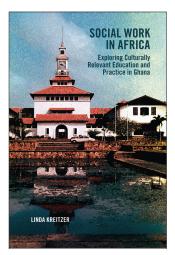# University of Calgary Press

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SOCIAL WORK IN AFRICA: EXPLORING CULTURALLY RELEVANT EDUCATION AND PRACTICE IN GHANA
by Linda Kreitzer
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Making a difference.
Making you think.

III. Hegemony of Western Knowledge[1]

Western social work knowledge is the best knowledge and we deserve the best knowledge, therefore we want western social work taught to us. If we learn western social work knowledge then it will give us the opportunity to go to the U.K., USA and Canada to practice social work. (Comments from social work students when asked if they wish to Africanize their social work curriculum)

A. Imperialism and education

The above statement is an underlying theme among African social workers when I have visited and have spoken to faculty and practitioners at different social work conferences. Is this attitude a deeply engrained colonial idea, civilized versus primitive, which continues to permeate the African continent? Is it a sad reflection of the state of social work in Africa that people want to move away and work in the western world? Is it an inevitable by-product of westernization? As can be seen in the previous chapters, colonization, modernization, and globalization have affected the identity

of a continent both positively and negatively. Deep down there appears to be a continued belief, by Africans and non–Africans, that African traditional knowledge is primitive and western knowledge is civilized.

> The secret that Europeans discovered early in their history is that culture carries rules for thinking, and that if you could impose your culture on your victims you could limit the creativity of their vision, destroying their ability to act with will and intent and in their own interest. The truth is that we are all "intellectuals," all potential visionaries. (Ani, 1994, p. 1)

> Westernization, connotating modernization … pushed aside African traditions, cultural heritage, accumulated knowledge, indigenous practices and the use of their local institutions. Westernization appears not to promote the sense of self–dependency and in short is a process of self–denial. (Mammo, 1999, p. 17)

Ndura (2006), speaking about education in Rwanda, states: "the entire educational system, from the boarding schools to the curriculum, was set up to bring shame to native cultures and aspiration for and honour to European or Western culture" (p. 91). He goes on to say: "Dominant groups have always used education as a major tool for assimilating and even subjugating dominated populations" (p. 99). Willinsky (1998) and Ndura (2006) speak of the absolute importance behind consolidating the European empire through education, noting that some former colonized countries are still working through this today. "We need to learn again how five centuries of studying, classifying, and ordering humanity within an imperial context gave rise to peculiar and powerful ideas of race, culture, and nation that were, in effect, conceptual instruments that the West used both to divide up and to educate the world" (Willinsky, 1998, pp. 2–3). Following the understanding that what is taught in the past affects the future mentality of a continent, Ndura (2006) states that western–bound education "produces at best graduates who hold a truncated and distorted vision of themselves and of their place in their respective African communities. It has produced isolated African educated elites that lack a

global perspective" (p. 96). Concerning Africans going to the West for educational training and practice van Wyk & Higgs (2007) observed that "graduates from other continents were sent to Europe and the United States for advanced degrees in order to provide indigenous faculty to replace expatriate ones. Those who studied abroad and were assigned teaching positions after the completion of their studies quite naturally emulated the practices established at the institutions where they conducted their studies" (p. 68). This cycle of western-educated teachers has had a socializing affect on African students. There seems to be a barrier in allowing the freedom to creatively and proudly teach African history, culture, philosophy, and traditional knowledge and practice. There is a fear that if anything other than western books is used and western knowledge is taught that somehow the educational experience will be less than what the western student has received. The importance of traditional knowledge and practice is often ignored.

B. Hegemony of knowledge

Gramsci defines hegemony as "a social condition in which all aspects of social reality are dominated by a certain powerful group" (Mayo, 1990, p. 35). This includes knowledge-making. "Knowledge-making cannot be neutral and disinterested but is a political process in the service of particular purposes, and one which has been institutionalized in favour of the privileged (Reason & Bradbury, 2001, p. 6). There is an intimate relationship between power and knowledge and "knowledge-making supported by various cultural and political forms creates a reality which favours those who hold power" (Reason & Bradbury, 2001, p. 6). Willinsky (1998) highlights the way in which Europe set out to civilize Africa through education and religion. The African educated in western ways fed the system of colonialism and also perpetuated the idea that African knowledge was primitive and western knowledge was civilized. Colonialism, modernization, and globalization have all had a part in taking forward the idea that western knowledge is the best and have also had a part in repressing indigenous ways of knowing and discouraging people from making use of their own traditional knowledge in everyday life and in a higher education setting (Bamgbose, 1983; Mammo, 1999; Mosha, 2000; Smith,

1999; Venkataraman, 1996). Edward Said (1991) speaks of the effect his western education had on his own psyche:

> There was a tremendous spiritual wound felt by many of us because of the sustained presence in our midst of domineering foreigners who taught us to respect distant norms and values more than our own. Our culture was felt to be of a lower grade, perhaps even congenitally inferior and something of which to be ashamed. (pp. 8–9)

The recognition that 'other ways of knowing' are as valid as western knowledge is increasing with different indigenous peoples and ethnic groups speaking out about their own knowledge and practices. The post-colonial literature challenges a western biased knowledge base and encourages the 'other' voices to be heard. As Ani (1994) states, "You have to teach Pan-African studies alongside European studies so people will understand the assumptions behind each. This is demanded by an African-centred view because we are Africans and because the future towards which Europe leads us is genocidal" (p. 2). What was this western education really about? Ndura (2006) sums up his thoughts on his own educational experience in Rwanda:

> What did we learn from this lesson that was imported from our colonial master? … [W]e learned that the White man was the supreme symbol of civilization. We learned to accept the superiority of the White man and his products and the inferiority of Blacks and their products. We learned that our worth was determined by our closeness to the White man's ideals and way of life. We learned to be ashamed of our ancestors, our customs, our history and ourselves. (p. 93)

Willinsky (1998) speaks of imperialism as an educational venture. "Imperialism was an educational venture that captured and captivated the imagination of the West. From its interests in tourism to interior design, the West still lives within the spell of the imperium" (p. 19). He finishes

by asking the question "How then can we distance ourselves from the spell?" (p. 20).

Education is a socializing process and it is assumed that this knowledge will be passed down from generation to generation. It is, therefore, understandable that western education continues to be the dominant form of education in Africa, due to its past colonization process. This imbalance between traditional and western knowledge can also be seen in social work in Africa. The impacts of colonialism, modernization, and globalization are reflected in the spread of western social work knowledge (Asamoah & Nortey, 1987; Haug, 2005; Osei–Hwedie, 1990; Torczyner, 2000; Venkataraman, 1996). The honouring of indigenous ways of knowing in social work has, until recently, been virtually ignored (Ani, 1994; Durst, 1992; Midgley, 1981; Smith, 1999; Venkataraman, 1996).

C. Western knowledge and social work education

The social work profession, including the development of its values, theories, and ideologies, originated in Europe and the United States (Healy L.M., 2001; Kendall, 1995; Midgley, 1981). By the early 1900s, the profession had been established and educational facilities had been created to train social workers in these countries. As Nagpaul (1993) notes, social work educational values "were and still are dominated by ideologies of capitalism, Social Darwinism, the Protestant Ethic and individualism" (p. 214). The early social welfare policies, from mainly European countries, were the basis for the social welfare policies of their colonized territories. According to Kendall (1995) and Midgley (1981), a combination of different influences moved social work into developing countries. As seen in chapter II, the spread of western social work knowledge worldwide had its beginnings with the United Nations, who felt the need for the increase of this profession after the Second World War and who assumed this knowledge was universal and transferable. The United Nations sent western consultants to non–western countries in order to help create social work curricula. As Kendall (1995) suggests, these consultants went with the understanding that western social work knowledge was superior to local knowledge. It was believed that duplication of the western curriculum would lead other countries to acquire this same knowledge and

have excellent, prestigious social work programs thus alleviating some of the social problems created through entering the new world economic order. From the 1960s onward, experts set up new social work programs in non–western countries and promoted western social work theories and methodologies, with little understanding of the relevance of these theories to those countries (Midgley, 1981; Rodenborg, 1986). Faculties of western social work institutions also helped in this process and continue to do so today (Asadourian, 2000; Driedger, 2004; Midgley, 2008). Bradsaw & Graham (2007) noted that, "the social work profession is heavily imbued with Northern culture and ways of knowing. Many countries have relied on Northern social work educators for the design of the content and structure of their social work curriculum" (p. 99).

One of the first official challenges to the universality of western social work knowledge was made at the United Nations Fifth Conference on Social Work Education (UN, 1971a). Others challenged this universality as well. Brown (1971) discusses the compatibility of western social work in Zambia; Gulati (1974) discusses western social work's role in traditional societies and questions the assumption of universality. Midgley's *Professional imperialism: Social work in the Third World* (1981) brought this subject to the forefront and challenged the exportation of western social work knowledge to developing countries. More recently, social work colleagues and academics from the non–western world have questioned western social work knowledge and its appropriateness in solving problems confronting non–western countries (Walton & Abo El Nasr, 1988; Lebakeng, 1997; Noyoo, 2000; Osei–Hwedie & Jacques, 2007; Gray et al., 2008; Osei–Hwedie & Rankopo, 2008). The traditional values of western social work stem from a Judeo–Christian background and the methods used arise mainly from a medical model. Those values and methods seemed to be inadequate and inappropriate for dealing with the consequences of colonialism, poverty, government corruption, religious practices, and other philosophical orientations. Social workers in non–western countries learned theories and methodologies alien to their cultures and had the added burden of filtering the parts that worked from the parts that did not work in their own social work practice (Midgley, 1981; Nimmagadda & Cowger, 1999; Venkataraman, 1996). Osei–Hwedie (1993) stated that African social workers had no part in defining their

profession with government and non-government organizations dictating much of their education. American and British textbooks continue to be used and translated into different languages. These textbooks promote American and British values and use case examples from urban western cultures. Osei-Hwedie (1993) found, in Africa, that there was a strong social science knowledge base that had no reference to Africa. To promote indigenous ways of knowing went against the trend of modernization. Lauer (2004) states: "Underdevelopment is not due to traditional knowledge or folk knowledge. Modern scientific tradition itself is a failure in the successful integration of modern and traditional knowledge" (p. 2).

Unlike other countries that have discarded western social work knowledge and theories, Africa has been slow to do so. Osei-Hwedie & Rankopo (2008) give an example of attempts to make African curriculum less western in Botswana. This was not as easy as they thought it would be due to pressures by the university authorities to keep up the international competition and recognition with western universities and to keep the student's degrees internationally marketable. Senior academics were uncompromising in the faculty's struggle with localizing curriculum and were adamant that "there was only one social work and it was Western" (p. 214). For the Botswana social work faculty "the challenge was to blend local and international content and in the process avoid Western domination" (p. 214). This critical process has not been encouraged by schools of social work from the western world either in the past or today. "In Australia it is sad to see social work schools seeking to export their programmes to Asia, and to recruit aggressively students from overseas to study social work in Australia, regardless of the cultural, political and social differences involved, and without any agonizing about the colonialist impacts of our international work" (Ife, 2007, p. 14). Midgley (2008) suggests that the increasing online approach to social work education continues the imperialism of the profession over the culturally relevant training and practice. "Students in the recipient country do not actually attend the provider university but are taught at a local site. They receive exactly the same curriculum as their counterparts in the Western country and little, if any, effort is made to include local cultural or other appropriate curriculum content" (p. 40).

There is a growing awareness that in this "multicultural and global context in which we live and work there is an increasing understanding that exclusively Northern approaches are ineffective for many communities" (Bradshaw & Graham, 2007, p. 94). The authors point out that in the thirty-five years since this issue was highlighted the profession has been slow and sporadic in changing this hegemony. A recent book, *Indigenous social work around the world* (Gray et al., 2008), brings this to light. However, this is not a one-way process. Many non-western countries, including Africa, also accepted a western curriculum at face value even though throughout the ASWEA seminars of the 1970s and 1980s there was a recurring theme that curriculum needed to be changed and was too western. And yet there seems to be a lack of critical thinking concerning what kind of social work would be appropriate to Africa. As one group member stated: "I believe we have learned from the western way but it has also inhibited us in just a way that we sort of can't do things on our own. Because after independence, barely 40 years, we are still hanging on to all that they brought. We haven't moved away."

Ndura (2006) lays out important questions concerning African education that African social worker educators and students should be continually asking:

> Why is Western literature elevated to the center stage of the educational experience while African languages and literatures remain under-explored? Why is Western financial assistance used to hire Western expatriates instead of preparing local educators for local schools? Why are most school textbooks imported from Western nations? Why do Western institutions deny so many African academic credentials when they were educated under Western philosophies and standards? (pp. 98–99)

More specifically to social work, other questions need to be asked as well: Who do social workers in Africa serve? Is the training appropriate for the important task of serving clients? We all know that social workers can be change agents as well as agents of social control. What does the social work curriculum encourage, a critical understanding and action or

conforming to the role the government has assigned to the social work profession?

Concerning culturally appropriate interventions, Demmer & Burghart (2008) suggest that "interventions should be developed that are more compatible with the issues and concerns of individuals in their context, mindful of each country's resources" (p. 368). Mwansa (2010) suggests that the traditional case work approach may not be the best interventions for Africans. Cham (2008) gives an example of the difficulties in transferring interventions from one culture to the other: "Not much is known about the interventions or models of care that are available for street children and orphans of HIVAID … and determining which models or interventions are working best is often difficult" (p. 411). Although community-based interventions seem the best approach for street children and orphans, little research has been completed on the fostering of street children and orphans as opposed to institutional care. "Orphans and street children have a voice about how they can interpret these practices and their voices should be incorporated into the structure of these models" (p. 414).

Transferring and replicating interventions from other countries is often not the best approach. "We can compare experiences, share expertise and resources in a manner that is sensitive to each culture and context, and we can promote indigenous responses that aim to help individuals affected by AIDS-related deaths" (p. 368). Ross (2008) suggests that "social workers need to revisit the issue of formulating African models of social work practice that do not rely exclusively on British, European or American models but which draw on indigenous best practices, knowledge and culture from the African continent. We need to understand, appreciate and engage the cosmological, ontological and epistemological differences that separate Euro-American and African medical and cultural approaches" (p. 392). This attempt will improve people's acceptance of appropriate interventions. "If interventions make sense to the client, a greater likelihood exists that the client will be invested in applying the intervention" (Hodge, 2006, p. 163). These interventions need to take into account the contextual aspects of society. Ross (2008) and Mensah (Kreitzer, 2004a) advocate for the collaboration of social workers and traditional healers to provide new approaches to counselling that incorporate an African

approach to healing. "Students need to understand the psychology of indigenous ways of knowing and be encouraged to construct intervention models that address the needs of most Africans in culturally appropriate ways" (Ross, 2008, p. 393).

This hegemony of western knowledge has created a number of critical issues in African social work:

1. There is a lack of critical process to redefine social work in Africa.

2. There is a lack of recognition of western dominance of knowledge in social work education and with this lack of recognition little is being done to create a culturally appropriate curriculum for Africa.

3. There is a lack of knowledge and understanding concerning the history of social work in Africa. This is partly due to the difficulties of accessing appropriate documents, many of which are in the western world or published in western journals.

4. There is a fear of breaking away from the colonizer's educational knowledge and institutions because it may not be as good as the west. Who defines good social work education? Why is looking at culturally appropriate social work education so difficult to do?

5. There is a lack of creativity in producing social work theory and practice based on traditional knowledge and practice, African philosophy, and traditional lifestyles. One group member asked an appropriate question:

If colonialism had not taken place in our system, could we have strengthened our traditional institutions, taking into consideration advancement in technology, increased migration, and economic independence? … Now we have our traditional system and our formal system. How are we going to integrate

these things? Where do we start from? We need to use the positive things from our traditional system and blend it so that we make social work more suitable to the condition in which we find ourselves.

6. There are greater financial opportunities to work in Europe, the United States, and Canada due to poor salaries practitioners are paid as professional social workers in Africa. This causes a brain drain[2] that continually undermines the profession.

7. When Africans return to Africa, they tend to be distanced from the culture and teach and practice in a western way that may or may not be appropriate to the setting.

8. Africa consists of oral societies and yet research continues to be quantitative and non-oral. Qualitative research needs to become an accepted research in African universities. It naturally works with the Africa-centred worldview and the social work profession.

The ASWEA documents recorded a critical debate and showed attempts at steering away from a western curriculum and had some success with curriculum development in family welfare and planning and community development. Osei-Hwedie & Jacques (2007) also points out that it should not be assumed that every western-educated African is uncritical of their western training: "Western educated Africans have been critical of Western knowledge and theories and have been in the forefront of the fight against domination, such as was the case with colonialism and Apartheid" (p. 32). The fact that there have been debates is a positive sign that critical thinking is happening, and the challenge is to see this thinking play out in teaching, research and practice in social work training centres in Africa.

1. Ethics and values

Another aspect of social work education that has been neglected is a critical look at social work values and ethics in relation to culturally relevant curriculum. Kreitzer (2006) discusses the issue of social work values and whether or not they are universal. This debate of the universality of social work values has been documented through social work literature (Abbott, 1999; Bogo & Herington, 1986; Cox, 1995; Gray, 1995; Taylor, 2000). The debate has somewhat been negated by the "IFSW/IASSW Ethics in Social Work: Statement of Principles," which identifies two universal ethical social work principles at the broader level (IFSW/IASSW, 2008). These are: 1) human rights and human dignity; and 2) social justice. What I have found is that, beyond these two universal ethical values, the more culturally specific ethical values may or may not be appropriate to a particular culture. One of the main value differences is usually accentuated by cultures that are traditionally communal as opposed to cultures that are individual oriented. For example, confidentiality and self-determination may be important in all cultures but the way they are manifested in each culture may be very different. Many countries have as their code of ethics the American Code of Ethics. Ramsay (1999) found this to be true in India. He challenged the Indian social work profession to rewrite their code of ethics to reflect the cultures of India. After many drafts, a more Indian value system and ethical practice became the new code of ethics. The preamble states the following: "The declaration is rooted in the contemporary social reality which has a historical background and in the framework of humanistic values, based on the intrinsic worth of all human and non-human life" (TISS, 1997, p. 1). Including the Indian ideologies of Sarvodaya, Swarajya, and Lokniti,[3] as well as Ghandian[4] principles, shows that a Code of Ethics has been created that reflects that society.

In Ghana, discussion centred on the fact that their code of ethics was drawn directly from the National Association of Social Work (NASW) Code of Ethics and that work should be completed on rewriting it to reflect a more African/Ghanaian value and belief system. But of course this involves critical awareness of African philosophy, values, and beliefs in order to begin this process. In 1993 the New Zealand Association of Social Workers re-wrote their code of ethics to reflect the trend toward a culturally appropriate curriculum. It took into account the importance of

the Maori in New Zealand culture. It "affirms the right of independence for the Maori people and represents the active commitment to the promotion of an indigenous identity for social work in Aotearoa[5] New Zealand" (ANZASW, 1994, p. 16). As the first bicultural code of ethics, "it recognizes that at the moment, the European has the power over resources and decision-making and social work needs to address this power regularly at an individual and institutional level" (Kreitzer, 2006, p. 9). It "attempts to accommodate difference and diversity in an emancipatory and social justice sense which, in turn, offers some direction of change" (Briskman & Noble, 1999, p. 65). All national professional associations around the world should go through this critical process of re-writing their codes of ethics to reflect their own culture and its diversity. As Osei-Hwedie & Jacques (2007) explains: "If foreign values predominate, then the practice derived from them will be of little relevance to the people to whom these values are alien" (p. 32).

D. Conclusion of chapter

The influence of western knowledge, used as a tool of European imperialism, has shaped the way in which Africans view western knowledge and how they view their own knowledge, traditions, and history. It is just as easy to idolize African traditional knowledge and practices, some of which are harmful and based on unsubstantiated evidence. This is equally unhelpful when looking at African social work education. The idealism of western knowledge can also be seen in social work education and practice. In my experience, African social workers now seem to find it difficult to think about a more African curriculum. It seems easier and safer to assume that western training, which has been tried and tested (in the western world mainly), is somehow appropriate to their situation. My point is that there needs to be a critical examination of all knowledge, and what is being addressed here is the imbalance of the use of western knowledge over African knowledge. There is a need in African social work to shed the clothes of colonial social welfare and western social work knowledge and radically shift its curriculum in a fresh, creative, and revolutionary way. When one has "let go of preconceptions, frameworks, models, theories, intervention strategies, our assumptions and skills, beliefs, materialism …

then we will open ourselves up to other possibilities, other wisdoms and other world views. It is only by letting go that we can enter into dialogue, learn from rather than about other people and cultures" (Ife, 2007, 14–15). We can then shed the colonial ideas of where Africans are in the world and grow in traditional knowledge and practices, which in turn will have a radical effect on social work education in Africa. This involves a decolonization process of re-education of the history of Africa, rediscovering the history of social work in Africa, and creating new theories and practices that reflect African culture. Cutting the umbilical cord of western social work curriculum, then creating culturally relevant knowledge and interventions, and then seeing what portion of western social work knowledge and theories fit within the new curricula is a starting point.

> Much of the knowledge achieved through conquest and colonization was understood to legitimate the political and cultural domination of imperialism. The resulting perspective on the world formed an educational legacy that we have now to reconsider. We cannot readily sort through and discard the colonial tainted understandings we carry, without devoting attention to how our view of the world has been shaped by imperialism's educational project, which included fostering a science and geography of race; renaming a good part of the world in homage to its adventurers' homesick sense of place and imposing languages and literatures on the colonized in an effort to teach them why they were subservient to a born-to-rule civilization. (Willinsky, 1998, pp. 3–4)

An example of the process above concerns naming the curricula. When I was asked to teach two courses at the University of Ghana in 1994, I was asked to teach "Framework for social diagnosis and "Framework for planned change." These terms were straight out of Social Diagnosis (Richmond, 1965) and Social Diagnosis in Case Work (Sainsbury, 1970). I asked myself if they were still teaching 1950s social work. Looking at the American social work books in the library I think they were. No course had a name that would indicate it was a social work course that reflected African society. I believe that the social work program would take on

a very different mindset if the courses were named and associated with African concepts. Understanding the history of these names, renaming the courses to be African names, and adding western names when appropriate would be a great start to the process of decolonization. Once this is completed, owning one's own curricula by making it culturally appropriate will complete the process. Language is so important to cultural identity and doing a simple task like renaming the courses is important. Like an onion, the layers of colonialism need to be peeled away so that there is an understanding of where words originate and why they are used in social work education.

The following story sums up my own thinking concerning the relationship between western social work education and practice in the African context. This story was in a tenth grade reading book in Burundi:

> Mecca was a very fortunate West African man. He had a job that drew envy from his fellow villagers. He worked for a White man who was very generous. Indeed, the White boss was so nice to Mecca that he gave him a special gift: a pair of used shoes. Mecca was very excited. This was his very first pair of shoes. The shoes had a little problem, though. They were too tight to fit Mecca's untamed feet. But, he was still determined to wear them. So, he drilled holes in the corners of the shoes such that his pinky toes would stick out as he walked. He was very proud. He marched through the village showing off his new acquisition to friends and neighbours and praising the White man for his infinite goodness. (Ndura, 2006, pp. 92–93)

Why is African social work still running around with a curriculum that doesn't fit but still showing it off, adapting it, and grateful for western schools of social work for providing them with used texts to study it? Let's get a new pair of shoes that fit. This calls for critical reflection on how social work came to Africa, influences like colonization, modernization, and globalization on the evolution of social work and present issues of power and inequality. "Unless there is critical engagement with the stark past and present realities of structural and social relations of power, privilege, inequality and oppression, social workers in South Africa will

deserve the past label of being upholders of the status quo" (Smith, 2008, p. 374).

Buying a new pair of shoes is not always easy when after years of working a person still doesn't have enough money to buy them. Financial backing is needed to buy these shoes. The present world economic order does not favour African countries when it comes to economic and social development. This in turn affects the growth of the social work profession, its associations, and the pay and conditions of social workers and academics. Even more importantly it affects the communities and people served by social workers who continue to work harder and harder and can't seem to get out of poverty. This is the theme of the next chapter.