

# SOCIAL WORK AND INDIGENISATION: A SOUTH AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE

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## ABSTRACT

For relevance to societal reality and challenges, countries should structure their social work education to deal with specific conditions and cultures. From its global North (i.e. Western Europe and North America) origins, social work has contributed to the expansion of the discipline and profession to the developing world, including South Africa. During the three decades (from the mid-1980s until the present day) during which they have taught social work in South Africa, the authors have witnessed half-hearted efforts to really integrate indigenous knowledge into the curricula. In writings and professional gatherings, scant attention was paid to curricula transformation imperatives enriching practice. To its credit, the Association of South African Social Work Education Institutions (ASASWEI) advocates for decolonisation and indigenisation of social work education. Discussing decolonisation and indigenisation in social work curricula, the paper critiques assumptions of global North ideas, cloaked as if universally applicable. An example is about some principles of social casework – a method of choice in South Africa – which mostly disregards cultural nuances of clientele with a communal collective world view that relies on joint decision-making. A culturally sensitive approach is adopted as theoretical framework for this paper. The paper concludes with recommendations that should help ensure that social work curricula strive towards being indigenous, contextualised and culturally appropriate.

**Keywords:** Africanisation; cultural context; decolonisation; indigenisation; social casework; social work; world view



## INTRODUCTORY BACKGROUND

The social work profession came into being as a means of helping people deal with all manner of human suffering resulting from social problems such as relationship dynamics, impairments, diseases, discrimination, displacement, poverty and unemployment. Its genesis can be traced to the global North (i.e. in both Western Europe and North America) at the start of the twentieth century, and was later introduced to the developing world of the global South (i.e. Africa, Asia and Latin America). Theories of professional helping processes were developed in the same global North (also referred to as the First World countries), and, when social work became globalised, such theories and models of intervention were adopted for practice in the global South, generally, with less regard to local cultures.

The rationale for this paper emanates from the three decades (from the mid-1980s) over which the authors have taught social work in South Africa, and have witnessed little enthusiasm for indigenisation of the curricula. It can be argued, an urgent task currently is to decolonise and indigenise social work, thus conceptualising it in a culturally congruent manner. To its credit, the Association of South African Social Work Education Institutions (ASASWEI) has been advocating for indigenisation and Africanisation of social work education. Furthermore, on the service delivery front, the national Department of Social Development (DSD 2015) held an all-stakeholders National Social Work Indaba (in Durban in March 2015) to deal with calls for responsiveness to local needs, under the theme “Revitalising Social Work Practice in South Africa”. For the future direction of the profession, conference resolutions implored DSD to market it vigorously for its societal visibility, to make sure that all social work methods are utilised, including community development, and to generate a body of knowledge on Afrocentric and culturally sensitive approaches to social work education.

It is argued in this paper that, for, its continued relevance and effectiveness, the social work education community needed to develop theory and training suited to its own socio-cultural environment. Therefore, the authors attempt to suggest ways it can strive towards being culturally appropriate, within the African cultural contexts in which it is practiced. Historically, social casework was the adopted method of professional practice compared to both group work and community work (Mamphiswana and Noyoo 2000; Midgley 2011). Hence, casework is used as an example in the paper.

For what it means, Payne (2011) proposed that social work would be better understood if it is holistically examined from its “three views”, namely therapeutic, social order and transformational views. The therapeutic view sees social work as involving helping everyone to attain “self-fulfilment”, and, by doing so, “society will be [in] a better place by providing help or services” (Payne 2011, 13). The social order view holds the understanding that by assisting with solving “people’s problems in society”, they will “fit in better with general social expectations”; thus, “promoting social change to stop the problems arising will produce all round improvements” (Payne 2011, 13). The transformational point of departure is that ensuring that people reach their potential

begins with identifying and working out “how social relations cause people’s problems, and make social changes so that the problems do not arise” (Payne 2011, 13). Each of these views emphasise some features related to what is needed to assist people to attain optimal levels of well-being.

To ensure that it continues to be responsive to global challenges, social work was recently defined by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) (2014) as follows:

Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing.

Payne’s (2011) explanation provides for a broader view of its application, and the joint definition by the IFSW and IASSW (2014) demonstrates continuing relevance and response of social work to global socio-economic challenges. Both efforts tried their best to escape the accusations and traps of Western hegemony about what social work should be seen as (Askeland and Payne 2006; Sinclair 2004). Both these provided apt accounts of what social work is about and give transcendental explanations of the discipline and profession, and, consequently, cannot be accused of being biased.

## THE BEGINNINGS OF SOCIAL WORK

Historically, social work developed in response to social problems which were produced within the context of the Industrial Revolution in Western Europe, during the 1880s (Midgely 1981; Woodroffe 1971). A few years later, during the 1915 American Charities Conference, Abraham Flexner raised both a doubt- and anxiety-inducing question to proponents and practitioners of the new discipline, when he gave a presentation themed “Is social work a profession?” To answer his own rhetorical question, Flexner specified characteristics supporting social work to be (then) moving in a positive direction towards professionalism, as it was “intellectual in character and required analysis and judgement” (Cree 2011, 3), but he was still then concerned about its lack of defined scope for its practitioners. He concluded his presentation by stating that social work was “not yet” then a profession and urged conference attendees “to go out and build a profession” (Cree 2011, 3).

In Britain, the founders of social work education included the Charity Organization Society (COS) and the Settlement Movement, while in the USA the first formal training for social workers began at the New Seminar School in 1900, which was absorbed into Columbia University (in New York City), as the first School of Social Work. These programmes contributed towards academic reflection and research, which resulted in formulation of theoretical ideas and principles, as well as specialised training for charity

workers (Midgley 1981; Muller 1989; Potgieter 1998; Woodroffe 1971). However, the first major statement of professional social work practice theory was Mary Richmond's Social Diagnosis of 1917, in which she developed a framework for assessment. Other efforts included adaptation from the works of Gordon Hamilton (diagnostic approach), Sigmund Freud (psychoanalysis) and Otto Rank (functional approach). At that time, social casework was seen as important because emphasis was on an individual's behaviour, and how that contributed to the problems that people experienced (Johnson 1998; Thabede 2005). In the 1940s, the end of the Second World War provided opportunities for social caseworkers to use formally acquired problem-solving skills. For example, caseworkers, led by Mary Richmond, helped American servicemen returning from the war theatre. Another example included the involvement of social workers in outreach work through the United Nations' international welfare institutions, such as the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (Thabede 2005).

Various authors have criticised social work's global North bias (Askeland and Payne 2006; Kreitzer 2012; Mamphiswana and Noyoo 2000; Midgley 1981, Osei-Hwedie 1995; Sinclair 2004; Tamburro 2013; Thabede 2005 and 2008). For example, Sinclair (2004) and Askeland and Payne (2006) argued against the imposition of Western education hegemony dressed up as "universalism". Sinclair (2004, 51) cautioned that, "The most harmful assumptions are that western thought ought to be the standard educational platform, is automatically relevant and valid, and is universally applicable." To add to the caution, Askeland and Payne (2006, 734) submitted that, "The concept of universal knowledge conflicts with the idea that different cultures have different ways of understanding the world." Using an apt ecosystem analogy, these authors concluded that "cultural diversity is needed just as much as biodiversity". Similarly, "A larger pool of cultures and knowledges may make it possible to deal with a wider range of human situations" (Askeland and Payne 2006, 735). Another example is by Tamburro (2013) about challenges for North American social work education. She opined that, "Social work students need to be provided the knowledge, skills and values that will support and enhance their ability to work in partnership with Indigenous peoples. Viewing curriculum from a post-colonial lens can aid in this endeavour" (Tamburro 2013, 1).

## SOCIAL WORK IN AFRICA AND THE DEVELOPING WORLD

Education programmes for social work began in Africa during the 1940s, in countries such as South Africa and Ghana, and were inevitably focused on methodologies mostly unsuited for problems of developing countries (Kreitzer 2012; Mamphiswana and Noyoo 2000; McKendrick 1990; Midgley 2011; Muller 1989). Kreitzer (2012), for example, argued that educational values of social work were inappropriately dominated by ideologies of capitalism, Social Darwinism, the Protestant work ethic

and individualism. Adding further to that criticism, Midgley (2011) expressed concerns about the use of “direct practice” (i.e. casework) in the global South, observing that the therapeutic approach was unsuited to the region experiencing problems of mass poverty, hunger, unemployment and ill health.

Already three decades ago, Osei-Hwedie (1995) recommended that part of the answer for unsuitable programme orientation could be found in decolonising social work curricula through indigenisation, and therefore it would then be based on the needs of the people, their culture and economic landscape. More work has to be undertaken – not to reinvent the wheel – but to research and ensure that local knowledge, wisdom and experiences that can enrich the discipline are highlighted and infused into formal teaching curricula.

## SOCIAL WELFARE AND SOCIAL WORK IN SOUTH AFRICA

South Africa is a multi-cultural society, which is in transition from the legacy of apartheid towards democracy and a human rights culture. The discussions on decolonisation and indigenisation, therefore, should not just be theoretical, but need to focus on how to transform and meet pressing social challenges. As Biko (1978) observed, oppressive systems such as colonialism and apartheid were deliberate, not accidental acts. Spolander et al. (2011, 818) reminded us, “The legacies of colonisation and apartheid have resulted in a history of inequality and violations of human rights in South Africa.” Before the 1994 democratic dispensation, social welfare services were mostly driven by the then government’s narrow concern for problems of white citizens.

Going back in time, as a result of the 1930s economic depression, the Dutch Reformed Church prompted the institution of the Carnegie Commission of New York to find a new approach to “white poverty” (neglecting other groups like the black Africans, Coloureds and Indians). The 1929 Carnegie Commission Report numbered poor whites at about 300 000 persons. Among other recommendations, the report highlighted the following issues (McKendrick 1990; Nicholas, Rautenbach, and Maistry 2010; Thabede 2005):

- major contributory factors of white poverty included changing economic and social structures, rather than personal inadequacies of the poor themselves;
- there was a need for a state bureau for welfare services and social pensions; and
- there was a need for the preparation of skilled, university-trained social workers.

These Carnegie Commission recommendations led to the establishment of a state Department of Social Welfare in 1937, and the development of social work training programmes at the then white South African universities (McKendrick 1990; Nicholas, Rautenbach, and Maistry 2010; Thabede 2005). A leading apartheid ideologue,

Hendrik Verwoerd, played a founding role in social welfare and social work by initiating the first Department of Sociology and Social Work in South Africa, at the University of Stellenbosch. He was largely influenced by the scientific rationale advocated by an American sociologist (Coulter 1930), on how to deal with poverty. Coulter (1930) had recommended that poverty could best be alleviated through focusing on the poor individually, using a sociological case-by-case scientific assessment. On that basis, Verwoerd concluded that social workers trained in sociology would be best suited to help alleviate poverty. He adjudged that assessments should be based on social science investigations of contributory factors of poverty, recommending the employment of formally trained social workers (Miller 1989; Thabede 2005).

Since the democratic dispensation, the DSD has been offering social services to all on a non-racial basis (Potgieter 1998; Van Eeden, Ryke, and De Necker 2000). The Integrated Service Delivery Model Towards Improved Social Services (DSD 2006) guides professional service delivery. For professional social work services, casework has been the method of choice (Drower 2002; Mamphiswana and Noyoo 2000). Decrying that choice, Mamphiswana and Noyoo (2000, 25) stated that, “Both group work and community work are least preferred”. That was so, as educational programmes for social work in the country were largely focused on “producing case workers or managers” and being “concerned with the preparation of highly skilled therapists to deal with first world types of social problems” (Mamphiswana and Noyoo 2000, 24).

Social workers in South Africa are now trained through accredited four-year Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) university degree programmes which must comply with the National Qualification Framework (NQF), as legislated in the South African Qualifications Authority Act (South Africa 1995; Spolander et al. 2011, 822). Also, as the social work profession in South Africa is partly governed by the Social Service Professions Act (South Africa 1978) and the professional board that governs social work, the South African Council for Social Service Professions (SACSSP). These specifications provide quality assurance measures to guarantee appropriate coverage of subject matter in curricula and to ensure quality for the discipline. By 2017, the SACSSP had 27 073 registered social workers in their records (SACSSP 2017).

South Africa is still dealing with the legacy of apartheid, which includes poor material conditions, testy race-relations and the need for psychological liberation for affected Black communities (NDoH et al. 2017; Stats SA 2016; Stats SA 2017). For example, in relation to poverty, the Community Survey (Stats SA 2016) report showed that about one-fifth of households reported to have run out of money for food in the previous 12 months before the study. Furthermore, the Stats SA Report on Poverty in South Africa (Stats SA 2017, 14) disclosed that by 2015, a total of 55.5 per cent of the population were poor. The unemployment rate was put at 26.7 per cent for individuals aged 15 to 64 years. For social security measures, the old age grant (OAG) and the child support grant (CSG) are two of the seven cash transfer state grants assisting the needy. Ninety-two per cent of the poor elderly rely on an OAG as sole source of income.

A quarter of all South African households have children receiving a CSG (Stats SA 2017). Violence and abuse are also big social problems. A Stats SA report indicated that 7.5 per cent of households have experienced crime in the 12 months before the study was conducted (Stats SA 2016). The report further stated that about “one in ten households headed by whites experienced crime, followed by Indian/Asians (8.4 per cent) while about 7.1 per cent of those headed by black Africans were victimised” (Stats SA 2016, 91). About domestic violence, the South Africa Demographic and Health Survey 2016 (2017) reported that 10 per cent of women aged 18 to 24 years have experienced physical violence from a partner in the previous 12 months. Thus, educational programmes for social work should help prepare professional practitioners to serve communities and clients from an environment that is characterised by the situations presented here.

## DECOLONISATION, INDIGENISATION AND CULTURAL SENSITIVITY

Already four decades ago, highlighting the importance of indigenisation and cultural sensitivity, Resnick and Stickney (1974, v–vi) emphasised that, as social work “is rooted in the social and cultural context of the country in which it is practiced, there are differences in content and emphasis, which need to be recognised in any determination of equivalence”. For this paper to be contextualised, in addition to the theoretical framework based on cultural sensitivity, both decolonisation and indigenisation require explanation. Decolonisation and indigenisation are two sides of the same coin of social transformation and change, which serves to ensure that elements of some phenomena, practice and processes contain features that are more local and help to make it culturally relevant and applicable to a situation. Both authors of this paper believe that the logical culmination of the colonialism-decolonisation journey is the indigenisation and adoption of a culture-sensitive approach to any endeavour that required the removal of colonial accoutrement. To guide the paper, therefore, a culturally sensitive approach was adopted as a framework. Social workers must be culturally sensitive and competent, especially in such a multi-cultural environment such as South Africa, where they are likely to work within diverse settings (Diller 2007; Mogorosi 2012).

### Decolonisation and Indigenisation

Beyond land and political dispossessions, colonisation involved adverse influence and re-engineering of local cultures, with a special emphasis on education. Askeland and Payne (2006, 733) noted that colonisers tended to “use education and cultural experiences to shift the colonised people’s culture and values towards that of the colonial power. In the post-colonial period, education and cultural development continue the same process.” Concurring with these observations, Crampton (2015) noted that social work has been

part of that project. To deal with that legacy, and therefore to decolonise it, he believed that:

Decolonising social work entails many dimensions, which includes identifying destructive beliefs and practices, reclaiming Indigenous beliefs and practices, and learning from successful decolonisation to improve social work practice with Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations. (Crampton 2015, 9)

To respond, post-colonial societies needed to affirm their own cultural identities, while valuing inputs from others. The authors of this paper concur with Prah's (2017) observations and key declaratory propositions in his argument to support the decolonisation of language education in Africa. These should help guide the discourse on the decolonisation and indigenisation of social work education and curriculum in South Africa. Prah (2017) pointed out the following:

- “No educational system was conceived of or operated in a sociological vacuum with value-neutrality and total politico-ideological impartiality.” (Prah 2017, 24)
- “No educational policy or system is constructed outside the framework of culture.” (Prah 2017, 34)
- “An Africa-centered approach implies that it is through the familiar African experience that teaching and curriculum development should be constructed.” (Prah 2017, 35)
- “African students must know the world through African eyes and experience. We must not be afraid to say this.” (Prah 2017, 39)

Calling for decolonisation within North American social work, Tamburro (2013) observed that, notwithstanding its European roots, what strengthened curricula debates currently is that social work is accommodative to varying viewpoints. To decolonise it, she believed the best way involved the adoption of post-colonial theory that advocated for “inclusion of the voices, stories, and cosmovisions of Indigenous peoples” (Tamburro 2013, 5). She explained “cosmovisions” as a view about the world, the cosmos and spirituality. Furthermore, for its effectiveness in communities that experienced colonialism, she highlighted factors she believed were relevant in efforts to decolonise social work education. According to Tamburro (2013), social work educators and practitioners needed to have a contextual understanding of the following:

- The history of colonialism, and consequent inter-generational social problems.
- The reasons for endemic dysfunctional behavioural problems within indigenous post-colonial communities and their over-representation as social service recipients. As she put it, these problems included “the loss of family, communities, and cultures”, which has “left a legacy of death, pain, and devastation that affects the Indigenous peoples today in the form of multi-generational trauma” (Tamburro 2013, 2).



- The perception that social service providers occupied a “privileged status in society” and represented the interests of a state.
- The need for a post-colonial social work education curriculum to incorporate indigenous knowledge, skills and values (“sharing one’s daily life”) and social justice. She concluded the point by saying that, “The inclusion of personal stories into the curriculum has been identified as the most effective way for educators to sensitise students to the issues of social justice and help create cultural change” (Tamburro 2013, 5).

Tamburro (2013) highlighted the profession’s privileged status and its influence in historically representing the interests of a state is in agreement with Sinclair’s (2004, 50) sentiments when he observed that social work has “not been free from colonial influence”. In the words of Freire (1990, 5), “The social worker, as much as the educator, is not a neutral agent, either in practice or in action.” Indeed, early social work practices were complicit in government colonial actions. Askeland and Payne (2006), Prah (2017) and Tamburro (2013) provided good pointers of what to focus on when re-conceptualising and decolonising systems and curricula. All emphasised the importance of gaining contextual understanding and awareness of the centrality of local histories, culture and experiences, as well as the importance of affirming own identities.

According to Midgley (1983), the indigenisation of social work involves ensuring that education and professional roles are appropriate to the demands of different countries. Concurring with Midgley (1983) and relating to the South African context, Mamphiswana and Noyoo (2000) are of the view that, for its relevance, there must be a deliberate attempt to indigenise social work on the predominant ethos of South African society. Prah (2017), as referred to earlier on about decolonisation, is also supportive of this position. Mamphiswana and Noyoo (2000, 30) opined further that:

South African social workers should therefore develop their own cumulative knowledge and in the process redefine their practice skills. In this way, the idea that problems must be solved in ways familiar to both the social work professionals and community members becomes a reality, and gives a practical meaning to indigenisation.

For any efforts to decolonise and indigenise one would not go far without explaining the centrality of the world view, which is aptly captured by Torrey (1986, 23), citing the work by Goldschmidt, when he stated that:

Anthropology has taught us that the world is differently defined in different places. It is not only that people have different customs, it is not only that people believe in different gods and expect different post-mortem fates. It is, rather, that the worlds of different people have different shapes.

As an example of variations in the world view, Sinclair (2004) gave an illustration of what is key within indigenous epistemology among Canadian Aboriginal communities (i.e. two features, namely “all my relations” and “the sacred”). The esteeming of “all one’s relations” is about one’s relationship with others, including even fauna and

flora, and is also “an encouragement for us to accept the responsibilities we have within this universal family by living our lives in a harmonious and moral manner” (Sinclair 2004, 54). “The sacred” has to do with reverent beliefs in the sacredness of life demonstrated in variety of behaviours that are integrated into daily life.

For curricula transformation, Prah (2017, 39) highlighted the need for local-centeredness; that is, “African students must know the world through African eyes and experience.” Decolonisation and indigenisation initiatives in social work should highlight localised approaches to the discipline and professional practice for it to be culturally appropriate and relevant. Both decolonisation and indigenisation have to do with epistemology; it is an effort to acknowledge the diverse knowledge bases and world views that provide the foundation for social work knowledge and practice worldwide (Crampton 2015; Graham 2011; Graham, and Al-Krenawi 2003; Thabede 2005 and 2008).

To ensure that social work is decolonised and indigenised, and is sensitive to local cultures and practices, the dominant world view is key to any efforts to such transformation endeavours. As this paper is about transformation of social work in an African environment, it begs the question, “What are the key ingredients of generic African cultural practices?” Graham (2011, 144), relying on the work of Asante (1980), listed some of the following as principles and values that underpin an African-centred world view:

- the interconnectedness of all things: that is, all elements of the universe – people, animals and inanimate objects – are viewed as interconnected;
- the spiritual nature of human beings: which forms the cornerstone and is the essence of a human being;
- the nature of collective and individual identities: that is, the individual cannot be understood separate from others. This is expressed throughout Africa from various derivatives of the expression, “I am because we are, and because we are, therefore, I am”;
- oneness of mind, body and spirit: asserts that there is no division seen between mind, body and spirit. These elements are seen as possessing equal value and are viewed as strongly interrelated;
- the value of interpersonal relationships: the collective nature of human beings entails collective responsibility for what happens to individuals, as well as emphasising that collective identity, commonalities and similarities supersede individual differences.

## TOWARDS CULTURAL SENSITIVITY IN SOCIAL WORK

To reiterate, authors here believe that the logical end of the colonialism-decolonisation journey is indigenisation and adoption of culture-sensitive approaches. Yilmaz et al.

(2017) said that cultural sensitivity serves as a foundation for the development of cultural competence. They believe that intercultural sensitivity is composed of factors such as open-mindedness and non-judgmental attitudes, which enable individuals to display adequate sensitivity in the acceptance of cultural differences and respect for these differences. According to the Newfoundland and Labrador Association of Social Workers (NLASW 2016), cultural competence is about the knowledge and skills required of social workers in working within the cultural context of clients. It is an ongoing process of learning, reflection and professional growth. It requires a commitment to increasing one's knowledge and appreciation of diversity, as well as the need to embrace culture as being central to social work practice, and having an awareness of one's own culture, values and beliefs and how these shape one's own world view. The American National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Standards for Cultural Competence (NASW 2006, 11), described cultural competence as a:

(P)rocess by which individuals and systems respond respectfully and effectively to people of all cultures, languages, classes, races, ethnic backgrounds, religions, and other diversity forms in a manner that recognises, affirms, and values the worth of individuals, families, and communities and protects and preserves the dignity of each.

The NASW (2006) standards further state that social workers who provide services within culturally diverse communities should attempt to:

- understand culture and its functions in human behaviour and society;
- have a knowledge base of their clients' culture and demonstrate that through sensitive service delivery, and;
- obtain education and seek to understand the nature of social diversity and oppression with respect to race, ethnicity, national origin, colour, gender, sexual orientation, age, marital status, beliefs, and also mental and physical disability.

## UNIVERSAL APPLICABILITY OF PRINCIPLES OF SOCIAL CASEWORK

Social casework has been criticised for focusing too heavily on individuals rather than looking at the wider social environment (Gray 1998; Kreitzer 2012; Midgley 2011; Thabede 2005). Casework is a primary method of social work practice used to help individuals, families and communities to solve intrapsychic, interpersonal, socio-economic and environmental problems through direct relationships (Barker 1999). According to Perlman (1957), the nucleus of social casework event has been, and still is, embodied in a person with a problem (coming) to a place where a professional representative helps him or her through a given process. In casework theory and practice, the assumption is that the current theories of personality, problem, place and process are universally applicable. Social casework, especially in the global North, has tended to

embrace the Freudian psychoanalytic theory, which provides an explanation for many facets of human behaviour (Kirst-Ashman 2015; McKendrick 1990). Raising a concern about the relevance of unsuitable curricula for casework in the African context, Thabede (2005, 47) argued that,

The researcher's view is that caseworkers who render casework services to African clients are somehow forced to apply practice theories and models that are foreign to the African clients' life experiences or have to resort to the social work practice mode that Johnson (1998, 21) refers to as pre-theoretical. In this mode, social workers just do what they think they have to do, without being guided by theory.

The reality is that there will always be problems and situations that need one-on-one forms of intervention, such as casework. What presents a huge challenge for professional practice in the developing world is that casework continues to rely on foreign forms of intervention that disregard the cultural nuances of clientele whose perspective begins largely from a communal collective world view that believes in the credo "I am because you are", joint decision-making and sharing. For the most part, this is largely how African communities tend to see themselves. For both social work and social case work to be effective in any society, the cultural dynamics of the society must be respected.

Principles of the social casework relationship as defined by Biestek (1967) have come to be accepted and adopted by the social work profession as definitive statements to direct and guide professional relationships. There may also be a mistaken assumption that these principles would be universally applicable: transcending nationality, race, ethnicity, culture and ideology (Askeland and Payne 2006; Burgest 1983; Midgley 2011). Thabede (2005) raised an argument against the mistaken application of "colour-blind" approaches in multi-cultural societies, such as in South Africa. This is not unlike a majority of communities throughout the world, beyond a few monoculture countries and societies that are fading away. That is unacceptable for reasons such as the following (Thabede 2005):

- The principle of individualisation in the worker-client relationship: as a principle, individualisation in a helping professional relationship sounds laudable and straightforward. However, it presents a major challenge to the communal understanding of being in societies, such as within the African cultural context. One must be careful about taking liberties of sweeping generalisation related to African generic practices, as, with such communities, significant factors – such as unique family, ethnic, cultural beliefs and practices of particular human being – are expected to be recognised. Practitioners in such communities would not expect to yield successful intervention – regardless of how personal a matter may be – should these professionals not respect important consultative roles played by significant others (for example parents, close elders and extended family members) in decision-making processes. As indicated elsewhere in the paper, the world view of "I am

- because you (we) are”, implores African people to approach major decision-making from an inclusive consultative perspective (see also Graham 2011 and Mbiti 1990).
- The principle of client self-determination: the application of “colour-blind” and the generic non-cultural checking approach in social casework presents challenges to the principle of client self-determination. Within the limits of the law and social consensus of actions and conduct, professionals should recognise and accept the right of people to make decisions for themselves and accept the consequences thereof. The caseworker must also recognise the basic right of human beings to fail, if they so choose. In many cases, it may be difficult for the worker to stimulate self-determination, because the values of social work may be in opposition to the very foundation of the culture wherein they practice. Unfortunately, an unwritten and prevailing assumption in the West is that people or clients in the developing world tend to be “incapable” of making effective decisions regarding their lives. As Burgest (1983) reminds us, the role of the social caseworker dealing with global South clients may be to recognise and accept the fact that self-determination is a God-given right and must be viewed against the cultural context.
  - The principle of having a non-judgemental attitude: the application of the “colour-blind” approach in social casework presents challenges to the principle of non-judgemental attitude. It is impossible for any caseworker to be completely free from the contamination of the negative biases that are inherent in the depiction of the “other” irrespective of social stature, gender, sexual orientation, disabilities, and the like. This may lead to problems with regard to the worker managing to meet the mandate of acceptance, which is to “see the client as s/he really is”, and may be crucial when all the qualities of acceptance and other attributes are contaminated by the worker’s negative view of the Third World – noting that the majority of founding academic material emanated from the global North, which subtly presented a particular depiction about the developing world.

## CULTURAL SENSITIVITY IN SOCIAL CASEWORK

As indicated in the section on theoretical framework, cultural sensitivity in social work is closely intertwined with indigenisation. It involves processes of professional intervention that are cognisant of the unique as well as common characteristics of clients who possess racial, ethnic, religious, gender, age, sexual orientation and socio-economic differences (Barker 1999). Even though social workers have been trained to respect all forms of diversity, they sometimes fail to integrate the knowledge of cultural differences when dealing with clients. Thabede (2005) argued that, in South Africa, some social workers tend to be racially, ethnically and culturally blind in their approach to social work practice, thus rendering their services ineffective leaving clients’ personal and social problems mostly unattended.

Social work practice entails the use of professional knowledge and skills to provide a social service in ways that are consistent with social work values. From the perspective of the authors here, as teachers of the discipline with more than three decades of experience (from the mid-1980s to the 2010s), social casework has tended to be a method of choice for practice at the majority of agencies; where BSW students in South Africa are eventually placed for work (Shokane, Nemitandani, and Budeli 2016). The authors hasten to add that regulations of the reformed BSW in South Africa (in the form of Exit Level Outcomes (ELOs)) have tried to ensure a balanced approach and prescribed that space be dedicated to all important aspects of the discipline. South African BSW prescripts require that sufficient attention be paid to broad areas such as all social work methods, research, social policy, supervision and management (SAQA 2015).

In terms of educational training and preparation for future practices, prospective social workers go through training that demands all-round knowledge and professional competence, which also includes ethical practices and skills. Blennberger and Fränkel (2006) talk about “ethical traits of character” essential for social workers, which include integrity and critical self-insight, responsibility and moral courage, a sense of justice and balanced judgement, broad-mindedness and sensitivity, as well as a basic attitude of respect and equality in relation to others. To ensure effective and ethical practice, these moral traits are demanded of all social work practitioners.

When derisive questions are raised against “romanticising” the “need for” or “non-viability of” indigenisation, decolonisation or Africanisation, the social work community in the developing world should not feel ashamed or cowed. The need is for progressive and open self-reflection about the state of the discipline. Part of the answer lies in the acknowledgement of long-standing world views, respect for all cultures and adoption of open-mindedness.

## CONCLUSION

This paper traced the beginning of social work to the global North at the start of the twentieth century, evolving from cultural assumptions of that social-political environment. Social work in the developing world – including South Africa – has tended to adopt theories and methods from the same global North, leading, for example, to the dominant use of social casework as opposed to the other methods of the discipline and profession. To avoid continued inclinations towards casework, quality assurance measures such as national accreditation for BSW programmes serve to ensure broad coverage of all professional methodologies and subject matter; but the jury is still out on what practitioners focus on, after completion of their studies.

What is argued for in the paper is that, for its continued relevance, the community for social work education needs to develop further theory and training suited to its own socio-cultural environment. Within reason and practical reality, this paper concludes that such a curriculum and its transformation processes should:

- ensure that future social work students and future practitioners be exposed more to a contextual understanding of local histories (African, South African);
- ensure exposure to a deeper understanding of cultural dynamics within disciplines such as cultural studies, indigenous knowledge systems, and sociology;
- encourage the use of local languages for academic instruction (beyond using only Afrikaans and English), because professional service encounters with service recipients and communities are conducted in local languages;
- encourage more research on the local applicability of some of the classical edifices of the discipline (for example, some of its principles);
- encourage more research on reasons for general failure for use of group work and community work as primary methods; and
- encourage publication for class use, local Master's and doctoral study findings as most would have focused on local South African experiences within the very wide field of social work.

What confronts the developing world is the need to deal with contradictions resulting from a lack of fit between what is needed and what is provided by social work practitioners. Authors argue that common sense culmination of colonialism-decolonisation discourse about social work curricula is indigenisation and adoption of culture-sensitive approach. Consequently, this paper argues for South Africa and the rest of the developing world to evolve a brand of social work theory and training suited to their own unique socio-cultural environment, informed by the world view of local realities.

## DEDICATION

† This is for my brother, colleague and conscientious social work teacher, Prof. Dumisani Thabede (1953–2014). Like Dr Maya Angelou (2013) said as a tribute to President Mandela: “We will not forget you, we will not dishonor you, we will remember and be glad that you lived among us, that you taught us, and that you loved us all.”

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