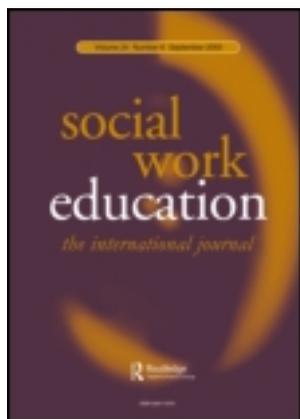


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Community-oriented Social Work in Cuba: Government Response to Emerging Social Problems

David Strug

Cuba developed a unique community-oriented social work approach in the 1990s that transformed social work education and practice. This paper describes that approach and why it emerged when it did. A review of the literature on social change in Cuba in the 1990s, and 31 open-ended interviews conducted in Havana, Cuba, showed that social work changed in response to economic crisis, emerging social problems and the need for social workers for community practice. Social workers' participation in neighborhood development projects and Cuba's post-Revolutionary communal ethos also shaped a community-oriented social work approach in Cuba. This approach contrasts with an individually oriented model in the US and in Britain. Social workers in Cuba and in these countries can learn from one another, despite the differences that exist among them.

Keywords: Community; Cuba; History of Social Work; International Social Work; Social Problems; Social Work Education

Cuba developed a unique community-oriented approach to social work education and practice in the 1990s that transformed Cuban social work. This paper addresses two basic questions: (1) what changes occurred in Cuban social work in the 1990s?; and (2) why did a community-oriented social work approach emerge at this time?

This paper shows that Cuban social work education and practice was transformed in the 1990s as a result of economic crisis, emerging social problems and a need for social workers for community practice with vulnerable groups. Social workers' participation in neighborhood development projects and Cuba's post-Revolutionary communal ethos also shaped a community-oriented social work approach in Cuba. A communal ethos here refers to a tradition of popular participation of community residents and of locally elected representatives in neighborhood social action programs. This communal ethos was a product of the Cuban Revolution of 1959.

Correspondence to: David Strug, Yeshiva University, Wurzweiler School of Social Work, Belfer Hall, Rm 810, Wilf Campus (Washington Heights), 500 West 185th Street, New York, NY 10033, USA. Email: strug@yu.edu

Community-oriented social work practice in Cuba is characterized by a close, working relationship between social workers and community members, representatives of community organizations, and officials from regional government offices. The need to train social workers for community practice was the impetus for social work educational reform in the 1990s. This reform resulted in the creation of Cuba's first university social work degree program and the start of four social work schools for youth. These schools have trained over 21,000 young community social work practitioners in the last four years.

Cuba's community-based social work approach contrasts with a more individually oriented model of social work in the US and in the UK. Social workers in Cuba and in these countries can learn from one another, despite the differences between them. Social workers from the US and the UK can share educational methods, research strategies, and theoretical advances with their Cuban colleagues. At the same time, Cuban social workers can share their community-oriented social work experience with their counterparts in other countries. An exchange of information between the Cuban social work community and social workers elsewhere can contribute to the internationalization of social work education and its professional development (Greif, 2004).

Background

Interest in Cuban social work has increased among social workers in Europe, Latin America and the US (*Rock Around the Blockade Newsletter*, 2002; International Federation of Social Workers, 2002; Strug & Teague, 2002). However, the international social work literature contains little information about Cuban social work. Cuban social workers traditionally worked in office settings in the public health sector (*NASW News*, 2001; Seplowin, 2001), but since the mid-1990s, they have worked in increasing numbers on community-based projects unrelated to public health, such as recreational and after-school programs for youth and family support programs for the elderly (Uriarte, 2002). Social work higher education in Cuba progressed slowly until the late 1990s (Goicoechea-Balbona & Conill-Mendoza, 2002), but has advanced in recent years (Strug & Teague, 2002). The international social work literature contains almost no information about Cuban social work, the changes it has undergone, or its relevance for the international social work community. This paper is intended to fill these gaps in the social work literature.

Methods

Information for this article comes from a review of the literature on social change in Cuba in the 1990s and also from open-ended interviews conducted in Havana, Cuba with 31 experts on Cuban social work education. The literature review was carried out to learn how the collapse of the former Soviet Union, on which Cuba was dependent economically, affected Cuban society in the 1990s. The open-ended interviews were conducted to gather basic information about social work educational

reform from key individuals involved in its development. Respondents provided important information concerning a topic not described before in the social work literature.

Interviews took place between September 2002 and April 2004. The author first met with the president of Cuba's *Society of Social Workers in Health Care* and with the director of Cuba's first university degree program in social work. These two individuals gave the names of other experts, who provided additional names in turn. This snowball sampling approach eventually led to the inclusion of 29 additional informants, comprising eight social work students, eight social work practitioners, five faculty members from the University of Havana who helped create new social work programs in Cuba, four additional officers from Cuba's *Society of Social Workers in Health Care*, and four officials from the Cuban Ministry of Public Health. This sample, although small, included many individuals who played a key role in the development of social work educational reform in the 1990s. The interviews were open ended and asked: (1) what was social work like in Cuba prior to the Revolution?; (2) what impact did the Revolution have on Cuban social work?; (3) how and why did social work change in the 1990s?; and (4) why did Cuban social work develop a community orientation? These interviews were conducted in Spanish and tape recorded. The interviews were reviewed to identify major themes, such as 'social problems' and 'community practice'. A theme refers to a statement of meaning that runs through all or most of the pertinent data (Ely *et al.*, 1991). This method of thematic analysis is commonly used in qualitative research for the analysis of open-ended data (Bernard, 2005). No quantitative analysis of the data was performed because of the small sample size and because this was an exploratory study.

Findings

Social Work Before the Cuban Revolution

Social work did not exist as an organized profession in Cuba prior to the 1940s. Social assistance was provided by charitable and philanthropic organizations through the 1930s (L. de Urrutia Barroso, personal communication, 14 September 2002). The first Cuban school of social work was established at the University of Havana in 1943. It was a two-year program and had a curriculum much influenced by the US (K. A. Kendall, personal communication, 2 October 2004). This was not a university degree program and ended when the university closed its doors in 1956, due to social turmoil leading up to the Cuban Revolution of 1959 (De Urrutia Barroso, n.d). 'The Revolution would change Cuban society in fundamental ways and distance it from the tradition of social work in the US', according to one social scientist interviewed for this study (K. Barrera, personal communication, 19 September 2002).

Cuba's Post-Revolutionary Communal Ethos

Cuba's post-Revolutionary government created 'mass organizations', which are still in existence. Mass organizations, such as the Cuban Federation of Women (FMC),

implemented major social programs throughout Cuba (Díaz-Briquets, 2002). The FMC provided an orientation for thousands of its activists in how to work with community members, especially women and children. The FMC called these activists 'empirical social workers'. They facilitated the entry of women into the labor market, promoted their economic, political and social involvement with the Revolution, and organized community members for participation in major educational and public health initiatives (Díaz-Briquets, 2002). This participation of neighborhood members in mass organizations strengthened community ties among family, friends and neighbors, helped define collective goals through the discussion of social issues at neighborhood meetings, and promoted a communal ethos in Cuban society. This communal ethos would influence the community-oriented approach that Cuban social work took in the 1990s, according to a social scientist at the University of Havana who was involved in social work educational reform (L. Pérez Montalvo, personal communication, 20 September 2002).

The Cuban Revolution transformed society and improved the lives of vast numbers of Cubans who had lived in poverty prior to the Revolution (Gott, 2004). The post-Revolutionary central government introduced education and land reform, massive literacy campaigns, and nationalization of foreign industry. Cuba's post-Revolutionary administration believed that Cuba did not need a cadre of professional social workers, because the government could deal with most existing economic, public health and social problems through radical economic and social policies aimed at transforming access to education, employment, health care, housing, nutrition and rural-urban disparities, according to a founding member of the University of Havana's social work program (L. De Urrutia Barroso, personal communication, 13 September 2002; see also, Halebsky & Kirk, 1985).

Technical Training Institutes for Social Workers

In the early 1970s, major economic, public health and social challenges remained, despite the achievements of the Revolution and its mass organizations (Halebsky & Kirk, 1985). The Cuban government determined that Cuba needed trained social workers to assist health care professionals in bolstering the country's public health infrastructure, which had deteriorated considerably due to the emigration of large numbers of health professionals at the time of the Revolution (Bravo, 1998). In 1973, the Cuban Ministry of Public Health (MINSAP) established technical institutes to prepare social work technicians to assist doctors, nurses and other health care professionals in hospitals and medical clinics. Students learned about the organizational structure of the Cuban health care system and the role of the social work technician in public health. Graduates of training institutes worked primarily as assistants to health care professionals in clinics, hospitals, and government offices, rather than in community settings. Students received little information about community practice as part of their training (Fierro, 1988).

The Special Period as Precursor to Community-Oriented Social Work

The collapse of the former Soviet Union in 1989 devastated the fragile base of the Cuban economy, because Cuba was dependent on the Soviet Union for most of its foreign trade. This had a catastrophic impact on living standards and led to worsening economic and social conditions, including rising unemployment (Cole, 2002). Economic class differences sharpened from 1989 to 1998 and economic polarization grew, threatening social cohesion (Burchardt, 2002). Real average wages in 1989–98 declined precipitously (CEPAL, 2000), as did salaries in the state sector. Income was insufficient to meet basic household needs (Togores González, 1999). Families experienced financial hardships. For 15% of Cuba's urban population, the monthly per capita income did not cover basic household expenses (Espina Prieto, 2001). The percentage of the population at risk of not covering some essential need in the city of Havana increased from 4.3% to 20.1% from 1988 to 1995 (including children below age 14 and the unemployed or not economically active) (Mesa-Lago, 2002). Food shortages resulted in elevated rates of morbidity and maternal mortality. Malnutrition increased, as did the proportion of low birth weight babies born to mothers (Mesa-Lago, 2002). An epidemic of neuropathy occurred (Garfield, 2004). Cubans refer to this time of economic crisis and hardship as 'The Special Period'.

Spending on Services

Government maintained social benefits in the areas of education, health care, social security and social assistance in the 1990s. Social expenditures, in particular for social security, increased in absolute terms and also as a proportion of the Gross Domestic Product during the Special Period. However, the real purchasing power of the peso dropped and allocations for services in convertible currency (US dollars) decreased, limiting the importation of medicines, building materials and other basic necessities (Uriarte, 2002). The educational budget contracted by 38% from 1989 to 1997. One expert on the Cuban economy reported that the demand for services by needy families increased at the same time as real per capita social expenditures in Cuba dropped by 40% in the 1990s (Mesa-Lago, 2002). The amount spent on social welfare (for those who are in severe need) reportedly averaged only 2.4% of total social expenditures in 1989–98, the lowest share of the entire services provided (Mesa-Lago, 2002).

Deterioration in Services

Many social services deteriorated during the Special Period. Fewer medical interventions were carried out in hospitals and health care facility infrastructures deteriorated. Deteriorating housing and sanitary conditions resulting from limited availability of construction materials contributed to higher rates of disease (Garfield, 2004). Housing construction was stagnant, especially in urban areas including Havana. Population growth and deteriorating housing stock created a crisis in housing (Uriarte, 2002).

Due to increased costs of living, the average real social security pension actually dropped by 42% between 1989 and 1998, despite small increases in nominal pensions. Cuba's disproportionately large older population had to get by with less (Strug, 2004). The supplementary safety net (subsidized food, adequate free health care and inexpensive public utilities) dwindled. Enrollment in secondary education fell by 20% from 1989 to 1994. In 1997, enrollment in secondary education was 10% below the 1989 level (Oficina Nacional de Estadísticas, 1998–99).

Social Challenges Facing Cuba and the Prioritization of Vulnerable Groups

Drug abuse, prostitution and street crime, long absent from Cuban society, reappeared. The socioeconomic needs of children and those with disabilities grew. The number of out-of-school and unemployed disaffected youth, pregnant teenagers and single mothers, prisoners and ex-prisoners, and senior citizens increased. Youth were particularly at risk. Segments of the youth population turned to crime and underground market activities and lost faith in the idea of a socialist Cuba (Wooden, 2004). Cuba's disproportionately large population of older persons had a hard time getting by on fixed incomes.

When a modest economic recovery began in 1996, the government decided to prioritize at-risk individuals from Cuba's most vulnerable groups for neighborhood outreach and development of new educational and social welfare projects at the community level (Pérez Montalvo, 2002). These groups included the elderly, single mothers and youth. Many new programs were created for these groups, including neighborhood educational and social assistance programs for pregnant women and for the elderly.

This decision to prioritize at-risk individuals for special services represented a significant shift in policy away from one in which every Cuban citizen was entitled to receive the same services from government regardless of degree of need (Uriarte, 2002). This shift resulted from Cuba's economic problems and the need to deliver services efficiently and economically to the most marginalized sectors of society at the regional and community level (Ferriol Murruga, 1997). This was an impetus to the emergence of a community-oriented social work, as noted below.

Community-oriented Social Work and the Neighborhood Movement

The community became the central locus for new social development and prevention efforts and for delivering services to vulnerable groups (Uriarte, 2002). This was the beginning of Cuba's 'neighborhood movement' (Dilla *et al.*, 1998). International organizations, local authorities, mass organizations and neighborhood residents became involved in construction, environmental protection and other types of community development projects (Uriarte, 2002). The central government delegated to regional local authorities and to mass organizations the responsibility of identifying at-risk individuals with special service needs and determining ways of meeting those needs. The Cuban constitution created People's Councils (*Consejos*

Populares), regional bodies that bridged the gap between municipalities and local communities. People's Councils were comprised of community delegates, mass organizations and administrative entities. The People's Council addressed the economic, social and medical needs of community members under their jurisdiction (Roman, 2003).

The neighborhood movement had an important influence on the community-oriented focus that Cuban social work assumed at this time. The government determined that the country needed social workers to identify and work with at-risk individuals living in Cuba's poorest neighborhoods and to work alongside other participants in Cuba's fledgling neighborhood movement. 'The government needed social workers to assist community members in "learning how" to participate in projects aimed at improving social conditions in the community', according to a former director of social work at the University of Havana (C. Proveyer, personal communication, 10 April 2004). Social workers became regular participants in People's Council meetings. They advocated for at-risk community members who needed special services, such as larger monthly pensions for the poor elderly or for medical equipment for the disabled (Strug, 2004).

Social workers like Elena Martínez Canals participated in collaborative community-based projects. Martínez Canals worked in La Timba, a poor neighborhood in Havana, as part of a team that included architects and other urban planners. They helped organize a committee in La Timba, comprised of formal and informal community leaders and representatives of mass organizations. The goal of the committee was to create a plan to improve social conditions, especially for those children and women of La Timba who were most in need of services (Martínez Canals & García Brigos, 2001; J.P. Brigos, personal communication, 6 September 2002).

Community-oriented Social Work and Reform in Social Work Education

The Cuban government concluded that the public health-oriented social work training institutes established in the early 1970s did not train a sufficient number of practitioners with the kinds of community practice skills needed for collaborative work with other community change activists, community members and elected officials, according to one of Cuba's longest practicing social workers (T. Iznaga y Estevez, personal communication, 8 April 2004). A respected social work educator made a similar point in the following statement:

We had to change our way of training social workers. We needed an educational program that would teach them how to work with Committees for the Defense of the Revolution and the Federation of Cuban Women [mass organizations], delegates [local elected officials], school teachers, and out-of-school-kids. Our training institutes didn't really prepare social workers to do this kind of work. (Z. Pereira, personal communication, 15 September 2002)

Cuba's need for social work practitioners to participate in neighborhood social action programs paved the way for social work educational reform. The Cuban

government responded to this need to train social workers for community practice by implementing a two-pronged social work educational program. The first component of this program was initiated in 1998 as a university degree program for advanced social work practitioners.

The University Degree Program

The Cuban government charged the University of Havana in 1998 with developing a six-year degree program to broaden the community practice skills and the educational horizons of social workers who had graduated from technical training institutes and who were working in public health settings, according to a senior administrator at the University of Havana (R. Gonzalez, personal communication, 5 April 2003).

A program called 'The Social Work Concentration in Sociology' was established within the Department of Sociology at the University of Havana, because sociology was closest to social work of all degree programs offered, according to the director of the Social Work Concentration (L. de Urrutia Barroso, personal communication, 10 September 2002). It was attended by students who received time off from their social work jobs to attend classes and study for exams. The former director of the Social Work Concentration noted that 'We were reluctant at first to take on the responsibility of this new program, since none of us were social workers with community practice experience' (L. de Urrutia Barroso, personal communication, 10 September 2001).

An important aim of the Concentration was to train students in community practice skills for work with at-risk populations, according to a senior faculty member in the social work program (C. Proveyer, personal communication, 11 September 2002). Another objective was to help students to understand the etiology of social problems in Cuba and to teach social workers how to assist community members to become agents of change on their own behalf (L. de Urrutia Barroso, personal communication, 10 April 2003). The Concentration curriculum emphasized the applied social sciences and was developed so as to help social worker practitioners think about social problems from a theoretical, as well as from a practice perspective. 'Giving social work students a theoretical framework for understanding social problems helped them understand those problems better', one faculty member in the Concentration noted (C. Proveyer, personal communication, 8 September 2002).

Concentration faculty taught students that they had an important role to play in helping community members become more actively involved in solving their own problems, given the central government's limited ability to directly provide community members with services, and given the state's economic difficulties. The head of the Sociology Department at the University of Havana noted that 'Cuba is a poor country and we cannot wait for the state to perform magic for us. Therefore, social workers have to assist vulnerable individuals and communities learn how to help themselves' (C. Proveyer, personal communication, 20 April 2004).

Social Work Schools for Youth

The second component of Cuba's new social work education program was initiated when the government in 1999 directed the University of Havana to create Cuba's first paraprofessional social work school for youth at Cojimar, outside of Havana. The creation of this school, which opened in October 2000, and the subsequent development of three others like it, was part of the government's 'Battle of Ideas' campaign (Barthelemy, 2004b). This was an effort to strengthen Cuba economically, socially and ideologically through the introduction of a variety of educational and social programs, including schools for the intensive training of social workers.

The students who were chosen to attend this school were primarily out-of-school and unemployed youth who resided in Cuba's poorest neighborhoods. Graduates were assured social work jobs with good salaries after graduation and were selected by the youth wing of the Communist Party of Cuba (Union of Young Communists or UJC) and this selection was approved by school officials.

The Cuban government created the school at Cojimar to train social workers for community-based practice work with disadvantaged youth, juvenile delinquents, the disabled, and other vulnerable groups. Another aim of the social work school was to train students how to work collaboratively with local authorities, with representatives of mass organizations, and with People's Council members. The school also was intended to train social workers who could address at the community level social problems resulting from growing social inequality in Cuban society. 'Government leaders were concerned about growing delinquency and alienation among youth and growing socioeconomic divisions in society' (R. Corral, personal communication, 6 April 2004), according to a psychology professor who participated in the development of the social work school curriculum.

Social work school graduates worked as *emergentes* in their own communities after they finished their training. They were named *emergentes* because they addressed emergent social problems, such as child malnutrition, school absenteeism, and the needs of the elderly for economic and social assistance (Barthelemy, 2004a). Social work schools prepared students to become 'friends of the family, knocking on doors not touched by the Revolution', according to one social work student (*Rock Around the Blockade Newsletter*, 2003).

President Fidel Castro frequently praised the achievements of the *emergente* program and of Cuban social work in general as evidence that the government was addressing Cuba's social problems in its poorest neighborhoods. He noted the role of the Union of Communist Youth (Barreras Ferán, 2004) in working with young social workers as proof that Cuban youth had not lost faith in the ideals of the Cuban Revolution.

Discussion and Conclusions

This paper noted that Cuban social work was transformed in the 1990s as a result of a confluence of economic, historical and social factors. The government promoted

social work in response to the social problems that emerged in Cuba during the Special Period. This paper showed that Cuba's neighborhood movement and the communal ethos characteristic of post-Revolutionary Cuban society also influenced the development of Cuban social work along community-oriented lines. Interviews with experts on social work education indicated that Cuba needed social workers with community practice skills. This was the catalyst for social work educational reform in the 1990s.

That social work in Cuba developed along community-oriented lines also reflects the fact that the central government in Cuba has for half a century promoted collective goals and community ties, and has involved local self-government in the management of neighborhood affairs. It is understandable why the Cuban government chose social work as one of the important components of its Battle of Ideas campaign, given social work's historical commitment to advocating for social justice and for helping individuals without sufficient power to solve their own problems (Connaway & Gentry, 1988). Furthermore, the importance that social work attributes to 'the person-in-environment' approach is consonant with Cuba's post-Revolutionary sociopolitical orientation and the significance that Cuban socialism attributes to the influence of the social environment on human development (Estrada, 2003).

Challenges Facing Cuba and Cuban Social Work Today

Cuban social work faces many challenges today, as Cuba wrestles with major economic and social problems. The Cuban economy is anemic and is experiencing a foreign exchange crisis (Pérez-López, 2003). Unemployment and labor productivity are low and wages are meager (García Díaz, 2003). Income inequality remains great and large segments of the Cuban population experience economic hardship. Many urban dwellers live in a situation of vulnerability (Espina Prieto, 2001).

Although the welfare system is still able to provide basic free services such as education and health care, 'the social contract' has been seriously eroded, as welfare state institutions can no longer maintain a minimum standard of living beyond which no Cuban citizen is permitted to fall (Monreal, 2001). Economic problems make it difficult for government to provide adequate pensions for retired workers, to obtain needed medicines or medical equipment, such as wheelchairs for disabled people, and to sustain public transportation and nutritional subsidies at satisfactory levels. A sector of Cuba's youth population feels alienated, because it does not see a hopeful future for itself, given the dismal economic conditions prevailing in Cuba. In an effort to fend off further social decay, the Cuban government plans in 2005 to increase by 10% what is spent on education, health and social assistance in 2004 (Mayoral & Jáuregui, 2004).

Although Cuba's leaders continue to advance socialist ideals, Cuba has been forced to move away from socialism as it existed before the crisis of the 1990s and to participate in the capitalist globalizing economy. Foreign tourism and increased foreign trade with capitalist countries have kept the Cuban economy afloat in recent

years. Participation in the global economy continues to grow in order to assure economic security for Cuba, even as this participation has contributed to the country's increased dependence on the dollar economy and on the introduction of market mechanisms, to social stratification, and to the emergence of inequality and vulnerability (Monreal, 2001). An increased role of market mechanisms in the Cuban economy seems likely in the future and the direction that socialism will take in Cuba remains unclear (Espina Prieto, 2001).

In view of the social challenges Cuba faces, the country's community-oriented social work approach continues to be important and relevant. Cuba still needs social work practitioners to work closely with community residents and elected officials to identify vulnerable populations for services. For this reason, the promotion of social work has become a national priority and an important element in the government's effort to cushion the social effects of the ongoing economic crisis. In a recent end-of-year speech before the Cuban National Assembly, President Fidel Castro praised social work by referring to Cuba's 21,000 *emergentes* as the 'true worker's army of the soul' (Prensa Latina, 2004).

Applicability of Cuba's Social Work Approach

Cuba's community-oriented social work approach still reflects that country's socialist ideology and value system (Estrada, 2003), even though Cuba has increasingly participated in a globalizing capitalist economy. Therefore, Cuba's social work model may have limited applicability to the US, to the UK, and to other capitalist countries. By contrast, the more individually-oriented social work approach of these countries may reflect the ideology and value system associated with a capitalist economic system.

Hopps & Pinderhughes (1996) suggest that the US government promotes an ethos of individualism, because individualism is consonant with the capitalist economic system of the US. In the more socially activist years of the 1930s and 1960s, social work in the US was more preoccupied with community action, environmental perspectives, and social reform than it is today. However, these community-oriented approaches never dominated the US social work field as a whole. Today, the curricula of US social work schools emphasize casework and direct practice rather than community practice, and growing numbers of students are entering social work school in order to receive a credential that will allow them to become private practitioners in mental health (Gibelman, 2004).

An emphasis on individualism also exists within contemporary British social work. The New Right in Britain promoted an economic policy in response to the emergent global economy that emphasized privatization, liberalization, deregulation and an attack on the welfare state. This influenced a shift in state social work away from one that provides a community-based and family oriented service available to all citizens (Harris, 1999), to a strategy that empowers the individual citizen as a consumer of welfare, with an increased focus on individual as consumer needs (Prime Minister, 1991). Services and resources in Britain became increasingly placed outside the public

sector in quasi-market arrangements. The value that the Conservative government placed on the independence of the individual from government support (Harris, 2002) has not diminished under New Labour (Jones, 2001).

Despite the differences in orientation between Cuban social work and social work in the US and the UK, social workers from these countries can learn from one another. Since Cuban social work is still in an early stage of its professional development, Cuban social workers are eager to learn about the research methods, pedagogical approaches, and theoretical accomplishments of social work in more developed countries. As noted earlier, US and British social workers can share educational methods, research strategies, and theoretical advances with their Cuban colleagues. At the same time, Cuban social workers can share their community-oriented practice experiences with their counterparts in other countries. This exchange can contribute to the internationalization of social work and to the infusion of international content into the social work curriculum of the US, the UK, and other countries. This is especially important, given the impact of globalization and the interconnectedness of social welfare issues internationally (Furman *et al.*, 2003).

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