Bar-On A

INDIGENOUS PRACTICE: SOME INFORMED GUESSES –SELF-EVIDENT BUT IMPOSSIBLE

Arnon Bar-On is an Associate Professor at the Department of Social Work, University of Botswana Gaborone, Botswana

ABSTRACT

Ever since Western social work was exported to Africa an ongoing debate has been taking place on whether it fits the African context. Most of this debate, however, has revolved around Western social work's techniques rather than on its ends, which, being predicated on Western values, are likely to be alien to many Africans. The article outlines the arguments why Africa might require a form of social work of its own and the chances of such indigenisation taking place. It concludes, however, that while indigenisation may be a desirable end, it is probably impossible unless African social workers can engage in reflective learning with their clients.

Common sense, presumably a universal trait, suggests that people behave differently in different situations and, as a corollary, that they require different types of knowledge that befit these situations. Most people, for example, conduct themselves differently at home and elsewhere and adapt their clothing and behaviour differently to formal and informal occasions. Equally apparent is that similar differences apply to people who live in different circumstances and, partly as a result, entertain different conceptions of the good. Thus, children in a resource-strapped school, who must share pencils in class, are more likely to develop interdependent outlooks than their counterparts in richer schools. Indeed, so self-evident are such observations that they beg the question why a practical pursuit like social work, as distinguished from more theory-oriented disciplines, must examine them at all?

Or is this so? Recent years have seen a sharp rise in social workers being accused of skirting this common sense by ignoring the specific, lived-in experiences of many of their clients and consequently of being largely ineffective. Among these concerns are the negatively labelled "anti-racist", "anti-sexist", "anti-oppressive" and "anti-agist" prescriptions that increasingly imbue Western social work writings, and the more positively labelled "indigenisation" movement that emanates more from developing countries. This article examines the latter's apprehensions, mainly as presented by African scholars, arguing that while its reasoning is self-evident, effective transformation of this reasoning into professional practice is often impossible. The article that follows this exposition (MW/SW 38(4) pages 311 - 323), by Kwaku Osei-Hwedie, contests this position in maintaining that the development of indigenous African social work knowledge and practices are possible.

BACKGROUND

"Indigenous" refers to physical and social traits inherently belonging to a people or place and so conjures up images rooted in history. It may be appropriate, therefore, to begin this exposition with the classic words "Once Upon a Time in a Distant Land" and, in line with such openings, also to identify a villain, a hero and a damsel in distress. One Upon a Time stories are purposefully ambiguous about their time and place, but in our case, in an historical freak, we can pinpoint the time and location of our tale almost to the minute!

The land is the United States of America and, more precisely, the city of Baltimore in Maryland. The occasion is a meeting of the National Conference of Charities and Corrections, a predecessor of today's National Association of Social Workers, and to the podium steps one Abraham Flexner. It is Monday, 17th of May 1915, and the time is 11:00 a.m.

Five years earlier Flexner had written a report, *Medical Education in the United States and in Canada*, that hastened much-needed reforms in the standards, organisation and curricula of North American schools of medicine, and that established him as the most influential individual in the USA in the area of professional education. He was therefore a nomination of choice for the meeting's programme committee to speak on the subject: "Is Social Work a Profession?"

In his autobiography, *I Remember* (1940), Flexner fails to mention this talk, perhaps because his interests lay elsewhere. But for his audience his words fell like a ton of bricks, whose impact is felt as strongly today as at the time. For what Flexner decreed was that, because the social worker "is not a professional agent as much as the mediator invoking this or that profession", and that because his vocation lacks an "educationally communicable technique", social work is "not so much a separate profession, as an endeavour to supplement certain existing professions pending their complete development" (Flexner, 1915:585, 584, 586).

Whether this pronouncement was merited has been hotly debated down the years (Carr-Saunders & Wilson, 1933; Greenwood, 1957; Goode, 1969; Roth, 1974; Austin, 1983; but see Wootton, 1959; North, 1972). In fact, it was not as conclusive as it was made out to be, especially as Flexner admitted that his "acquaintance with social work, with the literature of social work, and with social workers is distinctly limited" (Flexner, 1915:576). But this is immaterial. It is not facts that determine behaviour but beliefs, and what the audience and all who later read these words took with them was the pronouncement that social work was not only *not* a profession but was bound to disappear. Consequently, having accepted this diagnosis – and here enter our heroes – social work academics set forth to disprove it by identifying standardised "scientific" occupational techniques, which, at least until the advent of post-modernist thought, invariably meant that they were taken to be universal and so could not be differentiated. In retrospect, this search for order, regularity and patterns undoubtedly stimulated social work's development. We now also know, however, that it little helped to understand, and hence to construct appropriate interventions for, the complex, vague and largely unconscious structures of many of social work's clients' socially embedded experiences – our damsels in distress.

Social work, as it developed since 1915, particularly in the USA and in the UK, is now practised throughout the world. Yet to date no systematic comparisons of its application in different societies have been done. It remains unclear, therefore, what parts of its knowledge and ensuing interventions are universal and which might be particular to specific population groups. It is in view of this lacuna that the title of this article contains the words "informed guesses", and the reader is urged to treat its contents accordingly.

Yet lack of evidence has not prevented many academics from commenting on the relevance – or, more commonly, on the irrelevance – of Western-developed social work to non-Western contexts. The first of these criticisms appeared in the 1950s, hand-in-hand with the expansion of social work beyond its countries of origin (Hoey, 1954; Brown, 1957), after which they gained enormous momentum (for example, Branscombe, 1961; Robertson, 1963; Clifford, 1966; Paraiso, 1966; Almazor, 1967; Gore, 1967; Khinduka, 1971; United Nations, 1971; Dunning, 1972; Nagpaul, 1972; Shawkey, 1972). In fact, so popular did the discussion become that the editorial board of the *International Journal of Social Work* declared that it was "now threadbare and no further articles on it will be welcomed" (1972).

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This prognosis notwithstanding, the outpouring on the subject continued (for example, Clarkson, 1974; Lasan, 1975; Agouba, 1976; Resnick, 1976; Yiman, 1976; Hollister & Jones, 1977; Huang, 1978; Mutiso, 1979), culminating, it appeared, in Midgley's widely acclaimed *Professional Imperialism: Social Work in the Third World* (1981), which ruled decisively in favour of diversifying social work's modes of operation. But this was not to be. Partly out of momentum, but mainly because the debate failed to inform policy, the calls to reconceptualise social work in non-Western societies raged on and there is no sign of their cessation (Midgley *et al.*, 1986; Muzalle, 1987; Hammoud, 1988; Walton & Abo El Nasr, 1988; Hutton, 1992; Midgley, 1992; Mupedziswa, 1992; Mwansa, 1992; Ngwenya, 1992; Toors, 1992; Elliott, 1993; Osei-Hwedie, 1993; Anderson *et al.*, 1994; Raditlhokwa, 1993; Hutton, 1994; Dixon & Scherell, 1995; Osei-Hwedie, 1995a; Silavwe, 1995; Gray *et al.*, 1996; Man, 1996; Mwansa, 1996; Osei-Hwedie, 1996; Rwomire & Roditlhokwa, 1966; Mupedziswa, 1997; Rankin, 1997; Louw, 1998; Ntusi, 1998; McKendrick, 1998).

SO WHY THE DEBATE?

Depending on their particular orientation, different commentators advance different reasons why Africa needs to develop its own brand of social work. Generally, however, five themes emerge: (a) that Africa's social problems are significantly different from those in the West; (b) that the continent is materially poor; (c) that its organisational and administrative frameworks are weak; (d) that its leadership is not committed to combating social ills; and (e) that Western-developed theories are not transferable to other locations.

Probably the most prevalent argument for an indigenous African social work is that, although many social ills such as homelessness, domestic victimisation and addiction, beset people world-wide, other problems are unique. Usually referred to as "basic" and hence, by implication, as "more important", these problems include, among others, cyclic droughts, civil wars, large-scale illiteracy and unmanageable chronic illnesses. Consequently, given the breadth and depth of their suffering, which may prejudice life itself, "social work cannot continue to fiddle with minor problems" (Shawkey, 1972) or as Guzzella (1996:309) wrote most starkly:

> *While [Western] social workers fret about female circumcision, Tutsis and Hutus in Rwanda kill as many of each other as they can; Amhara in Ethiopia may be planning the next starvation campaign against the Siddamo; [and] food convoys are prevented from reaching hungry children in Sudan and Somalia.*

A second argument for indigenisation is that purely at the material level most African countries cannot afford a Western-type social work that focuses mainly on the marginalised, who inevitably form a small proportion of the population. With an aggregate gross national product per capita calculated for purchasing power of only $US1,640 as compared with $US22,020 of the OECD countries, and with 89 percent of all countries with "low human development" being in Africa (UNDP, 2002), this focus is simply impossible. Thus, even Botswana, the continent's second richest country, is forced to restrict anti-retroviral treatment of HIV/AIDS patients to those most at risk and has already announced that, even at this level, the intervention is unsustainable without substantial foreign aid. Moreover, this situation is unlikely to improve in the foreseeable future, as Africa is the only continent whose material situation has been steadily declining over the past two decades.

A third imperative for a special African social work, proponents argue, is organisational. In countries that are materially richer, social work is buttressed by and, in turn, buttresses other social provisions that together form a continuous, albeit not necessarily comprehensive, service network.

For example, schools usually have various support services, such as nursing and educational and psychological help, and institutionalised social security is a norm. In contrast, in most of Africa such formal infrastructures are absent or, if available, then they are either beyond the reach of most people or subject to bureaucratic mania and to "sticky fingers". Instead, most social workers work on their own, often individually and with little organisational backup, which renders many basic Western social work interventions, such as referral, brokerage or advocacy, largely redundant, apart from already impoverished informal service networks.

A fourth element is political. Primarily this factor relates to a general situation in which human deprivation is so prevalent that it is taken for granted, and where welfare provision is principally used to build loyalty and to contain social unrest rather than to promote individual and communal well-being. "To be begged from", Illife (1987:80) observes, "is one of the marks of [African] chieftainship", which in modern guise translates to allocating welfare services by party affiliation (Mayire & Asingwiire, 1996). On a subtler note, as in Botswana and Kenya, this phenomenon manifests itself in social workers being drafted to organise quasi-political events like trade fairs, youth rallies and the visits of VIPs, which is to say that at least part of their efforts are institutionally channelled to aggrandising the elite rather than to helping the excluded.

Finally, most writers also question the transferability of many Western interventions to non-Western settings. Historically, the main argument for this position has been that these interventions fail to assist people who require tangible and immediate help because their principal intention is to assist individuals to cope with the underlying causes of their personal predicaments rather than with the structural obstacles that gave rise to their difficulties. Increasingly, however, criticisms address social work's entire social science foundation, as its teachings are said to be eurocentric and so take little account of African mores. Typical examples are the dismissal of local medical practitioners as "witchdoctors" or "traditional" healers or the reference to Africa and her people as being "underdeveloped".

Each of these analyses and combinations of them lead to different proposals for change. Listed from the more conservative to the more radical, these proposals suggest that an African social work should:

- retain its Western-developed technologies, but note influences beyond its clients' immediate environment, such as different cultural practices;

- focus on "hard" and not on "soft" services (for example, counselling) such as helping release street children whom the police apprehend. Social workers, accordingly, should be equipped with more "practical" than "theoretical" skills, as exemplified by the original placing of social work training in Botswana in an agricultural college, where students were taught cooking, knitting, gardening and the like;

- disengage from ministering to individuals and families in favour of organising larger communities towards self-reliance, based on the pragmatic argument that, since formal assistance is weak, people must rely on themselves. Also, self-reliance is said to increase the "authenticity" of the problems identified and of the way that they are resolved, which is accepted as a self-evident good;

- expand its domain to include fields like primary health, family planning and urban development that focus more on prevention than reaction and cure. This approach is increasingly called "social work for social development" (Elliott, 1993) or "developmental social work" (Gray, 1998), although its boundaries and contents remain extremely vague;

- advance personal and communal income generation, based on the neo-liberal notion that most human suffering derives from material deprivation and so, once this obstacle is surmounted, most people will be able to fend for themselves;

- enter the political arena in the belief that mass welfare can only effectively be dealt with at the macro, social policy level; and

- challenge the *status quo*, including its political structures, on the assumption that by their nature present-day institutions and organisations are oppressive. Thus Raditlhokwa (1993), for example, calls on social workers to replace "the [prevailing] colonial management paradigm and professional elitism in social work organisations", primarily with processes that would allow greater participation by the masses to reflect their interests.

Few social workers today would openly contest these proposals (their conflicting contents aside), although adopting them is still met with considerable unease. Most of these reservations, however, are currently muted. With marginalisation in vogue and political correctness all pervasive, censuring the indigenous, no matter its validity, runs against the mood of the time. We must therefore seek the counter-arguments to the need for non-Western social work paradigms mainly in the past and, although some of them may appear outdated, they clearly persist if only in the stream of African social workers to Western institutes of learning and practice, which is predicated on their and their hosts' assumption that they can use their newly acquired knowledge back home.

Criticism of reconstructing social work to fit different societies takes three forms. One form may be called the "we are all human and so are the same" thesis. This idea does not mean that all people are equal, but that their nature is. It follows, therefore, that human predicaments are similar and hence can be managed by employing similar theories, principles and techniques. So, for example, Clarkson's (1976:4) categorical declaration that all that Western educators require in order to teach in the developing world is "a spirit of adventure". Also, by definition, this is the position of all who maintain that social work is a science and hence transcendental in nature and, conversely, of those who believe that its essence is "[to] convey a sense of human warmth and build up the dignity of those with who [it] deal[s]" (Kendall, 1971:61).

A second category of arguments against differentiating social work paradigms is ideological. One such argument derives from social work's practicality, which demands not only the need to explain societies' beliefs and structures but also to judge them. Endeavours of this nature, it is argued, require universal standards because particular societies' values and practices are limited to them and so carry no conviction with outsiders. Radical feminism and the incorporation of so-called international human rights into mainstream social work exemplify this thinking (for example, Dominelli, 1997; Ife, 2000). Another ideological stand stems from New Right thinking. According to this position, a mass problem is nothing but a problem of a mass of individuals, and so problems of this kind can only be handled at the individual level. Engaging in social policy and its micro incarnations, such as social development, is thereby ruled out of social work's pursuits or relegated to their margins (for example, Marshland, 1996). Others, by contrast, argue that such professional expansion is simply impractical because it would infringe on the domains of other occupations and so be strongly resisted (Midgely, 1981).[2]

Lastly, a third school of thought denies the need for indigenisation because it is already in place. For example, Brauns and Kramer (1986) suggest that, since social work training differs throughout the world, then its practice must be different. Similarly, but relying on practice, Toors (1992)

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2 Midgley has since revoked this position, and now maintains that social work should expand its domain, particularly to economic affairs (Midgely, 1995).

argues that in the developing world social workers engage in fields that bear little resemblance to those of their Western counterparts, like adult education, and as such are already indigenised. Moreover, according to Toors, the very idea of indigenisation is insulting because it suggest that the person's concerns are "too feeble to resist the imposition of foreign approaches" (1992:102).

In summary, almost from that day that social work was exported from its countries of origin, a vigorous debate has been raging on its applicability to other societies. On the one hand, many lament its teachings, writing of "the agony of [their] irrelevance" (Ngwenya, 1992). On the other hand, an equally distinguished but less vocal group regards the profession as a seamless community, united by a global body of knowledge. Yet, divergent as the proponents of these perspectives may be, most hold two things in common. First, many of their conclusions are little more than broad, common sense truths, from which only equally broad declarations derive. For example, after affirming that (a) social work deals with people, (b) people interact with their surroundings, and (c) culture is important (none of which, apparently, anyone knew before), Anderson *et al.* (1994) resolve that social work in Africa should embark on "multi-dimensional empowerment", embracing everything personal, social, educational, economic and political. In short, social workers should intervene in every aspect of human existence, presumably because – at least in Africa – they know better than anyone else how to advance the human condition.[3] Similarly, but writing against differentiation, Desai (1974:14, in Midgley, 1981:92), who approaches social work from a religious perspective, notes that religions embrace all the qualities of good social work – "good thoughts, good words, good deeds" – and consequently that all social work must be the same. The second, and more important, common theme is that the debate focuses almost exclusively on Western social work's *techniques*. Only rarely, and then only fleetingly (Almanzor, 1967; Lasan, 1975; Hammoud, 1988), have questions been raised about (1) the objectives of these techniques, as directed by Western social work's value premises, and (2) the acceptance of these values in other societies.

DIVERGENT ROUTES

It is with these two issues that the heart of the debate on deconstructing social work to fit different societies lies. That is, to which *values* do different societies subscribe and, hence, what knowledge and resulting interventions and concomitant skills do they require to promote them? For example, in the West, where assumptions about the meaning of life and its direction revolve around the individual, most knowledge is concerned with individuals and policies are directed to, and measured by, the extent to which individuals attain autonomy and self-fulfilment. In comparison, in Africa social networks, and especially kinship, are of primary importance. This situation calls for a different conceptualisation of society, based on roles and concomitant duties and obligations, and consequently for different policies than those in the West.

In response to these different value systems, Nann (1989), drawing on Pike (1967), distinguishes between two approaches to the knowledge base they require to sustain them – the emic and the etic, as noted in Table 1.

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3 Not content with this list, one of the co-authors of this article later added that social workers must also concern themselves with ecology as well (Osei-Hwedie, 1995d).

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TABLE 1
EMIC AND ETIC APPROACHES TO UNDERSTANDING SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR

	Emic	Etic
Perspective	A view from *inside* a culture	A view from *outside* a culture
Data collection	Intra-cultural	Cross-cultural
Knowledge base	The culture as a whole	Partial, selected elements from different cultures
Criteria	Internal	External

From a scientific standpoint, the emic and the etic complement one another, as they merely portray human behaviour from different perspectives. However, for social work, which must understand behaviour in its context to formulate interventions its clients can relate to, the two are at odds and especially so when, as with African and Western cultures, they rely on different conceptions of people's relations with their social and physical surroundings.

What, then, lies ahead for social work in Africa? The answer, as when the issue first emerged, can take two routes – the Western (etic) or the African (emic).

THE WESTERN ROUTE

Taking the Western route sustains the *status quo* in Africa, continuing to rely mainly on theories and interventions developed elsewhere. Justification for this journey rests on three alternative interpretations of the contemporary African scene: (a) that Africans are African no longer; (b) that they are *too* African; or (c) that even if they are African today, they are soon bound to lose their Africanness.

The first interpretation, whereby Africans are no longer African, holds that, historical and cultural sentiments aside, customary African social systems are outdated. This is so either because they voluntarily seek participation in the hierarchy of privilege they inherited from their former European rulers or are forced to imitate it, or by their adoption of new ideologies and religions and evolutionary adaptations to new technologies most Africans have come to accept that foreign ideas and practices are superior to their own and worthy, therefore, of emulation. Consequently, what was has been transformed into or replaced by other institutions and organisations that, in the main, take after those of the West. Contemporary manifestations of these processes are as diverse as a preference for Western wedding dresses, the outlawing of urban thatched-roofed housing except for the tourist trade, and, among the newly literate, an almost built-in reaction against their parents' knowledge that borders on taking offence at their lifestyle. Implementing Western social work in Africa is justified, therefore, as reflecting the continent's present-day reality.

The second interpretation rejects the above "end of history" thesis. On the contrary, contemporary African institutions and organisations, invariably rooted in the past, obtain too strongly and must be replaced, because they sustain power structures that treat social work's target groups "unjustly". Thus, Osei-Hwedie (1995a:123, 128) argues that:

> *Many obstacles, such as our traditional values and advantages of entrenched positions, have prevented and continue to prevent fundamental social changes in our society ... [Moreover, since] any attempt at social justice which uses the dominant thought structure in the end recreates the same hierarchical world with its unequal power relations ... there is a need to challenge current dominant [African] ideologies.*

In short, presuming that the end of this challenge is socio-political liberalisation, this and similar appeals that are increasingly heard in African political discourse (even if induced by a world in which even non-liberals are forced to defend themselves in liberal terms) call for reshaping the continent in the image of the West, using social work as one of the vehicles.

Finally, a softer version of the last stance derives from modernisation theory. According to this view, even if differences in the universal human condition still prevail, they are bound to converge, as so-called "developing" societies come to resemble the "developed" countries. It follows, therefore, that applying Western social work in Africa not only pre-empts the inevitable, but could also prove professionally advantageous in placing its practitioners at the forefront of "progressive" change.

The difficulties with these arguments are twofold. First, the conviction that Africa is evolving towards Western-style capitalist liberalism is not necessarily warranted, as many Asian countries, also labelled "underdeveloped", show. Instead, what data that are presented to prove this "inevitability" appear to emanate more from the rhetoric of a taken-for-granted "international community" and a consequent search for and imposition of global uniformity. Typical of such data is the United Nations' Human Development Index, which assumes that certain peoples' well-being is deficient if it falls short of a basket of predetermined goods that others possess. More importantly, however, it cannot be taken for granted that Westernisation is what most Africans want or, where this trend occurs, that it has not been brought about, often by force, by a self-selected minority. Thus, as Best (1995: 793) enquired, "will the decent ... peasant paterfamilias really bless the bundle of rights which will enable his family to watch soap operas made in California and sex films from Holland?" Likewise, would they willingly endorse reinterpretations of their religion in the light of the equality of the sexes and freedom of conscience, as is done with the Koran, such that if they take an anti-abortionist stand they risk being branded cruel and oppressive – alienating them from their beliefs (Parekh, 2000)? Rather, where pressures for change exist, as they do in most societies, they "may not be so much for 'human rights' or 'democracy' but for good government ... able to provide security and basic needs with good opportunities for an improved standard of living" (Kausikan, 1993:37). It cannot be blithely assumed that to this end "democracy" and "human rights" will do the trick. For example, in some cases good governance may require detention without immediate access to lawyers in order to deal with terrorism (Uganda), curbs on the media to avoid fanning racial tensions (South Africa), or laws to break entrenched interests, such as with land control (Zimbabwe).

The second difficulty in the Western route is that modifying theories and interventions structured in one culture to fit the paradigms of another is often impossible. For example, much Western social work relies on counselling, which is non-directive. Yet, in Africa, as in much of Asia (albeit for different reasons), social workers regard themselves as direct problem solvers and clients expect to be told how to meet their needs (Nimmagadda & Cowger, 1999). Similarly, as Man (n.d.) enquires, will revising Ellis's (1979) Rational Emotive Therapy (RET) into an African edition mark the beginning of an African social work? Intuitively, the answer is "Yes", provided RET is subjected to acceptable criteria. However, such criteria are lacking. This would pose no problem for Ellis. He would easily identify faulty cognition or irrational beliefs that must be disputed to free his clients of the tyranny of antagonistic "shoulds". But this is not so for social workers in Africa, where the rational and the irrational are often held in harmony and so practitioners may resist freeing their clients or for that matter themselves, from the different "shoulds" (see, for example, Ramsey, 2001).

THE AFRICAN ROUTE

Advocates of this alternative – besides a few eccentrics who want to transport Africa back to some mythical Nile Valley civilisation – also build on Africa's current reality. They contend, however, that although modernisation undoubtedly impacts on "traditionalism", human institutions are more resilient than they are given credit for. The question, therefore, is not whether change is occurring, but what aspects of the past can and should be maintained and how change should be managed.

Ironically, the difficulties with this position are similar to those encountered by the advocates of Westernisation. Thus, while critics of Westernisation question whether it genuinely reflects the will of its intended constituency, the same holds for Africanisation. That is, there is little evidence to show that most African do *not* want to emulate the "historyless, consumer oriented, fun-filled American expression" (Bradbury, 1995:769) rather than, for example, the romanticised notion of an African Renaissance, formulated by President Mbeki of the Republic of South Africa.

Equally problematic is how Africanisation can be achieved. As seen above, the emic must begin from within. However, for those seeking this route, a virtually insurmountable hurdle is that they are insiders no more. In the past Africans went abroad to study social work or had Western teachers sent to them and, assuming their socialisation succeeded, they internalised the profession's conventions rooted in their studentships. In fact, having studied the same texts as locals, and been tested by the same criteria, they became "Western" themselves, as attested by their professional accreditation in their countries of learning. After that, since one can only practice and teach what one knows, they invariably perpetuated their acquired orientation at home.

Today, in spite of local schools of social work being in place (although – South Africa apart – still very few), little has changed. In part, this is because most African social work educators continue to be trained in the West and model their curricula accordingly, and because Western or Westernised thinking monopolises the social work literature, which denies students alternative frames of reference. The slow but increasing African-originated social work writings change little in this regard, as all are still predicated on, and hence propagate, existing theories, all of which are produced in the West (Man, 1996). Indeed, they probably do so even more effectively than Western writings because, being written by Africans, they are believed to be "African". Another reason for the continued *status quo*, however, although apparently more so in Southern than in Eastern and Western Africa, is that many students are resistant to critical thinking due to their learning experiences. Conditioned by an educational system geared to accepting the knowledge laid down for them, and where independent thought is alien if not discouraged outright (Raditlhokwa, 1994; Silavwe, 1995), they want to learn "right" from "wrong" as in some rule-book rather than discover new answers (Bar-On, 2001). So, for example, texts, even when written for entirely different audiences – so specific that imagining that anyone else can gain anything from them is difficult – are seen as the way things ought to be, and the teacher who challenges this "truth" is not very popular, to say the least.

IMPLICATIONS

All social work interventions embody normative assumptions about what is desirable and good. It is at this level that this article argues that it must be self-evident that applying one indigenously developed form of social work in dissimilar contexts is not only misdirected but,

where Africa is concerned, also celebrates the triumph of colonialism. Put more crudely, this application sets to transform cultures from the core, replacing one way of life with another.

For some African social workers, perhaps the majority, this situation may pose little difficulty. Having adopted the West as their reference group, they may actively seek Western social work to transform their societies economically, socially, culturally and politically to resemble the West. They may also ask if their profession will be left with any meaningful category of "social work" if it continues to recognise differences within differences, since no culture is an organic, self-contained whole. All are ridden with varying degrees of incoherence and tension, divided along class, gender, generation and political lines, with each divide struggling to claim ownership. Thus, there is no one "Africa", as there is no one "Europe" or "Asia". Instead, there are many "Africas", which means that, even if it were possible to construct indigenous models, then innumerable such models would have to constructed to fit the black-lesbian-disabled-divorced-rural-etc. Tswana as distinguished from their Venda, Zulu or white - originally from Greece as compared from Cyprus or Russia - counterparts.

For other social workers, perhaps also the majority (since we do not know), this direction is anathema. Be it for pragmatic or ideological reasons, they believe that Africa must develop its own brand of social work, tailored specifically for her inhabitants and their way of life. The prospects of such indigenisation materialising fully, as this article argues, are dim. Yet some inroads along this path could be made if were possible to reverse the order in which social work knowledge is produced. At present social work theories are developed by academics, who also design the profession's practice models. Students and practitioners are then expected to internalise this knowledge and these skills and to use them with their clients. However, since these academics, even when African, are all "Westernised", those seeking an African social work must return to the drawing board by engaging in reflective learning with the persons who are most knowledgeable about what Africans require and how they best can be served, namely social work's clients. For example, much knowledge undoubtedly could be gleaned from studying the "counselling" offered by aunts and uncles in the extended family, the brokerage and advocacy roles of customary courts, or self-help groups like burial societies.

Reflective learning of this type is by no means new. It is, however, rarely practised. Almost by their very position, and particularly in Africa where extremely few are privileged to have acquired higher education, academics and professionals believe that their knowledge is superior to that of their clients, especially when the latter are materially poor. Their behaviour and attitudes then become self-validating. Treated as incapable, clients behave as such and hide their capacities even from themselves. Nor do most academics and practitioners know how to empower their clients to express and share their knowledge without reference to Western-based values and techniques. Thus, even the academics' and professionals' language is almost entirely drawn from the West (Man, 1996). Ignorance and incapacities then become not just an illusion; they constitute an artefact of the helpers' behaviour. This constraint is a world-wide phenomenon, but is much confounded in Africa where social structures dictate acceptance of, and subsequent submission to, social position, and where institutions of higher learning are therefore more concerned with teaching than with learning. Typical of this situation is the sense of frustration and deep personal affront many African educators feel when their students do not follow their teachings to the letter.

What local reflective learning will reveal is, of course, unknown. It may tip the indigenisation debate either way by showing that Africans differ either a lot or little from their Western counterparts. The first instance would obviously necessitate an indigenous agenda while the second would not. But one point is clear: if an African social work is required, then it can only

be developed by Africans who are able to conduct Western bias-free research. Until such time, the entire debate will at best continue to be informed only by guesses – akin to those that underline this article.

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