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Afrocentric Social Work: Implications for Practice Issues

Ndungu Wa Mungai*

Abstract

The paper is a critical review on how Afrocentric social work could be applicable to Africa and how this would be manifested in social work practice. Schiele (2000) in *human services and the Afrocentric paradigm* and Graham (2002) in *Social work and African-centred world views* have made solid cases for the approach. These two books and the authors' other related work refer to social work in the United States and Britain respectively. This paper argues that the Afrocentric approach has a wider application. The Afrocentric paradigm has identical principles with Ubuntu which in Africa exemplifies African values and ethics in the service of humanity. While social work theories make western theories and philosophies their reference point, the Afrocentric paradigm is based on traditional African philosophies, history, culture, values and ethics. There are also common grounds with social work values and ethics in upholding human rights and focusing on service to alleviate human suffering.

For the African people to cope with modern challenges it is important for them to seek strength in the foundations of their indigenous cultures. African cultures value collectivity, reciprocity, spirituality and interconnectedness of all beings. Much of these values have been eroded by modernity and market forces. The popular symbol of the Akan people of Ghana called *Sankofa* is a bird looking back but going forward and means that it is important to reflect on the past to build a prosperous future. The concept of *Sankofa* therefore advocates revisiting the past to find what is forgotten in order to build a strong and resilient future, noting that the past, present and future are all interconnected. The focus of this paper is to demonstrate how these values can address the challenges of social development in our time.

Keywords: *Afrocentric, Ubuntu, Social Work, Human Rights, Social Development, Indigenization.*

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Introduction

Social work has its roots in western theories and discourses but these are not always compatible with cultural values of non-western people especially those who have in the past been victims of western imperialism. The Afrocentric paradigm has its origin in the academic work of African American academics in response to needs and issues of African people and people of African descent around the world. The paradigm is particularistic in that its focus is the liberation of African people but is also universalistic in that it is grounded in the spiritual and moral development of the world (Graham, 1999).

While the term Afrocentric paradigm is used here, identical terms are found in literature including African-centred, Africentricity, Afrocentricity and Africology/Africology. The foundation of the paradigm is that for any study or work with African people or people of African descent, the African have to be at the centre of the study as the subject and the paradigm is informed by African history, cultural values and worldview. There are many interpretations of African values but in the paradigm the foundation ones that underpin an African-centred worldview are: interconnectedness of all things and beings; the spiritual nature of human beings; collective/individual identity and the collective/inclusive nature of family structure; oneness of mind, body and spirit and; the value of interpersonal relationships (Graham, 1999).

The interconnectedness of human beings means that people are perceived as an integral part of nature and living in harmony with the environment helps them to become at one with all reality (Graham, 1999). The interconnectedness has a spiritual dimension as it links all human beings spiritually across time and space (Graham, 1999; Schiele, 1997). This also links with kwimenya (self-knowledge), an idea that suggests individual as well as collective rediscovery and re-connection to traditional cultural roots (Maathai, 2009; Mungai, 2012). Cultural self-knowledge links one to others within that culture and the connection with others assists in spiritual development, well-being and transformation from an individualist focus to being part of a collective that is humanity (Graham, 1999, p. 805).

Spirituality is based on believing in a higher power or creator and it is suggested that 'spirituality can be broadly defined as that invisible universal substance that connects all human beings to each other and to the creator' (Schiele, 1997, p. 805). Emphasising the spiritual nature implies a shift in thinking from valuing people on the basis of their material status to their humanity. In the African context spiritual

connectedness is achieved through various rituals that connect the individual to the community and the spirit world. Among the Kikuyu of Kenya for example, giving the name of a relative to a child implies passing on the spirit of that person and therefore ensuring immortality (Mungai, 2010)

The collective identity emphasizes our similarities as human beings rather than our individual differences. People who see themselves as connected in a collective are also likely to care for other individuals who they perceive as part of their collective self. Spirituality is regarded as the key to understanding interconnectedness of all human beings and other elements in the universe and the foundation of the concept of a collective identity (Schiele, 1997). The individual uniqueness is still valued but it is also believed that harm to the individual is harm to the collective and vice versa. Mbiti (1970) expresses this well with the expression 'I am because we are and because we are therefore I am' (p.141). The western approach tends to put emphasis on individual autonomy and rights while traditional African societies tended to put more emphasis on the family and community welfare.

In the African-centred world view there is no separation of body, mind and spirit as they are regarded as having equal value and are interrelated. There is also emphasis in the concept of balance and harmony in order to maintain psychological, social and physical well-being. The harmonious balance of body, mind and spirit leads to attainment of optimum health and a harmonious existence based on peace with one-self and the external environment (Graham, 1999; Schiele, 2000).

Interpersonal relationships are regarded as critical as people are regarded as interdependent rather than autonomous individualistic beings. In the African worldview of Ubuntu, there is a saying that a person is a person through other persons. In other words a person's potential is best attained and expressed through harmonious existence with other members of the community (Charles, 2007).

Afrocentric Social Work

The Afrocentric social work can be regarded as a project to adapt social work to the needs and objectives of the African people and people of African descent. Afrocentric social work can be defined as 'a method of social work practice based on traditional African philosophical assumptions that are used to explain and to solve human and social problems' (Schiele, 1997, p. 805). Social work theories and practices, on the other hand, have deep roots in a Eurocentric worldview that does

not always work well with other cultural centres, despite the unstated assumption that they are universal.

There are efforts to address the western discourses hegemony with such approaches as anti-oppression social work, cross-cultural social work, anti-racist social work and critical social work approaches that focus on the structures of oppression. These are helpful and progressive efforts but while they sensitize social workers to the problems of minority groups, they do not embrace their worldviews and cultural values (Schiele, 1997). Afrocentric social work embraces the African world view in order to be relevant to the needs of the African people. It also shares the general commitment of social work to universal values of human justice and compassion and is therefore not in conflict with the core values of social work (Graham, 1999; Schiele, 1997). Therefore, there are differences in the particular focus and a commonality in the universal core values.

The distinguishing feature of Afrocentric social work is that the African person is placed at the centre with the aim of promoting empowerment, growth, transformation and development (Graham, 1999). The goals of Afrocentric social work are identified by Schiele (1997) as optimal thinking, fighting against political, economic and cultural oppression; building on community strength; engendering affective professional relationship and; mutuality within the professional relationships.

Afrocentric social work aims to assist in transforming people from suboptimal thinking to optimal thinking which implies holistic thinking. Optimal thinking seeks answers to problems and conflicts that bedevil our world and calls for a way of thinking that guides us from conflict to cooperation. A holistic approach views differences as interdependent rather sources of conflict and therefore leads to better ways of working together for the satisfaction of all, despite the differences.

Marginalization is a reality for Africans and people of African descent through the long history of colonisation and racial discrimination. Overcoming marginalization is therefore a major objective of the Afrocentric social work. It argues that all cultural groups need to be treated equally in all respects. The schools are regarded as a starting place to teach values like pluralism, multiculturalism and history that challenges myths that sustain oppression.

With all the problems in the world it is easy to notice what is wrong and the human weaknesses. On the other hand people have strengths that may be obscured to therapists but nevertheless sustain them through

their problems. Saleebey (2006) suggests that the central dynamic of strengths discovery and articulation lies in begetting hope and possibility, the vision of a better future or quality of life and the means of getting there. From an Afrocentric social work perspective, communities have a right to self-determination and should be supported to establish self-help organizations under their control to promote their interests.

Afrocentric social work promotes engaged social relationships that breaks down the boundaries of the helper and the helped which in mainstream social work would be regarded as professional heresy or deprofessionalization. Schiele (1997) argues that emotional connection leads to a more trusting and authentic helping relationship and transformation.

The Afrocentric social work argument on mutuality is that both the social worker and the client can learn from each other and the end result is the transformation of the whole society. While the mainstream social work approach would suggest to the social worker that the problem of the client is not their problem, this mutuality approach suggests that it is a shared problem and the social worker is also directly or indirectly affected. Schiele (1997) suggests that the social worker is not outside of the society that creates the problems affecting the client, despite the benefits accruing from being a professional.

As noted above, existing social work is grounded within European ethnocentric epistemologies but assumes these values to be universal. Accommodating other alternative worldviews would enrich, not threaten social work (Graham, 1999). To enrich social work and make the profession relevant in different parts of the world, a process of indigenization is recognised as being overdue.

Indigenization

Social work regards itself as an international movement that is practiced at international, national and local levels. Translating the applicable social work discourses with their western underpinnings becomes problematic in international work with non-western countries (Gray, 2005; Tsang and Yan, 2001; Yan and Cheung, 2006). Indigenization is the importation of international or western discourses and converting them to authentic discourses in domestic settings, by taking into consideration social, cultural, political and the prevailing economic situations of the importing country (Yan and Cheung, 2006). How this is done remains a matter of debate.

Yan and Cheung (2006) refer to indigenization as a process of recontextualization. The concept of recontextualization is based on the work of Bernstein (1996). Bernstein refers to this process as appropriation of other discourses in order to select the applicable elements. In this context then indigenization is a process where the Western social work discourse is 'selectively and discursively appropriated by various parties in the local context' (Yan and Cheung, 2006, p. 68). Gray (2005) refers to indigenization as the degree to which social work fits local context and is made consistent with the local culture.

While social workers might have shared universal values, different local conditions dictate that social work discourse has to be indigenized to be culturally relevant in the local context. The future of social work that honours both universalism and particularism or localism is considered feasible, with both differences and commonalities accommodated and guided by a shared commitment to develop a profession that serves humanity in addressing human problems such as poverty and social injustice (Gray, 2005; Gray and Fook, 2004). Afrocentric social work claims a role in developing social work that is relevant to the African people.

Culture is a critical issue in indigenization. For the African people there is a need to trace the culture before westernisation to understand what was valued in the community and why. This concept of going back to find what is forgotten to build the future is reflected in the concept of *Sankofa*. The Akan symbol for *Sankofa* depicts a mythical bird flying forward with its head turned backward. This symbol is often associated with the Akan proverb: *It is not wrong to go back for that which you have forgotten*. In *Sankofa*, history is regarded as a circular process rather than the linear concept in western traditions. That means that past, present and future are interconnected and equally relevant (Kanu, 2007). The implications here are that social work research and practice have to pay special attention to African culture, history and traditions. Afrocentric social work research adopts the *Sankofa* approach in being grounded in the history, culture, current and past experiences of African people and their worldview.

Afrocentric Social Work Research

For any research to claim to be Afrocentric it needs to be focused on and conducted from the standpoint of the African people. It therefore has to pay close attention to their history, culture, experience and

knowledge (Davis, Williams and Akinyela, 2010). The research should also have an objective of addressing the problems faced by the African people (Schiele, 2000). To operate from an Afrocentric perspective therefore implies being 'well grounded in a people's understanding, involves the researcher's having an affinity, knowledge and respect for the history, culture and knowledge of African-descendant people' (Davis *et al.*, 2010, pp. 342–343). Non-Africans can conduct Afrocentric research as long as the research agenda is to serve the African people.

The challenge for Afrocentric social work research is how to identify and structure the culturally grounded practices and methodologies. Four directions for Afrocentric research are decolonization, healing, transformation and mobilization (Davis *et al.*, 2010, p. 344). The authors further suggest that using the metaphor of four tides in Smith (2002), Afrocentric research identifies four major tides as survival, recovery, development and self-determination. Survival as a people who have faced enormous challenges is critical. Equally critical is the survival of their cultures, their ways of life and spirituality. Recovery refers to the shocks and domination of the past including colonialism that affected people's self-confidence. Development is based on reflections on the current situation and setting goals for the future. Self-determination is based on people's self-knowledge and rediscovery of themselves, to set their agenda and govern in their best political, economic and social interest. The point of departure with ordinary research is the political commitment to healing, transformation, spiritual welfare and self-knowledge and self-determination. This is consistent with social work's commitment. The Australian Association of social workers (AASW) recommends that when working with Indigenous people researchers need to comply with established Indigenous research protocols (Art. 5.5.2) (Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW), 2010). Social workers also have a duty to promote the welfare of the people, at local and global level and support the development of people, their communities and environment (National Association of Social Workers (NASW), 1996). The critical point here in Afrocentric research is that the research is centred on the African people- their history, their voices, their experiences, their interests and aspirations.

Cultural relevance is the key to Afrocentric social work and can be enriched by various disciplines but based on three fundamental criteria: centeredness, culture and self-determination. Davis *et al.* (2010) suggest that the Afrocentric framework can operate alone or borrow from established western methodologies to help social workers incorporate

cultural relevance into their research in the interest of the communities they serve.

Afrocentric Community Development

In claiming a collective in the African worldview would suggest that community development would be more culturally relevant than the individual casework favoured in Western social work. This would be consistent with traditional peasant economies dominated by communalism and traditional systems based on kinship (Schiele, 2000). Community development is not easily defined but Ife (2010) identifies six essential elements: social development; economic development; political development; cultural development; environmental development and spiritual development. These elements have a universal application and are also consistent with the Afrocentric paradigm.

Self-help is a practice found among Africans wherever they live. Self-help involves mutual assistance and support either on a rotational basis or as needs arise. A good example is the small self-help groups known as *chamas*¹ in Kenya and also diaspora groups like the Kenyan women in the United Kingdom (Kitetu, 2010). While wealthy people also form their elite clubs to promote their businesses, the *chama* is particularly useful in addressing poverty (Mbuki, 2012). Mutual aid also plays a big role in African Americans' communities and it is claimed to be evidence that traditional African values of the extended self and group cohesiveness have survived slavery and trans-Atlantic dislocation (Schiele, 2000). Self-help is not a substitute to struggling against oppressive structures but one of the ways to struggle against such structures.

Afrocentric Social Work and Gender

The issue of gender is very important in social work because of practises that lead to oppression and exploitation of women and girls around the world. The feminist movement has been critical in putting this issue on the agenda (Pease, 2010). Black feminists have also made their contribution to this debate (Baca Zinn, 2012; Collins, 2000). Collins and other Black feminists demonstrated the importance of race in the oppression of women and also how race intersects with other forms of oppression such as class and gender and hence the importance of intersectional analysis in understanding oppression (Pease, 2010). In

¹ *Chama* in Kiswahili literally means party or group. The plural should be *vyama* but in literature the tendency is to call them *chamas*.

the Afrocentric paradigm African womanism as advocated by Hudson-Weems (1997), rather than Black feminism, is the preferred approach on gender. African womanism rejects the conflict basis of feminism and instead takes a position that is pro-female but not anti-male on the basis that both male and female Africans have been victims of racism and working together would be more beneficial to African families than engaging in conflict (Asante, 2007; Bankole, 2006; Dove, 1998). African womanism acknowledges the existence of oppression of women as unacceptable but believes complementarity of men and women would be more beneficial to the African communities.

The role of culture is also important as some cultural practices lead to oppression of women while others may be supportive of women. There are some cultural practices such as family violence in African communities that lead to marginalization of women and need to be challenged and rejected (Dove, 1998; Maathai, 2009; Mungai, 2012, 2014a). Maathai argues that culture, with the exploitative practices acknowledged and expunged, can be a strong foundation for self-knowledge, self-belief and development. Dove (1998) notes that culture has the potential of being a weapon of resistance and of defining a community's desired future. Dove also notes the rich African history/herstory of resistance to European oppression and exploitation, with women playing important roles whether as individual heroines or as part of mass uprising. Mekatilili wa Menza is such a heroine and she led the Giriama people in their uprising against the British in 1913 and 1914 (Nyamweru and Neil Carrier, 2011). In more recent times, the Nobel Peace laureate and environmentalist Wangari Maathai stood up against autocratic rule in Kenya and led the African continent in planting trees to save the environment (Mungai, 2012). These heroines knew the secret that 'the greatest fear of our oppressor is that we will become conscious, independent and united' (Hilliard, 1995 cited Dove, 1998, p. 534). A community that marginalizes its women, marginalizes half of itself and can only suffer the consequences of reduced strength.

Gender issues are not just about women but about relationships between men and women. African men in Africa and diaspora have faced challenges as colonisation and modernity have undermined their masculinity (Mungai and Pease, 2009). Akbar (1991) suggests that African men need to emulate their African and African American heroes who were responsible for themselves and their communities. They need to take pride in their culture and history and work towards transforming themselves and their communities. Black feminists challenge African men to adopt progressive black masculinities that recognize race and

gender issues faced by black men but insist men must also renounce violence against women, be caring, responsible and value black women as equal partners (Collins, 2006; Mutua, 2006). Mutua does not reject Akbar's call for progressive masculinities but faults him for not addressing the relationships between men and women.

Afrocentric Social Work and a Vision for the Future

The process of decolonization is central to the Afrocentric paradigm when one contends that decolonization of the mind is a much longer process than political decolonization. Maathai (2009) argues that the effect of colonization is still affecting the thinking of the African people where they regard former colonizers' values and knowledge as superior, even when it is inappropriate for their circumstances. Ngugi (1986) also argues for a process of reclaiming African cultural knowledge including names and languages. Decolonization is a core area of Afrocentric research interest (Bankole, 2006). Nearly all countries in Africa are politically independent but the issue of decolonizing the mental attitudes that continue to regard European ideas and culture as superior or better remains (Maathai, 2009; Mungai, 2012; Ngugi, 1986). The only question is which African values and culture when there are so many cultures and the traditional ones have been forgotten (Bar-On, 1999).

In the Afrocentric paradigm a hybrid based on the best aspects of African traditional cultures, including those of ancient civilisations like Nuba and ancient Kemet/Egypt are adopted (Asante, 2007; Bankole, 2006; Schiele, 2000). There is also an argument that in reality the core of these values are still evident even among African Americans after centuries of removal from the continent (Schiele, 2000). Other scholars have identified Ubuntu as the moral philosophical foundations of an African renaissance (Charles, 2007; Mungai, 2014a). The foundations of Ubuntu are identical to those of the Afrocentric paradigm in that they arise from the African traditions. The major difference is that the Afrocentric paradigm has received more academic research attention by the African American scholars. The principles of interconnectedness and collective identity are common to both approaches. Ubuntu's emphasis on humanity suggests that whatever is good for humanity is Ubuntu and whatever harms humanity is against Ubuntu. Caring for the environment, for example, is Ubuntu because harming the environment will eventually harm humanity. A rational western scientific approach introduced to Africa by Europeans has had many benefits but one harmful effect is to introduce the concept that nothing is sacred. The

sacred forests and animals that could not be harmed lost that protection (Maathai, 2009). The ecologists now recognise that the concept of sacredness and interconnectedness of all beings, as found in the African and other non-European traditions, is the only way to protect planet Earth (Suzuki and McConnell, 1997). Farmers, social scientist and social workers and biological scientists can benefit from traditional knowledge in protecting the biodiversity that is being lost to the detriment of quality of life for all (Mungai, 2014b). Ubuntu represents the best in African philosophical thought that can be traced back to the ancient African civilisations including the ancient Kemet/Egyptian concept of Ma'at with an emphasis on harmony and interconnectedness of all beings (Nabudere, 2007). Ubuntu is consistent with social work's core values that hold that every human being has a unique and inherent equal worth. Ubuntu stands for unqualified respect for all humanity which is considered indivisible (Bangura, 2005). The search for indigenization of social work in Africa clearly leads to Afrocentric social work and Ubuntu.

Conclusion

It is clear from the discussion in this paper that Afrocentric social work is one well-developed answer to the quest for indigenization of social work in Africa and in working with people of African descent. There is a strong body of work to guide this process but it has predominantly come from North America so there is a need for other regions of the world to conduct their own feasibility studies. There are concerns about centeredness and whether that is a form of ethnocentrism. This is rejected and it is argued in the Afrocentric paradigm that having different cultural centres explaining what is relevant to them adds to better understanding of human issues (Asante, 2007; Schiele, 1997). Other criticism refers to past tendencies to neglect issues of gender, class and knowledge generated elsewhere (Mungai, 2008). These criticisms have been taken well and there have been improvements in theorizations of these issues.

Another area of contention is how in a diverse place as the Africa continent could be considered as being a unit or expected to have one culture that is also practised by African diaspora. There is an undeniable cultural diversity but what the Afrocentric paradigm and Ubuntu asserts is that there are some commonalities in the core philosophical thoughts and beliefs. The existence of African Union, its forerunner the Organisation of African Unity and the Pan-African movement of people

from the African continent and African diaspora suggest there is a strong affinity between these people. That there have been many wars between countries, within countries and violence within families would seem to dispel the 'myth' of harmony. However, there are also many examples of family members supporting each other, communities working together and countries hosting large numbers of refugees. This later narrative is the one that needs to be encouraged and used as the foundation of a prosperous future that promotes healing from centuries of violence, slavery, exploitation and decades of post colonial misrule.

The Afrocentric paradigm and the concepts of *Sankofa* and Ubuntu show that Africa already has the foundations for indigenization of social work. Indigenization is an ongoing endeavour and as social work spreads to different parts of the world it will be enriched by these different cultures. Other countries like India and China have rich cultural traditions and indigenization of social work there would mean social work theories and frameworks would be centred on those cultures, the history of the people there and their authentic experiences. Core social work values **based values** such commitment to our shared humanity and concern for the disadvantaged in the society will be identified and any cultural differences celebrated rather than feared. The concern for human rights, justice and social development, can be shared values, but how these are realized will be grounded in local situations.

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