
EDITORIAL/REDAKSIONEEL

DANCING TO THE BEAT OF OUR OWN DRUM

A review of the literature on indigenisation reveals that most African authors on this subject employ a modernist critique and define indigenisation in terms of the 'irrelevance of Western social work to non-Western contexts'. While several African writers, including Osei-Hwedie, Bar-On and Mupediswa, have made an important and interesting contribution to the indigenisation debate, their work remains exploratory in that they have yet to articulate why Western social work is irrelevant (if indeed we know what Western social work is) and how African social work might differ. While introducing and probing questions relating to the development of indigenous social work practice in Africa, they have yet to situate this within contemporary social work literature, where several related theoretical trends are evident:

1. Social work is a Western invention and a product of modernity. The notion of progressive change fits this paradigm.
2. Indigenisation is postmodern. It questions the dominance of "social work as a Western invention" and seeks to relate it to local culture, history, and political, social, and economic development.
3. Globalisation is producing increasing pressures for a "universal social work". Through global influences, African culture is changing even while African writers are attempting to pin down.

With regard to the development of indigenous theory and practice in Africa, African authors need to articulate how Africans conceptualise, understand and articulate culture and to show how Africa is different from the rest of the world, especially what makes "African culture" unique. The usual general reference is to an individualistic self-reliance type culture in the West and a collective, kinship oriented culture in Africa. I think it is very important to the argument being put forward by African writers (e.g., Bar-On, 1998, 1999; Mupediswa, 1992, 1997; Osei-Hwedie, 1996a, 1996b, 1995, 1993) that they establish very clearly what "African values" are and what "African social work" might look like. I believe this is already happening but it needs to be made more explicit. In my opinion, in Southern Africa social work is becoming far more aligned with social development and this distances it from "Western social work" since I do not believe that social workers across the world are in agreement that this is what social work is or should be about; neither is there agreement across the world about what social work is. I agree with Ife (2000a) that this is a contested domain and there are people working to transform social work practice in many different ways, for example, *inter alia* to counteract "governmentality" (Rossiter, 2000), the form-filling bureaucracy (Leveridge, 2002), an over-reliance on "technical-rational" approaches (Gray & Askeland, 2002), and universalising forces (Gray & Fook, 2002). There are many related debates.

Postmodernism highlights the tensions between universalisation and indigenisation (or localisation in postmodern term) created by the contradictions inherent in the notion of "shared or universal values" in social work; its professional culture seeks to be at once universalising and tolerant of difference. While we seek to promote social justice, collective interests, equality, fairness, and the like, our values about individuals and multiculturalism are essentially liberal and fit well within rights-based, Western democratic systems (see Bar-On, 1998; Ife, 2000b). If one wants to be essentialistic about this it goes back to Richmond's and Addams' differing perspective on social

work. Perhaps Africa is tending towards, or its value system is more harmonious with, Addams' perspective. In any way, Africans need not apologise for returning to the past (or for trying to counter the continuing march of colonialisation through globalisation). It seems clear to me that culture (where language and history is central), and the values moulded by it, are pivotal to the indigenisation debate. We know that colonialisation destroyed much of what was good, right and just in African culture and I would make no apology whatsoever for trying to reclaim that. The problems Africans are presently confronting (as articulated by writers like Bar-On and Osei-Hwedie) arise precisely because of social work's international heritage whereby indigenous modes of helping and natural kinship networks were overlooked in favour of professional and educational developments based on Western scientific thinking and social science theory. What would African social work look like if this had not happened? Perhaps there would have been no need for social work in African culture at all since the social system through its kinship network was naturally supportive of collective interests!

So what is unique to Africa? First, Africa is constructing its own critical theory for it must be remembered that, where social work is concerned, social development constitutes a critical perspective. Though other critical theories, like structural, postmodern, feminist, and strengths perspectives (Gray & Collett van Rooyen, 2002; Saleebey, 2002), might be useful to African social work, that social development is taking hold in Africa gives credence to the argument that it is moving further and further away from Western models of social work such that, in time, indigenous practice in Africa might not resemble social work in the rest of the world at all!

Secondly, through the indigenisation debate, African social work writers are beginning to take a proactive stance by showing the world that, while Africa has different problems, it also has different strengths and solutions. It dances to the beat of its own drum. These differences need to be celebrated because discussions about specific ways in which Africa is unique would strengthen the African argument for indigenous practice. Perhaps it might be more beneficial to argue that given that there are debates about the nature of global social work, the nature of social work in Africa is an equally contestable domain. Rather than using the amorphous notion of "Western social work", the argument becomes focused on what was inherited from the past that no longer fits the present. The discussion then centres not only on specific practices that do not fit the African context and are incompatible with African culture but also on alternative practices that are relevant because they are grounded in African culture and the problems, issues and interests of African people.

Finally, a distinction needs to be drawn between social work and social welfare. While in Southern Africa the development of social work was tied historically to the development of social work, this is not true in all contexts. For example, in Australia there is a separation between social work and social welfare (Gray & Fook, 2002). In the UK it may be argued that those aspects of state social work which have been most concerned with the promotion of social welfare are being steadily routinised to exclude therapeutic social work, with the former increasingly provided, if at all, by the independent, voluntary and private sector (Leveridge, 2002). In South Africa welfare is being replaced by social development to the extent that there is no longer a Ministry of Welfare. This has led to a questioning of social work's role in social development. With the criticisms against social work mounted in most of the literature on indigenisation, I would suggest that African authors are building a strong argument that social development is far more relevant to Africa than a service-oriented, professionalised, largely clinical, individualistic, Western, modernist invention called social work.

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