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A Call for Social Work Students in Mine Action

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Abstract

For too many, physical and psychological trauma are the unfortunate consequences of living in post-conflict regions where landmines and explosive remnants of war (ERW) continue to litter roads, farmland, and other critical infrastructure. Master's level social work students can be engaged on micro, mezzo, and macro levels to assist such victims of conflict by engaging in mine action sector activities like psychosocial rehabilitation, mine risk education (MRE), and advocacy efforts to mitigate the effects and eliminate the use of ERW. We propose a field education plan in which social work students can engage in this vital work through international fieldwork placements. Such activities benefit international students, local communities and organizations, and the cause they serve. With fresh ideas and great enthusiasm, students have the potential to not only influence the course of the global crisis of landmines and ERW, but to reap the professional and personal rewards of participating in the international mine action sector.

Keywords: Social Work, Social Work Education, Social Work Field Education, International Social Work, Curriculum Design, Landmines, Explosive Remnants of War, Rehabilitation, Mine Risk Education

Introduction

'There is pretty much nothing like getting up and going somewhere else and experiencing it. An internship, a semester abroad, volunteering, some experience in another culture where you get a sense for yourself of how disorienting it can be. I would imagine it would be very eye-opening to social workers to experience a new culture, and it would give them a broader kind of empathy to approach diverse clients. I think it is like daring to do a little more than you normally would...I call myself a grassroots activist and I am proud of being one, but I also recognize that I am an international social worker.'

Jody Williams (Saleh, 2012, p.57)

Communities around the world continue to be devastated by explosive remnants of war (ERW) and landmines that litter areas of conflict. These hazards affect communities by physically and psychologically harming individuals and families, as well as making access to resources more challenging. Although they are widely cited as a critical global public health issue (Williams, 1995), they fail to receive attention from the international social work community. Those injured by ERW and landmines experience psychological trauma, including long-lasting PTSD, stress, and anxiety (Cardozo et al., 2012; Southivong, Ichikawa, Nakahara, & Southivong, 2013; Mollica, Brooks, Tor, Lopes-Cardozo, & Silove, 2014). They also suffer all too often from the stigma of losing a limb (Hussain, 2011). Perhaps most tragically, landmines usually affect the most marginalized members of society, such as impoverished civilian women and children (Saleh, 2012).

In 1997, along with the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL), Jody Williams was jointly awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for global advocacy encouraging governments across the globe to align themselves with the cause against the use of anti-personnel landmines. Recognizing that at the heart of international social work is grassroots activism, in a recent interview Williams suggested that the sense of bewilderment and disorientation common to experiences abroad may lead social work students to deeper empathy for a broader array or clients. Today, Williams continues to serve as an Ambassador of ICBL and the Sam and Cele Keeper Endowed Professor in Peace and Social Justice at the University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work, where she teaches courses on human rights and global justice. Social workers' engagement in the field of international social work benefits both students and the causes they serve. Master's level social work (MSW) students can not only

influence the course of the global crisis of landmines and explosive remnants of war (ERW), but also reap tremendous rewards as a result of participating in the international mine action sector.

International Social Work Education

International social work was first defined by George Warren Brown as the practice of agencies that engage in organized international social service efforts (Nuttman-Schwartz & Berger, 2011). Social work relies heavily on field education to teach aspirants of the profession to practice. Field education generally comprises two, year-long internships during which interns apply their education in 'real world' settings working part-time; the assumption is that students learn best as apprentices of seasoned practitioners (Wayne, Bogo, & Raskin, 2010). Whereas first-year student placements typically involve the application of 'casework' or 'direct practice' skills at field sites selected by the university, second-year placements involve the application of highly specialized skills at a site that students select in a domain of their interest. Areas of speciality might include anything from advocacy and community organization and administration to programme development and mental health counselling, or some combination thereof. For the purposes of this model field placement programme, however, we would invite second-year students interested in advanced generalist social work, such as direct practice (or counselling), programme development, and advocacy. While second-year field sites vary dramatically in scope of work and field of practice, from corporate human resources to counselling centres to agencies engaged in legal advocacy, in most instances, they are conveniently located near campus and close to home. In recent years, only 0.7 per cent of MSW students in the U.S. worked in international field placements, a rate that has continued to decrease despite increased globalization, interest, and need (Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], 2011; CSWE, 2013; Okech & Barner, 2014).

Although different models of international social work practice exist, the *onsite group model* described by Pettys, Panos, Cox, & Oosthuysen (2005) would be ideal for students who want to work in the mine action sector, as it involves the exchange of one or a group of students accompanied by a faculty liaison from a home university and a host agency in the foreign country. Students involved with the international field of practice on an *advanced generalist* track would be most appropriate given their interest and training in mental health counselling, programme development, and community organizing, which, in general, prepares students to intervene at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels (Lavitt, 2009). These three levels of intervention map on to three distinct and critical

mine action sector activities, which MSW students are uniquely prepared to implement: victim assistance, mine risk education and advocacy.

Micro-level Engagement: Victim Assistance

There is much to be said about social work in victim assistance because social work students are, from the earliest days of their education, trained to provide social and psychological support. Indeed, one key feature of social work training is that students are expected to engage in field education beginning in their first week. This form of direct practice is referred to as 'casework', and the assumption is that students can effect positive change by simply listening and without engaging in any intervention, per se. In their first and second semesters, all first-year social work students take two courses in direct practice, which theoretically prepares them for progressively more active intervention in such casework. In addition to cognitive-behavioural theory, students learn how to apply evidence-based practices to improve the well-being of others at the individual level. During their second years, students continue to build on the foundations of their studies and may even learn how to implement a cognitive-behavioural intervention.

Without fully understanding local culture and values, MSW students will undoubtedly begin fieldwork in the international mine action sector at a disadvantage. However, with proper supervision and education from host institutions, their impact on target populations will be amplified. Furthermore, international MSW students may be better equipped to implement appropriate interventions than peer counsellors – the practice du jour (Rutherford & Macauley, 2013) – because they are specifically trained to select context-specific, scientifically-validated practices. Although evidence-based interventions are often culturally-bound, they may be translated for use by diverse cultural groups (Ayoughi, Missmahl, Weierstall, & Elbert, 2012; Bolton et al., 2007; Constandinides, Kamens, Marshoud, & Flefel, 2011; O'Callaghan, McMullen, Shannon, & Rafferty, 2015; Ventevogel et al., 2012). Not insignificantly, students should also be able to evaluate the impact of their efforts through formal program evaluation methods. Under the best of circumstances, they would have the opportunity to engage in outreach, building the capacity of local communities to deploy best practices after they repatriate so that programme continuity is ensured. The exchange of cultural and professional knowledge benefits all so that field placements do not devolve to 'volunteer tourism' only benefitting western visitors (Soussou & Dubus, 2013).

Mezzo-level Engagement: Mine Risk Education

Another key feature of advanced generalist social work education involves programme planning and the use of the *needs assessment*. The needs assessment is very similar, if not identical to the sort of survey work involved in the mine action sector knowledge, attitudes and practices (KAP) survey (Goutille, 2009). Social work students are expected to complete an assessment of the needs and strengths of the population(s) they serve as part of their second-year field placements. A needs assessment is a form of community-based research that allows service providers to identify which population(s) will be served as 'client', familiarize themselves with their needs, and develop a theory to target the intervention to the desired change (Beverly, et al., 2005). The most recent publication of Handicap International's tool for developing and implementing locally-relevant KAP surveys outlines the six steps of a KAP survey, and these overlap significantly with the needs assessment process. The results of the KAP survey can be used not only for programme planning, but for evaluation as well. Studies have been conducted using simple pre- and post-intervention KAP surveys to determine whether attitudes and knowledge have changed after the implementation of mine risk education activities in various regions (Handicap International, 2007). An important element for social workers to consider when conducting a needs assessment KAP survey is to also include an assessment component on local strengths and assets in order to incorporate community-based education tactics that have proven beneficial.

Macro-Level Engagement: Advocacy

Advocacy is another integral component of the education of social workers. First-year coursework on advocacy is required for accreditation by the U.S. Council on Social Work Education, and is an expected component of the advanced generalist's curriculum. Instruction on social work advocacy involves teaching students how to identify individuals, organizations and communities within their larger structural ecosystem, target key stakeholders and gatekeepers within those systems, and apply social work methods to intervene and achieve macro-level goals. Jennifer Mosley (2013) distinguishes social work policy advocacy from client advocacy by defining it as follows: 'Policy advocacy is...directed at changing policies or regulations that affect practice or group well-being.' Indeed, ICBL is a fine example of an international policy advocacy organization designed to end the use of anti-personnel landmines as a military battle tactic. Because they are trained to identify the systems and policies that encourage or perpetuate the use of such methods, social work students are

well-equipped to handle the task of advocacy in the policy arena to encourage governments to ban the use of landmines and to encourage the adoption of policies that will prevent future accidents and mitigate the negative effects of local ERW contamination.

Conclusion

It is important to keep in mind that field sites also benefit from the process. In exchange for supervision of their work and education about the issues at large, social work students provide a cost-effective means of engagement. That said, as long as there is adequate supervision from one MSW-level social worker, multiple social work students can be brought on board to work on a project. In addition, social work students are typically young, full of new ideas and eager to make a difference in the world. Those with international interests are often willing to make the sacrifices necessary to work and study abroad. Jody Williams has already articulated many of the benefits to students, which include but of course are not limited to knowledge of a new culture, deeper empathy, enhanced cross-cultural communication skills and knowledge of the mine action sector.

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Ethan Haymovitz worked in resource mobilization at the United Nations Mine Action Service and at the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission before returning to doctoral study in social work leadership at Millersville and Kutztown Universities, where he now researches the effect of school ecosystems on bullying and develops preventive programs. He studied advanced generalist practice and programming and social research methods at Columbia University School of Social Work, and holds a bachelor's degree in psychology from Vassar College.

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