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Immigrant Social Workers and Transnational Practices: The Example of Latin Americans in Switzerland

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This article explores how Latin American social workers living in Switzerland develop transnational practices in their professional and civic life. It focuses more particularly on the forms of support that these migrants provide to their societies of origin or to their immigrant compatriots through the activities they carry out either through their job, through their extra-professional commitments, or by combining these two dimensions of their existence. From interviews with 17 Latin American social workers, a typology of four forms of transnational commitment is suggested: local social work and transnational civic activity, professional transnationalism, transnational alternative professional exchanges, and "glocal" social work.

KEYWORDS Immigrant social workers, transnational practices, professional life, civic life, Latin American, social work, social policies

The question that interests us in this article is how migrant social workers in their daily lives combine professional culture, oriented to intervention at the national level, and life experiences marked by transnational influences. We assume that there is an important tension between these two dimensions. Indeed, social work is historically a profession strongly influenced by national boundaries (Castel, 2005). While migrant social workers are aware of these limits, they have also experienced how important is the transnational dimension in their lives. Thus, social workers have to take into account

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professional constraints related to state-oriented policies (Faist, 2014) in their transnational activities. Our hypothesis is that there are different forms of articulation between professional and extra-professional activities related to transnational commitment. If it is not possible to develop some forms of transnationalism in their professional activity, social workers will turn to forms of transnational civic commitment in their extra-professional activities or will find other arrangements in order to be connected with their home country.

The aim of this article is thus to analyze how Latin American migrants living in Switzerland and gainfully employed as social workers build and develop transnational practices in their professional and civic life. We focus more particularly on the forms of support that these migrants provide to their societies of origin or to their immigrant compatriots through the activities they carry out either through their job, through their extra-professional commitments, or by combining these two dimensions of their existence. The literature shows that this transnational support can take various forms: support for economic, social, educational and humanitarian projects in the home-country regions (Boccioni & Decimo, 2013; Faist, 2008); contribution to the training of professionals in the country of origin (Ionescu, Dia, & Guissé, 2009)[1]; transfer and exchange of scientific and professional knowledge (Tejada & Bolay, 2010); support for the improvement of immigrants' rights in both the country of residence and the country of origin (Østergaard-Nielsen, 2003).

The article is based on informal narrative interviews with 17 Latin American social workers, as well as participant observation and analysis of various types of document related to migrant social workers' activities (social work media and the newspapers of relevant associations, associative reports, bachelor's theses, etc.). The 17 social workers are from the following national origins: four Argentinians, three Bolivians, two Brazilians, four Chileans and four Peruvians. Women are clearly the majority (13), which corresponds to their greater representation in the profession compared to men. Three persons have titles other than a degree in social work; however they have exercised this profession for several years. As for social work graduates, the vast majority received their diploma in Switzerland; and only two of them, before their arrival there. The interviewees went to Switzerland for a variety of reasons: political exile, marriage, repatriated Swiss, family reunion, and the search for better living conditions. Today the vast majority of them have Swiss nationality, which facilitates their geographic mobility and transnational engagements (Bauböck, 2003; Faist, 2000). Most of them (11) arrived in Switzerland in early adulthood (between the ages of 20 and 29), while the six others arrived during middle adulthood (between the ages of 30 and 40). Interviewees exercise or have exercised their profession in institutions of social-service provision (9), in social education (3), and community work (*animation socioculturelle*) (5) in the canton of Geneva. Most of those who

work in social services are employed by mainstream welfare services for the general population (6), but three are working in services for migrants or asylum seekers. The three social educators are working with disabled clients. Three of those engaged in community services are working with young people; and two, in interventions at the district level.

The choice of Geneva is particularly relevant for our analysis, because Geneva is a multiethnic region where nearly 40% of the population is of foreign nationality and about 60% has a migratory background. Social workers are no exception. Even if there are no systematic studies on the ethnic origins of social workers, our empirical observations led us to estimate that a significant proportion of social workers living in the Geneva region have a migratory background.

If I chose to limit the research project only to Latin American social workers, it is because of the exploratory nature of the study; it was easier in this first step to get access to this population. Most of the interviewees were my students at the School of Social Work in Geneva where they followed my courses or were supervised by me in their bachelor's thesis work. I met the others through contacts with social work institutions or through research activities. The fieldwork took place between 2008 and 2009 and lasted 12 months. In most cases, I had two or more interviews with each participant. Most of the interviews were held in public places, mainly cafés, where it was easier to create an informal and confidential atmosphere. I took notes during our meetings. The duration of each interview was between half an hour and 2 hours. The data collected were submitted to a thematic analysis inspired by the principles of "grounded theory" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Thus, interviews were analyzed both vertically, to capture the stories of particular social workers, and horizontally, to grasp the recurrent patterns of transnational involvement of social workers. This qualitative and exploratory approach, with a limited number of professionals, seemed to be particularly appropriate to the obtention of greater insight into little-known transnational practices.

After a first section devoted to the state of the art in the study of migrations, transnationalism and social work, we present the main types of Latin American social workers' transnationalism that emerge from our empirical study. We discuss then the main findings and their implications for the analysis of social workers' transnational practices. The conclusion comes back to the tension between social work national boundaries and migrants' transnational realities and points out some questions that need further exploration.

STATE OF THE ART AND MAIN FOCUS

Various authors have highlighted the fact that the lives of migrants transcend national spaces. State borders do not delimit the spaces where the

experiences of migrants occur (Brenner, 1999). In fact, while participating in the societies in which they live, migrants preserve and develop many links with their home country or with their communities of fellow conationals established in different countries (Baldassar & Merla, 2013; Bolzman, 2011). They thus live their lives across borders and make daily decisions in connection with actors and institutions located not only in their state of residence but also in other states (Portes, 1997).

Transnationalism is the theoretical perspective that highlights the complexity of migrants' lives and their affiliations and loyalties to multiple spaces (Basch, Glick Schiller, & Blanc-Szanton, 1994). This perspective emphasizes the need to analyze not only migrants' lives but also the lives of a growing part of the "nonmigrant" population, taking into account the globalization process that increases the interdependence between individuals beyond the usual state limits used in conceptualizing the social world (Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002). Thus, in the case of migrants, it is not only their families, social networks, and economic ties, which are located in several states, but also their imagined worlds, their emotions, and their loyalties. They are inserted, often simultaneously, in a "here and elsewhere" to which they feel they belong. It is not a question of choosing between two affiliations but of fluid lives connecting places and creating new concrete and symbolic bridges between them (Bauman, 2000). Nevertheless, the intensity of migrants' transnational commitment and the forms it can take may be very diverse, ranging from "narrow" (involving few migrants with intensive and constant practices) to "broad" (involving large numbers of migrants with less-intensive and more-sporadic practices) (Itzigsohn, Dore Cabral, Hernandez Medina, & Vazquez, 1999). Or from "advanced transnationalism" (involving well-established immigrants acting in many areas of commitment) to "basic transnationalism" (new immigrants involved mainly in sending economic remittances to their families) (Ambrosini, 2013).

The purpose of this article is to explore the main forms of transnational practice elaborated by Latin American social workers settled in Switzerland in their professional and civic life. Like other migrants and other immigrant social workers, Latin American social workers live concrete experiences of transnationalism. For instance, they have family in different countries, social ties to their country of origin and elsewhere, and economic relations with their country of origin (remittances, investments, property) and sometimes with other countries; they also maintain cultural ties with their country of origin and with third countries—such as Spain, for example. Finally, during their training or in the practice of their profession they sometimes established contacts with social workers from their home continent or elsewhere (Bartley, Beddoe, Fouché, & Harington, 2012).

However, Latin American social workers also share the professional culture of their colleagues in the country in which they practice their profession. This culture is characterized among other things by the social workers' close

relationship with the national institutional reality in which they are included (Erath & Littlechild, 2010). This also means that social work is mainly a state-led profession and that the majority of social workers are civil servants and representatives of local authorities (Chaudet, Regamey, Rosende, & Tabin, 2000). Indeed, from a social work mainstream perspective, the aim is to support people in need, prevent marginalization or exclusion, and fight against poverty with instruments allowed by local, regional, and national laws and social policies within a state (Acker & Dwyer, 2004; Righard, 2008). These laws and policies have been designed to be applied to situations involving mainly people who have lived most of their lives on the territory of the same state (Bolzman, Poncioni, Vial, & Fibbi, 2004). Even though, in a world characterized by increasing international mobility, new transnational social realities do not necessarily match with these laws and policies, social work, as a profession, is still much influenced by this strong national dimension (Tabin, 1999) and is not very sensitive to the transnational dimension.

This is also the case for social work with immigrants. Even though, nowadays, more attention is granted to the value of diversity and to preventing discrimination (Bolzman, 2009), the main focus of social intervention remains the integration of more-precarious and recent immigrant groups in local and national spaces (Cox & Geisen, 2014). Transnational migrants' ties and commitments are very often a "black box" for social work. Therefore migrant social workers probably live contradictory experiences in their professional world: on the one hand, as migrants, they are aware of the importance of transnationalism for their users; on the other hand, as social workers, they realize that, for their employers and their colleagues, this is not a very relevant dimension. The issue is, then, how migrant social workers combine in their everyday lives a professional culture, oriented to intervention at the national level, and life experiences influenced by transnational realities.

This is exploratory research because, to our knowledge, studies on migrant social workers and transnationalism are scarce. Migrant social workers are part of an emerging field (Negi & Furman, 2010), unlike in other professions such as health (Ionescu et al., 2009) or the so-called hard sciences (Tejada & Bolay, 2010). If social work has attracted less attention from researchers until now, this is probably because it is an area where the issue of "brain drain" has arisen in a less acute way than in other professional sectors. Indeed, given the close relationship between social work and national social policies, the transfer of skills from one country to another encounters more obstacles than in the field of health, for example. Indeed, in the area of health, there is an international circulation of labor that has increased with globalization. Many states have problems training, recruiting, and retaining a sufficient number of professionals for their health services. So they resort to health professionals trained abroad to meet their deficit of labor (Buchan & May, 1999; Martineau, Decker, & Bundred, 2004). However, this problem

seems to arise in a less dramatic way in the area of social work, where the vast majority of professionals, even if they are immigrants, have been trained in the country in which they perform their jobs. Social workers need to know, for example, about the social policies of the country they practice in. Yet it is surprising that the issue of the relationship between social work and the various forms of cooperation with the country of origin has been granted little attention, while individuals who perform "human professions" (i.e., social work, education, health, psychology, etc.) tend to participate more often than the average in activities that require social commitment, whether in the workplace or during their "leisure" time (Bidou, 1984).

A specific typology about the forms of transnational commitment of migrant social workers is required because, as shown by Ambrosini (2013) in a recent article, most research on transnational practices has focused in three areas: economic business, familial remittances, and associative commitment. Professional transnationalism and, especially, social workers' transnationalism have been much less explored.

Remittances are very often described as the core of transnational activities. These remittances can be economic, social, or even cultural. In many studies (Landolt, 2001; Vertovec, 2004), the main focus has been on economic remittances. We assume that, in the case of social workers, remittances are not mainly economic transfers or financial transfers from the resident country to the home country. Rather, what probably predominate are social remittances, which are also quite important in associative transnationalism (Portes, Escobar, & Walton Radford, 2007). These remittances are characterized by the promotion of projects aiming at sustainable development in the home country—that is, at improving not only collective standards of life but also the equality of opportunities and access to material and nonmaterial goods, like education or health. In some cases, these remittances take the form of codevelopment, which requires the active participation of the local population in the home country.

Nevertheless, transnationalism does not mean exclusively one-directional transfers from the country of residence to the country of origin. The typology elaborated by Østergaard-Nielsen (2003) to distinguish the different forms of transnational political participation of migrants offers a useful starting point from which to distinguish the different forms of transnational commitment by social workers. We would thus be able to differentiate between four options: immigrant issues, homeland or diaspora issues, emigrant issues, and local–local issues. "Immigrant issues" designate those activities aiming to improve the situation of immigrants in the host country by furthering their rights and socioeconomic status in that society. "Homeland" or "diaspora issues" designate activities related to the domestic situations of the home country and aiming to improve human, ethnic, or religious rights or social situations there. "Emigrant issues" concern the transnational status of migrants—as residents of a foreign country—who are seeking to

improve their status and/or connections with their home country. The goal of "local–local issues" is the improvement of the communities of origin of migrants through different forms of participation (e.g., knowledge transfer) or involvement in local development processes. We thus analyze the extent to which this preliminary typology is relevant to our case study.

Taking into account the typology of Østergaard-Nielsen, as well as the different aspects of the literature on transnationalism examined above, I suggest a broader typology of social workers' transnational modes of engagement. This typology explores four dimensions: the links between professional and extraprofessional transnational activities, the forms taken by contacts with the home country (direct or indirect), the geographical orientation and issues related to transnational practices, and the orientation of transnational flows (unilateral or circulatory). The four dimensions can be also summarized by four questions: How do Latin American social workers combine occupational and nonoccupational transnational activities? Do transnational activities require the regular presence of a person in their home country or are they instead implemented from a distance? What forms does their transnational commitment take? Do transnational activities feed professional activities in the country of residence or is there no relationship between them?

Based on the answers to these questions, I have distinguished four types: (1) local social work and transnational civic activity, (2) professional transnationalism, (3) transnational alternative professional exchanges, and (4) "glocal" social work.

Note that the four social types presented here are ideal types (Weber, 1965) or "theoretical artefacts," synthetic and simplified constructions of reality from the perspective of the researcher. These types allow us to distinguish and understand more clearly a social issue. We do not profess to give an exhaustive description of all forms of relationship between social work and transnational engagement developed by Latin American social workers. It is also clear that the boundaries between these types are less tight than suggested by the presentation. Indeed, our article does not purport to be a perfect reflection of empirical reality, which, in any case, is perceived from the point of view of the individual who observes it. Moreover, we refer here mainly to social workers' narratives about their social practices, which do not necessarily correspond to the practices themselves. The aim is, rather, to explore new outlooks and to analyze and understand the complexity of the problem studied.

LOCAL SOCIAL WORK AND TRANSNATIONAL CIVIC ACTIVITIES

Among the 17 Latin American social worker interviewees, 12 are employed by various mainstream institutions and Swiss associations dealing with local

social problems; the other 5 are working with immigrant populations at the local level. Most of them, however, engage in activities, in their free time, in support of various sectors of the population of their country of origin.

They practice, in fact, forms of transnationalism that both express their desire to fit in and be recognized as professionals and citizens in the local area and, at the same time, maintain a link of continuity with their country of origin.

Actually, almost all have written their bachelor's dissertation in social work on a topic related to their country of origin (social security issues or wider social or human rights issues) or in connection with immigration issues (situation of asylum seekers or undocumented migrants, identity dilemmas, etc.). They express their interest for two main forms of transnationalism, as classified by Østergaard-Nielsen: homeland issues and immigrant issues. With respect to this last form of transnationalism, two of the social workers became involved, for example, in action research: they established a new association to provide information services for Portuguese-speaking migrants based on the assumption that there is a need for an interface between the local social services and these often-undocumented immigrants who ignore opportunities to be supported locally. The information service has had great success in attendance and has expanded the range of information to which migrants have access, thus, validating their hypothesis (Gaewihler & Pfister, 2004).

The interest of these social workers for immigrants in precarious situations reflects their concern to establish a link between their own migration trajectories and their integration in Switzerland. As put by Gaewihler and Pfister (2004, p. 3),

> We share a similar experience with people who are the 'target' of our action-research, because we also arrived in Switzerland as undocumented migrants. At that time we were confronted with the same problems as irregular migrants, especially in access to work, housing, etc., ... but we were also conscious that, as social workers, we should keep a necessary distance for the sake of our dissertation work.

In fact, most of the informants are currently or have been employed by institutions or associations working in Switzerland with immigrant populations, especially with asylum seekers and/or undocumented individuals. Some are very committed to defending immigrants' rights. For instance, professionals we interviewed of various nationalities, who were involved in Latin American associations, have joined together to open a free information center in order to use their expertise to advise persons from their country of origin. As one of them pointed out, "We cannot remain indifferent to the plight of

the poorest. We know how difficult it is to be a newcomer in an unknown society."

However, almost all the social workers I interviewed said that they are, above all, professionals of social intervention. They felt that they had been trained to work with clients of all backgrounds, which is normal in a multiethnic society, and not only with clients of the same ethnic origin.

Some have followed up the debates on social work and ethnicity (Boucher, 2005; Eckmann & Delpasand, 2001). These professionals are aware of the risks of being considered solely according to their ethnicity or migration expertise and, thus, being relegated to work only with certain types of client. They reject the division of labor within professional teams on the basis of ethnic criteria only.

Some interviewees are experiencing strong local integration into local community life—for example, they are committee members of different local associations. Others are actively engaged in Swiss political, often left-wing, parties, and one was elected to the city council of his town. He actively campaigned against discrimination and racism locally. Thus, for them, integration goes hand in hand with involvement in immigrant transnationalism.

However, they are also engaged in compatriot associations and support projects in their countries of origin. At this level they engage in homeland transnationalism and, to a lesser extent, in local–local issues. This is the case for three of them, who are part of the Association of Chilean residents in Geneva; they gave on impulse, with other compatriots, to cooperation projects with disadvantaged and minority sectors of Chilean society (rural schools, poor neighborhoods, Mapuche first nation, and monuments to missing people under the dictatorship, to name just a few) (Bolzman, 2011). The money for funding these activities is collected mainly in the context of intercultural festivals (especially the "music festival," which takes place every year around the third week of June to celebrate the arrival of summer and where the Association of Chilean residents often had a stall selling food and drinks), the Chilean national day which takes place in September, or through associative meals. These Latin American social workers practice forms of cooperation that are very common among migrants' hometown associations, as evidenced by different empirical studies in the United States and elsewhere (Antwi Bosiako, 2012; Orozco & Rouse, 2007; Sommerville, Duran, & Terrazas, 2008).

Most of the projects they support are identified through direct contacts with compatriots in the home country. These contacts, which often existed before emigration, were renewed and are strengthened during the social workers' visits to their homeland during the holidays. "During my last holidays in Chile, I visited the school we are helping with computer equipment to see how things are going on, but I also visited other social structures to see which other needs are important in the same town."

ALTERNATING LIFE PLACES: PROFESSIONAL TRANSNATIONALISM

The three interviewees discussed above are included in the group that I have labeled "professional transnationals." These social workers obtained their degree either in Switzerland or in Latin America. They have worked in their profession in Switzerland for some time, but they have alternated this work with professional activities in their country or even their continent of origin.

Among these individuals, both geographic and significant occupational mobility can be observed. They build bridges between social, cultural, and occupational spaces. For example, one of the interviewees has worked during her professional life in Switzerland, Peru, Brazil, and Argentina. As for occupational mobility, they have not only worked in the field of social work but have also alternated this with the exercise of other social professions, such as cooperation in development or health prevention programs. As explained by one interviewee:

> I obtained a degree from the Graduate Institute for Development Studies in Geneva. A few years later I had the opportunity to work in the International Labour Organization (ILO) as the coordinator of a project called "Analysing protection measures for women." Then I came back to my country to work on a project financed by the United Nations Program for Development. The project was stopped with the arrival of a new government in Peru. Then I decided to go back to Switzerland, where I worked in an NGO and then as a social worker for the regional government.

In any case, there are often links between other professional activities and social work practice. For instance, one of these interviewees has organized community work in the framework of her artistic activities. Identification with Latin America also remains important, because the interviewees have very often completed professional sojourns in this part of the world.

In fact, in certain periods of their lives, these immigrant social workers focus on an occupation locally oriented toward their society of residence and, at other times, are strongly oriented toward Latin America in their professional activities. Both family considerations and professional opportunities guide their decisions on the geographical location of their activities. For example, one interviewee who had a young child and a spouse with health problems decided, instead, to abandon an activity that required frequent trips to Latin America and resume a more stable activity in Geneva in order to devote more time to her family. This type of migrant social worker may be considered as a "middling transnational" (Ho, 2011). Such individuals do experience geographical mobility that is different from "highly skilled professionals," who are often associated with the activities of transnational corporations or capitalist elites (Bartley et al., 2012).

Their sensitivity to social, educational, and economic problems in Latin America is still very present and, like the type of social worker described earlier, these social workers feel that they cannot remain indifferent to the plight of the poorest of the subcontinent's populations. They engage directly in homeland transnationalism. The issue of commitment to their compatriots therefore has an ethical dimension that the social workers try to combine with a more personal development dimension in their work. This dual requirement can sometimes lead them to find themselves in precarious professional situations: They experience periods of economic uncertainty, related to the limited duration of work contracts or of the funding projects in which they are involved.

In this case, whenever it is possible, these social workers try to carry out as many of the activities to support their country or region of origin as possible in the framework of their professional occupation. For example, one social worker left Switzerland to work in a poor neighborhood of Lima in the context of a prevention project of a Swiss health NGO. Sometimes they also commit themselves at the civic level but not as systematically as in the first type we analyzed.

TRANSNATIONAL ALTERNATIVE PROFESSIONAL EXCHANGES

Among the Latin American social workers I interviewed in French-speaking Switzerland, I found two professionals who were employed by local associations and who could be defined as "alternative." This definition means that these professionals are particularly interested in innovative and critical social work. Therefore, like most other Latin Americans working in social professions, they put a special emphasis on social engagement as the core of their professional definition. The difference between them and other social workers lies rather in the form of their commitment: Interviewees from this category are more interested than the others in issues in the society of residence; they are also particularly interested in alternative experiences set up to find solutions to issues such as substance abuse, precariousness, or isolation. These social workers attach great importance to the everyday dimension of their existence and to the present time, and the value concrete interpersonal relations and friendliness. They also value these dimensions in their professional lives. They convey values that might be defined as "post-materialist" (Inglehart, 1977), wherein the social and personal dimensions of existence are strongly related.

A central aspect that characterizes these professionals is an understanding of their professional commitment as a form of both personal and political engagement. They do not consider their job as a partisan activity but as an activity that should contribute to changing society through practices that demonstrate the possibility of alternative forms of human relations. In this

context, as put by one interviewee, "the so-called personal activity" is thus very much related to other kinds of social activity.

Moreover, these "specialists in human issues" (Bidou, 1984, p. 29) aspire—as two connected sides of their social recognition—both to practice social work as their professional activity and to participate actively as citizens in the Swiss environment. They attach great importance to communication and the development of interpersonal relations with people who share with them the same vision of the world. For them, nationality or ethnic origin are not decisive criteria when choosing their friends; what matter are the affinity of ideas and the sharing of an alternative way of life.

This does not mean that these interviewees interrupt their relations with their country of origin. Actually, they maintain strong links with their homeland, but favor other channels—other areas of social reality rather than direct support for humanitarian or development projects. In fact, they become promoters of the exchange of new ideas and concepts between Switzerland and their country of origin, through links with universities, intellectuals, or professionals in both countries. For example, one of the interviewees is the director of a low-threshold center specialized in emergency accommodation for people in precarious situations. Through his writings and conferences he informs his colleagues in Latin America about this alternative model of social work he is trying to build, with others in the field, in Switzerland. At the same time, he lets his Swiss colleagues know about some dimensions of Latin American social work, such as various forms of community social work, which he considers relevant and which could contribute to social work in Europe.

Thus, social workers of this type develop a professional and methodological interface. They are "go-betweens" who promote bridges between various professional perspectives not only on the local or national level but also on the transnational level. They favor forms of local–local transnationalism by encouraging the flow of ideas from one place to another. They contribute to the exchange of professional experiences and theories of intervention from a professional experience focused on Switzerland. Unlike the previous type of social worker, they do not alternate professional activities here and elsewhere.

The main potential of this type of social worker is their contribution to the circulation of new ideas and practices in the field of social work at a transnational level. They can thus promote innovation in the professional field. However, the introduction and development of standardized managerial models in the mainstream social services tend to limit the influence of such alternative ideas (Tschopp, Libois, & Bolzman, 2013).

Professionals of this type have a solid academic and intellectual formation and belong to the upper-middle classes. If they are not numerous among social workers it is probably because, in this profession, oral culture is more developed than written. In fact, many practitioners define their

relations with their beneficiaries as singular experiences in which intuition, "feeling," and the ability to find specific solutions for each particular situation are much valued. They have the impression that it is very difficult to generalize and theorize their professional practice (Libois, 2012). Some of them also fear that written texts will limit their spaces of freedom and creativity, while oral communication allows them to preserve this protected sphere of relations between them and their beneficiaries. Things are changing with new attempts toward the "academization" of social work (Libois & Bolzman, 2014), but many professionals are still reluctant to conceptualize and analyze their modes of intervention in professional or scientific reviews.

"GLOCAL" SOCIAL WORK

In the final group, which I have labeled "glocal," only one interviewee is included, but I consider that this case represents a more complex and elaborated form of transnationalism. Therefore I have considered it as a type per se. Here, there is an attempt to create organic ties between professional activity in Switzerland and professional actions in the country of origin. The approach goes beyond the well-known slogan "Think globally, act locally." A formula that would better suit the spirit of the action observed here would be "Think globally, act locally here and there." In that sense this is a somewhat elaborate form of local–local transnationalism. One could almost assert that the professional interviewed is inventing new forms of everyday social work across boundaries, which connects action here with action there, both structurally and almost simultaneously. Hence the term "glocal social work" seems appropriate, since intervention is designed simultaneously at two local global levels. In fact, the work of integrating vulnerable individuals in Switzerland is strengthened through the work of insertion of vulnerable individuals in Latin America and vice versa. It is, indeed, a process that leads to encounters between people who, a priori, were not destined to meet. The social worker plays the role of the mediator craftsman who patiently weaves links between different types of actor within and between the countries. It also takes on the role of intermediary across cognitive, geographical, and statutory boundaries, which seemed, a priori, to be fixed once and for all but which actually prove to be flexible and fluid.

This perspective is characterized by the partnership between social workers and civil-society actors here and there rather than by a unidirectional approach wherein social workers here would, alone, hold the keys to what happens there. Indeed, actors involved in the project believe that actions both here and there serve to empower vulnerable populations. The key idea is to stimulate the self-organizing capacity and empowerment of these populations. Social workers are perceived mainly as facilitators who help to create the conditions necessary to enable the populations concerned

to take change themselves. They also play a role in encouraging local authorities to take more responsibility for and be more responsive to the needs and demands of vulnerable populations. The professional's role is also to facilitate the networking of the different stakeholders. These professionals perceive a strong link between social work and advocacy that favors the empowerment and self-confidence of persons in situations of vulnerability. For them, advocacy is not just one element of social work but a core dimension of social intervention (Dominelli, 2009; Schneider & Lester, 2001).

This is certainly an uncommon approach; however, one example is that of a social worker in Geneva, who has certain social characteristics that helped her to develop a specific approach. She came from her country of origin, Argentina, already with a solid background in the social sciences and some practical experience in community social work. Since she already had dual nationality, it was easier for her to find a recognized place in Swiss society, where she completed a BA in social work. She has since worked as a social counselor in postcompulsory secondary school (for students between 16 and 19 years old), where some students had school and/or social difficulties. After a few years of work, she gradually developed a highly complex project of support and exchange with a popular area of her hometown in Argentina.

She maintained many contacts in her hometown—with academics, social workers, health professionals, teachers, municipal officials, and so on. On several private visits, she found a situation of extreme poverty and very limited social organization in one district of the city. It was in this context that she decided to organize a humanitarian trip for a group of students from her school in Geneva. She managed to mobilize her fellow social workers, school management, teachers, students at her school, the Geneva development cooperation, the authorities of various communes in Geneva, the international relations office, students from the Geneva School of Social Work and, last but not least, various categories of people she knew in her home country.

The students leave for 2 weeks, accompanied by social workers and teachers. During their stay they work with young Argentine students on building a playground in a neighborhood where there is no play area for children. They also refurbish the school. All actors are mobilized around the project, including the Argentinian municipality that agrees to pay for the playground materials. For the social worker this is very important: Even if Geneva could finance the playground, it is important that the local authorities also seriously commit to supporting the project.

In addition, students from both countries participate in leisure activities (music, sports) organized by Argentinian community workers on the playground that was built, thus highlighting the potential uses of this space. Swiss students and teachers also meet local professionals working in social, health, and educational services in order to receive more information and help them to understand the broader dimensions of the social problems in that area.

After their return to Switzerland, the students, with the help of their teachers and social workers, produce a brochure presenting the various profiles of persons living or working in the Argentinian neighborhood. This work allows the students to improve certain subjects, such as French. They also learn to see their own everyday problems from a more-distant perspective, and they strengthen their self-esteem through their involvement in an activity of collective solidarity; thus their interest in social and health professions can increase.

The social worker who was the linchpin of the project has returned to Argentina, where she continued the experience for some time from there while maintaining contact with the actors in Geneva. Her position in the network has changed, but she has tried to continue her transnational commitment. However, the here and elsewhere not being completely interchangeable, she has more difficulty in pursuing transnational work since the main anchor is situated in a "southern" country. Thus, this example raises the issue of the structural conditions related to transnational exchanges. Indeed, it is easier to act transnationally when actors benefit from the financial and administrative resources needed to develop projects. Social workers residing in a developing country have more difficulty in accessing these resources. Paradoxically, this problem is exacerbated when the country in question is not considered to be a *very* poor country and thus is not seen as a main target for development cooperation.

DISCUSSION: CLARIFYING THE DIMENSIONS OF SOCIAL WORKERS' TRANSNATIONALISM

My purpose in this article was to explore the transnational practices of Latin American social workers living in Switzerland. Empirical evidence shows that four types can be distinguished: local social work and transnational civic activity, professional transnationalism, transnational alternative professional exchanges, and glocal social work. These types can be distinguished with respect to four dimensions: the links between professional and extraprofessional transnational activities, the forms taken by contacts with the home country, the geographical orientation and issues related to transnational practices, and the orientation of transnational flows.

With respect to the first dimension, transnational practices of the first type are developed mainly during extra-professional activities; of the second type transnationalism is related to professional activities in the home country; while, of the third and fourth types, there is a close connection between professional activities and civic commitment.

In all four types, Latin American social workers have direct contact with their home country: in the first type these contacts are related to extra-professional travel, mainly for holidays; in the second type the geographical

mobility of social workers is related to their professional activities, developed over long periods, in the continent of origin; in the third type a combination of personal and professional sporadic mobility favors the circulation of ideas; while, in the fourth, there is regular and organized professional and personal mobility within a glocal space. In all four types there is a predominance of advanced transnationalism (Ambrosini, 2013), with the involvement of social workers in many areas of commitment.

The adaptation of Østergaard-Nielsen's (2003) typology to distinguish the different forms of transnational commitment was useful in highlighting the main geographical orientation and issues related to these commitments. In the first type, homeland and immigrant issues predominate. In the second, homeland issues are the main focus of attention; while in the third, forms of local–local transnationalism related to the circulation of ideas from one place to another are central. The fourth type is also mainly concerned with local–local transnationalism but involves many more civil society partners than the third type.

With respect to the orientation of transnational flows there are also clear differences. In the first type, social and economic remittances to support development in the home country predominate. In the second type, the trend is to create development projects or to join already existing projects in the home region; in both cases the idea is to stimulate social participation. In the third type, there is a more circulatory perspective wherein contacts can stimulate social innovation both in the home country and in the country of residence. In the fourth type there is also a circulatory perspective; however the key idea is to stimulate the self-organizing capacity and empowerment of vulnerable populations in both countries.

These results highlight the diversity of social workers' transnational practices, embedded as they are in different social trajectories, experiences, resources, and ways of understanding the profession. However, beyond the variety of their practices, social workers' transnationalism has specific characteristics that distinguish it from other forms of transnationalism, such as economic business, family remittances, or even associative commitment. These differences invite more in-depth exploration of social workers' transnationalism and bring into focus a number of open questions that we tackle in the following and final section of this article.

CONCLUSION: BACK TO THE RELATION BETWEEN MIGRATION, SOCIAL WORK, AND TRANSNATIONALISM

Migrants are often considered as the target populations of social work provision, since they are perceived as vulnerable. In this article we have tried to highlight that they can also be actors of social work practice. Moreover, through their life experiences and their professional careers, they can con-

tribute with innovative perspectives, either on how to practice social work or on how to combine professional life and civic engagement at the transnational level.

The exploratory typology we sketched in fact shows the opening of social workers to other geographical areas. This opening can take various forms; it can be directly integrated into their work or express, instead, a civic activity. It can be practiced through cross-border cooperation or through private or professional trips to other countries. Transnational commitment can be designed more like one-way remittances to other regions or as forms of coconstruction, which also have an impact on social work practice in Northern societies, through the circulation of ideas, practices, and skills. Somehow, this bilateral mode is not just a simple gift from the North; it is also part of a logic of counter-gift or *contre-don* (Berthoud, 2004), because social work practices in Northern societies also benefit from these transnational exchanges. In any case, the typology may be an interesting instrument allowing further reflection on the models of social work with immigrants in host countries, on the one hand, and on the use of the resources and skills of migrant social workers in programs of humanitarian cooperation or development, on the other.

We have seen that the most frequent types of transnational commitment by Latin American social workers in Switzerland are developed as civic commitments during their "leisure time" or as immigrant social work aimed at the improvement of social conditions and the rights of immigrants in the "host" society. The main foci of their transnational civic engagement are, besides immigrant issues, homeland and local–local issues. Emigrant issues were seldom relevant for the social workers interviewed. However, the latter may well be concerned with issues such as the transfer of retirement or other kinds of welfare pension from one country to another. Do they consider these issues as out of their scopes of action? This question deserves further exploration.

Beyond the various forms that the transnational engagement of our social workers take, the examples raise the more fundamental question of the meaning of professional social work today, especially its geographical scope of intervention. As Jovelin (2008) points out, there is a strong historical link between the contours of social work practice and national social policies in Europe. For Robert Castel (2005), too, a close connection can be found between the process of development of the welfare state and social work. These developments have led us to consider the national society as the almost natural sphere of social work intervention. However, as noted by Righard (2008, p. 3):

> There is a growing discrepancy between the organisation of land people into states and citizens, and how people organise their lives. While states in general and welfare states in particular are organised in accordance

> with borders and boundaries significant of each state, individual and collective actors increasingly organise their everyday lives across these borders and boundaries.

Social work is thus confronted with the issue of the creation of new forms of intervention that take into account the increasing cross-border mobility of people whose lives and the lives of members of their close networks take place simultaneously between and across several states (Bolzman, Hirsch-Durret, Anderfuhren, & Vuille, 2008; Vatz Laaroussi & Bolzman, 2010).

This exploratory study has focused on Latin American social workers. Further research is needed in order to examine whether the forms of transnational engagement found among these respondents are also present among other migrant or national social workers. Many elements related to globalization processes tend to configure new social spaces in people's lives. However, the complexity of these social spaces needs more case study and comparative perspectives.

NOTE

1. The authors quote the case of a medical doctor from Cameroon living in Geneva and going back periodically to his home country to give specific training on some pathologies.

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