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Furthering decolonising social work in Africa

Sharlotte Tusasiirwe and Janestic Mwende Twikirize

Social workers have a responsibility to the present and next generation, to preserve, promote, and pass on indigenous ubuntu values and philosophies through their education, research and publications, practice and through their community interactions. Empirical evidence by Gebru and Wako (2022) showed that part of the reasons why African social workers and indeed at a global level, still over-rely on Western theories and knowledges was because of lack of information on indigenous theories, philosophies and knowledges and how they linked to social work. As the editors and authors of this book have experiential knowledge from their many years of teaching and learning experiences in Africa and internationally, we know that Indigenous knowledges and content are only beginning to be accepted and taught in schools of social work and practice, despite their enduring relevance in the communities that social workers serve. The editors were driven to develop this book project to make available knowledge on Ubuntu philosophy and how it informs different fields of social work. However, we know that there is still need for more advocacy to make sure that the education system and perspective changes to embrace and centre such indigenous knowledge and perspectives or world views of those communities where social workers will work.

However, to further indigenise and decolonise social work requires confronting the inequality and politics of knowledge production in social work. The editors observed that although Ubuntu philosophy had been popularised through international associations like International Federation of Social Workers and the International Association of Schools of Social Work, there was a gap regarding in-depth theorising of this philosophy to demonstrate how it informs social work and its different fields. Further, there are inadequate tools to facilitate decolonising actions continuously. Our requests to publish a special issue in some of the international journals were rejected, reminding us as southern authors the ongoing hurdles we have to face to have indigenous knowledges, theories, philosophies accepted as important knowledge for social workers to have and therefore published in journals to widen accessibility. No wonder in Africa:

> "… students, instructors, researchers, supervisors, examiners and journal editors as well as reviewers intrinsically believed that Western theories are

the paramount [and therefore] will prefer to employ the Western theoretical frameworks to obtain the gateway to join the international scientific community."

(Gebru & Wako, 2022: 193)

However, the rejections are lessons that demonstrate that to decolonise social work knowledges, education and practice is a process that demands a never-give up attitude that pushes boundaries and looks for alternative ways and platforms to ensure that the knowledges, voices and living experiences of indigenous peoples and communities are shared and heard.

To push further decolonisation entails freeing our minds to overcome the inferiority mindset and lack of confidence in indigenous African knowledges and philosophies in and for social work. Decolonising requires confronting the ongoing colonisation manifested in the socialisation from the education and other knowledge sharing systems where "we've been taught to understand that we don't have anything to contribute towards knowledge" (Hlatshwayo & Alexander, 2021: 44). African social workers must free their minds and allow themselves to think, which requires going beyond remembering and regurgitating content that the colonial curriculum has forced us to do.

Furthering decolonisation in social work requires confronting and combating epistemic racism that we have suffered in the education system in general and social work education and practice. Epistemic racism manifests where knowledges and ways of knowing and being of people that have experienced colonisation remain marginalised, invalidated, mis(under)represented while knowledges of the colonisers are established as legitimate, resulting into curriculums and a profession where the colonised rarely see themselves reflected in the profession's knowledge base, theories models, philosophies, among others. To date, the focus and advocacy around education in Africa have been put on the need and right to access education but there is an urgency to also examine the content of what is taught in curriculums in schools of social work and higher education to disrupt epistemic racism. Education has for long been a colonial tool through its marginalisation and erasure of indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing, but now is the time for it to be used as a tool to fight against further perpetuation of racism through what is taught, how it is taught and who teaches it. This is a task for both indigenous and non-indigenous social workers.

The role of indigenous languages and social workers in decolonising social work

To decolonise requires embracing multilingualism in social work and encouraging exploring philosophies in non-English languages to examine how they inform social work theories, philosophies, models, values, research, education, etc. Just the use of a non-English word *Ubuntu* allowed people to think, remember, re-imagine and theorise, relate experiences, analyse and interpret

lived experiences and community cases to expand social work literature and knowledge. Also adopting an African philosophy positioned the authors in this book as knowers giving them the confidence to write and share their knowledge, their stories, and experiences. Similar experiences are reported by Maree Higgins, an Australian social worker in her work on decolonising human rights through exploring constructions of the concept by African migrants in Australia. She shares that when the mother-tongue of participants was centred, it opened up conversations and people began to tell stories, use metaphors, proverbs, listing a range of experiences that brought to light different meanings in the words. Participants spoke with confidence and explored different meanings and constructions compared to when 'testing of how much they understood about human rights as an external concept approach' was used. When mother-tongue is centred:

> The conversation becomes critically reflective and dialogical and enhances the ability of the participant to tap into his stories and forms of knowledge, and by extension, enhances the quality of the data collected and the eventual findings. By engaging in this way, I was allowing for decolonisation of the concept [human rights].
>
> (Higgins, 2016: 166)

The point to make here is that centring of indigenous languages and concepts is likely to further decolonisation in social work. Embracing non-English concepts and philosophies in indigenous languages is likely to facilitate authors in the South to move beyond the banking model in social work where they cram and reproduce content read from the books of theories copied and pasted from the West, which as noted by many African authors, lack appropriateness and relevance for Africa.

Centring multilingualism in social work is coupled with the role of indigenous academics, practitioners, researchers, students in the decolonisation process. Indeed, as McLaughlin and Whatman (2007) maintained:

> "lecturers and academics from indigenous cultures bear the weighty responsibility for championing the struggle against colonial forms of domination in academic institutions, in terms of making meaningful contributions to the reclaiming of indigenous knowledge, values and ontologies in a bid for cultural continuity and survival."
>
> (cited in Manomano et al., 2020: 365)

However, as Ife (2020) argues, non-indigenous social workers have an important role to play in decolonisation than in indigenisation: one:

> …that requires us to address the dominance of white western worldviews in shaping social work, not only in social work practiced in non-white settings, but also in white western countries (which are in any case

becoming more cosmopolitan and less 'white'). While we cannot fully understand Indigenous and other non-western worldviews, we certainly understand white colonising world views, as we have been part of them, they are part of us and they have given us particular privileges.

(Ife, 2020:27)

The argument is that decolonising social work is a responsibility of all social workers as it is a matter of fulfilling the social justice commitment that the profession claims as its foundational value. Social workers must walk the talk of social justice by engaging in decolonisation in and outside the classroom.

Taking decolonisation to the classroom and practice

Complete decolonising social work will not happen only in the classroom but must also be the top agenda in practice. In this book, models have been proposed by different authors in different fields of social work practice, research, and education. Some of the authors have theorised the indigenous principles and models that are already being adopted by organisations working with different target groups and communities in Africa. As a way forward from this book, there is a need for social workers to apply the proposed models in practice and to document results and experiences with the models, to improve and strengthen them to respond to the issues and context. It appears that decolonisation has already been happening given that organisations and social workers in practice have been drawing on indigenous philosophies, African epistemologies, but which have not been explicitly acknowledged and named in the organisations' formal operations. A decolonising agenda requires that the silencing of and marginalising of indigenous knowledges and philosophies comes to an end implying that organisations should feel free to acknowledge and state explicitly the indigenous knowledges, principles and philosophies that guide their work. In fact organisations and social workers should make it an agenda and policy to explore ways they can make their practice, policy, research, indigenous as a way to demonstrate true liberation of a people in Africa especially indigenous Africans. As the authors Okoye and Nwafor have argued in this book, social work must stop being contradictory, as it is a profession that aims to liberate people, yet it continues to practise hegemony in terms of what it recognises as legitimate models, knowledges, methods and theories for practice, education and research.

Furthering decolonising social work research: going beyond the deductive approach

During the process of editing this book and from the editors' other publication experiences, we noticed a tendency to centre a deductive approach to research and presentation of findings and conclusions. We noticed that some of the authors were more inclined to report findings and conclusions that corresponded to already

existing literature. We noticed the hesitancy to disagree or even report on findings and conclusions that contradict existing theories and conclusions in social work. Hence, although it may sound basic or simplistic, we want to highlight that to further decolonisation in social work and research, there is a need to also centre and prioritise theorising from observations, experiences, stories as told by Africans or people with whom we work in the communities, to come up with theories, models, research methods, etc., that may not necessarily be already in existence in social work literature.

We also would like to re-assure indigenous African authors that it is okay to have findings and conclusions that contradict or disagree with existing literature and scholars. We know that this is a big ask given the colonial education system that socialises us as students and later academics and researchers to follow 'educators' teachings to the letter" (Bar-On, 2003: 35); where Western theories and literature are presented as objective and the truth (Tusasiirwe, 2022). In a keynote address at the 2015 American Indigenous Research Association Conference, Prof. Chilisa narrates that while in the USA, she was surprised that her professors and even students could disagree and challenge each other on certain theories, conclusions and findings (Chilisa, 2015). As an African who grew up in Botswana and was educated in a university where it was regarded as a taboo to challenge your lecturers in class, this was one of her biggest learning moments that she took on to start challenging the existing research and evaluation literature and international researchers and donors when they mis-represented Africa and Africans. To further the decolonising agenda, there is need to challenge, disagree, uncover, document and name those models, research methods, ways of doing and being, philosophies that are central to working with African people, naming them in their own right rather than as local versions of existing methods or theories that are often Western. We need to name them, including naming them in their indigenous languages and theorise or describe in details the principles, philosophies, protocols, taboos, etc., embedded or encompassed in these models and methods to grow and generate indigenous knowledge and literature that is appropriate for working with people in African contexts. African indigenous knowledges, models, lived experiences do not need validation from the West for them to become legitimate forms of knowledge for social work.

To further decolonising social work also requires the disruption of the thinking that the West, the international/global is the best for Africa and its social work. There is a tendency in Africa to privilege and to want to identify with or use terms used globally, sometimes uncritically. The thinking that Osei-Hwedie & Boateng (2018) highlighted that "many academics and professionals have accepted that what is Western is global, fashionable, and functional, if not perfect" is still holding back decolonising of social work in Africa. As evidence by Gebru and Wako (2022: 193) shows there is undisrupted reliance on Western theories, models, methods by African social workers because they want "to get acceptance" from the West. Thus, "we have developed inferiority complex by considering the Western as superior in introducing and advancing the modern

knowledge in the world" (Gebru & Wako, 2022: 193). Yet as Higgins highlights what is mostly defined as Western and therefore global often arises out of "a limited cultural frame of reference achieved by compromises and assumptions that effectively reinforce hegemonic tendencies" (Higgins, 2016: 162). Often in Africa, there is a tendency to want to align with what is global, sometimes coming at the expense of what is local, appropriate, and relevant. This is not to argue that the global is not necessary and people should not endeavour to align with the international or what is Western. The point is that African social workers need to examine that the global is not coming at the expense of the local and indigenous communities, their knowledges and models. The thinking that the "global is fashionable and therefore the terms and concepts are to be used and everyone must align with them", must be avoided. The community being served should be the one at the centre and models, methods, knowledges that align with, are understandable, and are respectful of them and their rights should be what is centred instead of centring international alignment.

All that is global is not necessarily good for the local and therefore careful thought should be given to what gets imported and adopted. Indigenous models should be centred and exhausted first and Western ones sought if there are no indigenous ones. The point that Meo-Sewabu and Walsh-Tapiata (2012) make should guide African social workers in these decisions; what is international is "only relevant to indigenous peoples and communities and villages if they know about [it], if they know how to effectively use [it], and if they see it as having some relevance to their communities" (308).

This chapter has focused on final thoughts on how to further decolonisation of social work in Africa. This project of decolonising social work fields of practice, drawing on African and indigenous philosophy of Ubuntu is only a great start towards compiling knowledges, case studies, thoughts, literature, experiences that can be used in social work education and practice in Africa and beyond. The writing and editing process has demonstrated to us how enthusiastic indigenous Africans are to remember, reclaim, restore, revalue indigenous philosophies, knowledges, experiences, exploring their applicability to the fields of social work. Indeed, indigenous Africans have lived and living experiences as knowledge, and empirical knowledge to write about and theorise social work that is embedded in perspectives, philosophies, values of the African people. We end by calling up on more thinking and re-imaginations to grow diverse knowledges and epistemologies that serve justice to the diverse communities social workers serve in Africa and around the world.

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