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Integrating African epistemologies in social work: The role of proverbs

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ABSTRACT

The colonisation of Africa saw an onslaught of African ways of knowing and celebration of western epistemologies. During colonial and postcolonial eras, African indigenous knowledge systems have been decimated, trivialized, and received little to no attention in the education and professionalization of most disciplines. Therefore, what constitutes 'basic knowledge' in most disciplines has generally ignored traditional African knowledge systems despite their utility in specific contexts. Despite the call to decolonize social work, its education continues to be based on teaching content developed outside of Africa. The resources used in social work education are often informed by western epistemologies, though the decolonization process requires the development of approaches, perspectives, models, and theories that speak to African contexts. In this current paper, we argue that African proverbs that are central to African epistemologies can form a prominent jigsaw part in the knowledge base for decoloniality in social work. Very few scholars have studied the applicability of proverbs in the social work profession. These proverbs are found in almost all African languages and cultures, which makes it easy for social workers to apply them in their localities. During training, social workers should be taught to identify proverbs in local cultures and apply them in their professional practice. Such proverbs may guide the conduct and professional behaviour of social workers, their interaction with clients, as well as influencing techniques and approaches used in problem solving. There are innumerable proverbs found in the breath and width of Africa, and only a few will be selected to demonstrate their pertinence in social work practice. The proverbs help to promote contextualism in the practice of social work. They help promote good communication between social workers and clients, promote good moral and professional conduct, and respect for clients.

KEY TERMS: African proverbs, indigenous social work, social work knowledge, Afrocentric social work, Afrocentric theory, African epistemologies

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INTRODUCTION

The decolonization of the social work profession remains at the top of the agenda in most African countries. However, despite this call, the processes and steps toward this worthy cause remain unclear. What exactly should be done to unhook the profession from its western girds? In this paper, we submit that African proverbs form a paramount cog in the knowledge base of decolonized social work in Africa. The proverbs have the potential to serve as ethical guidelines for social workers. The purpose of this article written from the vantage point of proud black Africanity is to simply argue for the relevance of African proverbs in Afrocentric social work.

BACKGROUND

Afrocentric social work has been defined as a method of social work practice based on traditional African philosophical assumptions that are used to explain and solve human and social problems (Schiele, 1997). Afrocentric social work is not fully developed and requires a theoretical foundation to operate from. However, it is based on the belief that African epistemologies should be central in any approach to solving the social problems of black Africans (Mathebane & Sekudu, 2018). Our argument is therefore that African proverbs can offer such a base. Proverbs have been, are, and will always remain an important feature of African cultures; hence this call to include them in social work education curricula and consider them in practice. Proverbs may be one of the pillars in decolonizing social work and represent a fundamental part of stimulating self-knowledge, improving traditional social learning, significant and analytical home training, and educating about self, family, clans, history, genealogy, society, and nature (Dei, 2013). These proverbs may enhance the practice with African clients and African people in the African diaspora. Bent-Goodley, Fairfax and Carlton-LaNey (2017) note that for the profession to remain relevant in the diaspora, and in the mainland Africa, African centred theory should be placed alongside longstanding theory that are taught in social work education. We are cognisant of the ideological differences between western and African frameworks of learning, and teaching that might pose a challenge in putting these theories parallel. Proverbs may be one of the things Africa may offer towards the theoretical basis of social work learning and teaching. Therefore, African proverbs may be considered in social work practice in Africa and with clients of African ancestry living in the African diaspora. The paper proceeds by discussing African proverbs, the Afrocentric theory which we believe is critical in decolonization of the profession in Africa before illustrating how selected African proverbs may be profound in social work practice.

AFRICAN PROVERBS

Proverbs form part of a rich cultural heritage that has helped Africans to live harmoniously within their physical, social, and spiritual environments. Proverbs are at the centre of communication in Africa. They are used when giving warnings about situations or events, coaching, supporting, training, or mentoring. According to Ehondor (2017), proverbs are sayings or stories intended to assist learning, either formal learning or in informal, family, or folk learning. They are condensed but memorable sayings that embody some important facts of experience that are taken as true by many (Ehondor, 2017). Medier (2004) in Ehondor (2017) defined a proverb as a short generally known sentence of the folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals, and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed and memorable form and which is handed down from generation to generation. Oluwatoyin and Olayiwola (nd:3) opine that “In proverbs there is a rich deposit of wisdom from many generations... It is in proverbs that we find the remains of the oldest forms of African religious, oral tradition, and philosophical wisdom”. For Ehondor (2017), proverbs are gems of wisdom, a mixture of wisdom and philosophy. African proverbs have been applauded as a tool for teaching moral and social values and how to conduct oneself successfully (Oluwatoyin & Olayiwola, nd). Proverbs serve many purposes, they are used to teach new things, warn against evil, encourage people to do something, settle quarrels, to praise people and teach people how to obey societal norms. Mugovhani (2014) notes that proverbs have various functions which include promoting hospitality, solidarity, collective action, interdependence, reciprocity, admonishing wrongdoers, censure inappropriate behaviour, shame someone into compliance, radicle, mock, warning, encouraging and motivating people.

Finnegan (1970) in Ehondor (2017) argues that proverbs are highly culture- and context-dependent and cannot be understood outside the culture context they are spoken. Therefore, the use of proverbs relies on cultural allusions; when the cultural element is not understood, the essential meaning of the proverb can be missed or lost (Ehondor, 2017). Using proverbs in the best way will make one feel more confident than speaking the normal language. Although African proverbs emanate from African culture, Oluwatoyin and Olayiwola (nd) even argued that they can provide key teachings in other racial communities.

The place of proverbs in Afrocentric theory

We challenge the positivistic paradigm, which always requires scientific evidence to prove reality. Therefore, we opt for Afrocentricity to undergird our arguments. Afrocentricity has gained popularity as a theoretical framework that informs decolonization in social work (Mabvurira, 2016). Afrocentric theory resists western forms of marginalization of African people (Mgbeadichie, 2015). Afrocentric theory is an ideology that critiques external forms of discrimination in Africa. "... there have been robust and accurate attempts by Afrocentrists to critically position the Afrocentric ideology as a theory that challenges debilitating African cultural traditions that marginalize certain communities and persons within African communities" (Mgbeadichie, 2015:1). Afrocentricity challenges western universalism and suppression of alternative ways of knowing. Afrocentricity existed long before the term was named and identified by scholars (Bent-Goodley, Fairfax, and Carlton-LaNey, 2017). It seeks to create substitute western-derived knowledge about African world experiences. Although it was coined way before him, Molefe Kete Asante is considered the most provocative voice in Afrocentric theory (Whitehead, 2018). Whitehead (2018) used the term Afrocentric to critique the contribution of the western intellectual community to human knowledge. Although several scholars (Lowe, 1988; McKendrick, 1990; Du Toit, 2003; Patel, 2005; Seekings, 2008) argue that the whites introduced western-originated social work in Africa, we strongly argue that effective helping systems in African structure and form existed prior to the coming of the white man to the African continent. They were well-developed helping systems in African communities underpinned by the philosophy of Ubuntu and probably what the white man introduced is professional modern day social work. The traditional social work methods of casework, group work, and community work were mirrored in traditional helping systems that existed in most precolonial and during colonial African states and in South African apartheid states. Western imperialism, industrialization, capitalism and hegemony, urbanization and its associated problems disrupted these traditional systems and supplanted them with western ones. It is therefore Western social care systems that undermined, demoralized and neglected an African culture and the principles, philosophies, and ideologies founded in African cultures. It was through this imperialism that the relevance of African proverbs in traditional helping systems was lost. Modern social work is derived mainly from a western sphere of influence (Whitehead, 2018). In support of this, Mungai (2015: 68) argues that "Social work theories and practices have deep roots in a Eurocentric world view that does not always work well with other cultural centres despite the unstated assumption that they are universal". Although they have been sidelined, African proverbs that have space and recognition in African cultures may form a strong knowledge base from which social workers can operate. Their biggest advantage is that they are context-specific, which makes them relevant in specific settings.

THE KNOWLEDGE BASE IN SOCIAL WORK

Uche et al. (2017: 15) defined knowledge as "...statements about facts, people, and situations that can be tested and verified". Before colonisation, Africans had their ways of attaining and perpetuating knowledge. Colonization then ushered in an era where any knowledge that did not conform to western ways of knowing was trashed and considered unworthy of scholarship (Ani, 2013). Social work is a highly skilled activity which calls for extensive knowledge base (Trevithick, 2009), however, what remains unclear is what should constitute knowledge base in indigenized social work. Should the knowledge base be the same for the profession across the globe? Should we have different knowledge bases grounded on space and context? If social work is to really Africanise, we strongly argue that African epistemologies should be considered in the education of social workers in African universities. Unlike positivism, African epistemologies are rooted in, among other things, contextualism, realism and spirituality. The science of positivism is therefore not always relevant in African epistemologies. Not everything can be proven with material evidence. African proverbs should be considered part of the knowledge base of the profession. Uche et al. (2017) argues that cultural knowledge is a prerequisite in professional social work practice. Proverbs are part of the non-material culture of African people. Non-material culture refers to the nontangible and invisible aspects of a people's culture. These include things such as language, beliefs, mores, and values. Understanding non-material cultures like proverbs demonstrates cultural competence among social workers. These proverbs have the potential to influence the behaviour of social workers and their interaction with clients. It is important to note that the current definition of social work recognizes indigenous knowledge as part of the social work knowledge base. The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) (2014) recognize that indigenous knowledge is among the theories that should inform the practice of social work. Indigenous knowledge is also recognized by higher education councils in countries such as Zimbabwe, South Africa, and Kenya. Scholars are therefore challenged to provide pathways of how indigenous knowledge should be incorporated into social work. The epistemicide of African perspectives for a very long time has propelled scholarly docility, and very few scholars have awoken

from the hypnotisation from the west. At this stage, what and what does not constitute indigenous knowledge relevant to social work is fallible. African epistemologies and ontologies are open to scholarly interrogation to assess their relevance in decolonized social work. The process of assessing the relevance of indigenous knowledge in social work requires scholars with an eagle eye and a giraffe view. An eagle eye in the sense of keen sight, vigilance, focus, sharp vision, and strength. A giraffe view in that they must be able to see beyond the immediate but view into the future. A giraffe view will prevent advocating for something that will be disapproved as irrelevant in times to come.

Mathebane and Sekudu (2018) posit that the colonisation of social work education challenges scholars to critically assess the profession with the aim of decolonizing it. Therefore, we heed this call and submit that proverbs are part of indigenous knowledge that is pertinent to the field of social work. Their biggest advantage is that they are found in almost every culture and language in Africa and are culturally relevant. They are generally acceptable, and their adoption by social workers is likely to enhance smooth service delivery. As moral guidelines, they have the potential to improve the acceptability of social workers and the profession in local communities. Bringing proverbs to the fore of social work knowledge comes at a cost, as some scholars inside and outside Africa consider African knowledge unscientific and delusionary (Ani, 2013). This is so because African epistemologies are against dominant western epistemologies that most Africans are schooled into. Ani (2013:316) challenges African scholars to "... critique and elicit indigenous values and systems that should be promulgated in the present-day continent, as well as global issues".

Proverbs and social work

The decolonization agenda of the social work profession should explore the rich cultural heritage of African people. Very few scholars such as Tadam (2013) have interrogated the importance of African proverbs in the education of social work. These proverbs are one of the knowledge systems silenced by western hegemony. The list of African proverbs is infinite. There are as many proverbs as there are various grass species across the continent. Proverbs are part of folkloric elements that are used as vehicles for advising, correcting, reprimanding, or rebuking. Some of these rich proverbs have capacity to influence the behaviour, relations, and conduct of social workers as they execute their duties. Some, if considered carefully, may form part of the ethics of the profession. As alluded to earlier, our argument remains that these proverbs should be part of the knowledge base of the decolonized profession. Social work professional councils in Africa can therefore identify local proverbs that are applicable in their contexts. Such proverbs may be taught to social workers in relevant modules. In the following section, we will illustrate the influence of selected proverbs on the social work profession. These are just examples drawn from various indigenous African languages.

Table 1: Selected proverbs applicable to social work

Proverb	Language	Literal English translation
1. <i>Zano ndoga akapisa jira mumasese</i>	Shona, Zimbabwe	A person who knows all of this ends up in trouble.
2. <i>Panorwa mikono uswa ndihwo hunoparara</i>	Shona, Zimbabwe	When two beasts fight, it is the grass that suffers.
3. <i>Moja morago ke Kgosi</i>	Tswana, South Africa, Botswana	A Chief eats last
4. <i>Tshwene ha e ipone lekopo</i>	Northern Sotho, South Africa	One is blind to his/her faults
5. <i>Indoda ehambayo a yi sakhi isibaya</i>	Zulu, South Africa	A walking man builds no kraal.
6. <i>Inyathi ibuzwa kwabapambili</i>	Zulu, South Africa	You ask for the buffalo from those who are ahead.
7. <i>Kuyasa nangomso</i>	isiXhosa, South Africa	It shall dawn again tomorrow
8. <i>Ukufunda akupheli, kuphela amalanga</i>	isiNdebele, South Africa/ Zimbabwe.	Learning never ends, it's the day that ends
9. <i>Xihlovo a xi dungiwi loko u heta ku nwa mati</i>	Xitsonga, South Africa	Don't spoil the waters after drinking at the well

The influence these selected proverbs on the social work profession is discussed below.

1. *Zano ndoga akapisa jira mumasese* (a person who knows it all ends up in trouble). The proverb is generally

used to encourage people to seek advice from others. In social work, it may discourage social workers from making decisions about things they are not sure about. Consulting other professionals, especially work colleagues, is important for effective service delivery especially when the practitioner is unsure of what they want to do. This proverb discourages social workers from having an 'I know it all' attitude. Social workers are encouraged to constantly engage others. Briefing sessions can help social workers to bring challenging situations to their colleagues rather than quietly doing wrong things. This proverb may also help in social work supervision, where a supervisee must work under the guidance of a supervisor. When a supervisee considers this proverb, s/he will constantly engage the supervisor. This proverb, in general, can encourage social workers to consult with colleagues and share their thoughts before making wrong decisions. Quite often, social workers work in multidisciplinary teams; therefore, they are encouraged to make meaningful contributions during meetings and other discussions for the optimum benefit of clients.

2. *Panorwa mikono uswa ndihwo hunoparara* (When two beasts fight, it is the grass that suffers). This proverb was used to discourage conflicts between leaders or those in positions of authority. Even among married couples, it was used to discourage conflicts as children ended up suffering. When those in positions of authority fight, the grassroots people end up suffering. Conflicts are inevitable including in welfare organizations where social workers work. It is possible to find two social workers conflicting at the workplace or a superior and a subordinate who are always at loggerheads. Such skirmishes, if uncurbed, may negatively affect the smooth running of an organization and, ultimately, the quality of services offered to clients. Social workers should therefore bear in mind that their conflicts may at the end of the day affect their clients. As such, they should limit them at all costs or try to solve differences in an amicable way and in the shortest period. Apart from frontline social work, social workers may be found working as supervisors, managers, and employee assistance practitioners. These may benefit from the proverb by being reminded to expeditiously resolve differences among employees of welfare organizations. Conflicts, though inevitable, must not be left to hamper the quality of services rendered to clients. The proverb reminds social workers that clients are the ultimate losers if conflicts in an organization remain unresolved.

3. *Moja morago ke Kgosi* (A chief eats last). In traditional African jurisprudence, a chief represents a person in a position of high authority responsible for leading a particular people. A chief is responsible for settling community differences, maintenance of morals and order among other many functions. Despite his/her royal position, the proverb *Moja morago ke Kgosi* suggests that the chief should eat last after all the other people have eaten first. The chief should consider his people first before considering himself. This proverb is in tandem with the social work value of service, which suggests that social workers should provide services above self-interests. Social workers are encouraged to consider their clients first before considering themselves. When there is need, social workers are encouraged to try to provide comprehensive services to clients. Sometimes they may even do it for free (*pro bono services*). This is so because social workers have an ethical responsibility for the welfare of the broader society. Therefore, the proverb *Moja morago Kgosi* may encourage social workers to consider clients first when clients need their services.

4. *Tshwene ha e ipone lekopo* (One is blind to one's faults). This proverb helps social workers build self-awareness skills. The fact that one is blind to their faults suggests that they need evaluation from others to be aware of their attributes, strengths, and weaknesses. The proverb encourages social workers to take constructive criticism from others. The criticism may help the social worker improve in their areas of weakness. In that regard, social workers should periodically evaluate their services. Such evaluations may require getting feedback from clients, work colleagues, or other stakeholders they work with. Feedback may be in the form of quality of services rendered, communication and interpersonal relations, and anything else that the social worker may deem necessary.

5. *Indoda ehambayo ayisakhi isibaya* (A walking man builds no kraal). This proverb means that a person who never settles down in one place will not be successful. This proverb may be used to encourage social workers to choose and settle in one area of specialization within the profession. There are many fields of practice in social work and it may be wise for a person to select one field and become a specialist rather than swiping among various fields. The person who does not settle in one field becomes a jack of all trades and a master of none. We assume that specialization can increase the level of competence of a person in a particular field or fields.

6. *Inyathi ibuzwa kwabapambili* (You ask for a buffalo from those who are ahead). The proverb basically indicates that those who have been in a particular job/field for a long time have more experience and practice knowledge. This proverb is of paramount importance to recent social work graduates who would have just joined the world of work or to those social workers who would have joined new organizations. It encourages them to seek guidance

from those who are established in the industry or organization. It also encourages social workers supervisees to respect the guidance they receive from established social workers. For someone to be a senior social worker, they need to have worked in a particular field for a prescribed number of years. The assumption is that through experience, they are more knowledgeable than their subordinates. Therefore, this proverb may form part of ethics in the supervision of social work in Afrocentric social work.

7. *Kuyasa nangomso* (It shall dawn again tomorrow). This proverb gives hope to dejected, hopeless people. In some circumstances, social workers work with dejected clients who have lost hope. When a social worker communicates this proverb to clients, it has the potential to give them a positive mindset despite their problems. Clients often lose hope when overwhelmed by social problems. In addition to clients, the proverb has implications on the social workers themselves. It can help social workers to view their clients with a positive mind despite their circumstances. Social workers are not immune to social problems. They also face challenges just like any other person. This proverb helps them to have hope despite their problems. Social workers also face work-related problems such as burnout despite having to continue helping people in need. When they believe that tomorrow will dawn again, they may have hope and energy to continue despite their circumstances.

8. *Ukufunda akupheli, kuphela amalanga* (Learning never ends, it is the day that ends). Learning is very important in social work. Even after acquiring the qualifications that allow social workers to be licensed, learning continues. Social workers learn new things as they practice, do research, and embark on continuous professional development. This proverb encourages social workers to continue learning. It subscribes to the notion that learning is a lifelong process. Social workers may also learn new things from their colleagues, clients, and communities they practice in. Basically, the proverb encourages social workers to continue acquiring new knowledge which can enhance their practice. This is in line with the ethical responsibility of social workers to the profession that requires them to seek continuous professional development. In cases where social workers must earn continuous professional development points to renew their practicing certificates, this proverb plays an important role in motivating them.

9. *Xihlovo a xi dungiwi loko u heta ku nwa mati* (Do not spoil the waters after drinking at the well). This proverb has been used to encourage the maintenance of good relationships in African communities even after getting what one wanted. It is like the common English proverb 'do not burn a bridge after crossing the river'. The bridge should not be burnt because a need may arise that may require a person to cross that river again. This also applies to social work where the social worker should maintain good relationships with communities even after achieving what they wanted to achieve. Relationships are very crucial and are the vehicle on which social workers ride. In some circumstances, social researchers make false promises to communities when they want to gain entry and once, they collect data, they will never return to the communities even to inform them of the findings of their studies. Such unethical conduct is discouraged by the Xitsonga proverb *Xihlovo a xi dungiwi loko u heta ku nwa mati*.

CONCLUSION

This article adds to the ongoing epistemological debates in social work. We agree with Hothersall (2018) that all knowledge is fallible, social work knowledge is provisional and subject to revision. Therefore, the time is now to revisit the knowledge of African social work and consider African epistemologies. Cultural capital such as African proverbs have great potential to influence client worker relationship, enhance communication with clients, motivate social workers to seek known knowledge among other benefits. They also have the potential to influence the professional behaviour of practitioners, in addition to serving as ethical guidelines for social workers. Therefore, this article advocated for the consideration of African proverbs in social work practice in Africa. Diligence and perseverance are still needed to decolonize social work in Africa. The endeavour requires considering African epistemologies in the knowledge base of Afrocentric social work. African proverbs may be part of the knowledge that can be considered in decolonizing and indigenizing the social work profession. However, it should be noted that the proverbs are culturally sensitive, as they are not universally applicable. Proverbs should be used in contexts where they are relevant. It is also important to note that not all proverbs may be beneficial to the social work profession and only the relevant ones may be exploited.

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