

What if social work turns transnational? On the research implications of an emerging approach to immigrant clients

Paolo Boccagni

University of Trento

Migration, like other globalization-related phenomena, questions the traditionally “territorialist” approaches and boundaries of social work research and practice. In fact, professional practice with migrant and ethnic clients is hardly new. Much has been done (and written) about it under the banners of cultural competence, anti-discrimination, diversity and even international social work – a long-standing tradition which, in the last decade, has been promisingly (if quite vaguely) reframed as transnational social work. What the latter perspective adds to the social work-migration nexus, primarily in terms of research, is the core question of my paper. I will conceptually revisit a debate primarily based in social work, but open to the insights of migration, development and social protection studies. Central to the transnational view (Furman et al, 2008; Chambon et al., 2011) are, first, a critique of the viability – let alone the appropriateness – of the traditionally exclusive focus of social work practice on migrants’ assimilation; second, an emphasis on migrants’ cross-border attachments and relationships, especially among first-generation newcomers, as a source of needs, claims and obligations that are out of sync with the “sedentarist” frame of social work provision. Migrant needs and concerns may be multi-scalar and territorially dispersed, insofar as they involve significant others and life contexts in their homelands. Making sense of them would require a sophisticated understanding of the prevailing social needs in their home societies, of the attendant social work resources, cultures and institutions, and of the potential to make connections, through migrants’ life experience, between “here” and “there”. How far these transnational needs could (or even should) be addressed, and through which strategies, is contentious. Doing research in the regard – concerning, for instance, support to migrants’ transnational family life – is itself a source of promises and pitfalls to be explored further, as I aim to do in this paper.