‘A World on the Move’: Migration, Mobilities and Social Work

Across the world, people are on the move—international students, highly skilled workers, economic migrants, retirees, refugees, nomads, those within global care chains and those whose unauthorised status leave them vulnerable to all sorts of human rights violations, including slavery. Even the term ‘migration’ now seems inadequate to describe the movement of people across the world as twenty-first-century communication technologies, transportation and culture make mobility so much easier, enabling people to think and act beyond the borders of their countries. The title of this Special Issue directs our attention to the complexities of global migration flows and the emergent networks and interconnections occurring across nation states. Migration is not of course new. Historically, human populations have migrated to different countries following long-established patterns of people fleeing conflict, war, persecution, escaping poverty and unemployment. What is new is the nature and extent of the social transformations produced by these movements which are challenging established ideas about migration itself. Major shifts in the scale and diversification of international migration serve to generate questions about identity, nation, citizenship, the reshaping of contemporary societies, community and place and, most pertinently for social work, raising questions about the adequacy and nature of responses within particular welfare regimes.

It is estimated that some 232 million people or 3 per cent of the world’s population live outside their country of birth (UNDESA, 2013). Although this is a small proportion of the world’s population, its impact is far greater than the numbers suggest. The North, or ‘developed’, countries account for 136 million international migrants, compared to 96 million in the South, or ‘developing’, countries. Most international migrants are of working age (twenty to sixty-four years), making up 74 per cent of the total. Globally, half of all migrants are women, most of reproductive age and women migrants are particularly vulnerable to labour market exploitation, human trafficking and sexual violence (UNDESA, 2013). Refugees fleeing natural disaster, famine, persecution and conflict form a distinct category within this movement and constitute an estimated 34.4 million people in 116 countries. Unaccompanied minors, often traumatised by violence and war, arrive in
country contexts only to find their rights as children subsumed to their refugee status. It is difficult to collect data on such minors but, in the EU alone in 2012, there were just over 12,700 applications from unaccompanied minors (Eurostat, 2014). Such movements are not, however, simply between one nation and another, but also occur within nations, from rural to urban areas, or are part of multiple to-ing and fro-ing, place to place, country to country.

Whilst, as social workers, our engagement is with the most vulnerable and marginalised within this movement, the term ‘migrant’ also includes those who are highly qualified workers or studying to be and those in a multiplicity of roles that prop up the welfare infrastructure of many societies through their labour, both formal and informal. The role of these migrants in the development of social welfare organisations within civil society is of note. Migrants have made, and are making, a key contribution to the social work and social welfare workforce in countries all over the world (Boccagni, 2013; Williams, 2010). Thus, we arrive at our first paradox of migration—the fact that the term (im)migrant is often differentiated according to national politics and migration policies and, more often than not, surrounded by negative connotations or vilified and lacking any suggestion of positive contributions to the receiving society. As Castles and Miller point out:

…one of the dominant images in the highly developed countries today is that of masses of people flowing in from the poor South and the turbulent East, taking away jobs, pushing up housing prices, and overloading social services. Similarly, in the South, such as Malaysia and South Africa, immigrants are blamed for crime, disease and unemployment (Castles and Miller, 2009, p. 15).

This view presents the migrant as carrying a one-way ticket, in flight from a set of disadvantaged conditions and demanding priority access to services. Such assumptions represent a profound misreading of the nature of migration.

The effects of migration, forced or voluntary, on the individual and communities are well documented (Valtonen, 2008) and can be gleaned from the contributions in this volume. The position and treatment of refugees, as one significant group, have received some considerable attention in the social work literature (see, for example, the comparison of UK and Australia by Briskman and Cemlyn in 2005, Robinson in 2013 and Kohli’s 2006 work on unaccompanied asylum children in the UK). Factors of international migration impact on the experiences of individuals and families on an everyday level in their local contexts, pointing to the intimate interconnections of the global and the local. There are numerous examples of this interconnection. Some are obvious: asylum seekers and refugees who face the pain and trauma of loss and separations following displacement and children who are the subject of inter-country adoption. Other examples are less apparent: the support of older dependents left at home through remittances and transfers, for example, or the impact of the attrition of social support on
communities through such migrations. International students on social work programmes are another example of this immediacy of the global network and its impacts. Too often, they experience hurdles in their training and transitions into local labour markets and face localised discriminations and racisms.

Migrants and their descendants provide an important focus of consideration in that they are often overrepresented amongst those in need of welfare supports and benefits, subject to discrimination, marginalisation and human rights abuses, whilst also forming a significant but undervalued core of the workforce of social service provisioning. Neither does this mass movement come without a significant intersection with issues of racial and ethnic discrimination, xenophobia, and exacerbated social disadvantage and inequities. These are central concerns for social work. The effects of migration are not simply individualised problems, but strike at the heart of wider issues of nationhood, belonging and identity for all. Migration calls into question ideas of nation, national identity, entitlement and citizenship.

**Developments in migration theory**

Advances in migration theory have provided a new lens for the analysis of this increasingly complex patterning of human movement. Castles and Miller’s (2009) *Age of Migration* is a highly politicised, feminised as well as a profoundly diversified era. It conveys a contemporary picture that takes us well beyond the push/pull of standard economic theories that saw the migrant, mostly male, on a one-way journey outward. It advances a more nuanced understanding of wider social, economic and political relationships between different countries. It also draws attention to the role of families, friends and networks in assisting settlement, sustaining connections with home and with a community of interest. And it raises the notion of return migration. Far from being simply economically driven, recent trends show migrant motivations are complex and multidimensional and often linked with family or community ties. Pathways of migration are now firmly mapped within *transnational networks*, as a new dynamic of globalisation. It is often said individuals don’t migrate, networks do.

The focus of much of the migration literature has been on national policy models with an emphasis on matters of integration and cohesion. In various national contexts, debates have been framed by assimilationist approaches that hark back to ideas of an imagined ‘homogenous society’. A recurring theme is fear of migrants as a threat to social cohesion which feeds into ‘social problem’ approaches. Anxieties over entitlement to welfare resources rage, with incomers pilloried as scroungers and a drain on society to the neglect of the contributions they make and the capital they bring. In this melee, the focus on assimilation for the settlement of communities has been assumed by many policy makers and practitioners alike to be the
desired option. A plethora of government agents, including social work, have been engaged in assisting the migrant to settle and assimilate. Policies of multiculturalism that once venerated and celebrated heterogeneity have gradually given way in the present neo-liberal era to a neo-assimilationism, a conditional integration proscribed by the ability of the migrant to adapt to dominant values and ways of life. The force of the integration mandate, however, impacts differentially on communities. Portes and Zhou (1993, p. 74) provided the concept of ‘segmented assimilation’ to illustrate the ways in which some groups assimilate into a second or third culture and thrive whilst others do not. Their argument, and it is not without contestation, suggests that there are gradations of integration variously accommodated by different groups, with those most likely to be excluded having that exclusion compounded by the apparent inclusion of others.

Such perspectives lead to a developed consideration of second, third and successive generations of migrants and their experiences of settlement, attachment and belongings giving currency to concepts such as diaspora, ‘race’, ethnicity, hybridity and, more recently, intersectionalities. In particular country contexts, these organising categories have underpinned analysis of social welfare provisioning, notably highlighting inequalities in provision. They have also been useful in understanding how minorities mobilise for the expression of needs, protest and dissent. Such organising concepts illuminate not only forms of civic deliberation and political mobilisation at a local and national level, but also provide for an understanding of transnationalism as migrants deploy their networks for engagement with homeland and international politics, often via new technologies. The virtual and alternative spaces opened up by these connections and interactions reveal the scope of a research field that encompasses a broad range of localities, scales, practices, technologies and dynamics that go well beyond embodied migrations to an understanding of mobilities: those connections made and developed within an increasingly mobile world. As it has developed, migration theory has turned its attention to the nature, impact and relevance of these spaces of connection.

This is indeed a political terrain, but also a gendered terrain (Lutz, 2010). Women tended in the past to be excluded from the study of migration movements—more or less invisible, only registered when following men through family reunion or clustered in domestic labour markets in destination countries. Over the past decade, however, gender has emerged as a key area of research. As women now outnumber men in international migration, we can speak of the feminisation of migration and take this as a point of analysis for understanding particular forms of exploitation and of women’s role in adaptation and change in families and communities.

Any reading of the migration literature will fascinate with its contribution to the development of a wide variety of research approaches with migrant communities. These include the use of ethnographies, narrative approaches, stories, use of oral archives, analysis of artefacts, religious iconography,
photographs, drawings, writings, music and performance (Blunt, 2007). These tools enable access to the felt experiences, embodied nature and expressed emotions of migrations, as well as the structural dimensions. They capture the social and cultural capital migrants carry with them, and their strategies and mechanisms for coping and resilience.

Such developments are shaping new understandings of the complex process of international migration and its social, economic and political impact in both the receiving and the sending societies. We are now more attuned to what has been left behind as a result of migrations and more attuned to the notion of return. New and emerging theoretical positions grapple with the relationship between structural considerations, the wider forces, rules and resources, and the subjective agency of individual and collective actors. They provide ways to think about the manner in which individual agency is shaped and constrained by structure. Recent work by Karen O’Reilly (2012, p. 13), for example, offers a comprehensive ‘practice theory of migration’ delineating a dynamic meta-theoretical framework that provides a set of concepts for approaching the field. Her model invites us to join the dots between broad structural layers of analysis and intimacies of agency and habitus; to consider the practices of migration as enactments (stories of practice) and capture their specific outcomes. It is a multilayered tool of analysis which she argues can provide coherence to migration research.

Thus, new developments in migration studies are transcending the national gaze to employ theories and methodologies to explore global migratory flows and mobilities, greater diversity, more complex cultural interactions, biographies of migrants’ life courses, and the emergence of transnational communities and transnational spaces of action. These new and interesting ways of thinking about the diverse forms of migration, practices and politics of mobility open up spaces for consideration alongside the more familiar terrain of issues of citizenship, human rights and national politics (Blunt, 2007). So what can be said of the nature of social work’s engagement with these developments in the field?

**Social work and migration**

The scale and complexity of contemporary migration have demanded far-reaching change from within the profession: highlighting issues in interventions, in the training of social workers and in the types of research they undertake. We would go further in proposing that this issue challenges the very nature and identity of social work itself, its ethical claims, its positioning vis-à-vis state policy, its strategies and its portrait. Good practice on the ground abounds and in particular country contexts settlement services reflect a high degree of specialist knowledge and practice. Social work is one of the professions heavily enmeshed within the web of stakeholders in
the field: the migrants, their families and communities, and the network of informal and formal institutions at the interface of these encounters. We are deeply implicated in the implementation of national immigration policies and in so-called integration policies (see Humphries (2004) on the UK context, for example). As a profession, we are well placed to significantly identify the nature of needs, shape the discourses of settlement and integration, develop practice models and contribute to policy development. Above all, we have discretion: the scope to interpret policy and shape its implementation.

Yet we note a deep angst—an angst that speaks to the fact that social work has not responded adequately to the challenges and opportunities of these multiple sources of social change (Midgley, 2001; Valtonen, 2008; Negi and Furman, 2010). Nor, it is argued, has the nexus between social work and migration been fully understood and theorised. Cox and Geisen in this Special Issue, for example, point in their analysis ‘Migration perspectives in social work research: Local, national and international contexts’ to the lack of recognition of the impact of migration in social work research, citing the paucity of comparative studies. They argue that social work is clearly lagging behind in developing appropriate models of research which can inform and answer questions about policy and practice given its limited and myopic view of the migrant.

To date, there has been relatively scant attention given to social work responses, research and education in the changing patterns and implications of migration itself (Cox and Pawar, 2006; Valtonen, 2008; Shier et al., 2011; Lyons and Huegler, 2012). This is indeed surprising given that this is a core issue of the globalised world which itself has received increasing emphasis in social work literature (Lyons et al., 2006; Lyons, 2006). The ‘international’ in the social work profession has developed rapidly. Various authors have debated the definition, the framework of practice and questions surrounding the universality of social work values and practice of international social work (Healy and Link, 2012; Lyons et al., 2012). Several organisations such as the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) are engaged in writing global standards for social work as well as setting agendas around contemporary social problems in global contexts, the most recent being The Global Agenda for Social Work (IFSW, 2012). Yet attention to migration is but one dimension of this broad and disparate arena and, as we have argued, one that has been significantly under-theorised. Shier et al. (2011) make a good point when they say that, whilst some social work practitioners may be trained in international social work, this does not necessarily prepare them for the subtleties of the contexts, dynamics and paths of specific migrations. Their review of the research literature concludes that ‘the literature is only partially informing international and domestic social work practice’ (Shier et al., 2011, p. 52).

In light of these concerns, there are a number of key issues worth highlighting in our opening observations which we argue have delineated the social
work approach to the migrant. We would label these interrelated processes of: *decontextualisation*, *disaggregation*, *culturalisation* and *ambivalent assimilationism*. First, it is a given that social work services with vulnerable migrants are necessarily shaped by national contexts and policies within different welfare regimes. The dilemma for the profession is its rooted and contextual nature vis-à-vis the often turbulent, complex and dynamic demographic it confronts. This focus on the national contexts, however, infused by a domestic politics of integration, obviates the ways in which social structures, as well as decisions in everyday life, are situated within a global context. To date, much of the discussion of social work’s response to racial, cultural and ethnic diversity has focused on domestic politics, often divorced from transnational considerations of movement and exchange. Perhaps nowhere has this been more poignantly demonstrated than in the case of Victoria Climbié in the UK, where critical factors of her recent migration pertinent to an understanding of her vulnerabilities were overshadowed by the dominant narratives of domestic UK racial politics (Garrett, 2006). The potential of an international dialogue in producing lessons for change has been overlooked.

Accordingly, the migrant becomes detached from their migration, *decontextualised* from a consideration of these wider influences shaping their lives and their agency in a focus on their immediate needs and in-country integration. Jessica Jönsson’s paper in this Special Issue, ‘Local reactions to global problems: Undocumented immigrants and social work’, challenges the national focus of social work, arguing that social work in its emphasis on vulnerabilities and responding to immediate needs has neglected to consider the global contexts of issues impacting on the migrant such as colonialism, slavery, wars and exploitations—all integral elements of the process of modernisation. This is indeed myopia. We need to consider how, in focusing on individual and community transitions following displacement, social work fails to accommodate not only the facts of global development dominated by a global neo-liberal economic doctrine, but also the wider and coordinated exclusionary strategies towards immigration, refugee and asylum. It is as though we are always somehow out of step, confounded by the flux and change and complexities of the encounter, unable to consolidate and transfer learning or take into account the wider context.

Second, and coupled with these processes of decontextualisation, is the *disaggregation* of the migrant experience by category. Needs are disaggregated, labelled and categorised in a variety of ways according to country context and conferred particular status. Refugees, international students, undocumented migrants, child slaves, unaccompanied minors and those who are sex-trafficked are particular constructions that belie the complexities of the individual and community narrative. This is not to argue for the homogenisation of migrant, need but to underscore intersectionalities, networks, interconnectedness. The individualisation of the migrant and disaggregation of needs do not match the complexities of migrant experience. Families, kinship,
communities, networks, flows, space and place will need to characterise our vocabulary more significantly if we are to accommodate the realities of migrant experience and acknowledgement of the very *habitus* — to use a Bourdieun term— of the migrant themselves.

Our third point springs from this. We note the ways in which groups become cultural, objectified, stereotyped and homogenised in national contexts which frequently justifies their spatial segregation in communities, towns and cities, contributes to xenophobia and racism, and most particularly fundamentally underpins service and social work responses. Migrants in practice become over ‘culturalised’ as opposed to rights-bearing. Our argument is that, whether describing individualised or community responses, the predominant orientation is towards a focus on language and cultural attributes as barriers to integration. The tendency is to problematise language and culture, and to work with deficit assumptions to the neglect of strengths, skills, resilience and agency. This contributes to attaching problem labels and negatively framing interpretations of policy that pathologise migrants. Indeed, we would argue the national politics of ‘race/ethnicity and social work’ have reached something of an impasse confounded by the ‘multicultural turn’ — a turning *away* from multiculturalist policies which characterises the politics of most ‘advanced’ neo-liberal Western states, and confounded by its inability to make a substantive difference to the lived experiences of migrants and settled ethnic minorities. At the same time, social work is evidencing its own ‘multicultural turn’ — paradoxically, a turn *towards* culture in increased professional anxiety to respond to the defining factor of our era: diversity. There has been a narrowing of the debate through a focus on the micro practices of cross-cultural encounters and cultural competency at the expense of scholarship and understanding of how these issues are contextualised within the critical phenomenon of our time: international migration.

Associated with this culturalism is the failure to address the in-country dynamic of change, differentiation and transition as it plays out in length of settlement, migratory trajectories, second- and third-generation descendants, and so on. The cultural model fixes the migrant and their descendants in a permanent state of *other*. It counters their access to substantive citizenship and belonging and to rights, and refuses to acknowledge the ways in which communities change and adapt internally. The discourse of language and culture predominates and is one in which, paradoxically, both the worker and the migrant group collude, but in different ways: the migrant asserting it as their expression of identity; the worker interpreting and constructing as the orchestrating factor of service need and interventions. This culture conundrum lies at the heart of the questioning of the particularity of ethno-specific services as opposed to universal service delivery taken up by Rocio Calvo and colleagues in their research reported in this issue of the Journal. In their article, ‘The effect of universal service delivery on the integration of Moroccan immigrants in Spain: A case study from an anti-oppressive perspective’, they consider the ways in which universal service
provision can be used to traverse such us/them binaries that foster anxieties in the majority community and effectively hamper migrant integration.

Finally, this leads us to a consideration of the master narrative of integration, which we name as our second major paradox. The integration mandate places the migrant in a paradoxical position and produces what we are calling the *ambivalent assimilationism* of social work practice. In this debate, migrants find themselves framed within a binary they can never wholly traverse. It is the language of us/them, insiders/outsiders in which migrants are cast in a permanent state of ‘the exceptional other’ (to use Cox and Geisen term) irrespective of transitions through space, place and time. It is a debate that focuses on visibilities and difference as opposed to likeness and intersections with the majority society. Sameness as a consideration is ruled out, as it is incorrectly read as synonymous with assimilation. The integration mandate seeks inclusion uncritically without asking — included into what and by whom? It is a debate in which the dominant viewpoint says what multiculturalism is or should be, who is and who is not to be integrated, and how, and requires little or no adjustment to the dominant ‘us’. The problem of integration is accordingly seen as subject to the capability, the will and commitment of the migrant to change and integrate. They are held responsible and accountable for integration via the increased use of strategies such as integration tests (for example, in Australia, Europe, UK) and community cohesion policies. Several essays in this collection acknowledge the Westocentric nature of the dominant view — a view that defines the core values whilst migrant voices are barely heard. Migrant voices are passive in integration debates, their representation and participation low. This is therefore a one-way linear dynamic, not the two-way mutual accommodation that true integration implies. It is one which social work as a profession struggles to reconcile with its ethics of social justice, care, user involvement, partnership and empowerment.

The effect is the manifestation of an *ambivalent assimilationism*, in which social workers collude, wittingly or unwittingly attempting to navigate organisational imperatives that compromise their professional values. Such an ‘ambivalent assimilationism’ speaks to the disjuncture between our professional proclamations and commitment to an anti-oppressive/ethical social justice practice and the realities of our activities. It accommodates the invisible comforts and power base of a predominantly ‘white’ and Westocentric profession over a predominantly vulnerable, marginalised and visible migrant. It is a position that acknowledges xenophobia and racial discrimination but fails to address these as critical dimensions of a flawed integration process compromising the profession despite everyday small acts of subversion and sabotage.

In their contributions to this Special Issue, Calvo and colleagues provide a trenchant critique of the current ideological underpinnings of such neoliberal integration mandates. Through their case study of Moroccan migrants in Spain, they use an anti-oppressive lens to critique social work interventions
that conceal a fundamentally ‘embodied assimilationist approach’. The authors show how the best of intended programmes can hinder the integration of migrants and deploy social work in an assimilationist agenda that perpetuates unequal power relations between users of services and state providers.

Several articles in this collection highlight the constraints of legal frameworks in specific national contexts on ethical social work practice. They speak to the rescaling of citizenship under neo-liberal regimes which produces hierarchies of rights and exacerbates national anxieties over difference and diversity. They note the abject vilification of refugees and asylum seekers in an era of economic stringency, the infringement of human rights and the compromises to the experience of a ‘lived citizenship’ (Lister, 2007) as a result of discrimination and racism.

**Advances in the field**

Social work is not short of models for practice or indeed debates that explore the strengths and weaknesses of particular anti-oppressive approaches. Valtonen (2008), for example, offers a critical overview of the prevailing social work approaches to practice with migrants and refugees, including the human rights and citizenship approaches, ethnic sensitivity and cultural competent approaches, preventative approaches and the critical social work approach. Robust settlement practice (Valtonen, 2008; Negi and Furman, 2010) is also detailed and includes inter-agency working, strong advocacy and lobbying skills, collaboration and partnership, work that foregrounds migrant organisations and communities, and the recruitment of minority group members within the social work workforce. This is work that thrives on fostering relational belonging, identity, trust, loyalty, transparency and genuine participation for ethnic minority groups, and requires action at macro, meso and micro levels, incorporating both the broad-brush and the small strokes.

In addition, contributions to understanding the social work response on the ground have attempted to delineate particular types of settlement intervention. Lyons and Huegler (2012), for example, focus on three main delivery modes relevant to social work and migration—specialist therapeutic services, services geared to wider social groups that take account of the particular needs of migrants and services that focus on community development strategies. They argue that such responses reflect the professional location of social work with the Western countries placing emphasis on individualised and clinical models of assistance and other societies favouring community-based approaches. The practice field is developing new strategies and these will need to be captured through evaluation and research. The issue is clear. Migrant settlement cannot take for granted human or citizenship rights as a given. In many states, their exceptionality puts them beyond the
state or confers sets of differentiated and constrained rights. Even where citizenship rights are granted, substantive citizenship eludes them. Wider strategies of change effort are required. Accordingly, a predominant theme of the literature is that this field of work demands reaching out to international forums to work at the macro level engaging with the new technologies in building networks and collaborative activities (Negi and Furman, 2010).

The education and training of social workers for work in the field of migration are taken up by Guru (2012), who has outlined core elements of migration and refugee practice for inclusion in social work education. Webster et al. (2010) also provide useful comments on curriculum development, stressing the potential of interprofessional work in addressing issues of transnationalism. The emergent nature of the field demands multidisciplinary learning drawing on skills and insights from social development, social geography, law and human rights, and from migration studies.

Current research on social work and migration is actively contributing to the reframing the debates. Our reading of almost 150 abstracts submitted for this Special Issue and the content of these papers have contributed considerably to our understanding of social work engagement with the range of issues posed by contemporary migrations. In itself, the response indicates a growing field of interest and research. There are some common and identifiable themes that emerge from the papers and traverse national context: the appeal to critically engage with neo-liberal welfare policies shaping social work responses and services; the appeal to the ethical basis of social work in navigating the possibilities of practice; the appeal to the possibilities of social work discretion. These are not simply good practice accounts of settlement practice, but evidence of critical engagement with the multi-tiered terrain of social work action in this field. The papers speak to the politics of mobility in terms of identity formation and sense of belonging, and the complexities of permanent and temporary settlement while retaining homeland bonds. These issues are intertwined with stories of specific migration paths, with the to-ing and fro-ing inherent in these mobilities; they are infused with the resilience and coping strategies of migrants themselves, shaped and nurtured through their transnational networks and connections. Amongst these themes, we wish to particularly underscore some of the advances the research reproduced here evidences.

Through several of the papers, we gain insights into the powerful role that social workers play in framing discourses and interpretations of need. In her empirical study undertaken in Sweden, for example, Jönsson characterises prevalent discourses which reveal a gendered presumptive base in depictions of the undocumented migrant that in turn guide interventions. Female undocumented migrants are seen as ‘victims’ and deserving of assistance whilst males are viewed less sympathetically, being associated with ‘illegality’ and held responsible for their own and their family’s position in-country. Mostowska’s contribution, “‘We shouldn’t but we do . . .”': Framing the strategies for helping homeless EU migrants in Copenhagen and Dublin’, also
illuminates how framed discourses shape interventions. In her comparative
analysis, she finds that, for workers in Copenhagen, the dominant ‘migrant-
worker’ frame which shifts the responsibility for homelessness onto the
migrant is often supplemented by an ‘exceptional humanitarianism’—an
innovative frame that allows staff to express their professional values. In
Dublin, by contrast, where considerations of economic efficiency predomin-
ate, the ‘undisciplined deviant’ frame is most commonly embraced, leaving
many of the workers frustrated and discouraged.

A critical nexus between legislative requirements and ethical social work
practice is a theme taken up in the papers to explore the ways in which
social work seeks to navigate this (dis)juncture through creativity and sabo-
tage, thus opening up spaces of discretion. In a wonderfully described typ-
ology of social work positionings, Jönsson’s study, cited above, reveals the
range of practices deployed—from those employing passive or unhelpful
responses to clients, those applying compliant legalistic and bureaucratic
responses, to others who enacted practices which ignored or manipulated
the legal limitations to proactively improve the social conditions of migrants.
In keeping with this theme, Ottsosdottir and Evans, in ‘Ethics of care in sup-
porting disabled forced migrants’, explore the interactions of professionals
in tackling ethical dilemmas in the social and health care of forced migrants
with disabilities in England. Their research highlights the multiple barriers
facing forced migrants with care needs which in turn lead to various levels
of exclusion based upon their legal status and absence of entitlements to
health and social care provision. This contribution delves into the tensions
entangled in daily practice as social workers attempt to follow national
policy on immigration and asylum yet at the same time meet policy require-
ments in safeguarding vulnerable adults and children. Social workers in
Ottsosdottir and Evans’s study are depicted as straddling overlapping roles
both as ‘gate-keepers of services’ and as agents of control, as well as struggling
to protect and prevent harm to vulnerable adults and children.

Barberis and Boccagni, in their article ‘Blurred rights, local practices: Social
work and immigration in Italy’, are more circumspect when illuminating the
nature of daily social work practices operating in a climate of welfare retrench-
ment, anti-immigration sentiments and institutional discrimination. They map
out the pitfalls and perils expressed within social work with migrants in Italy,
pointing to the myriad of regulations and institutional and professional prac-
tices that constrain the pursuit of human rights and social justice commitments.
In their fascinating account, they are critical of the Italian social work agenda
on diversity but do note the potential of discretionary power, supra-national
coalition building and professional networking across Europe.

From research studies like those reported in this Special Issue, we gain
insight into the processes of sabotage, subversion, creativity and innovation
in social work. These are the new and emerging spaces of interconnection—
the social work mobilities that require further exploration. To engage in this
space, social workers need to be well versed in social policy and legislative
requirements, migration theory and policy, welfare entitlements and the system, able to work cross-nationally and attuned to the profession’s ethical responsibilities. They need a confidence as key framers and shapers of policy in the implementation processes. A debate will rage about whether these little acts of maverick in themselves represent acceptance of the status quo or lead to bias, favouritism and inequities and inconsistent service provision. The evident tension between such individualisation and standardisation demands further consideration given the deeply ambivalent positioning of the profession vis-à-vis state policies.

In this Special Issue, we have further illustration of the importance of the various types of ‘capital’ embedded in migrant networks and connections, and of their use by individuals and communities as forums of deliberation, as a resource and as a source of resilience. Anleu Hernandez and Garcia-Moreno, in ‘Migration, resilience and social work: Latin Americans in Tarragona’, explore the ways in which Latin Americans in Spain mobilise their own strategies to cope, often without using formalised services. This reflects aspects of their rich cultural heritage and optimistic motivations to survive. What struck us in this particular study were the visibilities of these Latin Americans in Spain by virtue of this cultural heritage—a factor that evoked discrimination despite their ability to speak the language of the host nation. The literature generally shies away from an interrogation of the notion of ‘visibilities of difference’ (Colic-Peisker and Tilbury, 2007) and the ways in which, in some countries, groups that are more conspicuous by virtue of cultural, religious or physical traits are likely to experience much higher levels of exclusion, hostility and prejudice than other less visible minorities. Migrants are highly differentiated by power. These power relations reflect histories of racism and colonialism which should inform our analyses, research and practice. By examining Moroccan and Turkish migrants experiencing poverty in Belgium, Dierckx and Van Dam’s paper, ‘Redefining empowerment interventions of migrants experiencing poverty’, highlights the methods particular groupings utilise to empower themselves and shape their environments and how these relate to local infrastructures and the availability of social work services. These studies point to avenues for preventative work in strengthening and facilitating self-help networks; the ability of social work to operate at a transnational level in terms of drawing on the resource of family networks, self-help networks and NGO groups; the ability to engage with the international forum and the ability to facilitate schemes and initiatives generated by migrant communities themselves.

In our reading of the submission to this Special Issue, we were struck by the lack of voice, representation and participation of migrants and their descendants. Kathleen Valtonen (2008, p. 188), in summing up years of work she had undertaken in immigrant and refugee settlement, bemoaned ‘the low levels of representation of immigrants at higher levels of responsibility in organizations and in the professions… even in societies with long experience of settlement’. She forcefully argued that this erodes the principles of
solidarity and equity, and calls for greater representation, greater collaborative activity and partnership with migrant communities and organisations, and more participation at different levels of the immigration discourse (p. 187). In a personal correspondence with the authors, she expressed her frustration at integration and settlement interventions run for, rather than by and with, migrant communities. This should also be a cautionary note for research activities, as Cox and Geisen point out in their contribution. We would argue this type of consideration has far-reaching implications for the role and remit of social work as currently conceptualised as well as for its portrait and identity. The call for genuine engagement, working together and partnerships with migrants in developing ways of thinking about needs and services requires a much greater level of negotiated practice, built on mutual responsibility and mutual respect.

Migration theory has pointed to the dynamic nature of migratory movements, to the notion of living between two worlds or more that transmigrants experience and of course to the possibilities of return. Hunter et al. (2010, p. 222) refer to the ‘delicate dance of maintaining emotional, family, financial and legal ties to both home and host country’. Helen Carr’s article in this collection, ‘Returning “home”: Experiences of reintegration for asylum seekers and refugees’, demonstrates the importance of conceptualising that ‘dance’ and looking beyond national borders to facilitate smooth return migrations. She seeks to examine the literature on social work responses to those returning home and reveals social work as often ill prepared to support repatriation and lacking in an understanding of a composite picture of migrants’ lives and connections prior to arrival that would inform and facilitate appropriate support for their return to their homeland.

We, as social workers and social work academics, are also on the move: professional transnational mobility is increasingly a feature of a globalised economy. Our own experience as authors is part of this story. The issue of what might be called lifestyle migration should not be overlooked and, in our selection, we sought to put on view the experiences of workers moving across borders—the theme which unites the final two papers. Hussein’s contribution, ‘Hierarchical challenges to transnational social workers’ mobility: The United Kingdom as a destination within an expanding European Union’, explores transnational social workers’ mobility within Europe and the portability of their qualifications. Drawing on data from twenty-seven European Economic Areas (EEAs) on regulations and qualifications, she examines the factors operating at macro, meso and micro levels creating specific hierarchies of recognition and affecting EEA and non-EEA social workers differentially. She concludes that, while social workers experience similar challenges to other professional migrants in terms of professional recognition, there are a number of potential barriers specific to social work, including the political relationships between sending and receiving countries. The variability in training and qualifications across Europe and beyond shows that ‘English’-speaking countries fare better in terms of the mutual recognition
of qualifications. Beddoe and Fouche, in their article ‘Kiwi’s on the move’, take us further across the world to the longstanding relationship between Commonwealth countries and report on a small-scale interview study with New Zealand social workers practising in the UK. The findings of their study suggest that, although social workers overall encountered positive experiences, cultural translation into new socio-cultural and political environments proved to be a stumbling block for some. Whilst these papers relate to a particularly advantaged group of migrant workers, they remind us of the transformations that are taking place within the professional workforce and the ways in which this can enrich the profession and its knowledge base. We are also mindful of the fact that these movements of highly skilled workers are not as seamless or as frictionless as governments might have us believe; or indeed as open and available to all as they may seem in as much as they replicate the well-worn tracks of Colonial privilege and exchange and legacies of highly exclusive national politics.

Finally, as Editors, we were obliged to make a selection from the huge response to the call for papers received and we are sensitive to the gaps left by the choices we made. Abstracts included work on internal migration as people move from rural areas into cities seeking employment, particularly within China and India; there was also material on work being undertaken with older migrants, with international social work students, Gypsy/Travelers, LBGT migrants and other intersectionalities; work on sex trafficking, child migration and transnational motherhood; work on use of English with migrants, as well as work with particular diasporic ethnic groups in a variety of country contexts. We could easily have compiled a further edition. We are grateful for all of the contributions received for this Special Issue and for the network we have established through contacts with authors all over the world. It is clear to us that there is a lot more to be shared, investigated and theorised in what is an emerging field. Migration is not a specialism of social work, but a central concern for the profession, as all societies are fundamentally and ever more deeply migrant societies. We hope that this Special Issue gives expression to that and will prompt new conversations about a world on the move as social work responds to major social change taking place across the globe.

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Co-Editors

References


