How do current social work practices in Southern Africa reflect a continuation of colonial ideologies? A decolonized framework to empower communities

Miképpen tükrözi a szociális munka gyakorlata a gyarmati ideológiák továbbélését Dél-Afrikában? Dekolonizáció a közösségi empowerment szolgálatában

KATRINA ADRIANNE STANGROOM

Katrina Adrianne Stangroom: independent researcher (Pécs, Hungary); katrina.stangroom@gmail.com

Stangroom, Katrina Adrianne: *független kutató (Magyarország, Pécs); katrina.stangroom@gmail.com*

Abstract

The impact of colonialism continues to shape social work practices in Southern Africa, where Western ideologies remain dominant in education, policy, and intervention strategies. Despite the profession's commitment to social justice and community empowerment, its foundation in Eurocentric frameworks marginalizes Indigenous knowledge systems and often fails to address the specific needs of African societies. This study critically examines the persistence of colonial structures within social work and explores the necessity of a decolonized framework that prioritizes culturally relevant approaches. Decolonization is not a rejection of Western theories but a recalibration that centers African epistemologies, traditions, and values in professional practice. By integrating Indigenous philosophies such as Ubuntu, which emphasizes collective well-being, interconnectedness, and mutual responsibility, social work can develop contextually appropriate, empowering and sustainable solutions.

Keywords: culturally competent social work, decolonization, indigenization, Ubuntu, colonial legacies, community empowerment

Absztrakt

A kolonizáció hatásai mindmáig alakítják a szociális munka gyakorlatát Dél-Afrikában, ahol a nyugati ideológiák változatlanul dominálnak az oktatásban, a szakpolitikákban, és a beavatkozási stratégiákban. Bár e hivatás elkötelezett a társadalmi igazságosság és a közösségek felhatalmazása iránt, alapjait tekintve eurocentrikus, és ez marginalizálja az őshonos lakosság tudásait, és gyakran nem tud válaszolni az afrikai társadalmak speciális szükségleteire sem. A tanulmány kritikai nézőpontból vizsgálja azoknak a gyarmati struktúráknak a továbbélését, amelyek a szociális munkára hatnak, és vizsgálja egy dekolonizált keret szükségességét, amely a kulturálisan releváns megközelítéseket helyezi előtérbe. A dekolonizáció nem jelenti a nyugati elméletek elutasítását, csupán ezek hozzáigazítását az afrikai episztemológiákhoz, hagyományokhoz, és szakmai értékrendhez. Az olyan őslakos filozófiák integrálása, mint amilyen

például az Ubuntu, amely a kollektív jóllétet, összekapcsoltságot, kölcsönös felelősséget hangsúlyozza, elősegíti a szociális munka területén a kontextuálisan is helytálló, megerősítő és fenntartható megoldások kifejlesztését.

Kulcsszavak: *kulturálisan érzékeny szociális munka, dekolonizáció, őslakosok képviselete, Ubuntu, gyarmati örökség, közösségi empowerment*

Introduction

In the last century, social work practice gained recognition internationally. Social work, as defined in the *Global definition of social work* by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) is:

"a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social sciences, humanities and Indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing. The above definition may be amplified at national and/or regional levels" (International Federation of Social Workers, 2014).

As inclusive as the global definition tries to be, there is no single understanding that can be applied internationally. This is because the practice, education, and research of social work are highly context dependent. Each context is shaped by unique histories and knowledge systems. It is, therefore, important to look at the what's, why's and how's of social work in different regions to understand how best to shape education, research and practice.

In the African context, social work has a unique identity. There are two reasons for this; the first is that it is made of developing countries with diverse and multifaceted social issues. Social workers' commitment to promoting social development and social change, as stated in the global definition, means that the profession is extremely valuable to these nations and plays a critical role in shaping the future for the people. The second is that the formal social work profession is rooted in colonial practices that center around Eurocentric ideologies that do not align with local needs. The profession acts as a tool for the West-to-rest ideals, prioritizing Western perspectives and perpetuating the idea that Africa needs to be "saved" by something other than herself. This, in turn, marginalizes African knowledge systems, cultures, identities, and values and does not provide them a space in the global conversation.

Decolonization theory offers a critical lens for re-examining and dismantling these legacies, advocating for the reclamation and re-centering of African knowledge systems, cultural practices, and language within social work. As Tusasiirwe (2023) notes, decolonization within social work is not a rejection of Western knowledge, but rather a recalibration that prioritizes African epistemic traditions before extending to external sources. Decolonization involves two core actions: first, challenging and decentering the hegemony of Western worldviews that often lack relevance or applicability in African contexts, and second, prioritizing Indigenous knowledge systems that better resonate with the lived experiences of African communities. Through this approach, social work in Southern Africa can move toward models that genuinely support community empowerment, embedding the values, practices, and traditions intrinsic to African societies.

Methodology and spatial focus

This research is based on a systemic literature review that aims to explore the colonial history of Southern Africa and what role social work plays in the continuation of colonial legacies. It considers how the adoption of a decolonized framework provides the pathway for empowerment, cultural affirmation, and more contextually appropriate support systems for Southern African communities.

The primary database used for source collection was Google Scholar, which enabled access to a broad range of academic literature, including journal articles, books, and gray literature. Foundational texts, including works by Tusasiirwe (2023) and other key authors in the field of African social work and decolonization theory, served as core references. These were used to initiate a snowball sampling strategy, whereby additional sources were identified by examining citations within relevant literature and tracking the thematic continuity across the texts. The keywords used in the search process included: Southern Africa (and the affiliated countries), colonialism, postcolonial, decolonization, indigenization, Afrocentric social work, and Ubuntu. These terms were selected to reflect the central themes of the study and were adjusted as needed based on recurring concepts encountered during the review process.

The research was guided by several interrelated questions: How has colonialism shaped the Southern African region? Where does social work fit into this context? What does decolonization theory propose? How might Ubuntu serve as a philosophical and practical tool in decolonizing social work? And finally, how did traditional African communities historically support their vulnerable members in ways that align with what is now defined as social work? Materials included in this review were selected based on their direct engagement with themes of colonialism, postcolonialism, neocolonialism, decolonization, indigenization, and social work. While the primary geographic focus remained on Southern Africa, theoretical literature from other regions or Indigenous contexts were included when the conceptual frameworks proved relevant to the Southern African experience. For theoretical and historical literature, older sources were included due to their continued relevance in decolonial discourse. In contrast, empirical data was restricted to sources published between 2019 and 2025, to ensure the use of the most current statistics and social indicators.

Figure 1: *Map of Southern Africa*

(Own source, created using https://www.mapchart.net/africa.html)

For this paper, Southern Africa is defined as the countries of Angola, Botswana, Eswatini, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. Southern Africa is unique within the African continent due to its history of a large-scale European settlement, where settler populations intended to establish permanent societies. This settler-colonial model, although somewhat mirrored in Kenya, stood in contrast to most of Africa, where European presence was limited to administration and extraction. Settlers in Southern Africa did not integrate with Indigenous communities, but instead built systems designed to maintain their dominance despite remaining a demographic minority. The legacies of these systems remain embedded in modern institutions, including the social work profession (Noyoo, 2021). Effective social work requires an in-depth understanding of local realities, and in Southern Africa, this includes acknowledging the colonial past.

Colonial history

Colonization was the occupation and control of both people and territories by Western powers, executed through exploitative and dehumanizing regimes. Colonization went beyond land occupation; it dismantled the pre-existing ways of life, beliefs, and practices, imposing the colonizers' vision of what they believed African societies should be. Alfred (2004) stated that colonialism was "a fundamental denial of our freedom to be indigenous in a meaningful way". The colonizers played the role of the creator, while the colonized were forced to consume the imposed foreign culture and systems (Chivaura & Mararike, 1998). This deep-rooted occupation could not be undone simply by granting independence, as the legacies of colonization continue to shape African societies long after formal liberation.

Colonization spanned the entirety of the African continent, leaving most of the people disadvantaged and subordinate to the European minority. In 1870, less than one-tenth of Africa was under colonial rule, however, by the end of 1914, less than one-tenth was not. Fueled by the turn of the Industrial Revolution, there was significant interest in Africa's natural resources; 'the scramble of Africa' was the period in which European powers divided and colonized 40 African countries. Major powers and territories in Southern Africa during this time included Britain (Botswana, Malawi, South Africa, Zambia, Zimbabwe), Portugal (Angola, Mozambique), and Germany (Namibia) (Chamberlain, 2013). The intensity and duration of colonialism varied across the region; Angola, South Africa and Mozambique were colonized for centuries. In contrast, Botswana, Malawi, Zambia, and Zimbabwe were under colonial rule for less than a century, and Namibia was colonized for just over one hundred years.

The colonizers used multiple means to acquire and maintain control. Open violence was used to instill fear, establish dominance and suppress resistance. However, subtler forms of manipulation were also employed, such as treaties and economic pressure. Through negotiations and agreements, colonial powers sought to legitimize their presence and authority in the region while exploiting the local population's lack of familiarity with legal concepts and foreign languages. The indigenous economies were weakened, disrupting local trade networks and allowing European systems to replace them, creating a lasting dependence on the occupying power (Kuper, 1964). Additionally, the division of the territories did not consider existing societies and cultures, dividing tribes and combining hostile groups, thereby paving the way for future conflicts (Guest, 2004).

The complex tapestry of methods used to control colonies extended past economic and territorial domination. Eurocentric views of precolonial Africa and its Indigenous populations

were distorted, enforcing the narrative that Africans were inferior, primitive, and barbaric, and without civilization or history. They believed it was their responsibility to "enlighten" and "civilize" the "backward" people. "Enlightenment" was achieved by implementing Western religious and educational systems. To the Western man, a place without Christianity was a place that worshiped the devil, and all the traditional African practices were seen to be witchcraft and Juju (Adjepong, 2000). The role of these belief systems was to rationalize and legitimize European occupation. However, it led to the paradoxical state of the African people, who both depended on and feared the Europeans while adopting a European god. Thus, disconnecting from indigenous culture and learning that it was inferior, or worse yet, that it did not exist.

Europeans integrated Africa into international trade, introducing technologies such as railways and mining techniques, and developing roads that positively influenced economic growth. The rise in economic activity cannot be entirely ascribed to colonization, as in some places signs of development were already at play. Before the colonial era, the Tswana people displayed the ability to expand institutions and negotiate with foreign powers. However, the Tswana-led advancements came to a halt during the colonial period; chiefs, and elites focused their efforts on resistance rather than development (Heldring & Robinson, 2012). Therefore, the benefits of colonization cannot be considered without questioning the direction societies would have developed without it. Although it may have introduced systems and technologies Africans did not have, it was coupled with land dispossession, labor and resource exploitation, loss of sovereignty, extreme inequality and poverty.

Neo-colonialism

Colonialism is not confined to a particular historical period and the notion that colonialism is outdated and no longer operates in contemporary Africa disregards the ongoing legacies of colonial frameworks, such as economic exploitation, cultural hegemony, and neocolonialism. Neo-colonization, coined by Kwame Nkrumah, exposes the system in which foreign powers manipulate the internal affairs of independent nations through economic, political, and cultural pressures (Tiger & Nkrumah, 1966). At independence, formerly colonized nations adopted the systems that the colonizers operated and did not establish autonomous modes of policymaking. Rather, they follow international and foreign models. In this process, international institutions have the upper hand in critical and strategic decision-making, shaping policies that often favor external interests over local needs (Okafor, 2020). Additionally, dependency and reliance on the more economically developed countries are maintained through conditional aid programs, where the resources can only be accessed if they are used according to a foreign agenda that prioritizes the interests of the donor country (Yadav et al., 2023).

Beyond the political and economic landscapes, colonial attitudes are reflected in knowledge production and psyche. Knowledge systems are an important way in which the West imposes superiority. Indigenous knowledge systems were suppressed during colonial times, leading to the establishment of knowledge hierarchies that favor Western scholarship over African ones. As a result, the ownership of research outputs remains predominantly in the hands of Western scholars and institutions, sidelining African contributions (Connell et al., 2016). The long perseverance of such superiority-inferiority hierarchies has significant and long-standing psychological consequences. The term "colonization of the mind" refers to the internalized oppression and struggle for authentic identity (Oelofsen, 2015). The psychological effects spill into contemporary issues seen today such as social fragmentation, political instability, and

economic dependency. The legacy of colonialism contributes to a sense of disempowerment and a struggle to assert autonomy over cultural narratives, leading to ongoing challenges in nation-building and social cohesion.

Social work in Africa: A history of professional imperialism

Social work in the African context is still a young profession, despite a long history of missionaries from Europe pre-dating colonialism who acted as informal social workers, it was only formally recognized during the colonial period of the 1960s. Therefore, it is critical to examine social work practice and education from a colonial lens. In contrast to Western societies, where social work arose to address issues caused by industrialization, urbanization, and modernization, the evolution of social work in African nations was shaped by colonialism, imperialism, and racial oppression. The welfare systems were established to keep the peace, not for the benefit of the colonized but to strengthen the control of the colonizers (Spitzer, 2014; Kaseke, 1989). Social work values, practice, and education mirrored the activities of the colonizing power, adopting curative and remedial approaches rather than preventive techniques. The social ills were, therefore, created and cured by the same system that sidelined the Indigenous cultures.

Roach and Midgley (1983) identify professional imperialism as the process whereby the West imposes its professional standards, practices, and models on other nations, disregarding local contexts, needs, and cultural differences, with the assumption of universal applicability. With that being the case, it is essential to question and identify the shortcomings of the Western social work theories and practices in the African context and beyond. Western models follow a narrow scope and treat the symptoms of social issues, not targeting the root cause but rather tending to individual pathologies. This emphasizes individualistic philosophies that are not harmonious with Indigenous ideologies, but rather reinforce capitalist and modern societal values associated with the West. Furthermore, local customs and practices come second to international and national policies and conventions, and with top-down implementation methods, neglecting local needs and strengthening hierarchical relationships. The magnitude of social problems produces a unique environment that renders the Western methods of casework and reporting inefficient (Chitereka, 2009). Lastly, despite social work's recognition as a global profession, at a local level there is still a lack of translation into Indigenous languages, and many of the practices that are said to be social work were incompatible with the cultural traditions (Tusasiirwe, 2023).

Social issues

There are lasting legacies of inequality in Africa that can be directly attributed to colonialism, especially in settler colonies, where the colonizer did not leave after independence but stayed to benefit from the system. In South Africa, the minority white population, roughly 8%, own 78% of documented farmland, in total, 50% of the land (Sihlobo, 2022). Racial representation in tertiary education also highlights the persisting inequalities faced in South Africa. Higher education is a means to acquire specialized knowledge to enter the workforce, it contributes to both the reproduction of existing social structures and the potential for societal change. According to the South African Institute of Race Relations report on higher education, only 5.6% of Black people aged 20 and older have a graduate, postgraduate or doctoral degree,

whereas for whites and Indians it is 25.2% and 20.3%, respectively (Institute of Race Relations, 2024). Although there has been a significant increase of black participation, there are still disparities in representation of racial groups that will influence future workforce opportunities.

Beyond racial inequalities, there are a multitude of other social problems the continent is facing including poverty, food insecurity, unemployment, health crises, gender inequality, and corruption. According to the Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) as of 2023 (United Nations Development Programme & Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative, 2023), the region with the highest multidimensional poverty was Sub-Saharan Africa. As of 2022, Africa had the highest share of people living below the extreme poverty of 2.15 U.S. dollars a day (Statista, 2024, March 22). Moreover, more than one-fifth of the population of sub-Saharan Africa is undernourished (Statista, 2024, October 10). Southern Africa held the highest recorded rate of unemployment on the continent, estimated at 28.6% (Statista, 2023).

HIV and malaria have the highest recorded rates in Africa. As of 2023, approximately 7.7 million people in South Africa were HIV positive, with Mozambique reporting 2.4 million and 150,000 new cases a year (Statista, 2024, July 29). In 2022 Africa accounted for 93.5% of the reported malaria cases and 95% of the malaria deaths (Statista, 2024, March 8). Gender-based violence (GBV) has also been reported to be an increasing problem. Not all crimes are reported, so the real number may even be higher (Govender, 2023).

The overview of statistics highlighted provides an insight into the severity and complexity of social issues in Africa. All areas are vulnerable to environmental and social adverse conditions. Some may be attributed to colonialism and neocolonial structures directly, whereas others are a result of underdevelopment, oppression, and the legacy of exploitative practices. The continued impact of these historical factors manifests in ways that stifle social and economic development. A decolonized approach to the direct by-products of colonization and the structural practices that keep these legacies in place is crucial in empowering Africa with the autonomy and self-determination needed for sustainable development.

Social work practice

Social workers in Southern Africa operate across a wide range of settings, including national and provincial government departments, local municipalities, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), hospitals, clinics, treatment centers, schools and educational institutions, residential care facilities, workplace and occupational environments, corporate sectors, community-based organizations, mental health services, and private practice (South African Council for Social Service Professions, 2023).

In Southern Africa, social work can be structured around two models: developmental social work and clinical social work. Developmental social work is rooted in social justice, poverty alleviation, and the promotion of human rights through community participation and empowerment (Gray & Lombard, 2022). In contrast, clinical social work focuses on psychosocial support and mental health services that follow a more individualistic Western-oriented, and therapy-based practice (Van Breda & Addinall, 2020). As both models continue to operate within frameworks originally shaped by Western theories, there is a growing recognition that meaningful, contextually relevant practice must reconcile these models with Indigenous knowledge systems and local realities to create more inclusive and effective social work.

The extensive and demanding nature of social issues in Southern Africa requires the most efficient methods of social work practice possible. This requires enough trained and specialized professionals. The pressure on education models to equip professionals means that Western theories alone are not enough. Social work education in Africa struggles with contextualizing Western theories in local environments, as they do not align. Although there is an effort to indigenize curricula, there is still a reliance on Western epistemology with theory heavy programs imported from the Global North. The social workers that participated in Canavera's (2019) study emphasized the need to have specialized programs rooted in the local contexts, as a general impression emerged that the disconnect between education and practice left them under-prepared to face the realities of the profession. The study also observed that additional field training failed to address local needs and was mostly suited to equip professionals to practice on behalf of international NGOs or international bodies such as the UN.

A consequence of the Eurocentric curriculum is that it prepares students to work and practice in the Western welfare systems, where their knowledge and skills are more applicable and often include better pay and working conditions than those in African countries (Kurevakwesu, 2017). This brain drain of experts places higher pressure and workloads on those who remain with increasing work-related stress, burnout, workload fatigue, and a leave many vulnerable groups without sufficient care. In South Africa, there was an estimated shortage of 52,500 social workers for the Children's Amendment Bill (CAB) alone (Opperman, 2018).

A study from Malawi examining social workers in the child protection field highlights the practical challenges from navigating complex community dynamics and perceptions (Sichone, 2019). While both social workers and community members share the common goal of human rights protection and guidance for children, differences in spiritual beliefs, the role of shame, and traditional norms created tensions in how violations were reported and addressed. A core issue was the lack of cultural familiarity on part of some social workers, whose approaches were perceived as detached from local values and lived realities. This disconnect led to polarizing opinions from community members: some viewed them as facilitators and problem-solvers, while others regarded them as intrusive figures crossing cultural boundaries. Similar patterns have been observed in other Southern African countries, where practitioners encounter both shared values and resistance, and must continually work to position themselves as allies rather than enforcers (Mwapaura et al., 2022).

African "social work" practice

Communities had intricate methods of intervention and prevention in areas that now fall under the social works professional responsibility. In African cultures, collective approaches are taken to address social issues; every member has something to add toward the well-being of others (ubuntu). Spirituality and religion are also seen as sources of resilience and hope for many people in Africa, and can be used as a coping mechanism in the face of adversity. A look into two target areas provide examples of the value that these collective systems offer: suicide prevention and elderly care. These examples showcase the inherent strengths and insights within indigenous social work principles. By exploring African social work ideologies at their best, the goal is to identify elements that could enrich global social work through an African

lens. This approach acknowledges that while practical applications may vary, the ideologies offer valuable lessons that merit attention and respect.

The philosophy of Ubuntu

Ubuntu is the African philosophy of "I am because we are." The philosophy translates differently over the African continent, some Southern African translations are Botswana (muthu), Malawi (umunthu), Mozambique (vumuntu), Namibia (omundu), South Africa (ubuntu/botho), Zambia (umunthu/ubuntu) and Zimbabwe (hunhu/unhu/botho/ubuntu). Despite being expressed differently, they all refer to the same belief that the "individual human being is part of a larger and more significant relational, communal, societal, environmental and spiritual world" (Mugumbate, 2020).

Samkange and Samkange (1980) outlined three maxims of the Ubuntu philosophy. The first is human relations, stating that to be human means to respect and acknowledge the humanity of others, building kind and courteous relationships. Sanctity of life states that preservation of life should be prioritized in all matters, especially in the areas concerning wealth. Lastly, people-centered status highlights that a leader's power comes from the people they serve. This applies not only to leaders, but also to professionals like social workers who hold influence over clients and communities.

Ubuntu-based social work is rooted in the principles and values of ubuntu, providing a theoretical, educational, and practical approach to decolonize social work. Ubuntu practices honor collective humanity and community-centered values. The ubuntu philosophy emphasizes teamwork, collaboration, and a strong sense of group belonging, whether in the family, clan, or broader community. This approach upholds human dignity, encourages self-respect, and insists on mutual contribution to community and national development. For social work in Africa, Ubuntu offers a valuable framework for academic and practical purposes, guiding interventions that nurture human potential across individual, family, group, and organizational levels. Embedding ubuntu within social work curricula and practice can enhance practitioners' competencies and techniques (Mupedziswa et al., 2019).

The importance of the Ubuntu-social work was recognized in Zimbabwe (unhu). In the Zimbabwean Code of Ethics for Social Work (International Federation of Social Workers, 2012), the ubuntu agenda is highlighted as one of three core mission statements, "promoting social justice, unhu/Ubuntu, human rights, positive change, problem-solving, and improvements in individual and community relationships and the development of society in general." It proceeds to clarify that a core value of the profession to be adopted by all social workers is that it "recognizes and promotes unhu/ubuntu, and appreciates that inherent in each person is dignity and values, and that each person deserves respect and that person exists within a cultural setting and a community and that the individual and community shape, influence and benefit from each other." Incorporating indigenous knowledge into an official doctrine is a major step to the decolonization and indigenization of the social work profession, it not only acts as a step towards the recognition and validation of Indigenous practice, but also recenters it as a valuable source of empowerment.

Suicide prevention and mental health

Suicide prevention and mental health in Africa is strongly rooted in the Ubuntu philosophy. Feelings of hopelessness, despair, lack of belonging and loneliness that trigger suicidal ideations are met with values of interconnectedness and community support. The values highlight the importance of the other in relation to the self, the needs of others before the needs of the individual, celebrating and learning from others' strengths, and ensuring well-being through acts of service, with special aid to those suffering loss. Central to Ubuntu are the themes of respect for the living and the dead and the interconnectedness of the two. The elders, who are wise with years, are valued as sources of knowledge, and are an important pillar in collective problem-solving, taking the pressure off the individual. Spirituality provides hope and peace, encouraging the acceptance of circumstances and asking for help. It acknowledges that success and failure are related, as life and death are, and are essential aspects of the human experience that should be embraced as lessons for the self and the community. Rituals such as cleansing are a practice that can help forgiveness, healing, reconciliation and the restoration of life. They can also be used to maintain ideologies and deter people from rebellious action. Taking a life, even one's own, is looked down upon and, therefore, bodies of the people who have died by suicide are not prayed for nor touched (Tusasiirwe, 2023). Addressing the needs of the collective, and seeing oneself as a moving part within that collective, removes the pressures of individualistic ways of life and provides purpose through authentic and connected relationships. The framework applied to suicide prevention is an important source for all mental health treatment.

Care of the older people

> "The old woman looks after the child to grow its teeth, and the young one in turn looks after the old woman when she loses her teeth." (African proverb)

Care of older people in the African culture is a community-based and honored responsibility. It is shaped by the value of reciprocal, interdependent and intergenerational relationships. It is a cultural, spiritual and moral obligation to care for one's parents and guardians. Caregiving responsibilities extend beyond the immediate family to include all individuals who have contributed to a person's growth and success, reflecting the cultural values of interconnectedness and reciprocating past support. Responsibility for older people, therefore, is a community activity. Older people are valuable members of African culture, as their lived experience is seen as a rich source of knowledge and wisdom. Their role becomes that of providing advice, guidance, and counsel to younger generations (Tusasiirwe, 2023).

Child protection

In traditional African societies, the care and protection of children is not seen as the sole responsibility of biological parents, but rather as a collective obligation embedded within the extended family and broader community. The extended family system consisting of grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and other kin serves as a resilient social safety net that steps in when children lose one or both parents. In cases of orphanhood, children are commonly absorbed into the households of relatives without legal formalities, retaining their names, identities, and connections to both birth and caregiving families (Tusasiirwe, 2023). This

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approach to caregiving avoids the alienation often associated with institutional care or Western-style adoption, and instead fosters a sense of belonging, continuity, and cultural identity. Importantly, this system is not only relational but moral and educational. Extended families and elders take on the role of nurturing, disciplining, and socializing children, while preserving cultural values, spiritual traditions, and moral norms (Mawusi, 2013). This entire structure is underpinned by the African philosophy of Ubuntu. It ensures that no child is ever truly alone, and that caregiving is a shared duty, guided by a communal ethic of care and solidarity. In contexts where state systems may be underdeveloped or inaccessible, this traditional model continues to provide a sustainable, contextually rooted framework for child protection that centers the dignity and interconnectedness of every member of the community.

A decolonized framework

Given the history and the limitation of Western practice and the richness of Indigenous methods available but overlooked, there needs to be a call to decolonize social work. Decolonization is the process by which colonized people actively work to free themselves from the beliefs and systems imposed by colonial powers, aiming to reclaim their cultural identity and autonomy. In the context of social work practice it requires questioning, challenging, disrupting and unlearning the Eurocentric ways of practice to consciously break away from colonial patterns. It does not mean a complete rejection of Western knowledge, but rather a critical analysis of what is relevant and how it can be applied in the local contexts, rather than a blind mirroring of imperialist bodies (Tusasiirwe, 2023).

Indigenization is a valuable tool of decolonization; it is the recentering and rediscovery of indigenous traditions, beliefs, languages, and practices. It acknowledges the existence and validity of indigenous and traditional ways of helping that were devalued during colonial rule, and looks to them to find efficient models for localized help (Gray & Hetherington, 2013). Decolonization advocates for African knowledge to be recognized on a global scale, sharing its knowledge, so that others can learn from it, and redefining the inequality in knowledge production where Africa is seen only as a consumer (Hlatshwayo & Alexander, 2021). Decolonization and indigenization of the social work profession is particularly important, as not reflecting Indigenous peoples' ways of doing and understanding may lead them to internalize a deficit narrative that their ways are inferior or irrelevant. Embracing the indigenous ways of knowing within social work is essential to foster genuine empowerment and cultural respect, reducing the risk of internalized oppression and the continuation of the colonial mindset (Tusasiirwe, 2023).

Indigenization

Indigenous knowledge refers to the holistic, context-specific, and culturally rooted wisdom developed through communities' deep, sustained connections with their environment, social structures, and spiritual practices. This form of knowledge integrates ecological, social, and ethical values, reflecting the experiences, traditions, and perspectives of Indigenous peoples (Gray & Hetherington, 2013). Indigenization in the Southern African context requires integrating African philosophical traditions that inform the understanding and resolution of societal problems.

In Africa, kinship can be established either through bloodline or through a totem. Totems are a sacred part of the environment, be it an animal, bird or plant species that clan members identify with and protect. They represent an interconnectedness with the environment, animals, and humans "regarding power, wisdom, spirits, respect, trust, and understanding" (Makgopa, 2019, p. 1). Different totems are allocated to clans, and in some cases, have been passed down from the beginning of their culture, spanning multiple generations. In Southern Africa, totems can be found in ethnic groups such as Shona in Zimbabwe, Zulu, and Ndebele in South Africa, and the Herero in Botswana and Namibia (Katsande, 2023). They are a symbolic representation of the strengths, weaknesses, and aspirations of the people. For example, the totem of the African elephant strengthens communal and caring practices. Totems also have spiritual significance; they are believed to guide and protect clans people and play a crucial role in promoting societal ethics. For instance, swearing by one's totem after committing a crime is believed to bring bad luck not only to the individual but also to their family. They, therefore, play a key role in indigenous social work and can be used to aid action in the community.

In Africa, spirituality is an essential part of understanding the way that people perceive human behavior. In Zimbabwe, taboos (zviera) play a critical role in collective morality as they outline a code of conduct. Taboos contribute to the preservation of relationships and the conservation of human and environmental health. Breaching these rules is believed to invite a negative reaction from the spirit world (Chemhuru & Masaka, 2010). Two important conclusions can be drawn from this; the first is that in addressing social issues it is important to understand the way that Indigenous people view them, which in the Zimbabwean context is attributed to spiritual karma. The second is to understand the strength of the moral code and ethics that exist within traditional cultures.

Indigenization of research

"For until the lion learns how to write, every tale of the hunt will glorify the hunter." (African proverb)

To contribute to knowledge production, the written form of African epistemic tradition is integral to its dissemination into the global intellectual landscape. African knowledge and wisdom are primarily passed through generations via oral and non-written formats. Although there have been attempts to document African knowledge systems and methodologies, there is still a lack of recognition in orature. In academic settings, institutional frameworks favor Western language and written forms of knowledge and often require reference to only written sources, marginalizing oral knowledge and Indigenous scholars. This incorporation of African epistemologies into the global sharing is limited because of the institutional barriers that hinder African scholars from using their indigenous languages and knowledge systems in research conceptualization and dissemination.

The African Journal of Social Work (AJSW) Framework for Classification of Sources and Knowledge OPW-N framework provides a framework for decolonizing knowledge production that recognizes and validates the unique ways knowledge is shared in Indigenous communities (Mugumbate, 2020). The OPW-N framework classifies knowledge into four categories for a holistic system for gathering, organizing, evaluating, and presenting various sources of knowledge. Orature (O-sources) includes oral forms like stories, proverbs, songs,

and poems. Inherited Personal (P-sources) draw from firsthand knowledge shared by elders, family members, and community leaders. Experienced Written (W-sources) comprises documented sources such as books, articles, reports, and archives. New (N-sources) refers to knowledge obtained through systematic research methods, including experiments, interviews, and various analytical studies. This framework emphasizes diverse, culturally rooted knowledge sources.

Indigenization of education

The decolonization of social work education runs parallel to the appeal for the indigenization of knowledge production and the prioritization of local methodologies and languages over foreign frameworks. The reliance on Western theory in the social work education in Southern Africa sustains colonial values and is a method by which the West can maintain its superiority. Habashi (2005) stated that decolonization in education institutions frees scholars from oppressive conditions, providing them with the academic freedom to reconstruct and implement culturally relevant discourse.

Indigenization of education is the critical analysis of curricula that challenges Western dominance and then reviews and selects only what is relevant in the local context. It focuses on recentering Indigenous knowledge, culture, and philosophy. Decolonization of social work education is critical in the indigenization of research and practice as educational institutions play a vital role in shaping the values, perspectives, and methodologies used within the profession. By implementing indigenous knowledge and methodologies, educational institutions can cultivate practices that respect and respond to local cultures and needs, countering dominant Western paradigms that are not-fit-for-use in African contexts. Practices such as Ubuntu-social work can be used as educational models that better align with African realities and values, enriching education and supporting more effective and ethical social work. Indigenization of Language and Practice

The most essential tool for indigenization is the use of language. Hall and Hall (2002) write that culture is communication and communication is a threefold system of words, material entities and behavior. Understanding how these interact to form the fabric of cultural reality helps display the importance of language within the helping professions. Language does more than communicate meaning; it retains cultural significance. Use of a foreign language has limitations in both education and practice.

English is the primary language of instruction across most higher education institutions in Southern Africa, sidelining indigenous languages in their curricula, which are foundational to cultural identity and should be prioritized in education (Makhubele et al., 2018). Language in the social profession is how meaningful relationships are made. African languages are saturated with proverbs and metaphors, often losing their essence in translation. Linguistic differences can, therefore, lead to a bidirectional disconnect between community knowledge and professional practice. The social worker may not be able to authentically engage with clients, and clients will be estranged from the methods of the practitioner. In many African languages, the term social work, and social work practice and research lack direct translations. For example, the concept and translation of the term "interview" has negative cultural and historical connotations and may be perceived as an interrogation. Therefore, for meaningful and culturally relevant social work to take place, social workers need to, at the very least, have a

member of their team who is fluent in the indigenous languages to prevent the disconnects (Tusasiirwe, 2023).

Indigenization of ethics

Ethical practice is a core pillar of the social work profession that governs practice, education, and research. However, local institutions and governments model their ethical frameworks on Western methodologies, leaving them unable to navigate the complexities of indigenous research ethics (Mugumbate & Mtetwa, 2019). All communities have ethical codes they follow; whether documented or not, there are collective agreements that maintain the harmony of human relationships. Unlike Western models that are based on individualistic philosophies, African ethics outline a more collective approach grounded in ubuntu. For example, confidentiality, which is at the core of Western social work ethics, is contested in societies that practice communal and collective living (Ubuntu). In African communities, friends, families, and neighbors believe it to be a cultural norm to be involved in each other's lives, and a practice that aligns with confidential protocols might be seen as disrespectful and a violation of community ethics.

Acknowledging indigenous languages and cultural differences but not integrating them into the research procedure and processes leads to cosmetic indigeneity (Chilisa et al., 2016). To combat this, Mugumbate and Mtetwa (2019) outlined the need for fully indigenous ethics committees "to review research proposals and ensure that the accepted protocols are followed and also to promote confidentiality, voluntary participation, risk avoidance, truthfulness, informed consent, including consent to publication of results or storage of responses and avoidance of deception."

It is important to note that respecting the diversity of ethical frameworks that exist should not be an excuse for human rights violations in the name of culture. The Global Social Work Statement of Ethical Principles (GSWSEP) notes that these nuances may silence social workers when faced with human rights issues. To overcome this, the GSWSEP offered a human dignity approach where human dignity is the guiding principle ensuring that every individual or collective deserves honor and respect. The social worker's role is thus not to support or take part in any activity that might violate human dignity, even in the name of diversity (Sewpaul & Henrickson, 2019).

Case study from Zimbabwe: The Friendship Bench

The Friendship Bench in Zimbabwe is an approach to mental health care that is the meeting point between theory and culturally relevant application. The Friendship Bench was developed in response to the shortage of mental health professionals and instead looked to train grandmothers, who were already trusted members of the community, with skills to deliver problem-solving therapy in accordance with their informal roles of guidance and counsel. The problem-solving therapy was developed in the Shona language using a combination of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) and concepts drawn from the local cultures (Chibanda et al., 2011). Common mental health disorders, depression, and anxiety in European and American practice, were translated into concepts understood in the local language and culture: thinking too much — kufungisisa, deep sadness — kusuwisisa, and painful heart moyo unorwadza. The therapeutic techniques were also translated, opening of the mind — kuvhura pfungwa, uplifting

— kusimudzira, and strengthening — kusimbisa. Since its inception in 2007, the Friendship Bench has expanded across Zimbabwe and similar programs have been developed globally; strength-based care in a localized and indigenized way (Chibanda, 2018). The Friendship Bench is an example of a successful indigenous and localized framework, improving quality of life through mental health services delivered in familiar environments. It does not try to replicate Western therapeutic practices, but redesigns them to be culturally relevant and sustainable.

Case study from Zambia: The Girl Power Program, Chibombo District

The Girl Power Program in Chibombo District, Zambia, is a practical example of a community-driven, culturally embedded model for child protection. Implemented by Plan International, the program uses Community-Based Child Protection Mechanisms, which include local committees, traditional leaders, teachers, and parents working collaboratively to prevent and respond to school-related gender-based violence. Committees such as Anti-Pregnancy and Child Marriage Committees monitor cases of early pregnancy and marriage, intervene through local authority structures, and support the reintegration of affected girls back into education. The community-based model is effective because it is readily accessible and integrated into the daily lives of the people they serve. It builds on existing cultural systems and structures that are widely respected and trusted and helps to preserve the community's shared values and traditional ways of life. Rather than imposing external frameworks, the program strengthens what already exists and engages with local leadership and customary norms to drive protective action (Chilwalo, 2020). It emphasizes child protection as a collective responsibility, rooted in relationships, mutual care, and communal accountability.

Conclusion

Colonization involved the imposition of Western ideologies, systems, and institutions on African societies. Even post-independence, the influence of these foreign frameworks persist, local contexts are overlooked, and Western epistemologies remain dominant. The enduring impacts of colonization continue to affect Southern Africa, shaping and contributing to various social issues. Social work, as a profession committed to individual well-being and social change, is particularly impacted by colonial legacies. Rooted in practices developed in the Global North, social work inadvertently maintains colonial ideologies by sidelining Indigenous cultural beliefs and practices.

A decolonized social work framework challenges western theories as the default, actively seeking to revive and recenter indigenous practices and perspectives. It is a process that is ongoing and requires continuous learning, unlearning and adaptation. Indigenizing social work requires working with communities in their own language, guided by their ethics and traditions. Social workers can be guided by philosophies like Ubuntu, which emphasize community interconnectedness, and provide a useful framework for practice and education. Real empowerment is achieved when individuals are provided the opportunity to exist authentically within their identities, beliefs, and cultural practices.

Substantial research and reflection are essential for the social work profession in Southern Africa. Integrating indigenous values into all areas of practice alongside established theoretical frameworks promotes practices that genuinely empower communities, preserve

cultural identities, and respond adaptively to diverse needs. This principle will support a more holistic and culturally rooted model for social work and community support.

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