

Is Indigenisation a Social Justice Risk? Exploring Indigenisation of Social Work in Africa through the Lens of Universalism Versus Relativism of Social Work Ethics and Values

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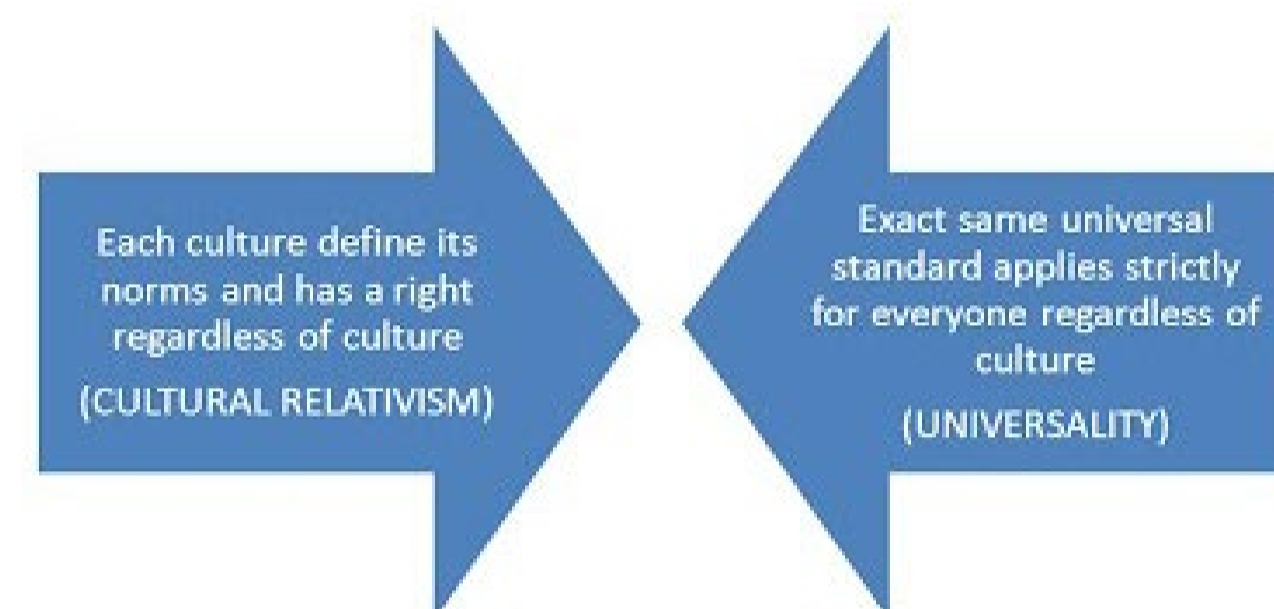
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Abstract

With the indigenisation of social work gathering momentum, the lens of universalism and relativism can highlight some critical social justice concerns. Sociocultural beliefs around human rights and gender equality, reproductive health, and traditional fostering, among others, pose unprecedented dilemmas for social workers in Africa and indigenous societies globally. Further, the blind pursuit of indigenisation can reinforce discriminatory and oppressive beliefs and practices. To rectify this, developing ethical decision-making screens and additional research promoting indigenous cultural competency within the social justice goal of social work is needed.



Introduction

- There is a growing call for the indigenisation of social work practice globally, born out of the requirement to better serve the needs of indigenous people (Anucha, 2008; Ugiagbe, 2015) and the realisation of the failures of Western social work methods to do so (Ugiagbe, 2015).
- The value of the indigenisation of social work in Africa cannot be overemphasised; however, as Zhang and Huang (2008) caution, social workers risk reinforcing structures supporting discrimination, inequality, oppression, and other injustices when they uncritically follow indigenous sociocultural beliefs. Universalism versus cultural relativism offers a platform to consider the various ethical dilemmas in the indigenisation of social work in Africa.
- Social workers in Africa and some indigenous communities may be torn between adhering to social work ethics and values in their totality (universalism) and selectively applying them within existing indigenous cultural beliefs, norms and laws (relativism).

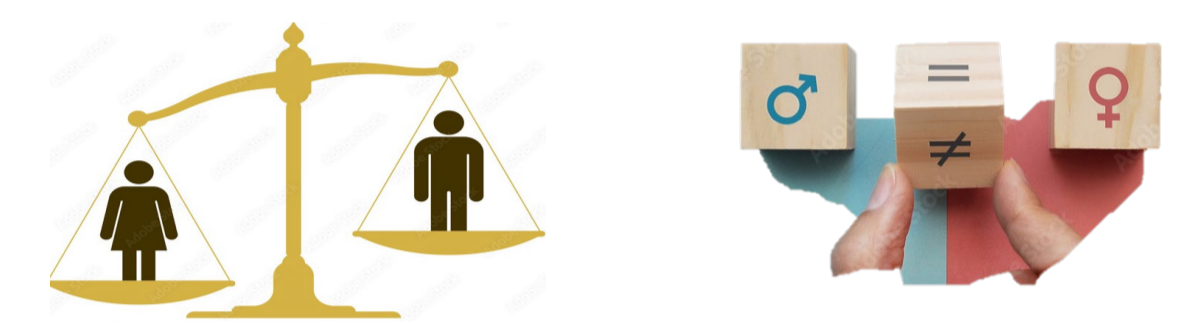
Key Social Justice Issues

Anti-oppressive and anti-discriminatory practice



Social workers have the ethical mandate of preventing and eliminating discrimination and oppression against people based on ethnicity, religion, race, nationality, or mental and physical disabilities (Ugiagbe, 2015). This can be a source of conflict for African and social workers worldwide within cultures promoting discrimination as many African countries have draconian laws against sexual minorities, with the argument that sexual minorities are a Western import and against African cultures (George and Ekoh, 2020; Jacques, 2013).

Gender equality



Social workers have an ethical responsibility to advocate for human rights. Indeed, principles of human rights (United Nations, 1994) guide the theories, values, ethics and practice of social work. However, many African cultural beliefs contradict human rights, and social workers advancing human rights may face harm. Also, indigenising social work in Africa may reinforce some of these oppressive cultural beliefs, such as gender roles that subjugate women.

Women reproductive rights



Many African countries limit abortion for religious, moral, cultural and political reasons (Guttmacher Institute, 2016), placing women's lives at risk. In these societies, social workers face conflicts between advocating for women's rights to health and self-determination and respecting the norm and laws of their country.

Female genital mutilation

While the universalist social workers' approach to this issue is total condemnation citing Article 3 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1994), which posits that people should not be exposed to inhumane, cruel treatment or torture. A relativist social worker may argue that the imposition of this article to discard centuries of indigenous culture is arrogant (Oyowe, 2014). They may also cite indigenous women's belief that this practice is essential for the success of their marriage and as a valued social status symbol, which aesthetically looks better and attracts suitors (Mitchum, 2013).



Traditional fostering

In Africa, the practice of fostering is informal, with relatives, extended family and friends overseeing the care of children (Isidienu, 2015). However, this practice has resulted in the widespread abuse of children (Nnam-Okechukwu et al., 2020; Olaore et al., 2016), with proponents of physical and emotional abuse arguing that it is a culturally accepted way of training children.

Self-determination versus Ubuntu

The ethic of self-determination fundamentally prevents social workers from dictating life choices for service users and facilitates respect for service users' worth and dignity, and decision-making ability. In Africa, the principle of Ubuntu- you are because I am- means that we are all interconnected. African scholars have argued that the emulation of a Western individualistic lifestyle is a threat to African societies and a source of many of the problems Africans face

Conclusions and Recommendations

- To address the issue of cultural relativism and universalism, Dolgoff et al. (2005) proposed the use of an ethical screen consisting of a hierarchy of considerations in making ethical decisions: protection of life, equality and inequality, autonomy and freedom, least harm, quality of life, privacy and confidentiality, and truthfulness and full disclosure.
- Healy (2007) and Lenzerini (2016) argue for a different tactic-- a dialogical approach to addressing the extreme polarisation of these theories. This approach entails respecting indigenous cultures and practices which do not constitute harm and implementing human rights to protect individuals from harm. This approach also calls for humility in having conversations about culture with the recognition that culture is dynamic; hence culture can be changed or molded to reflect contemporary human rights issues and African beliefs (Gray, 2005).
- The complexity of multicultural contexts calls for more research on ethics and values in social work, focusing on how different indigenous cultures try to reshape their practice of social work to mirror their peculiar societies, devoid of imperialist and colonial exact hand down, with sound ethical foundation.
- Bodies of social work in African countries should also start developing codes of ethics that are culture-sensitive and specialized ethical screens for decision-making and cultural competency.
- The dynamism of culture as a concept that changes over time should be reflected so that African and indigenous social workers do not rigidly hold onto cultural beliefs that encourage oppression and discrimination, as this will defeat the social justice mission of social work.

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