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New challenges for urban social work and urban social work research

Nieuwe uitdagingen voor stedelijk sociaal werk en stedelijk sociaal werk onderzoek

Dirk Geldof

Most European cities have been, and still are, faced with a strong increase of inhabitants with other ethnic backgrounds. Globalization has increased the processes of migration during the last three decades, especially to urban areas. These processes are changing cities and their social landscape profoundly, not least because many migrants are being confronted with structural social exclusion. Consequently this evolution becomes one of the most important challenges for urban social work. One of the targets of social work research in an urban context in Europe is the need to interculturalize the way social work operates. In this article I explore how this increasing ethnic diversity is becoming one of the main challenges for urban social work. Specific methodologies are required to reach empowerment objectives with the diversity of citizens in urban contexts. Reflecting on a selection of cases, the article explores theoretical and methodological challenges for urban social work research.

Keywords: Urban Social Work; Social Work Research; Ethnicity and Social Work; Interculturalization

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De meeste Europese steden kenden de voorbije decennia, maar ook vandaag nog, een sterke toename van inwoners van andere etnische afkomst. Globalisering versterkte de voorbije drie decennia de migratieprocessen, vooral naar stedelijke gebieden. Deze processen veranderen onze steden en het stedelijk sociaal veld grondig, niet in het minst omdat vele migranten geconfronteerd worden met structurele sociale uitsluiting. Hier een antwoord op bieden wordt één van de uitdagingen voor sociaal werk in stedelijke omgevingen. In dit artikel verken ik hoe de groeiende etnische diversiteit uitgroeit tot één van de belangrijkste uitdagingen voor stedelijk sociaal werk. Vaak zijn aangepaste methodieken noodzakelijk om vergelijkbare empowerment-doelstellingen te halen met een grote diversiteit aan burgers in een zeer diverse stedelijke context. Eén van de hoofdtaken van onderzoek naar sociaal werk in stedelijke contexten in Europa vandaag is de noodzaak om sociaal werk te interculturaliseren. Voortbouwend op enkele cases verkent dit artikel de theoretische en methodologische uitdagingen voor stedelijk sociaal werk.

Trefwoorden: Stedelijk Sociaal Werk; Sociaal Werk Onderzoek; Etniciteit en Sociaal Werk; Interculturalisering

The international conference *Two Birds of a Feather. Research and Social Work in Urban Areas* in autumn 2009 in Antwerp¹ focussed on the relation between social work and research, mostly dealing with social problems and/or social work in urban areas. In his keynote lecture, Ian Shaw focused on the history of social work research, going back to the Chicago School. A little provocative, his lecture (and article in this volume) was titled 'Social work research—an urban desert' (Shaw, this issue).

In this article I try to explore some challenges for the future of urban social work research. Ethnicity is gaining importance in urban social work. What makes social work in urban areas and in European cities different anno 2010? And what specific urban research demands are generated? Or, building upon Ian Shaw, are we confronted with the evolution from an urban desert to a multi-ethnic urban jungle?

In the first section of this article, I frame briefly my view on social work research. The next sections focus on the urban dimension and on the increasing importance of ethnicity for social work in an urban context in Europe. The fourth section examines a selection of social work research cases as presented at the conference. In the final part the focus is on the challenges for social work and research in urban areas.

Social work research

In his article in this volume, Ian Shaw argues that contemporary published social work research in the English language has little to say about the engagement of social work and urban life. He goes back to the Chicago School to look for an old, but closer link. In this article, I try to do the opposite. Starting from the fast demographic and social changes in European cities, I reflect on the needs and challenges for urban social work research in the future.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the aim of social work research, according to Shaw and Gould (2001, p. 3), is to contribute to the development and evaluation of social work practice and services, to enhance social work's moral purpose, to strengthen social work's disciplinary character and location, and finally to promote social work inquiry marked by rigour, range, variety, depth and progression.

Research should shed light on the processes and outcomes of practice, thus assisting in building knowledge and skills for practice. Social work should also gain from a wider range of knowledge questioning research that seeks to describe or explain social problems encountered by human services practitioners. Social work therefore poses an agenda for (qualitative) research, to commence from the problems and practices of social work rather than those of methodology (Shaw & Gould, 2001, pp. 3, 12). Ian Shaw showed in his article that the Chicago School was offering this with their ecological view and connections to welfare work. In this article I focus on the urban dimension and the increasing importance of ethnicity in social work processes in European cities in the twenty-first century.

What makes urban social problems specific?

At first glance, social problems look the same in European countries, regardless of whether people live in large cities or in smaller and/or more rural communities. Becoming unemployed due to the economic crisis decreases someone's income and might have an impact on his or her confidence or well being. Living with debts or in financial poverty effects people's lives regardless of where they live. The need to support a teenager struggling with his or her homosexuality or the need to support relatives after a suicide in their family are not bound to certain parts of the country. Structural exclusion happens everywhere, the need for personal support to cope with social problems is an individual need, and the empowerment of people or groups is necessary all over the country. Most courses for students in social work focus in general on structural and personal dimensions and methodologies.

Nevertheless, looking more closely at European cities, a first layer of differences between urban and more rural areas becomes clear. Although city marketing nowadays likes to focus on the possibilities and strengths of cities (Loopmans, 2008), we cannot deny that at the same time cities are confronted with concentrations of people with social problems. These problems affect, in absolute and relative figures, more people, are often more complex, and require more and (perhaps) other interventions by local and national authorities and by social workers.

Most European cities have higher poverty rates compared to the average of the country. They are confronted with higher concentrations of social problems such as unemployment, deprived housing conditions, etc. Consequently, we find a wider range of social services in European cities compared to the rest of the country. Within cities, deprivation goes together with spatial segregation processes. As a result deprived neighbourhoods are confronted with high concentrations of vulnerable people with multiple social problems.

Too often the role of the city is minimized as a kind of ‘urban décor’ for social work or social work research. However, social work in urban areas differs substantially from social work in less urbanized areas. The urban context makes it different. Are specific methodologies required to reach the same empowerment-objectives in an urban context? And are the research demands consequently partly different as well?

In order to understand the specificity of the urban dimension, I briefly indicate four crucial elements. Starting from Simmel and the Chicago School, many authors defined cities as places where many people live and interact. Density is one of the crucial elements. This density offers space for a plurality of lifestyles, using a degree of urban anonymity. It allows people to develop and express personal lifestyles and subcultures. Urban lifestyles feed and influence social networks. The *larger urban scale* is a first element of the urban context for social workers, different from smaller communities where social workers are mostly not familiar with clients and their networks. Those networks—that are, for example, relevant as sources for support—are often less visible and fragmented. Urban lifestyle can be considered as a habitus that offers freedom, but is at the same time characterized by strangeness, individualization, contradictions, unexpected situations and ambiguities, but also by contingency.

A second characteristic of urban social work is the already mentioned *scale of the social problems*. Cities are confronted with concentrations of social problems such as poverty, unemployment, integration of (ethnic) minorities, drug abuse, etc. mostly concentrated in specific, deprived neighbourhoods. Such concentrations often cause neighbourhood-effects, reinforcing social exclusion of the inhabitants. Most European cities are not (yet) confronted with ghettos as American cities or cities in developing countries are (Kazepov, 2005; Wacquant, 2007). The existence of relatively strong welfare states and active social work in Europe compared to the US prevents extreme ghettoization. Nevertheless, deprived neighbourhoods have effects on the possibilities that people will overcome their social problems (Musterd & Ostendorf, 2005). Deprived neighbourhoods and weak social networks may help people to cope with poverty, but can at the same time, enclose people in their deprivation.

A third challenge for urban social work is *the need to cooperate in complex networks*. Most European cities have a large number of social organizations trying to help people with social problems. Local authorities, quangos and NGOs provide support to vulnerable people, in a more or sometimes less coordinated way. This means that urban social workers never work in a monopolistic setting, as is often the case in smaller communities. This can be an advantage as well as a disadvantage. The multiplicity of social actors allows for specialization and collaboration between social organizations, but it can also cause tensions between the organizations and requires (a lot of) time for coordination. Urban social work is working in networks. Clients have to find their way in the broad maze of social organizations, but they can also change their behaviour as a result of the wide network of social organizations.

Sometimes they become 'consumers' or 'shoppers', trying to combine the best of different social organizations in order to improve their living conditions.

The context for social work in European cities becomes even more specific in the early twenty-first century. The intensification of migration processes—in all their different forms—is changing the population in European cities in the space of a few decades. Urban social change, according to Castells (2003), is the redefinition of urban meaning. Different causes, such as urban renewal or demographic changes, can lead to such conflictual changes. It changes social work in these cities as well.

Increasing ethnic diversity as a challenge for urban social work

Cities in Europe have historically always hosted migrants. However, in the second half of the twentieth century, the number of migrants and the countries of origin changed rapidly. Typically, urban areas also have much higher, and still increasing, ethnic diversity in European cities (Beck-Gernsheim, 2004; Kazepov, 2005; Beck, 2007; Geldof, 2009). Neighbourhoods with a majority of inhabitants with roots in migration are a normal part of the city today.

European cities are changing relatively fast in this age of globalization, with the rise of an increasingly complex network society (Castells, 1996). The larger the city, the larger the share of the population with another ethnic background or roots in migration. Due to their more vulnerable social position and due to segregation processes, people with different ethnic backgrounds are overrepresented in deprived neighbourhoods. Increasingly, ethnic minorities are becoming an (internally diverse and fragmented) majority in those neighbourhoods. Due to the demographic evolution, further migration and spatial segregation processes, people belonging to ethnic minorities will become the majority of all citizens in European cities, as is the case today for example in the cities of Rotterdam (the Netherlands) and Brussels (Belgium).

This is a very challenging evolution for urban social work. One could say that 'the failure of social work to engage with issues of diversity in an appropriate manner has been a common theme throughout the history of social work and can be linked closely to the profession's location within the nationstate' (Dominelli *et al.*, 2001, p. 290). Despite increasing research and interaction between researchers and practitioners, this 'failure' still seems to be there. The urban context in Europe seems to change faster than our knowledge about diversity and ethnicity in European societies and cities. Working with such a diversity of urban citizens will make urban social work more different from social work in less urbanized areas in the twenty-first century, because the increasing importance of ethnic minorities goes together with specific social needs.

The consequences of increasing ethnic diversity for social work—often still dominantly white and middle class oriented—are enormous. Williams and Graham (2010, p. 156) conclude that social workers and other professionals across nation states are increasingly engaged in refining approaches to ethnic diversity, in

challenging and critically interpreting national (and/or local) mandates into practices that reflect the social justice ambitions of the profession.

Here is just one example to illustrate the impact of the demographic changes: the *Two Birds of a Feather* conference took place in Antwerp, a city with approximately 480,000 inhabitants. Some 13% have a non-Belgian passport, and almost one third of the population is rooted in migration. For social work in Antwerp this is a major challenge. Almost 75% of the clients of the Public Centre for Social Welfare have another ethnic background, although they represent only one third of the population of Antwerp. This shows their vulnerable position; poverty rates among ethnic minorities are much higher. More than 50% of people with a Moroccan or Turkish background live in poverty (Van Robaeyns *et al.*, 2007). Antwerp hosts almost 170 different nationalities. Social workers in their local social welfare centres work sometimes with clients of 30–40 different nationalities and/or cultures. Language is only a first threshold, certainly if people have just arrived, but often this is the easiest problem. Too often social work methodologies and trajectories are not entirely adapted for the variety of people and cultures. Social workers complain that they lack certain ‘skills’ to do their job adequately in such a rapidly changing and increasingly diverse setting. The traditional body of knowledge of social work is not always and certainly not entirely transferable to their work with the different ethnic groups.

New inhabitants and clients often introduce new problems, such as the trauma of extreme violence during war experiences, religious and family pressure or forced marriages. Social workers in such a diverse ethnic urban context speak about an immense challenge, often surmounting the available resources and methodologies at their disposal. Combined with a high case load, the risk is enormous that they will only be able to deal with the ‘easy’ problems (e.g. providing access to medical care, providing a subsistence income for people in poverty, putting them on a language course). The underlying and mostly more complex problems—and aren’t those the core business of social workers?—often remain unsolved; really empowering trajectories seem unfeasible. The city and the social landscape change faster than the tools of social work and urban policies. *Interculturalization* of urban social work is an urgent need, to meet individual needs and to start working on structural deprivation in cosmopolitan cities. Williams and Graham (2010, p. 157) mention how research moved from largely polemic accounts to more empirical studies, with a growing recognition of the issues and dilemmas played out in practice and attempts at providing a more nuanced understanding of culture. Consequently, the research demands from urban social work are huge. Empowering social work has to start from people’s social world and environment.

Two birds of a feather: echoes of diversity

Urban social work has to deal with an increasing differentiation of social worlds and backgrounds. Thus, the question of how to adapt our existing methodologies to the different urban context is one of the major challenges for social work at the beginning

of the twenty-first century. The main focus of the international conference *Two Birds of a Feather: Research and Social Work in Urban Areas* was on cooperative knowledge production in social work research. The urban dimension was present, but not dominant in most cases. Mostly cases were situated in smaller or medium-sized European cities, not in global cities. In most cases ethnicity was not elaborated as an important dimension in the research.

Nevertheless, three elements are relevant to mention, coming from three different case-studies, because they are illustrative of methodological problems in and challenges for urban social work research.

The French case on ‘Cultural diversity and construction of social bounding: action research on the tool ADLI’ (Agent de Développement Local pour l’Intégration) (Autant-Dorier *et al.*, 2009) is illustrative of many local integration initiatives in European cities [for more information, see the article by Steyaert *et al.* in this issue]. Relevant to mention here, among other things, is the long history of the project. Begun in 1996, it has been developed over 15 years. Crucial at the start was the involvement of a young researcher who also spoke Turkish and who was familiar with the problems of the immigrants. Both elements—speaking the language and knowledge of the world and living conditions of migrants—are crucial conditions for social work with migrants. Very often these conditions are not fulfilled in urban social work. Insufficient knowledge of the national language from the side of the migrants, and no knowledge of the language of the migrants from the side of the social worker, are important handicaps for in-depth social work. Insufficient knowledge of the cultural background, their life history and present living conditions are often further barriers to developing client-centred social work. Although the number of social workers belonging to or rooted in ethnic minorities is increasing, a large contrast has often arisen between predominantly ‘white’ social services and ethnically diverse neighbourhoods.

Also for research on social work with people from different ethnic backgrounds, knowledge of language and cultural differences are often crucial conditions for adequate access to the clients of social services. Finally the translation of such knowledge to the curricula of social work educational programmes is crucial; research results are not only necessary to adapt social work relations, but also to interculturalize the way social work operates today.

Illustrative also was the research on the ‘Soziale Stadt’ project about ‘The quality of life in the quarter of Lützel/Coblenz’, a small sized German town (Baum, 2009). The aim of the project was to improve the living conditions and the quality of a deprived neighbourhood, with a very heterogeneous population, including an important number of Russian migrants. As in many urban development programmes and programmes to improve the quality of life in deprived areas, participation of the inhabitants was a crucial focus, with the important involvement of community workers. However, the research mentions that

only people from the middle class and some young people were present in the assembly, and none of the migrants appeared to have found access to it. (...) We

did not know what this population is interested in, and were not able to find out through interviews. (Baum, 2009, p. 35)

In many deprived neighbourhoods we experience that people cannot represent themselves in public spaces. Even social workers sometimes have problems seeing that many ethnic minorities have other understandings, other uses and other accesses to public spaces. They 'occupy' the spaces concerning their cultural understanding of presentation, communication and integration, and this always leads to conflict situations (Baum, 2007, p. 136). In other words: neither the community workers and their actual methodological tools, nor the researchers, were able to obtain the participation of migrants in the project or in the research.

The same conclusion pops up in many evaluations of urban development programmes or participation initiatives at the local level. The increasing ethnic diversity too often goes together with an increasing inability of community workers to involve significantly the diversity of individuals with another ethnic background and/or ethnic communities. Often local authorities, social workers and researchers do their utmost to increase participation, but success is not guaranteed. Interculturalization of participation methodologies will need to become a crucial element in order to involve those ethnic groups that are not reached or involved today. Also for researchers there is a need for new methodologies. In all large scale surveys migrants are strongly underrepresented. Collaboration with social workers and other people working in the frontline will become crucial in urban settings in order to obtain representative research information. I will return to the challenges for researchers at the end of this article.

Finally the 'Home of the gypsies' project (Pedernana *et al.*, 2009) in Trento (Italy) illustrates how social workers find it particularly challenging to work with Sinti communities, and how difficult it is to communicate with them and to make any sort of plan or agreement. The case illustrates indirectly how important it is to recognize the diversity within the diversity. Depending on the country of origin, the ethnicity, sometimes the religion, the differences between different groups of migrants are sometimes enormous. Nevertheless, the majority of social workers are not specialized in working with only one ethnic group. In frontline services this is not possible, or desirable.

Intercultural social work, with respect to the tradition of social work (research)

There has been, and still is, a certain resistance among social workers to focus too much on ethnic and cultural differences. The concept of ethnicity itself is highly controversial in both popular and academic circles, yet it is relatively underdeveloped in the academic literature. However, ethnic identity is constructed by the interaction between personal and social elements, between cultural and structural elements (Fook, 2001, pp. 9, 17). Cultural, religious and/or ethnic elements do not replace structural problems and structural exclusion mechanisms. Too often the culturaliza-

tion of exclusion has been used to stigmatize people: to blame the poor. Therefore, increasing awareness of ethnic and cultural aspects and causes for social problems should be part of a structural and empowering approach, using the ethnic and spatial/urban dimensions of the problem in order to improve social work and policy approaches to empower people and groups.

This means that increasing attention on ethnicity must be integrated into the empowering tradition of social work, or even better into the approach of anti-oppressive social work. This approach challenges social workers to evaluate critically their own practices and possible exclusion mechanisms. According to Dominelli, anti-oppressive social work is

a form of social work practice, which addresses social divisions and structural inequalities in the work that is done with 'clients' (users) or workers. Anti-oppressive practice aims to provide more appropriate and sensitive services by responding to people's needs regardless of their social status. Anti-oppressive practice embodies a person-centered philosophy, an egalitarian value system concerned with reducing the deleterious effects of structural inequalities upon people's lives; a methodology focusing on process and outcome; and a way of structural social relationships between individuals that aims to empower service users by reducing the negative effects of hierarchy in their immediate interaction and the work they do. (Dominelli, 2002, p. 6, cited in Danso, 2009, pp. 3–4)]

Anti-oppressive social work stresses the structural causes of social problems and the need to transform unequal social relations and power balances into (more) equal positions. This goes beyond 'classical' anti-racist perspectives and anti-discriminatory models in social work (Graham & Schiele, 2010). Social workers are invited to reflect on their position in social structures, in order to minimize 'disempowering effects' and avoid reproduction in their social work (Danso, 2009, p. 4). In an urban context with increasing ethnic diversity, this approach can help us to become aware of the unintended effects of social work practices with clients belonging to ethnic minority groups, but interculturalization also means adapting our goals, our ways of listening and our methodologies. Dialogue and multi-level reflexive practices are crucial.

In different European countries, projects have been designed to search for a way to implement these valuable principles. Such a project as found in Flanders is the research of 'Bind-Kracht' (empowerment and linking against poverty), also presented at the conference. 'Bind-Kracht' is a Flemish organization consisting of researchers, tutors and people living in poverty who want to improve the quality of social work with people living in poverty [see also Driessens & Van Regenmortel, 2006; Vansevenant *et al.*, 2008; Driessens *et al.* in this issue]. To support social workers and their organizations to deal with the changing population of clients in Antwerp (Belgium), and the fast increase of vulnerable people with another ethnic background, the Bind-Kracht team started research on the possibility of adapting their approach of strengths-based social work to people with different ethnic backgrounds, with special attention to the experiences of migrants in poverty. Through in-depth

interviews with clients from different ethnic origins and with social workers, they focussed not only on the living conditions and life experiences of migrants living in poverty (Van Robaeya *et al.*, 2007) but also on their needs for social work and on the tensions they experience in working together in social work practice. Such research-based support for the interculturalization of interventions in social work is needed for the broad range of methodologies and specialities in social work, at least in an urban context (see also Autant-Dorier *et al.*, 2009).

Ethnicity and the city

With the demographic changes in European cities, the context for urban social work and the challenges for social work research also change. Urban social work operates within crucial tensions: structural versus cultural changes, changes at the macro versus those at the micro level, targeting the geographical dimension versus the categorical dimension.

We have to recognize the evolution towards cosmopolitan cities and lifestyles, writes Ulrich Beck (2007, 2008). If we want to understand the real social situation in European cities, we have to leave our old national way of looking at our society behind us. Nationality is no longer a useful category if we want to understand ethnic evolutions in European cities. Increasingly citizens have multiple identities, rooted in migration processes. They belong to local and global networks, with transnational lifestyles. They mix and combine cultures and lifestyles. Ambivalence is a crucial concept: we cannot understand the dynamics in urban societies using our old national 'and/or' framework. People live in an 'and/and' world. They are at the same time inhabitants of their neighbourhood and of their city, and nationals with a passport from their new country while still holding one from their country of origin. Their family is here and in their country of origin, and often in other European cities as well. These new transnational networks must be taken into account when exploring the potentials of inhabitants. This is another focus for social work research to support social work in such an urban context (Gesemann & Roth, 2009). This cosmopolitan mix makes cities in Europe different from their surroundings (Beck, 2008; Geldof, 2008, 2009).

For larger cities cultural diversity and the heterogeneity of lifestyles is an essential characteristic nowadays. The problem is that people with a migration background mostly live in a precarious social situation, together with the 'original' inhabitants of such deprived neighbourhoods. Both are threatened by processes of social exclusion. Both are fighting for recognition and for a social status, which ensures social integration and identity, but in many cities they are competing at the same time. In the direct contacts within their neighbourhood they must interact under the conditions of direct communication. Or, as the Dutch sociologist Paul Scheffer (2007) concludes, migration causes alienation, not only for people migrating, but also for the citizens of the receiving societies. Migration can enrich societies, but it

causes conflicts as well. To a large extent urban social problems in the twenty-first century will have a strong ethnic dimension on top of the structural problems of exclusion in the labour market, in the housing market or in the educational system.

This ethnic dimension makes social work in an urban context in Europe increasingly different from social work elsewhere. The context of the city is specific. Both the scale of the city and the concentration of social problems in European cities and in deprived neighbourhoods within these cities are relevant. At the beginning of the twenty-first century the migration processes of the last three decades have changed our cities and their social landscape profoundly.

This increasing ethnic diversity is becoming the specificity and one of the main challenges for urban social work. Often, specific methodologies are required to reach the same empowerment objectives with the diversity of citizens in such diverse urban contexts. The main need for social work research in an urban context in Europe is the need to make social work operate in a more intercultural way today, which requires a profound knowledge of the living conditions of all citizens, with respect to the broadening variety of ethnic backgrounds.

However, this remains a slow process. Dominelli *et al.* (2001, p. 290) concluded that:

dynamics of people to exercise agency and constant changes in social categories of ethnicity push social work practice to look for problem-solving mechanisms far beyond the traditional positions of essentialism and universalism. (...) Furthermore the challenge of developing theoretical frameworks for social work practice and exploring empirical bases of such frameworks will take place in cross-roads between the demand for context specific practices and the need for more generalisable knowledge. This in its turn presupposes international and global collaboration between the actors in social work, whether they are practitioners or researchers.

Though this was written 10 years ago, it is still valid.

European cities are becoming cosmopolitan cities. Social work has to become a cosmopolitan profession in order to become more relevant for the empowerment of all citizens. Increasing our knowledge about socio-demographic changes in communities and neighbourhoods, about the living conditions and the needs of specific populations and providing new tools for intercultural methodologies for urban social work is a tremendous challenge for social work research. This requires cooperative knowledge production, not only between practitioners and scientific researchers, but also with the relatively new urban citizens with roots in migration.

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Note

- [1] The conference *Two Birds of a Feather: Research and Social Work in Urban Areas* took place in Antwerp from 24 to 26 September 2009. It was organized by the Master of Social Work at the University of Antwerp together with Artesis Hogeschool and Karel de Grote-Hogeschool. Eight teams of researchers, social workers and local/regional authorities based in six European urban areas presented an evaluation of their model of co-operation between research and practice.

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