.
- The research represented a major change of direction for me – my background was child protection practice.
- I was new to academia and social work education.

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The Research Respondents

- The research had Ethics approval from the SASW and Monash University Ethics Committee.
- All research respondents were Singaporean:
 - They were from peak bodies able to comment on social issues
 - They were tutors and leading practitioners.
 - They were BSW Singapore graduates.

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The Research Question

How should an Australian University introduce a social work education programme into a different cultural context? What are the historical, contemporary and policy trends and issues in the host and recipient countries (in this case Australia and Singapore) which influence and shape the delivery of a particular programme in an offshore context?

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The Answer (My Experience)

- 1% inspiration and 99% perspiration!

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The Answer (Seriously)

- There is need for thorough review of the historical and contemporary setting of the host and recipient country.
- An understanding of the perspective of the recipient country.
- The formation of relationships between key players in the host and recipient counties.

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Insights from Literature Review

- Globalisation is a worldwide phenomena but a contested concept.
- Globalisation represents a new relationship between nation states and the rest of the world (Mullard 2004).
- There is a view that in the latter part of the C20th there has been a downgrading of the social, allowing ascendancy of markets and economics (Gough 2001).

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Insights from Literature Review

- Higher education has always had an international flavour but in the past decade more students have elected to study internationally (OECD 2004 & 2006).
- Australia has expanded international education significantly since the late 1980s.
- In Singapore there are policies seeking to become a regional educational hub (Sidhu 2005).

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Insights from Literature Review

- Both Australia and Singapore have a colonial past and are largely modeled on the Westminster approach to government and governance.
 - Australia has a residual approach to welfare provision, historically having been the *wage earner's welfare state* (Castles 1985). Benefits are gained through employment and wages and social security exists as a safety net only (Castles 1985).
 - Singapore has eschewed a welfare state but Government is a major provider of infrastructure and services and is a major economic and social actor (Smyth 2000; Ghesquiere 2007).

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Insights from Literature Review

- All societies, throughout history have developed some provision to help individuals, communities and families facing difficulties.
- Charity and help for the poor has been a characteristic of all societies (Payne 2005).
- Social work began to emerge in the late 1800s, as a means of responding both to the conditions of the poor and to anxiety about social disorder (Payne 2005).

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Insights from Literature Review

- Social work models are largely Western in their origin.
- Social work approaches are largely individual in their focus vested in models of charity and remedial action.
- Both in many contexts, the problems are not so much a consequence of individual (in)action as wider social concerns such as poverty and under-development.

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Comparing the Contexts

<i>Issue</i>	<i>Australia</i>	<i>Singapore</i>
Globalisation	Constructed primarily in economic terms. Deregulation of markets to enhance competitiveness.	A challenge to be confronted and many challenges for the workforce and workforce planning.
Higher education	A primary goal of wealth creation.	Workforce planning and streaming of students.
Conceptualization of the welfare state	Relatively minimal with emphasis on a safety net.	Singapore cannot afford a welfare state but significant expenditure in health, housing and education.
Conceptualization of social work	Concerned with direct client work. Also advocacy, policy, lobbying and research.	Counseling and therapy, minimal lobbying and minimal policy development.

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Comparing the Contexts

<i>Issue</i>	<i>Australia</i>	<i>Singapore</i>
Identification of social issues	Active commentators but some resistance from government.	Public debate is generally not encouraged except where government has identified the topic.
The pursuit of advocacy	An ambivalent attitude but some tolerance for advocacy.	There is some tolerance but advocacy does not appear a recognized role of social work.
Approaches to research	A general view that internationalization (of education) is the way to expand research.	Social work research appears not to have achieved a high priority and generally education is to meet workforce demands.

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Research Methodology

- The research was qualitative and a case study approach.
- The research, as it unfolded, raised significant considerations as to the role of the researcher – apart from the research or a part of it?
- There was much insight and information derived from presence in Singapore:
 - Anecdotal information from conversations;
 - Reading of student incident reports over a five year period.

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Pressing Social Issues (1): The Welfare State

“I would oppose it [the welfare state] ... it would make us too comfortable ...” Respondent 2

“Singapore has subscribed to not developing a ‘crutch mentality’ ...as well there is fear around complacency....” Respondent 3

“Government is responsive to need ... there is public assistance available to those needing it .. But there is debate whether this is adequate ...” Respondent 4

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Pressing Social Issues (1): The Welfare State

- Does this mean the primary issue is resistance to direct cash transfers?
- Does it mean that CPF (with recent amendments) is viewed as being able to meet need?
- Does this mean that skills upgrading remains the most appropriate option?
- Does this mean Government will remain responsive (and be able to finance this) to individual need?

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Pressing Social Issues (2): The Family

- The literature suggested a high level of communitarianism and collective orientation but the research:

“Values are changing with globalisation ... families used to be close knit but they are now more distant and there is a decrease in family support networks ...” Respondent 2

“We think about ourselves alone ... outside our class status our family ... we do not care” Respondent 6

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Pressing Social Issues (2): The Family

- There are changing family structures and family expectations:

“some of the key issues include the break up of the family, decreased parental control over children ... this all stems from the erosion of family values and parents not being in a position to carry out their responsibilities ...” Respondent 8

“many younger people are opting for divorce ... this may not be a problem if there are no children” Respondent 2.

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Pressing Social Issues (2): The Family

- there are concerns about the future:
- there are concern about reliance on foreign labour for child care:

“with the care of young children the child often becomes more attached to the domestic worker than the parent ... children experience significant upheaval when the domestic worker departs” Respondent 1

- There are concerns about the future:

“can the family hold.” Respondent 4

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Pressing Social Issues (3): Social Cohesion

- Economic growth is the key to cohesion.
- Foreign professionals are *different* and have the potential to undermine social cohesion:

“foreign talents believe themselves superior ... they look down on Singaporeans who may have come from different castes ...” Respondent 3

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Pressing Social Issues (3): Social Cohesion

- Racial harmony is important but there is evidence of discrimination:

“there is still discrimination ... the darker your skin, the more the discrimination” Respondent 10

- There is a need to improve responses to foreign labour and foreign domestic workers:

“[Singapore] is a compassionate society but it is also very racist. Singaporeans do feel sorry if a foreign worker is stranded ... they come forward to help but still do not want them in my area”
Respondent 7

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Pressing Social issues (3): Social Cohesion

“basically Singapore is harmonious It has a long history of multi-racial living and all but Malays are in fact immigrants. So it is about helping to promote understanding of the impact and implications of immigration” Respondent 3

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Pressing Social Issues (4): Gap between Rich and Poor

- The issue is not about food and shelter but the extent to which all Singaporeans can enjoy a similar standard of living:

“...there is an issue of the working poor ... that is where income is below S\$1500 per month ...” Respondent 4

- There is potential for the gap to follow ethnic lines which in turn has implications for racial harmony:

“..it is difficult to match the Chinese but this must be done in order to be part of the nation; otherwise there will become known as an underclass. If there emerges an underclass then there will be more problems....” Respondent 3

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Pressing Social Issues (5): Foreign Labour

“there have always been foreign workers ...they were never a problem Migrant workers were never a concern of social work ... they continue not to be a concern ...” Respondent 7

“there is a major issue with changing demographics, specifically the presence of foreigners.... Foreign professionals that are leading local [Singaporean] graduates to feel they are not good enough ...” Respondent 3

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Pressing Social Issues (6): Other

- **Integrated resorts:**
 - As yet the nature of problems are not clear/known.
 - Will the planned responses be adequate?
- **Volunteerism:**
 - There is a *Many Helping Hands* philosophy but there are difficulties in attracting volunteers.
 - There are also issues around support and training.
- **Dysfunctional families:**
 - These are families with multiple difficulties for whom no single agency can respond.
 - There is a lack of Singapore specific analysis in the literature.

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Social Work in Singapore

- The research respondents did not have any specific views concerning the application of Australian social work education to the Singapore context.
- This was 'at odds' with some of the literature which, as a whole, is concerned with the indigenization of practice and considers this an imperative for local social work.

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Social Work in Singapore (contd).

- There are challenges for the promotion of social justice.

“Social work is weak in community work and advocacy ... social work continues to conceptualize social work as casework” Respondent 7

- There are challenges regarding structural analysis.

“The issues are clearly structural ... and the need is for action stopping at food and shelter is not enough” Respondent 7

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Social Work in Singapore (contd).

- There are challenges for social workers engaging in policy development:

“These [policy] skills are not so important ...but they do need to recognize how policy can impact on the ground” Respondent 2

“It is unrealistic to expect beginning social workers to be able to develop policies .. social workers should have a knowledge of policy and be able to understand the overall policy and rationale” Respondent 5

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Social Work in Singapore (contd).

- The research did not specifically set out to explore the indigenization of social work (for/in Singapore). It was, however, anecdotal feedback that gave rise to some insights about this:
 - In essence social workers in Singapore are trained in Western models but practitioners have emphasized that these may be modified to ‘fit’ local demands.
 - There is a need to articulate and document what is going on with this regard and to develop the ‘uniquely Singapore brand’!

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Equipping Graduates

- The research focused on the Monash programme but there are some important messages for social work education more broadly.
- But a major message from the research was:

“I do not think employers are worried about the source of the qualification ...” Respondent 11

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Equipping Graduates

“They need a good understanding of the culture ...” Respondent 3

“There is need for cross-cultural sensitivity ...” Respondent 4

“They need to carry the attitude of a professional ... they need to have a good attitude towards self and society” Respondent 5

“They need to be able to conduct good basic assessments ... they need good organizational skills and community organization and programme management skills” Respondent 5

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Equipping Graduates

“The role of social work is under valued ... one reason is that the value is placed on professions [such as] doctors and lawyers that have higher status and higher salaries”

Respondent 1

“Its really about learning on the job ...” Respondent 12

“[Students] struggle to take on new knowledge and to integrate it. Specifically .. How do they make sense of the different perspectives” Respondent 3

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Researching Singapore

- The literature review that underpinned the development of the thesis was reliant on material from disciplines such as sociology, law, education etc.

“There is not much [social work] material available about the Singapore context Singapore does not do research”

Respondent 11

“There is need to increase research from the social work perspective in Singapore ... students should be encouraged to write about their experiences and to build practice knowledge” Respondent 10

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Some Future Challenges (1)

- There are challenges for foreign Universities (in this case Monash) to fully internationalize the curriculum.
- Equally there is a challenge for the social work profession in Singapore to build its evidence base through research - this means practitioners writing about their experiences as well as formal academic research.

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Some Future Challenges (2)

- There is a specific challenge for the SASW and the sector in terms of meeting demand:

There are competencies [to be demonstrated] ... but there is need to be pragmatic as one of the issues is that there is not enough [qualified] social workers to offer supervision ... many existing supervisors are not social work trained. As well, many social workers leave due to pregnancy and child rearing arrangements ... part time arrangements are not necessarily satisfactory .. (Respondent 5).

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Some Future Challenges (3)

- The social work that emerged in the 1950s was characterized by a small number of social workers but great enthusiasm (Braga *et al.* 1961).
- One focus was to debate whether Western models of social work could apply to Singapore (University of Malaya 1956).
- Early social work education was concerned with indigenization of practice to meet local needs (Wee 2002).

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Some Future Challenges (4)

- Within the context of indigenization some challenges include:
 - Whether there can be continued reliance on people meeting their own needs (Low & Aw 2004)?
 - How to manage a rising gap between rich and poor (Lim 2007; Neo & Chen 2007)?
 - How to manage an ageing population (Tay 2003) and the associated pressures on the healthcare system (Asher & Nandy 2006)?
 - Can there be continued reliance on foreign labour?
 - How will susceptibility to threats that originate elsewhere be managed (Tan 2007)?

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In Conclusion

- Social work in Singapore emerged at a time when social problems were pressing and urgent.
- Contemporary social services provision, arguably, are a product of the crisis through which modern Singapore was born and the interplay of Confucian tradition, the Colonial past, and specific political imperatives.
- The dominant framework was the need to Singapore to be well organized, efficient and internationally competitive (Neo & Chen 2007).

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In Conclusion

- I have developed a love for Singapore, its achievements, its people and my social work colleagues some of whom are/were my students.
- I have a high regard for the social services sector – it is grappling with the various issues just as we Australians are doing.
- I have developed a passion for international social work – by this I mean looking outside my own frame of reference in a bid to develop understanding from other perspectives.
- I hope to be a part of the social work scene in Singapore into the future.

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