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The Creation of the European Social Work Research Association

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Brian J Taylor¹ and Elaine Sharland²

¹ Professor of Social Work, University of Ulster, Northern Ireland

² Professor of Social Work Research, University of Sussex, England

Corresponding Author: Professor Brian Taylor, University of Ulster, Shore Road, Newtownabbey, Belfast, Northern Ireland BT37 0QB. Email: bj.taylor@ulster.ac.uk

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Abstract

As the social work profession matures the need for robust knowledge becomes more pressing. Greater co-ordination is required to develop the research community, and an infrastructure to support this nationally and internationally.

This paper discusses the foundation, in 2014, of the European Social Work Research Association, and its roots in the annual European Conference for Social Work Research series since 2011. Discussion focuses on the Association's context and aims, its principles, developments and future plans. The initial development of the Association has been very encouraging; it has attracted over 250 members in its initial months, including individuals from 19 of 28 European Union countries, and 3 of 23 European non-EU countries, as well as 6 countries outside Europe.

Continuing efforts are required to encompass the diversity of practice, organisation and research, and for the Association to be truly inclusive of social work research and researchers across the whole of Europe.

Introduction

This paper outlines the development of the European Social Work Research Association (ESWRA) which was formally constituted at the fourth European Conference for Social Work Research (ECSWR) at Bolzano in Italy in April 2014. The development of the conference series and the wider Association are described in the context of major themes relevant to the development of an international infrastructure to support social work research: diversity of research paradigms; diversity of conceptualisations of social work; and stakeholder and international inclusion.

Context

As the social work profession matures, the need for a robust knowledge base becomes more pressing (Marsh & Fisher, 2005; Shaw et al, 2010; Taylor, 2012), as does the need to consolidate and develop what is as yet a relatively young social work research discipline (Lorenz, 2004). In order to create these, greater coordination of research activity along with increased cross-fertilisation of research knowledge and ideas relevant to social work is required. For this, infrastructures to support social work research and the research community needs to be developed. Until recently there was no such infrastructure in Europe with a primary focus on social work research.

It is often hard to say exactly where or when the ideas for a new initiative began. Undoubtedly, in the case of the newly-formed ESWRA, particular credit must be given to Ian Shaw, Professor of Social Work at the University of York, for his vision, creativity, networking and persistence, not to mention time. Questioning finally extracted from Ian that he had been considering the need for a European forum for social work research from about 2005. In that year he gave a plenary address at a conference to celebrate the work of William J. Reid, Distinguished Professor of Social Welfare and an internationally recognized scholar in social work practice and research at the University at Albany, State University of New York. Ian had regularly attended meetings of the Society for Social Work and Research (SSWR) in the USA. The vision was strengthened by his involvement and that of Professor Peter Sommerfeld (University of Applied Sciences, North-western Switzerland) in the Inter-Centre Network for the Evaluation of Social Work Practice which spans seven European countries as well as having North American connections.

There were (and are) challenges to developing a cohesive body of people with complementary understandings of social work research in Europe, as commented by Gunilla Avby and colleagues (2014) based on their study in Sweden. The status and orientation of social work research are perhaps more diverse than in the USA. There are debates in various countries about the distinctiveness of the discipline and there are diverse positions regarding the nature of research paradigms. However these challenges are also opportunities; they provide fertile ground for debate and development.

It was also important to take account of existing conference-based organisations. SSWR is a highly successful research association, but its membership base is primarily in the USA; it offers a partial role model, rather than an alternative forum for European social work researchers. The *European Association of Schools of Social Work* has its main focus on education for social work although there has been some research-related activity. The *International Federation of Social Workers* and the *International Association of Schools of Social Work* – sometimes meeting jointly – tend to focus more on other aspects of the profession such as practice, organisation and education. While making a valuable contribution, their remits are too diverse to focus directly on research issues. A number of PhD students in social work appreciate the supportive network of the *International Social Work and Society Academy* (TiSSA), which provides a forum for innovative discussion on theory and practice at the cutting edge of the social professions. Also of course there are the various conference organisations that focus on particular client groups, such as the *International Society for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect*, the *European Conference on Mental Health*, etc. These tend to focus on policy and practice issues for their own domain, often informed by research but not in themselves aimed at strengthening the research base of social work as a profession. There are also a number of national social work and social work education conferences that include some research dimension but where research is not a major focus.

Despite the potential for some overlap, and some concerns about possible rivalry where these conferences have a research element, the benefits were apparent to many - initially of a separate European social work research conference series, and following that a dedicated association. In the UK, the Economic and Social Research Council, the main public funding body for social science research had, since 2006, recognised social work as a distinct research domain within social sciences (Sharland, 2010 & 2012; Shaw et al, 2004; Shaw and Norton, 2007) and from 2008 were calling for a 'step change' in the quality and quantity of social work research. This provided a further impetus towards action at least for UK social work academics.

The European Conference for Social Work Research

Thus it was, after much urging by various European organisations and networks, that the first European Conference on Social Work Research (ECSWR) was held at St

Catherine's College, Oxford in March 2011. With this venture into the unknown the conference planning committee was very grateful for the support provided by School for Social Care Research at the National Institute for Health Research in England and five other organisations. The conference was a great success, attracting high quality research presentations and a remarkable 261 participants, the majority from Northern Europe, but also from Eastern and Southern Europe, the USA and Australia.

There have followed three annual ECSWRs to date, the second hosted at University of Applied Sciences, North-western Switzerland in March 2012, the third at the University of Jyväskylä, Finland in March 2013, and the fourth, in April 2014, held at the Free University of Bolzano, Italy. As Table 1 illustrates, initial enthusiasm for the conference - in terms of numbers submitting abstracts and making presentations (mostly short oral papers, but also workshops, symposia and posters) and the number of participants overall - has not only been sustained but has grown, peaking at the most recent Bolzano conference.

Table 1: Abstracts and attendees at the first four European Conferences on Social Work Research (2011-2014)

Place	Year	Reviewed abstracts	Accepted abstracts	Accepted abstracts %	Key notes	Attendees
Oxford, England	2011	273	153	56	6	261
Basel, Switzerland	2012	270	128	47	4	253
Jyväskylä, Finland	2013	309	185	60	5	243
Bolzano, Italy	2014	446	265	59	4	354

The range and diversity of research and participating researchers will be discussed below. But here it is worth recording that the emphasis across all conferences has been on inclusivity combined with quality. All submitted abstracts have been reviewed and scored 'blind' by two reviewers, using clear selection criteria that emphasise both research rigour and relevance to social work. At the same time we have sought to be inclusive of a diversity of methodological approaches, as well as including some literature based and conceptual work relevant to the social work research endeavour.

The development and launch of ESWRA

There were already calls at the Oxford conference in 2011 for a member organisation, both to act as 'parent' to the annual conference and as a continuing hub for social work research development, collaboration and exchange. But it was from the time of the second ECSWR, in 2012, that action on this began to gain momentum. The success of the second conference inspired more confidence that a European research association would be both a welcome and a sustainable development. It was at this point that Ian Shaw and Peter Sommerfeld were joined by several colleagues, either currently or previously involved in organising ECSWRs, convening an informal working group to develop the proposal proper for an association. That proposal was brought to a plenary discussion at the third ECSWR in 2013, where it was met with overwhelming support. A mandate was formally given for an international planning group to work towards the formation of a European-wide organisation to take forward a vision for social work research across Europe. Work then began in earnest on a framework for the full constitution of the Association, its draft bylaws, and its legal and financial foundation (for practical reasons in Switzerland). Along with this, most importantly, came clarification of its

vision and goals, its intended membership base and benefits, and the role it intends to play. So it was that on 17th April 2014 at the fourth ECSWR, the European Social Work Research Association (ESWRA) was launched, its first General Assembly held, and the officers and members of its Board formally elected in anticipation of the launch. At the launch event itself, a warm invitation to join ESWRA was widely circulated.

ESWRA vision and goals

At the launch of ESWRA the vision of the Association was announced, as *'taking forward the development, practice and utilization of social work research, to enhance knowledge about individual and social problems, and promote just and equitable societies'*. Within this vision the following goals were set out:

- to promote social work research which will have beneficial consequences for practitioners, service users, educators, researchers, graduate students, and those responsible for service development and delivery;
- to foster and maintain the development of high levels of social work research and knowledge production across the European community of nations;
- to enhance research capacity and learning opportunities within the European social work community;
- to provide an environment for the application of research methods and approaches by those from a wide range of disciplines within and beyond the social sciences, in forms which have relevance for social work practice and research; and
- to build and work with networks of social work researchers within Europe and actively foster links between European and wider international research networks.

Diversity of understandings of social work

The Association is intended to be inclusive of the range of understandings and configurations of social work across diverse European countries. Yet it seeks also to achieve a coherence that will establish a common identity as a social work research community. Taking first the conferences for example, the over-arching theme for each ECSWR is largely determined by the local planning committee for that year, and seeks in particular to give a focus for the plenary speakers and to reflect something of the flavour of social work research (and therefore of practice and education) in that country. Given the diversity in defining and configuring social work in different country contexts, and therefore the spectrum of social work preoccupations, there are many challenges in seeking to identify suitably inclusive yet useful themes, capable of capturing the priorities and interests of the wide range of researchers intended to participate. So the conference themes are applied loosely when selecting contributions, without the requirement to march under pre-determined banners. From the perspective of those submitting high quality abstracts, this is primarily the opportunity to present their own research and its implications for, or impact upon, social work in local, national or international contexts. These principles of inclusivity will apply to ESWRA as a whole; its developing networks are likewise intended to create a social work research community with some common identity, but with diversity too in their understandings of social work, and their visions for social research.

Diversity of research paradigms

The same principles of inclusivity apply to the research paradigms encompassed both by the conferences and now by ESWRA. Across Europe there a wide diversity of methodological approaches taken to concepts of evidence to inform practice, as expounded by Isaac Nevo and Vered Slonim-Nevo (2011) in their paper from Israel. This is explained in part by the heterogeneous intellectual traditions in different national contexts, partly by different cultures of social work and social sciences, and partly by the different location of social work (and thus social work research and education) within these

traditions and cultures (Dellgran & Höjer, 2012). The annual conferences have informed the emerging Association regarding the breadth of research paradigms to be encompassed, whether in appraising needs at an individual or societal level; or understanding people's perceptions of their problems or of providing services; or studying the effectiveness of services; or the dissemination and use of research in practice and policy. The principles that have been, and will continue to be, applied are ones of intrinsic and extrinsic quality (Shaw and Norton, 2007) embracing, for example, experimental, qualitative and survey methods as well as evaluations and action research (quality improvement) approaches, where they best fit the problem to be addressed. Similarly, the development and use of theory to underpin conceptualisation of social work problems and research has been welcomed. This said, rather few abstracts submitted to ECSWRs to date have used experimental approaches. Among ESWRAs aspirations is to contribute to building research capacity and quality in what may be less the well-developed aspects of European social work research, as well as to foster continued advancement and innovation in those areas already strong. Papers focussing on developing research methodologies are particularly welcome at ECSWR, and Special Interests Groups with similar foci are being developed within ESRWA.

Stakeholder and international inclusion

Membership of ESWRA is on an individual basis, open without restriction to anyone who accepts and engages with the Association's aims. This may include practitioners, members of the policy community, managers and service users engaged with research, as well as university and agency researchers, lecturers, and graduate research students. It may also include those from broader social care, human services, and social pedagogy fields, and to interested members of other academic and professional disciplines. We are also actively seeking to engage with doctoral students, who are a key resource for the future development of research skills in the profession, as elucidated by Darja Zaviršek and her colleagues from Slovenia (2011).

Importantly too, ESRWA membership is open to those who do not live or work in a European nation state. At 31 August 2014, the Association had 263 members. Members at that date were from 28 countries, including 19 of 28 European Union countries and 3 of 23 European non-EU countries, as well as 6 countries outside Europe. Participants at the first four ECSWRs have been from a total of 41 countries, including 19 of 28 European Union countries and 5 of 23 European non-EU countries, as well as from 17 countries outside Europe.

The Association has benefitted from the participation of members from some former communist-bloc countries. The large number of non-EU European countries not represented at any of the conferences to date is perhaps the major challenge facing the ESWRA in relation to international inclusion. In general there is probably more engagement at present among Northern and Western European countries than Eastern and Southern. The Association is seeking to address this, for example by hosting the 2015 conference further into Eastern Europe (Slovenia) and the 2016 conference in Portugal in Southern Europe.

Potential obstacles to participation, both in ESWRA and in the annual conference, need also to be explored and ways forward found. Although the Board is aware of varying conceptualisations of social work across Europe, and has sought to encompass these, the way that the profession and its researchers identify themselves may vary more widely than we think. It may be that in countries with less centralised regulation of social work or its qualifying education programmes, more targeted approaches are needed to reach to reach potential members and participants.

The issue of language has been considered. So far, all ECSWRs and all ESWRA activities and communications have been conducted in English, at the initiative

of Board members from non-native-English-speaking countries. The 'heart' of the Association is stated as being that: '*The working language of the Association is English, but the Association seeks to develop in ways that promote language inclusivity*'. Practical ways forward with this are being sought.

The engagement of those from countries beyond Europe has been welcomed. At the first ECSWR in 2011 Professor Bruce Thyer, a founder of Society for Social Work Research (SSWR) in the USA, commented that his impression was that there was a sufficiently solid body of European social work researchers to support the establishment of a European equivalent to SSWR and mentioned how useful it was to have a social work venue solely devoted to the presentation of high quality research. Professor Jeanne Marsh, drawing on her experience as President of the SSWR, has been invaluable in informing and encouraging the development of ESWRA, and was a consulting member of the Development Group that led to ESWRA's formation. At each ECSWR one of the plenary speakers has always been from outside Europe, ensuring a linkage with developments beyond the continent. This connection is one that ESWRA intends to nurture and grow.

Current and Future Developments

Among its primary roles, ESWRA will from now on 'own' the annual ECSWR series for social work research in Europe and take responsibility for shaping it year on year, working with the local conference committee. In addition, the Association will support the social work research community through a wider range of activities and initiatives. The Association aims to enable the development of social work research agenda, along the lines beginning to be charted out by Daniel Gredig and colleagues from Switzerland (Gredig et al, 2012). The intention is to give social work research a presence and identity in Europe, in seeking to promote a social work profession marked by knowledge, evidence, understanding and justice. ESWRA will also provide a basis for mutual support of and collaboration with 'sister' organizations and networks in Europe and around the world. In terms of members themselves the new Association is actively exploring and pursuing opportunities for member benefits such as access to journals, support and mentoring schemes, facilitating special interest groups, and providing support to specialized workshops. From 2014, there is now in place an agreement that the Association will be affiliated to the European Journal of Social Work, which is particularly fitting and should provide benefits to both the Association and the Journal. Members of the Association receive online access to the Journal as part of their membership benefit via the Association's website, and can also elect to purchase the print volume at a specially discounted rate. Most importantly, the ESWRA website is now up and running (<http://www.eswra.org/>), and will become a primary forum for communications and information, networking and exchange. The Association's administration is currently being carried out by a non-governmental organisation in Switzerland, and membership invitations for 2015 are imminent.

Conclusions

Social work has long been hampered by a knowledge base that is often ill-defined in terms of robust research. The bringing together of those interested in social work research across Europe augurs well for the future of a more effective social work profession. Serving our clients, families and wider societies will be enhanced by building a stronger evidence base to inform social work policies and practice. Until now, there has been no forum in Europe with a dedicated focus on social work research, as opposed to social work education, practice or specific client groups. Both the conference series and the Association are intended to complement rather than compete with these, but to have a

distinctive research identity and to consolidate and grow the research community, in turn to support creation of knowledge for professional practice.

The initial development of ESWRA has been strong and encouraging, and participation has been enthusiastic. However we need to continue our efforts to ensure that the Association becomes truly representative of social work research across the whole of Europe, as the majority of non-EU European countries have yet to engage in the Association or the Conference series.

We must continue also to rise to the complexity and challenge of the varying conceptualisations and configurations of social work across Europe, along with the varying organisation of academic social work, the wider cultural contexts and the diversity of research paradigms. However these challenges are also our opportunities; they are the spice that adds interest and value to the venture! In her welcome speech at the launch of ESWRA in April 2014, Jeanne Marsh announced that '*The foundation of the European Association for Social Work Research is a remarkable achievement in itself. It holds great promise for the future of social work research, in Europe and beyond*'. The Board has every hope, and every intention, of fulfilling that promise.

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