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Challenges with the adoption of indigenous theories in Nigerian social work field practice

Nma-Njoku Alexandra CHUKWU, Ngozi Rita OKAFOR & Amarachi IDU

ABSTRACT

Social work field practice is a major component of social work education programs where students learn to practice social work through educationally focused experiences in agencies and community settings. A social worker in an African setting, should be well equipped with indigenous African theories, which interacts with culture and norms of client's environment. However, most social work students apply foreign theories and approaches during field work practice. This study investigates the challenges in the adoption of indigenous theories among students during social work field practice in Nigerian setting. The study adopted a qualitative method of data collection using the focus group discussion (FGD) and In-depth interview guide (IDI) in generating data among 80 social work students and 20 lecturers using multistage sampling technique. An informed consent form was used in the identification of participants who were interested in the study. The study revealed insufficient classroom training using indigenous theories as a major challenge in the adoption of indigenous theories. Recommendations for a reorientation of social work educators and adjustment in the social work curriculum to suit practitioner settings were made.

KEY TERMS: challenges, social work, field practice, social work theories, Nigeria

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AUTHOR DETAILS

- Nma-Njoku Alexandra CHUKWU, Department of Social Work, University of Nigeria, Nsukka
- Email: nma.njoku@unn.edu.ng & rita.okafor@unn.edu.ng
- Ngozi Rita OKAFOR, Department of Social Work, University of Nigeria, Nsukka
- Amarachi IDU, Department of Social Work, University of Nigeria, Nsukka

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INTRODUCTION

Social work is a profession designed to help people function better in their social environment. In every organization, institution and gatherings, there should always be a social worker, whose duty is to resolve conflicts which remains inevitable. Therefore, for social workers to have a clear understanding of their roles, duties and expectations in every giving situation, social work students are trained and exposed to various settings. During this training which is generally referred to as social work field practice, social work students are exposed to real life problems and situations and are expected to systematically resolve these problems using theories, approaches and models taught in classrooms. A successful utilization of selected theories, approaches and models are dependent on student's knowledge of the selected theories, approaches and models the situation at hand and the client's environment. This means that African theories, approaches and models are to be prioritized over foreign ones. However, despite the role of client's environment in the identification of appropriate theories during intervention, most students in Nigerian universities, address clients' problems using foreign theories. This study is therefore designed to examine the reality of social work field practice in University of Nigeria, Nsukka; to examine the importance of Indigenous theories in social work field practice among study participants in order to explore the extent of knowledge on indigenous African social theories among study participants and to ascertain the challenges with the use of indigenous African social work theories among study participants

BACKGROUND

Social work is both a scholarly discipline and a practice-based profession whose goal is to empower the vulnerable groups in the society such as women, persons living with disabilities, children and the elderly as well as people living with HIV/AIDS, among others. As a helping profession, social work is primarily concerned with how to enhance client's abilities to enable them function better in the society (Uranta & Ogbanga, 2017). For social workers to effectively assist clients to perform their social roles within their environments and beyond, a professional social worker should be equipped with a wide range of knowledge about causes, consequences and potential solutions for social problems existing within the client's social environment. Empowering social work practitioner with this knowledge helps them have an insight when dealing with clients affected by different adverse conditions (Uche, et al., 2014). Based on the above discuss, the over-riding concern of this paper is therefore to examine the challenges in the adoption or application of African indigenous social work theories in Nigerian field work settings. Social work being a course of study that is based on both theory and practice, the delivering of sound theory suitable with the environment of practice is expository as it magnifies knowledge gained from social work field practicum. With well-arranged social work field practice setting, social work students gain, practice principles, values and ethics and the scientific foundation for practice (Udeani, 2019). Onalu & Okoye (2022) noted that social work field practice is an equipment of acculturation which lays the foundation for the student to be self-reliant practitioner in the future. In addition, they assert that, students who are trained in significant agencies with practicable indigenous theories usually have better perception of the individual's environments and contributory factors to social work profession and the nature of the problems the profession addresses. Therefore, the application of indigenous theories in a well-organized social work field practice helps the students develop intellectually, emotionally and practically.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Importance of theories in social work field practice

Several works have been done on theories in social work field practice: (Osawe,2018; Shakane and Masaga 2018; Genitty, et al 2015 and Udeani 2019). Osawe (2018) defined social work theory as a foundation for the practice of social work, which provides the social worker with the understanding, explanation and prediction of human behavior and social structure. Shokane & Masaga (2018) views theory as a link between knowledge of an identified problem and its intervention process with a conceptual format that is oriented towards action. Social work may borrow theories from Sociology, Psychology, Political science, Public health, Community development, law and Economics to give meaning to an individual's behavior, to have a better understanding on how the environment affects that behavior, to guild their interventions, and to predict what is likely to be the result of a particular social work intervention (Genitty, et al., 2015). Furthermore, Udeani (2019) asserts that theory is an essential ingredient that guides the way in which social workers view and approach individuals, groups, communities, and societies. Theory helps to predict, explain, and assess situations and behaviors, and provides a rationale for how the social worker should react and intervene. Simply put, theories help social workers to engage client's system, conduct assessments and develop intervention to solve personal and social problems.

However, Canavera et al., (2020) noted that western theories may not always be appropriate or effective in understanding, evaluating and intervening in all African situations, hence African peoples have a very different perception and culture. Although there are a host of African theories but Social work practice and social work research in Africa especially in Nigeria continually adopt foreign theories in their explanations of phenomenon. It is against this background that this paper examines the challenges in applying social work indigenous African theories by undergraduate social work students during field practice.

Social work indigenous African theories

Indigenous theories are those theories that put into consideration the structure, philosophy, culture, hierarchy, sovereignty of the environment in which they are applied. Some African social work theories which could be adopted during social work field practice may include:

Ujamaa Theory (African Community Theory): was popularized by Julius Kambarami Nyerere. Ujamaa theory focuses on societal oneness. It is a theory that explains the need of brotherhood among members of a given community. Ujamaa emphasis on the need for social support among community members. It is about human relationships. Ujamaa was built on the basis that national development is achievable through communal efforts, institutionalization of social, political and economic equality and abolition of segregation based on ascribed status (Mukhungula et al., 2017).

African Family Theory (Ukama Theory): Ukama means relations or family-hood. Families look after each other. For an individual, family includes immediate, extended and tribal relatives. Ukama was built on the assumption that families are social capital builders were members of a family gets: (i) resource or economic support when needed (ii) moral and psychological support, for example during ill-health, death, marriages (iii) social support, for example, mentoring (iv) information, for example, family history (v) care (vi) kinship care (vii) dispute resolution (viii) inheritance (9) identity and belonging (Ewuoso & Hall, 2019)

Ukuru Theory: Ukuru means dominance, oppression or colonization (Nyerere, 2011). It can happen at individual, community, societal or global level. Ukuru implies silencing of voices, beliefs, values, theories and thoughts of the oppressed by the oppressed themselves. Ukuru is the attitude of making some African histories, literature, symbols and practices invisible, unrecognized and irrelevant. Some African social work practitioners have successfully used the ukuru philosophy to make irrelevant African founders and theorists of social work while promoting western founders and theorists. This enslaved mindset otherwise known as mental slavery, have resulted to low self-esteem, inferiority complex, social, cultural, economic, environmental, spiritual dependency (Nyerere, 2000).

African Strengths Theory: This theory was popularized in the 1950s and 1960s by Julius Nyerere, Kwame Nkrumah and Modibo Keita. The theory is not new to African inventions. The theory emphasizes that focus on an individual's drive, desires, ambition and abilities is the best way to achieve success rather than focusing on competition and comparison. Strength is the capacity to cope with difficulties. It is the ability to use external challenges as stimulus for growth and using social supports as springboards to rebound. Strengths can be any personal or environmental attribute that has the potential to stimulate growth and solutions (Saleebey, 2009). It can be located within an individual and within a community in which an individual resides (Mekoa, 2018). In reference to individuals, strengths can be aspirations, competencies and confidence. In reference to communities, strengths can be opportunities, social networks, resources and tangible services.

Theory of Grandparents: This theory emphasizes the positive contribution of elderly people. For instance, in most African region post-natal care involves the care of the newborn and their mothers by the grandparents who takes the responsibilities of bathing, cooking as well teaching the young mother how to care for their new born. Grandparents are custodians on community laws and culture (Schrijner & Smits, 2018). Their wealth of knowledge is usually tapped to settle individual, family and community disputes. In addition, Hope (2005) added that grandparents are regarded as a well or pot of knowledge, no wonder the common Igbo adage says thus "what an older person sees lying down, the young can't see even if they climb the tallest mountain or tree". This theory does not support the notion that being aged is associated with retirement from life, lack of wisdom, uselessness and evil. Rather, it means that when people grow old, they become wiser and more caring (Schrijner & Smits, 2017).

African Spiritual Theory: This theory is centred on the importance of being, becoming, contentedness, belonging, and identity. Spirituality differs from religion, as religion deals with institutional rituals and social relationships.

Whereas spirituality is concerned with individuals experiences, the search or recognition of the scared or a supreme being (Marumo & Chakale, 2018). Spirituality and religion are not in a dichotomous relationship, rather, spirituality is a larger concept that can be expressed in religious and non-religious ways. The theory emphasis that spirituality is inherent in human condition. It would be malpractice for social workers not to consider the spiritual and cultural practices of a client during intervention. Religion and spirituality have been associated with an ability to successfully overcome suffering and improve recovery (Shahadah, 2016). Social workers must recognize that a persons' spiritual beliefs, values, perceptions, feelings and ideas are intrinsically connected to religion, spiritual, cultural and life experiences, and should not be neglected when helping a client overcome challenges.

METHODOLOGY

This study was qualitative research which employed a multistage sampling technique to generate data from the research participants. At first the various levels of study (100 level, 200 level, 300 level and 400 level) was observed as various clusters where research participants were selected for a focused group discussion session. Secondly, simple random sampling technique by balloting was then employed to select 10 males and 10 females from each cluster. This gave rise to a total of 80 participants which was made up of 40 males and 40 females respectively. Purposive sampling technique was finally employed to select two lecturers teaching field practice across the four levels of study. This gave rise to a total eight lecturers who participated in the eight interview sessions. The instrument used in generating data was Focused Group Discussion (FGD) and In-depth Interview (IDI). Ten focused group discussion sessions were conducted among the 80 undergraduate students with 8 participants per session. The instrument was consensually drawn up by the researchers to ensure standardization and collective understanding of what all questions entail. The deductive method of data analysis was used in analyzing data generated for this study. This means that the analyzed data were categorized under themes which were in line with the study objectives. The focused group participants were aged 19 – 23 years whose levels of study cut across the four level of study in the undergraduate programme, while IDI participants were aged 30-48 years. Questions and probes in the research instruments spanned through the four major objective of this study. Only participants who consented to the study, by ticking accepted in the informed consent form which was made available to prospective respondents before the study was selected for the study. Information provided by respondent were recorded for the purpose of cross-checking, documentation and clarity. Respondents were also assured of confidentiality and anonymity before commencing data generation. Information from the study participants using tape recorders, which was transcribed with English language. Transcripts were read over and over to identify key issues. These key issues from each of the transcript were placed under themes which were designed from the study objectives. The responses from the participants were organized into themes and quotes. Below are themes as discussed by the participants.

RESULTS

Reality about Social Work field practice in University of Nigeria, Nsukka

This selection explores students view on the reality about social work field practice. The study participants expressed in various views the relevance of field work practice in social work. But the nature of most agencies makes it difficult and uninteresting for students, except for those students who are fortunate to be placed in some good hospitals, few communities and schools, the rest seem to find field work very uninteresting. Amaka who is a female undergraduate stated:

Though field work is an essential part of social work profession, most agencies such as student hostels do not make field work practice interesting. Many students in the hostels do not treat the social work students with respect and will rather talk to their hall supervisors and portals than the social work students. With this we hardly treat any real-life cases and also find it discouraging going to such agencies to avoid being disrespected and looked down on by our fellow students, (Amaka, FGD).

Yet another participant opined that most agency supervisors do not know much about the roles of a social worker in their agencies which affects their input in general.

My agency supervisor does not really know what social workers do. He kept telling me that social work is all about doing work, and work could be anything including sweeping, cleaning, arranging files. However, some of our lecturers had come to educate him on what is expected of social work students in the agency, yet he insists that we must do those works that are outside the purpose of our visit", (Somtochukwu, FGD).

On the contrary, a participant maintained the view that:

Field work practice has given them the opportunity on how to go about with community development processes. “As someone who will like to work with community development agencies, field work practice has exposed me on how to go about the process of need identification to actualization”, (Amarachi, FGD).

From the narrative, it appears that social work students in the study area, though they understand the value and importance of social work field practice in the profession, but desires a more organized and practice-oriented agencies, which could avail them the opportunities to acquire more knowledge and skills as well as put into practice the knowledge gained from class room experiences in real life situations.

General Knowledge about importance of social work theories

This section examines students’ knowledge on the usefulness of social work theories during field work practice. Majority of the participants maintained that theory is expected to guide social worker’s activities with their clients. Some also noted that theories provide explanations as to why clients behave in a particular way. Utilizing theories during field work helps in ordering the treatment pattern and indicating what next is to be done. Thus,

“Theories provide the social worker with a holistic approach to analyzing the client’s problems in order to proffer solutions. Though applying it in real life cases is difficult but I can comfortably apply it while writing my reports”, (Obioma, IDI).

Another participant expressed poor knowledge on the use of theories.

I feel as though I am still learning the use of theories as it applies to field work cases, beside some theories such as system theory, client centered model and labeling theory, I have not understood other theories and their applications”, (Ifeoma, FGD).

Knowledge about indigenous African social work theories

This section examines participants views on the knowledge of African indigenous social work theories. Data from the study revealed that majority of the FDG study participant expressed poor knowledge about social work indigenous theories. Data from the participant revealed that poor knowledge on indigenous social work theories is as a result of non-inclusion of indigenous theories in the course outline, non-inclusion of indigenous theories recommended textbooks, never taught in class. For instance, Amara a 3rd year student said thus:

Although I have been taught about the need to indigenize social work in Africa, but I have not heard about indigenous theories... all the theories taught in class not only in field work class, but other courses have been on foreign theories because their pro-pounders are all white people”, (Amara, FGD).

Ikenna, a second-year student said thus:

Knowledge about social work indigenous theories in Africa would have made application of theories easier, but we can work within our expectations as students. As a student, I don’t think it is my duty to teach the lectures, so I can only function within or enhance the outline given by lecturers and not to answer my questions out of the provided scope”, (Ikenna, FGD).

Godson, an IDI participant said:

Although I have knowledge about social work indigenous theories which I mostly use in the area of research, but I have never included any while teaching student, this I feel is as a result of following ancestral footsteps”, (Godson, IDI).

Timothy, Another IDI participant also said:

I feel one of the reasons we pay more attention to foreign theories could be because it is universally applicable, African theories may limit the practitioners’ knowledge and exposure. However, this does not mean that students in African setting should not have knowledge of what could work better in their African environment”, (Timothy, IDI).

Angel, An IDI participant also said:

Ingenious textbook where you could make reference to while teaching indigenous theories are limited. This means that one may not find sufficient literature to support or consult while teaching. This is one of the reasons we keep making reference to foreign theories since there is variety of literature to reference”, (Angel, IDI).

Challenges with the use of Indigenous African social work theories

Lack of interest/ preference of foreign theories to indigenous theories among social work educators

Data from the study revealed that study participants highlighted areas of challenges with the use of African indigenous social work theories during field practice to include preference over foreign theories, which include rigidity, time consuming, difficulties in the selection of most appropriate theories. One of the participants noted thus: “My major challenge in adopting indigenous theories is that most indigenous theories are not as detailed as those foreign theories and do not have literature to prove its applicability in various situations”, (Obinna/IDI).

Amaka an IDI participant also noted that: Many social work educators prefer the foreign theories over the indigenous theories... the foreign theories have been from the origin of social work and it's generally acceptable, while the indigenous theories are new and not been applicable in many situations, (Amaka, IDI).

Zoe, an FGD participant also stated,

My major challenge in adopting indigenous theories during field work practice, is absence of knowledge about indigenous theories. This is because I have never been thought anything about indigenous theories in social work. Although Ubuntu theory was once mentioned in the class, however, it was not thought it was not taught”, (Zoe, FGD).

Another participant also stated, “Even though I wish I could use indigenous theories during field work, but that may inappropriate because we were never thought not asked to do any research on them”, (Karl/FGD).

DISCUSSION

The study investigated challenges with adoption of indigenous theories in Nigerian field work practice. The findings from the study revealed respondents view on the reality of social work field practice in University of Nigeria, Nsukka, which includes, limited agencies for practice, poor supervision of field work both by lecturers and agency supervisors, collaborates the findings of Tippa and Mane (2018) who identified lack of suitable content for field work training, lack of practical-oriented faculties, lack of suitable agencies for field work practice as the reality of field work practice in India. The findings also revealed that one major problem facing field work practice in the study area is unprofessional practices from some of the agency's supervisors. This implies that some supervisors are not being guided by their organization's ethics and principles while supervising social work students. This can affect learning and quality of student's input. Kadushin (2014) maintained that social work supervisors should build a relationship that will achieve competent accountable performance, develop staff knowledge, skills, values and ethics, as well as develop learning and support functions. In addition, the study revealed some challenges with the application of indigenous theories during field work practice. Majority of the study participants identified lack of knowledge and awareness as a major challenge with the application of indigenous theories during social work field practice. Participants went further to explain that social work educators in the study area do not teach indigenous theories and that has resulted to lack of knowledge on the existence of indigenous theories.

Implications of the adoption of indigenous theories in Nigerian Social Work Field

Based on the findings of this research, the adoption of Indigenous African Theories in Social Work practice will expose students and researchers on the importance of the indigenous theories in social work practice. This will make the indigenous African theories to be accepted by other people on the general use and reward of the indigenous African theories thereby transferring the culture and norms of the African people world over. The awareness the indigenous African theory created while being implemented will go a long way in enriching the social work practices with research and practical tools that will benefit both students, practitioners and clients since the new knowledge derived from the indigenous theories will be used to enhance both learning and practice in the social work field.

Therefore, policy formulators should adopt various indigenous social work theories that will be beneficial to the

practice of social work. This will not only enhance the social work practice but it will go a long way in educating relevant stakeholders on the importance of various indigenous African theories in social work practice. It is also derived from this research that the application of indigenous theories in a well-organized social work field practice will help students develop intellectually, emotionally and practically the Social work field practice that will guide excellent social work practice in the study environment. It is therefore imperative for social work educators to reintroduce social work practice through the indigenous lens. This will help in producing social workers who can identify the role of culture, tradition and spirituality in social work intervention in African societies.

Conclusion

From the findings of this research, major challenges with the utilization of indigenous theories is the lack of knowledge and interest indigenous theories. The study discovered the most social work educators to not explore indigenous theories in their research and interaction with students. It is therefore necessary that a lot should be done to improve the use of indigenous theories among social work educators. Indigenization of social work in the African settings should encompass a total understanding of social work practice from the African perspectives, this should include understanding and ability to use social work indigenous theories, approaches and model during field practice. In addition, indigenous theories, models and philosophy gives the practitioner room to explore clients situation through assessing the individual support system such as children, families, communities, and various programme that could critically help in problem analysis and interventions, promoting collaboration and participation with communities, developing ethics and research strategies. Social work educators in African settings are hereby encouraged to explore and unitize African philosophies in their interactions with students. It is through this means that indigenous theories will be learned and popularized.

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