

Social Work in Africa: Decolonizing Methodologies and Approaches

Introduction

Calls for culturally relevant social work research, teaching and practice, abound in the profession. Such context- and population-specific approaches have been evoked in many areas in the form of cultural competence, gay affirmative practice (Crisp, 2006), anti-oppressive social work (Dominelli, 2003), non-imperialist social work (Midgley, 1990), spiritually sensitive social work (Candar and Furham, 2010; Payne, 2011), Afrocentric social work (Schiele, 1996); and other context-specific forms of social work. Such approaches have informed what has been termed “indigenization” in social work, or more appropriately, culturally relevant social work (Gray et al., 2008). Calls for indigenous social work in Africa have gained ground with local scholars who now widely question the relevance of Western style social work for addressing the challenges faced by the continent (Rankopo and Osei-Hwedie, 2010; Gray, 2016).

Social work was first introduced in Africa by colonial administrators, missionaries and industrialists, who had little concern for the wellbeing of the Indigenous people (Mwansa, 2010, Smith, 2015). South Africa was the first country to begin social work education and training in Africa, in the 1920s. At that time, as was the case in the West, the social work profession was born out of a concern for white poverty, particularly [white] orphans and juveniles, and it was predominantly a white profession (Sewpaul and Lombard, 2004, Smith, 2015).

In Africa, colonialism disconnected people from their histories, landscapes, language, social relations and their own ways of thinking, feeling and interacting with the world (Thiong'o, 1994; Tuhiwai Smith, 2012). It further destroyed existing structures and social support systems based on mutual respect and reciprocity through the introduction of capitalist economic structures (Chilisa and Tshenko, 2014; Rankopo and Osei-Hwedie, 2010; Smith, 2015).

Capitalism, which is rooted in individualism, competition, and concentration of capital within a free market economy, ruptured the cooperation and reciprocity that underlay African cultures. It promoted money as the medium for exchange of goods and services; widened the distinction between the homestead and the workplace; and reduced the importance of mutual reciprocity as the basis of social welfare (Smith, 2015; Rankopo and Osei-Hwedie, 2010). Further assessing the impact of imperialism and its manifestations in colonialism, liberalism, globalization and empirical research, and decolonizing the concepts and methodologies that are part and parcel of social work as a discipline, remain crucial tasks in Africa.

A number of scholars have pointed to the fact that the Western models of Social Work practice and research have come up short in addressing social problems that are specific to Africa, including rural poverty; interethnic conflicts; land disputes; and HIV/AIDS, malaria and other communicable diseases (Osei-Hwedie and Rankopo, 2010; Midgley, 1990; 2008; Rankopo and Osei-Hwedie, 2010). Thus, to make the profession of social work useful in Africa, a serious reexamination is required.

This paper examines current social work trends in Africa; highlights how social work in Africa has failed to adequately address issues that are pertinent to the continent; and reviews major gaps in the emergent processes of decolonizing and indigenizing social work in Africa. It also highlights important issues that should be considered in advancing these processes, as well as some of the critical challenges. This article is intended for three major audiences: 1) Educators and practitioners in indigenous communities and the ‘developing’ world; 2) Educators and practitioners in the developed world who are actively engaged in the development of policy and practice that directly or indirectly affect the lives of indigenous people in Africa; and 3) indigenous people and community members who aspire to ensure that the voices of the

grassroots are heard and influence policy and practice that affect their lives. Due to the limited research in this topic we will often use the broad term “Africa,” making specific references to African countries such as Botswana, Tanzania, Ethiopia, Zimbabwe and South Africa where appropriate. However, we remain cognizant of the complexity and diversity within the continent as well as within individual countries.

Social work in Africa: the need to reorient

Traditional African cultures are collectivist. Collectivism as a cultural pattern—and value—emphasizes the extended family, community, caste, tribes, country, and related group identities (Haj-Yahia & Sadan, 2008; Lituchy and Michaud, 2017). Members of collectivist societies carry a sense of obligation to their collective community. Personal satisfaction, self-actualization, and fulfillment are experienced in reference to their community; accordingly, individuals are able to maintain harmony with the collective (Haj-Yahia and Sadan, 2008). Existence-in-relation defines the African conception of life and reality. For many African people the group has priority, but without crushing the individual (Chilisa and Ntseane, 2010; Haj-Yahia and Sadan, 2008; Lituchy and Michaud, 2017).

Chilisa and Ntseane (2010) illustrated significant cultural differences between African and Western nations by contrasting the philosophy of Ubuntu (from the Bantu people of Southern Africa) and the Cartesian Eurocentric view of humanity. Ubuntu expresses “‘being’ as essentially bound by others: ‘I am we; I am because we are; we are because I am’” (p. 619), while “Descartes’ Eurocentric view of humanity proclaims ‘I think, therefore, I am’” (p.619). For Lituchy and Michaud (2017) Ubuntu is a humanist approach that emphasizes respect, compassion, human dignity, and fostering and sustaining community. Given this context, Western social work practice, heavily focused on individuals, profoundly fails to adequately

recognize cultural, communal, and spiritual values central to indigenous African communities (Midgley, 2008).

Western social work has been adopted to Africa through 1) missionary work, which went hand in hand with the colonization of Africa (Mwansa, 2010; Smith, 2015); 2) the training of Africans in the West, who have been encouraged to, and therefore naturally try to apply the Western methodologies and approaches they have learned (Gray, Kreitzer and Mupedziswa, 2014; Midgley, 2008); and 3) through the internationalization and standardization of social work education, whereby social work schools are creating extension programs in developing countries including Africa (Midgley, 2008; Osei-Hwedie and Rankopo, 2008).

Gray, Kreitzer, and Mupedziswa (2014) criticized programs whereby Western universities provide social work degrees to students studying in developing countries using the same curricula as their western counterparts, which perpetuate unilateralism and professional imperialism. This situation also creates a serious dilemma for the academic as well as the practice arena since as a result of neo-colonial values, foreign and foreign-sponsored degrees are assumed to be more prestigious, and are therefore more likely to enhance employment opportunities (Midgley, 2008). However, social work training, research and practice in Africa ought primarily to be responsive to local realities, both in rural communities in which collectivist cultures and values struggle to survive, as well as in urban settings where collectivist values often remain deeply embedded in the population, in constant tension with neo-colonial economic realities.

For most people in Africa, living in rural areas has always been a fact of life. However, rural economies, and people who live in rural areas, have generally been marginalized in national development priorities (Adjei and Buor, 2012; Barrett, Christiaensen, Sheahan, and Shimeles,

2017). Given the high concentration of professionals, civil servants and international development agencies present, it is no wonder that social work has largely been centered in urban areas. This urban bias is also consistent with much of Western social work theories and ideologies, which emerged and still tend to be oriented towards urban problems in industrialized and urbanized nations. However, for Africa, this orientation fails to honor the fact that the rural population is expected to increase from 695 million in 2015 to 809 million by 2025 (GEOHIVE, 2015). The GEOHIVE data also indicates that the rural population is 59.6% of Africa as a whole. Therefore, regardless of the phenomenal growth of cities and increasing rural urban migration in the developing world, rural communities will continue to harbor a significant proportion of the population of Africa (Adjei and Buor, 2012).

Social work practice in Africa therefore needs to shift focus to accommodate the needs of rural populations, including approaches to land use and interethnic conflict resolution. Land provides an identity and livelihood for rural peoples in Africa as it does for all indigenous peoples (Mtetwa and Muchacha, 2016). Wangari Maathai, a former Nobel laureate from Kenya, indicated the significance of land for people in rural areas. Conflicts over land use (and water) are widespread in Africa, where pastoralists are fighting against agriculturalists, as well as hunters and gatherers (Mbah, 2016). With increasing population and land degradation traditional forms of livelihoods have been severely disrupted, thereby increasing pressure on scarce resources. This pressure manifests itself in various forms including migration and displacement, rebellion, extreme poverty, and interethnic conflict or in its extreme form, genocide (Mbah, 2016; Hendrix and Salehyan, 2012). Social work with its orientation to social justice and human rights should be at the center of these salient issues in Africa. In Zimbabwe, land conflicts took on a racial character in which the political leaders decided to redistribute all land that was owned

by white settler minorities, throwing a country that was once considered “the bread basket of Africa” into hunger and starvation. In this regard, Chogugudza (2004) argues that social workers in Zimbabwe failed to intervene in these structural issues because of the nature of social work as it was being practiced, modeled largely on Western remedial and medical models. Similar trends can be seen in other African countries such as South Africa, Tanzania and Ethiopia where land grabbing by multinational mining corporations is displacing Indigenous people—what Senga (2010) called “accumulation by dispossession and displacement.” According to Senga (2010), large mining corporations dispossess land and natural resources from local small-scale miners in turn forcing them to retaliate against foreign investors, which often resulted in bloodshed. Social work therefore needs to be prepared to address such structural issues affecting the most rural and marginalized segments of the population.

This argument does not ignore the need to give attention to social work training and practice with a focus on urban communities. African countries are already experiencing high levels of urbanization. According to United Nations Fund for Population’s report the world’s urban population grew very rapidly (from 2.84 billion in 2000 to 4.7 billion in 2015) over the 20th century, and the next few decades will see unprecedented urban growth in the developing world. To overcome the challenges related to urbanization, social work in Africa also needs to formulate its own indigenous approaches to help deal with the problems resulting from urbanization. Urban African populations carry deep cultural roots in traditional practices and values, leaving many to struggle between what feels right, and what appears necessary to survive in globalized corporate environments. The corporate work environment requires and promotes competition, individuality, and objectivity to increase productivity, individually tailored rewards

(in terms of salary increment, bonus, or promotion) and overall company profit—while cultural norms dictate the importance of having a sense of community, collaboration and cooperation.

In terms of social development policies, the influence of donors on planning and program implementation has been widely documented in Africa (Bourguignon and Platteau, 2017; Garcia, Moore and Moore, 2012; Iwelunmor, et al, 2016; Pallas and Ruger, 2017). The overall national policy environment is commonly shaped by international donors and international policy agendas that shape development and welfare programs, including community-based initiatives, while enforcing restrictive requirements (Bourguignon and Platteau, 2017; Gray and Ariong, 2016; Pallas and Ruger, 2017). If social work practice allies with these generic programs, it is unknowingly reinforcing neo-colonialism (Briskman, 2008; Ugiagbe, 2016). Social work in Africa should elaborate approaches that can shape and function within a framework of indigenous models of social development (Midgley and Livermore, 2005; Chilisa and Tsheko, 2014). This role may entail cooperation without cooptation, challenging, and insisting on a strong voice in shaping international and national development programs such as Sustainable Development Goals, rural development, civic engagement, good governance, and natural resource stewardship (Chilisa and Tsheko, 2014; Midgley, 1990; 2008).

Indigenous knowledge, methodologies and approaches to development

Indigenous social work requires the development of culture-specific knowledge and practice (Gray and Coats, 2010). It is about developing local, empirically based knowledge that provides culturally appropriate solutions to particular contexts (Gray and Coats, 2010; Rankopo and Osei-Hwedie, 2011; Simonds and Christopher, 2013). It is opposed to any attempts to “internationalize” and/or “standardize,” replicating Western theories, concepts, and methods globally (Gray and Coats, 2010; Rankopo and Osei-Hwedie, 2011). Gray and Coats (2010)

further argue that the development of indigenous knowledge and practice can be a naturally occurring process—characterized by assimilation and resistance. “It can also be understood, as it is in postcolonial studies, as a process of decentering colonial discourse and power structures through tactics that can be resistant or more confrontational.” (p. 623).

Gray, Coates, and Yellow Bird (2008) further moved the discourse around “indigenization” to cultural relevance. They argued that indigenization is an outmoded approach since it is about adapting imported ideas to fit local needs. Indigenization must be viewed against historical processes of globalization and colonization. Thus, it is important to move to authentization, a culturally appropriate approach that requires accessing values and practices that are culturally genuine, going back to one’s cultural and spiritual roots to seek direction, and distancing from Western social work theory and practice (Gray, Coates & Yellow Bird, 2008).

Indigenous knowledge

So far, there is no consensus on what defines being indigenous. The “politics of indigeneity,” as Escarcega (2010) calls it, requires the (re)construction of peoplehood and negotiating concepts used by nation-states. Analyzing the history of the United Nations Working Group on Indigenous People (WGIP), indigeneity was defined based on the current state of colonization. Indigenous people were those who are still colonized, disregarding many countries in Africa and Asia that have “undergone decolonization,” i.e., obtained their political independence, with the assumption that they have achieved self-determination (Escarcega, 2010). However, this definition was contested by African representatives in the WGIP for ignoring the oppression of indigenous groups within “decolonized” societies (Duri, 2004; Escarcega, 2010). Durie (2004) argues that “the defining characteristic of Indigenous peoples is not necessarily premised on colonization or sovereignty or a prior claim to settlement, but on a

longstanding relationship with land, forests, waterways, oceans and the air. ... In this sense, indigeneity can be conceptualized as a state of fusion between Indigenous peoples and their accustomed environments” (p.1139). Thus, using this definition, Africans can be recognized as indigenous groups. Note also that this definition is grounded in relational strengths, rather than victimization.

Indigenous knowledge and practices also refer to worldviews that are locally shared as products of direct experiences of nature and its relationship with the social world (Chilisa and Ntseane, 2010; Chilisa and Tsheko 2014; Gray and Coates, 2010; Safa Dei, Hall, and Rosenberg, 2000; Sen, 2005; Silliote and Marzano, 2009; Tuhiwai Smith, 2012). However, knowledge is not homogenous as differences exist along gender, age, class, caste, occupational and other lines, as well as among individuals of similar social status (Silliote and Marzano, 2009). Indigenous knowledge emerges from a range of sources embedded in institutions, relationships and rituals, and is a dynamic mix of past tradition and present innovation, and thus is ever evolving, and usually tacit (Durie, 2004; Getty, 2010; Sen, 2005; Silliote and Marzano, 2008; Wilson, 2001).

Several scholars (Chilisa and Tsheko 2014; Durie, 2004; Getty, 2010; Sen, 2005; Silliote and Marzano, 2009; Tuhiwai Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2001) note that Indigenous knowledge is diffused and communicated through everyday life. Getty (2010) also affirms that Indigenous knowledge arises from observation and interaction with the biological and social environments, as well as from visions, stories, and spiritual insights. Therefore, knowledge among Indigenous peoples, “is perceived to be eternal; it can be retrieved when needed and recede from consciousness when not required” (p.11). Thus, Indigenous knowledge involves understanding rooted in the local culture (Chilisa and Ntseane, 2010; Escarcega, 2010; Gray and Coates, 2010; Silliote and Marzano, 2009; Tuhiwai Smith, 2012).

Indigenous Methodologies

Methodology is important to social work research and scholarship since it frames the question being asked, determines the set of instruments and methods to be employed, shapes the analysis, and defines the curriculum (Denzin and Lincoln, 2008; Chilisa and Tsheko, 2014; Matsinhe, 2007; Nicholls, 2009; Tuhiwai-Smith, 2012). Matsinhe (2007) argues that “methodology legitimates and delegitimates, validates and invalidates, approves and disapproves, passes and fails, claims to knowledge and knowledge production. Methodology is the exercise of power to include and exclude, that is, the erection of boundaries and gate keeping” (p.389).

Matsinhe, (2007) affirms that Indigenous knowledge is cluttered with virtualities. The interweaving of the actual and the virtual, the here and the hereafter, the physical and non-physical worlds abound in indigenesness (Matsinhe, 2007; Tuhiwai Smith, 2012). For Tuhiwai Smith (2012), her respondents are experts on their everyday lives. For indigenous people, the physical and non-physical were equally real, and they draw knowledge from both in constructing their social reality (Chilisa and Tsheko, 2014; Tuhiwai Smith, 2012). However, ‘Western’ methodologies, which are the grounds for most social work practice and scholarship, typically acknowledge one what is perceivable by the five human senses—taste, touch, sight, smell and audition—as legitimate evidence of knowledge. The rest—such as gods or spirits—is dismissed as fictitious (Chilisa and Tsheko, 2014; Matsinhe, 2007; Silliotte and Marzano, 2009; Tuhiwai Smith, 2012). In non-western societies spirituality and aesthetics structure the people’s life (Matsinhe, 2007).

Indigenous research protocols require building relationships and collaborations between the researcher and research participants so as to forge trust, equity and partnership in the whole process (Kovach, 2010). This research paradigm is appropriate to the needs of Indigenous

communities in their struggle for self-determination as it can emancipate social change (Kovach, 2010).

Moreover, Nicholls (2009) argues that indigenous methodologies require relationality, and multilayered reflexivity. Researchers need to challenge their traditional notions of objective control between researchers and research participants. Nicholls (2009) also identified three layers of reflexivity (p. 121)—self-reflexivity, interpersonal reflexivity, and collective reflexivity. Nicholls (2009) argued that through practicing these three layers of reflexivity, one can reframe the notion of empowerment, participation and justice. For Nicholls (2009) research is a paradigm of relationships whereby “an individual person is constituted through his or her communicative and interactive relations with others” (p.121). This process of reflexivity requires indigenous methodologies to interrogate colonial academic procedures (Morgensen, 2012).

For Tuhiwai Smith (2012) research is one of the ways in which the underlying code of imperialism is regulated as well as realized. It is regulated through the formal rules of individual scholarly disciplines and scientific paradigms, and the institutions that support them (including the state). It is realized in the myriad of representations and ideological constructions of The Other in scholarly and popular works, and in the principles that help to select official histories and school curricula (Chilisa, and Tsheko 2014; Gretty, 2010; Matsinhe, 2007; Tuhiwai-Smith, 2012).

Indigenous research is not socially, or politically, neutral (Silliole and Marzano, 2009). Moreover, it should not be taken as pre- or anti-science (Matsinhe, 2007). Tuhiwai Smith (2012) argued that indigenous researchers carry the burden of reconciling two separate views of research: the one that could judge their research models as 'not valid', 'not reliable', 'not rigorous', 'not robust', 'not real', and/or 'not theorized'; and the other as 'not indigenous', 'not just',

'not useful', and/or 'not friendly'. Hence, the process of reflexivity is very important for both 'insider' and an 'outsider' researcher, even if it is a fluid identity and there are multiple ways of being an 'insider' and an 'outsider' researcher. Unlike 'outsiders' who would leave the community once the research is done, 'insider' researchers need constant and critical reflexivity about their research process, their relationships, and the depth and quality of their data and analysis because they, along with their families and communities, will live with the consequences of their research (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012).

Indigenous approaches for development

In its annual development reports, the World Bank acknowledges that knowledge is the key to sustainable social and economic development. Sen (2005) also argues that building on local knowledge is the first step in mobilizing capital. Development, in the past decades, has been continuously criticized for its expert-led, top-down approaches, which failed to bring the desired change (Midgley, 1990; Silliote and Marzano, 2009).

Western oriented policies and intervention approaches tend to be more focused on individuals, ignoring the cultural, communal, and spiritual values that are central to indigenous communities (Midgley, 2008). Since international policies have been adopted, most of the policies in African counties failed to address structural problems that are specific to the countries (Chogugudza, 2004). In adopting Structural Adjustment Plans (SAP), many Sub-Saharan African countries experienced unintended negative consequences, especially in relation to privatization and land use, thus perpetuating unilateralism and imperialism (Midgley, 2008). National policies, therefore, should reflect on structural issues, giving due attention to the sociocultural and economic realities of citizens.

Silliole and Marzano (2009) and Midgely (1990, 2008) argue that the perpetuation of inappropriate interventions is partly due to the failure of politicians and policy makers to realize the complexity of development and the contextual nature of problems, which vary across cultures and history. Politicians also often fail to acknowledge there is no tailor-made or generic “solution” to these problems. In such cases, social workers as advocates and students of social justice have an obligation to raise their voices, acting to influence policies in a positive manner through incorporating indigenous knowledge, methodologies and approaches.

Developing indigenous approaches for development is linked to indigenous knowledge development as knowledge is the base for designing interventions. Indigenous knowledge is also used as an approach to understand socio-cultural contexts within which local knowledge and practices are set (Harrison, 2001; Midgley, 1990, 2008; Silliole and Marzano, 2009). Indigenous knowledge helps to avoid replicating futile programs. Hence, there is a growing interest in indigenous knowledge development, largely driven by ensuring sustainable development practices in developing countries, as well as concerns about loss of bio-diversity (Johnson et al. 2016; Sen, 2005).

It is important to acknowledge that Indigenous knowledge development faces multiple challenges. Silliole and Marzano (2009) pointed out that incorporating local knowledge and values into the development process (typically dominated by foreign ideas and hierarchies) requires substantial time, effort and resources. Moreover, local knowledge is heterogeneous and complex, which is inconvenient for development. Indigenous knowledge is neither static nor uniform. Its dynamism—which produces its power—makes its representation difficult. And, its local specificity hampers its incorporation into development planning. Moreover, in its current state, indigenous knowledge research currently demonstrates limited conceptual or

methodological coherence since the spectrum of indigenous knowledge studies is by its very nature fragmented.

Despite these challenges, Silliotte and Marzano (2009) affirm that indigenous knowledge research plays a significant role in facilitating meaningful communication between development staff and local people, “informing outsiders about local knowledge and insiders about what scientific technology offers, so that both can better understand the alternatives and realize their comparative advantages” (p.17). As a result, indigenous knowledge research has proved effective in places where non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have worked closely with local people to develop effective technology interventions (Silliotte and Marzano, 2009; Simonds and Christopher, 2013). For all of these reasons, social work, as a helping profession, needs to acknowledge and adopt indigenous approaches to be salient in Africa.

Important considerations in decolonizing social work in Africa

In the search for relevance in social and economic policies, the starting point must be the community, the bedrock of culture. Indigenous approaches are about developing local, empirically based knowledge regarding culturally appropriate solutions for particular contexts (Chilisa and Ntseane, 2010; Davis, Williams and Akinyela, 2010; Gray and Coats, 2010; McClelland, 2011, Rankopo and Osei-Hwedie, 2011). Thus, Indigenous approaches require decolonizing the process of education and research, policy formulation and intervention program planning (Chilisa and Ntseane, 2010; Chilisa and Tshenko, 2014; Escarcega, 2010; Matsinhe, 2007; Nicolls, 2007).

According to the Charter of United Nations, Chapter XI, Articles 73 and 74, decolonization requires respect for self-determination of all peoples. However, we acknowledge that this process very challenging since structuring decolonization within social and educational

policy is a difficult task. Decolonizing is not a onetime event, but a process of decentering colonial discourse and power structures (Gray and Coats, 2010). The process of decolonization requires ethically and culturally acceptable approaches to the study of issues involving indigenous people, whereby underlying assumptions, motivation and values that are enacted within imperialism and colonialism will be criticized (McClelland, 2011; Mtetwa and Muchacha, 2016; Tuhiwai Smith, 2012; Ugiagbe, 2016).

Within the current context of globalization, indigenous people cannot simply return to their traditional governance structures because of the changes in the socioeconomic and political environment (Harrison, 2001; Smith, 2016). Thus, developing indigenous approaches require a balance, challenging dominant models of social work practice and research, while integrating traditional values and practices that have withstood centuries of oppression into culturally consonant forms of service and inquiry. The fundamental place to begin is for social workers to engage in open and honest dialogue with the community to validate voices at a grassroots level. Eventually the community voices will set directions for social worker response. Thus, it is important to believe in the presence of reciprocity in knowledge creation. As various indigenous scholars (Chilisa & Ntseane, 2010; Sheehan, 2011; Sen, 2005; Tuhiwai-Smith, 2012) point out, knowledge is dynamic and continuous. Every interaction is a venue to learn from one another and develop or broaden one's perspective. It must be emphasized that decolonization does not negate collaboration with external partners and experts, or seeking resources for capacity-building.

Decolonizing the methodologies in social work requires considering diversity, history, culture, and contemporary realities (Weaver, 1999). Culture defines people's daily life and patterns of interaction (Chilisa and Ntseane, 2010; Durie, 2004; McClelland, 2011). Africa is a culturally

diverse continent. Cultural and linguistic differences exist within countries. For example, the languages spoken in Ethiopia are more than 80; in Nigeria, 250; Ghana, 76; South Africa, 23; and Botswana, 28 (Rankopo and Osei-Hwedie, 2010). The diversity in Africa may pose a challenge because more groups and backgrounds require more flexibility and resources to address. But cultural diversity also offers enormous opportunities because it can create venues for sharing different knowledge, wisdom and experiences.

Religion and spirituality also play significant roles in individual as well as communal life (Chilisa and Tsheko, 2014; Rankopo and Osei-Hwedie, 2010; Gretty, 2010). Thus, in the process of decolonization, it is important to pay attention to diversity, social structures and patterns of communication, ranges of current beliefs and practices, as well as the impacts of religious colonization. Secular approaches that ignore these facts will not effectively address critical social problems. As in other cases discussed earlier, there is no one policy, intervention program and/or practice guideline that can be used and replicated everywhere, neglecting spirituality and religious practices, that can be expected to yield similar results (Midgley, 2008; Silliole and Marzano, 2009; Sen, 2005; Weaver, 1999).

Understanding history is an important component in the process of forming culturally competent programs (Weaver, 1999). In his book *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward W. Said (1993) eloquently described the link between the past and the present as “past and present inform each other, each implies the other and each co-exists with the other. ... Neither past nor present, any more than any poet or artist, has a complete meaning alone.... How we formulate or represent the past shapes our understanding and views of the present (Said, 1993, p. 4).” Therefore, to better understand the structural issues in indigenous communities, including those in Africa, we need to know the history of colonialism and its vivid manifestations to date, as well

as the emerging history of culturally responsive indigenous social work (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012; Weaver, 2008; Smith, 2015).

Several examples from African institutions can be used to shed lights on how acknowledging diversity and history can be harnessed and contribute to the process of decolonization. For example, in Zimbabwe, the School of Social Work in Harare restructured the curriculum to make it more responsive to social justice concerns and the development needs of the people (Chogugudza, 2009). Gaining independence from the British resulted in an effort to indigenize social work using “local teaching staff and the development of appropriate teaching material” (Chogugudza, 2009, p.4). A similar move was taken in the newly opened African Leadership University of Mauritius. In her article on *the Conversations*, Auerbach (2017) discussed the seven commitments the university to decolonize the social science fields. These commitments are: assigning open source materials to students; focusing on language beyond English; enhancing student exchange programs; moving beyond text books and assigning non-textual sources of history, culture, and belief; interdisciplinary collaboration; producer—not only consumer; and ethics above all. Such commitments, which may differ by culture and setting, can offer useful beginnings and exemplary moves in the process of decolonization, while acknowledging that it is too early to fully evaluate their impact.

In applying indigenous approaches, it is important to allow different ways of knowing, challenging the recognized epistemology (Silliotte and Marzano, 2009; Tuhiwai-Smith, 2012; Walker, Fredericks, Mills and Anderson, 2014). Tuhiwai-Smith (2012) argues that Indigenous research challenges the so called objective, value-free, and scientific process for observing and analyzing human reality, due to the emphasis placed on deterministic models of analysis and its denial of culture as a mediating force. The process of knowing is at times more important than

the results, especially working with indigenous people (Chilisa and Tsheko, 2014; Denzin and Lincoln, 2008; Tuhiwai-Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2001).

Gray (2002) noted that the problem confronting African social work has to do with its past, in which foreign developments, thought and theory, were preferred over indigenous ways of helping. Indigenous social work accepts cultural diversity and recognizes that social work may be practiced differently among diverse groups, confirming the need for locality relevance. Therefore, social work in Africa should build on local knowledge, norms, values and skills (Mtetwa and Muchacha, 2016; Rankopo and Osei-Hwedie, 2010).

To be effective or even useful in indigenous settings, social workers are required to recognize their privilege, validate indigenous wisdom, and surrender colonial power as professionals and scholars (Briskman, 2008). In indigenous settings, social workers need to be open and humble to learn the community's value systems and ground their research and practice recognizing on these values (Chilisa and Tsheko, 2014). Social workers also need to recognize the autonomy and self-determination of indigenous people; all dominant languages including verbal and physical expressions, proverbs, stories and tales; and the notion of spirituality and healing that allow holistic ways of seeing the world, knowledge development and dissemination (Chilisa and Tsheko, 2014; Briskman, 2008; Johnson et al. 2016). This way, social workers can earn acceptance by the community as partners in the process achieving social justice and transformation.

To better understand the structural issues in Africa, social workers need to know the local (and global) history of colonialism and its vivid manifestations to date. The enormous class differences within a country, and the conscious, systemic and systematic oppressions present can only be fully understood in understanding the past. Peoples' fight for survival and their ruthless

realities—begging, prostitution, homelessness, addiction, substance abuse, and crimes can only begin to be addressed if we are able to address the structural issues shaping lives and communities, and take culturally appropriate measures to respond. Thus, it is important to pay attention to historical accounts (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012; Weaver, 1999).

As this is written, the first author was in Ethiopia collecting data for her dissertation, “Details omitted for double-blind reviewing”. Participants are rural based mothers, who have been targets of marginally successful international and national maternal health policies and programs. During the data collection, we learned that many mothers prefer home birth over [health] facility-based birth since birthing is considered sacred, and the whole process, from pregnancy to child birth, is accompanied by traditional rituals. However, these rituals cannot be performed at health facilities because health facilities have “standard” policies and procedures. It was enlightening for us to learn that in addition to the problem of access to health facilities, shortages of skilled manpower and necessary utilities, standard policies of health facilities (widely accepted elsewhere and by funders) are serious barriers to utilization of maternal health services.

Therefore, improving maternal health in Ethiopia will necessitate an indigenous, community-based, and integrated/holistic approach that requires more than building a health facility and training health professionals. It will be essential to understand the cultural nuances and the socioeconomic contexts of different communities, since it is different for different tribes and ethnic groups. It is also important to involve the target community in every process of health interventions, from planning throughout implantation, to ensure grassroots development, community empowerment, and sustainable outcomes.

However, this process has challenges. One major challenge is funding. Research, curriculum development, and publication require significant financial investments. For African countries, allocating budgets for highly localized research and development while struggling to provide basic necessities for citizens could be difficult. Thus, institutions tend to seek funding from international donors, who tend to have their own restrictions and agendas. A further challenge is winning the political will and support of administrators who often have been deeply influenced themselves by colonialism, and providing tangible results demonstrating the effectiveness of locally generated relevant approaches (Gray and Coats, 2010).

Conclusion

The history of social work as a helping profession in Africa has unfortunately been one of paternalism and colonialism. While some changes are occurring, the process of establishing indigenous African social work has been challenging. A number of scholars have pointed out that Western social work cannot effectively address social problems unique to Africa. However, the social work curriculum and practice approaches in African countries generally fail to address, and in some cases even acknowledge, structural and contextual issues. A true decolonization of social work methodologies requires promoting and building genuine partnerships with existing community-based systems (such as kinship care, neighborhood associations, tribal associations, religious fellowships, and so on).

Every community value system must be considered and accessed. Prior to judgment of the community, it is important to attempt to understand why the community values what it does. Oftentimes, a practice which may be viewed as “bad” under western standards is rooted in some practicality or circumstance. For example, in cultures where child marriage is practiced, we need to know why it is prominent. Then, we would learn that it is mostly related to poverty, fear of

rape, premarital pregnancy, loss of virginity and being judged as a bad parent if something goes 'wrong' or unplanned. If we focus on educating the community and focusing on the issues underlying child marriage, the community is more likely to change the practice. However, if we begin by condemning the practice and penalizing parents who wed their girls, without addressing the underlying problems, the community is more likely to reject the outside intrusions into their culture and continue to engage in the practice. In fact, in the case of child marriage, parents started changing weddings to "family gatherings" to avoid or being caught and no **lasting** change occurred. When the community participates in discussions, become aware of the consequences of various normative behavior and practices, engaged in the process of change and become more secure, then lasting transformation occurs.

[Mattaini and Holtschneider](#) (2016) argue that "... the core mission of social work is to take action to realize a progressive vision of a just and caring society" (p.1). They also identified three principles of integrated practice to fulfill the mission: "(1) challeng[ing] oppression and structural violence wherever found, (2) offer[ing] care and accompaniment for casualties of systematic oppression, and (3) co-construct[ing] an ecological field advancing individual and collective health and liberation" (p. anonymous). It is important for social workers to center their practice on fulfilling this mission using the principles identified. To do so, social workers need to be reflective and open to learn. They also should promote mutuality and reciprocal relationships. Hence, for social workers, cultural relevance and political justice are to be privileged over personal and professional interests. Furthermore, as Midgely (2008) emphasized, reciprocity can only be experienced when "relevant innovations from the global South are imported into Western countries as well" (p.42).

It is important to recognize that all social work is not the same. We cannot expect practitioners to practice or teach the same way. Thus, in indigenous social work, we are looking for some level of agreement and commitment to shared values and recognition of cultural relevance. To make social work useful in Africa, decolonization and reorientation of the curricula, research methods, and practice approaches that facilitate holistic and indigenous intervention is mandatory. In the process of decolonization, it is important to:

1. Revise school curricula (Osei-Hwedie and Rankopo, 2008). Even though there is no specific way to do it, decolonizing of curricula would entail acknowledging and promoting indigenous knowledge, emphasizing social justice, developing culturally centered research design (Simonds and Christopher, 2013).
2. Launch culturally relevant pilot programs that are centered on the needs of the grassroots. These programs will help measure the effectiveness and reliability of such approaches. Studies demonstrate that culturally relevant programs elicit active community engagement and are more likely to nurture positive outcomes (Botes & Rensburg, 2000; Chilisa and Tsheko, 2014 Zakus & Lysack, 1998).
3. Explore different ways of knowing (Tuhivai-Smith, 2012; Weaver, 1999).
4. Encourage research that addresses national and local problems.
5. Write local and national text books.
6. Develop national and local scholarly journals publishing culturally relevant research (Gray, Coates and Yellow-Bird, 2008).

Moreover, the decolonization process could also be further facilitated through developing intra-continental exchange programs for African faculty; and promoting genuine relationships between the global South and Western countries (Midgely,2008). Social workers need to

embrace and inculcate indigenous methodologies in their scholarship as well as practice to bring tangible and sustainable results.

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