



Africanizing Social Work Research and Practice: Perspectives from Fieldwork Experience in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

There is no gainsaying the fact that Western or Euro-American approaches are the orthodox approaches in social work practice globally. This is not surprising given that social work has a largely Western history or origin. The above notwithstanding, experience has shown that these approaches often appear insufficient when it comes to capturing the peculiar realities and nuances of fieldwork practice in a typical African society like Nigeria. In other words, the social worker may become incapacitated in responding to client needs or social situations in spite of his/her mastery of these orientations. In effect, social work is primarily a social science and thus its practice and even relevance are determined or affected by the social context in which it is practiced. In view of the foregoing, this paper attempts to highlight some typical realities in a typical African situation that are inured to these approaches. Thus, it highlights some obvious incapacities of these Western approaches in dealing with social situations in Nigeria using actual experiences from field practice. Given the social scientific nature of social work, its values are influenced by the socio-cultural context in which it is practiced. Therefore, the methodological challenge of social work in Nigeria and by implication in Africa would be on how to tailor or indigenize social work approaches to capture extant realities of African experiences, especially from a socio-cultural perspective.

Keywords: Africanization, approaches, culture, fieldwork, research, social work, values

1. Introduction: Conceptualization of social work

Based on fieldwork experiences in Nigeria, the paper interrogates the adequacy of orthodox social work approaches to the apprehension and resolution of local social challenges in Nigeria. It is anchored on the assumption that given the largely Western prominence of orthodox social work approaches, and even methods, resolving social problems through them may be especially tasking. In other words, while one is cognizant of the universality of typical social work problems like child abuse, child neglect and, divorce, these problems have an undoubted local tinge that may make them not easily amenable to orthodox or conventional social work approaches.

Corollary to the above is the fact that even dominant social work research and practice frameworks are simply derived directly from the Euro-American frame which incidentally are calibrated on social realities and values of the Western world. As a result, strengthening and entrenching social work as both a research discipline and practice would necessarily require framing its methods and practice orientations on African-based values and norms. The obvious gaps in the effectiveness of the orthodox perspective have been borne out by the field experiences. Therefore, the paper in the spirit of the current decolonization debates in the global south tackles the need and approach towards meaningful Africanization of social work research and practice (see, Anugwom, 2019; Hall and Tandon, 2017; Mignolo, 2011; Kessi et al, 2021; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013; Maldonado-Torres, 2011).

Be the above as it may, human existence and the transactions that take place between people in society can be very challenging and more often than not even frustrating. These transactions often leave individuals in society depressed and helpless. In recent times in developing countries like Nigeria, suicide among teenagers and young adults has been on the rise as a result of the frustrations and challenges of living. According to Hakeem (2020), close to 800 people die yearly as a result of suicide, which translates into one person every 40 seconds. According to the author, people commit suicide due to five prominent reasons viz: depression, psychosis, compulsive impulses, neglect, and possession of a philosophical desire to die. The World Health Organization (WHO) 2016 rated Nigeria as the leading country in suicide cases with a figure of 17,710 followed by Ethiopia and South Africa with figures of 7,323 and 6,476 respectively (see also, Akinremi, 2019).

Even when individuals do not resort to suicide, a good number of them take to the streets or get involved in all sorts of evils and crimes in order to overcome their challenges and survive in the face of the tough times confronting them. These life-threatening situations, therefore, call for the intervention of experts in counseling and psychotherapy to help the individuals overcome their challenges and redirect their energies to healthier and more beneficial means of livelihood and survival. Social work simply put can be seen as a profession that helps people find better ways of solving their problems in order to live healthier and more fulfilled lives. As early as in the 1950s, Walter Friedlander defined social work as a professional service based on scientific knowledge and skill in human relations, which assists individuals alone or in groups to obtain social and personal satisfaction and independence (Friedlander, 1955).

According to the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW), social work is an academic discipline and practice-based profession that concerns individuals, families, groups, communities, and society as a whole in an effort to meet basic needs and enhance social functioning (CASW, 2011). The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) in 2014 stated that social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Ronald, Malar, and Laavanya (2014) defined it as a field of study in social sciences that is mainly concerned with the study of social problems and social interventions and sets to study individuals, groups, communities, and institutions within academic boundaries. In agreement with the definitions of social work by the CASW and the IFSW, these authors further stated that social work though an academic discipline can also be seen as a practice-based discipline because, unlike the other social sciences, it is involved in direct practice and interventions in the field.

Thus, social work can therefore be defined as an academic as well as practiced-based discipline which helps individuals enhance their problem-solving capabilities, promote individual/group empowerment and assist people to live optimally in society (CASW, 2011; IFSW, 2014). It is also a profession that pays conscious attention to the unique and individual needs of individuals in society with the aims of helping them get the desired assistance from the right places, overcome challenges, promote mental well-being, and help individuals live healthy and fulfilled lives (Okoye, 2014). While the academic and practice-oriented nature of social work seems settled, there is no doubt that over the years and especially in the face of the increasing challenges of daily life, the value of social work in improving the coping capacities of individuals in the society has increased. However, despite its global recognition and the universalization of some of its main concerns, social work remains a discipline and practice that cannot be easily dislodged from the local social environment. In other words, effective social work can be perceived as that which is in tune with its social environment. It is based on the above that the paper examines the “Africanization” or “indigenization” of social work research and practice depending on both the author’s field experience of two decades and the sentiments exposed by selected users of social work services in Nigeria.

2. Methodology

Apart from drawing from the researcher’s varied and robust experience as a professional social worker and counsellor, the study also depended on the information from the in-depth interviews of a randomly selected sample in the southeastern zone of Nigeria.

The study was conducted in Enugu state in southeastern Nigeria. This location was purposively selected as it has all the qualities needed for the study. One Local Government Area (LGA) – (Nsukka) was selected from the seventeen LGAs in the state. The qualitative method of data collection was used in gathering information for this paper. Hence, twenty (20) respondents were purposively selected from the selected local government area and In-depth Interviews was used in data collection. Ten of these respondents were selected from amongst the middle class persons while the other ten respondents were selected from amongst the lower class persons in LGA. Out of the ten from the middle class, five of them were social workers, while five were organic social (not trained as social workers but perform social work duties by virtue of employment like those in the ministries and social welfare offices. This selection was done to ensure that opinions of both the educated, uneducated, privileged and less-privileged in the LGA were captured. The data gotten from the interviews were analyzed thematically and have been used as in-text quotations where necessary.

3. An overview of some Euro-American Orthodox social work approaches

Social work has its history rooted in volunteer efforts for the betterment of the people in the late 19th century in Europe and North America and became an occupation in the early 20th century (Stuart, 2019). According to Stuart, the profession evolved as a result of society’s attempt to deal with such issues as poverty, social justice, social exclusion, and inequality. Originating from Europe and Northern America, it is therefore not surprising that the profession while trying to help individuals makes use of mostly, if not purely Euro-American orthodox approaches. These orthodox approaches like the systems theory, behaviour modification theory, task-centered theory etc. colour both the theoretical and practice orientations of the discipline. Inadvertently, nothing much has been done thus far towards situating the discipline within the social environment in Africa.

3.1 Systems theory

The systems theory which is anchored on what sociologists call the “organismic analogy” likens social phenomena to the biological organisms and envisions that there is a process of interaction and interdependence between different spheres and organs of the society. Very instructive in the systems view is that a problem or dysfunction in one part of the society affects the other parts as much like the infirmity in one part of a biological organism affects the organism as a whole. In other words, the different spheres of the society are not only interrelated but equally interdependent. According to Wilkinson, (2011), systems theory is a conceptual framework based on the principle that the component parts of a system can best be understood in the context of the relationships with each other and other systems, rather than in isolation. Bouchrika (2023) asserted that systems theory is used to understand and address the complex dynamics of human behaviour and social systems.

The above definitions imply that a dysfunction in one part of society, be it with an individual, family, group, or community, there will automatically be problems in other parts of that society. This approach has been used in solving problems arising from human transactions for over a century and has been very useful in detecting the real problems in society whether it is presented by an individual, family, group, or community. Incidentally, social work like most other social science disciplines has utilized the systems perspective not only as a theory but also as benchmarking practice.

3.2 Behavior Modification Model

This is an early approach that used respondent and operant conditioning to change behaviour; overt behaviour was modified with consequences, including positive and negative reinforcement contingencies to increase desirable behaviour or administering positive and negative punishment and/or extinction to reduce problematic behaviour (Mahoney, et al., 1974; Mace, 1994; Mace, et al, 2010). It is a type of therapy introduced by B. F. Skinner used in demonstrating that behaviour could be shaped through reinforcement and/or punishment (Scott, Jain & Cogburn, 2022). According to Scott et al, Skinner noted that a reinforcer is a consequence that increases the likelihood of behaviour recurring while punishment is a consequence that decreases the chances. This model argues that all human behavior is learned and can also be unlearned. The proponents of this model, therefore, believe that good behaviour can be encouraged and improved upon by offering positive re-enforcers such as gifts, praise, etc. while bad or unwanted behaviour patterns can be discouraged and unlearned through the use of negative re-enforcers such as withdrawal of praise, punishment, etc. (Robbins, et. al., 2019).

3.3 Task-Centered Theory (TCT)

This approach believes that for problems to be solved, the people whose lives are entangled in the problem have to be part of the problem-solving process by carrying out different tasks or roles toward achieving the desired solutions. This approach believes that individuals have a lot of roles to play so that their problems can be solved. Another argument of this approach is that when individuals are parts of the problem-solving process, they will not be overwhelmed by the same problem or something similar should they be confronted by it again in the future as they already have ideas of the roles to [play in order to overcome the challenge. Ramos & Tolson, (2023) defined TCT as a short-term problem-solving approach to social work practice that helps clients solve their problems as they define them. According to the authors, changes in problems are secured by developing and implementing tasks, and respect for the client's rights to be self-determining is emphasized in TCT. Corullo, (2013) in the words of Laura Epstein and William Reid described TCT as a technology to alleviate specific target problems perceived by clients i.e. problems they recognize, understand acknowledge, and want to attend to. This model is a forward-thinking, goal-oriented approach to social work which aims to empower service users and help them resolve problems within a short period; it is used to structure solutions to problems and also gives service users experience of problem-solving in general (Beckett, 2006; Doel & Marsh, 1992; Marsh & Doel, 2005).

4. Limitations of the orthodox approaches

Though the Euro-American methods have been used in helping individuals for centuries, they have been seen to be inadequate when it comes to dealing with individuals in typical African societies. This inadequacy can be said to be because they oftentimes suggest that every situation has equal impacts and control on individuals and the environment. However, when working under these assumptions, some social workers get stuck while dealing with clients in typical African situations. According to one of the respondents who is a social worker:

“as a social worker, it gets frustrating while working with the orthodox methods because our situations in Africa are very different from that of the Western world and this leaves us stranded in the middle of our cases a good number of times”

As evident from the views of the respondents, the orthodox approaches usually focus on environmental factors in learning neglecting other factors such as genes, free will, personal choices, individual differences, cultural values, etc. In a country like Nigeria with her enormous cultural and religious diversity, the orthodox approaches also face a lot of challenges as they struggle to resolve underlying issues like deep-seated personality issues and large scale social issues as discrimination, unemployment, poverty, violence, etc. due to the differences in cultural and religious values of the people. As one of the respondents stated,

“these orthodox approaches seem not to take note of our culture and traditions as Africans. They fail to understand that a country like Nigeria with all the religious and cultural differences we have needs specific approaches for resolving issues, not a generalized approach simply because it works in the Western world. This makes it very difficult for us when we want to adapt to the suggestions of these Western approaches”

The orthodox approaches also focus more on individual actions without considering the social structures that are driven by those actions. For instance, in our typical African settings with the peculiar family systems, these orthodox methods often fail to address the issues that arise in typical African families. For instance, in Africa and Nigeria to be precise, where polygamy is very popular, these approaches fail to proffer solutions to problems that arise through human interactions in such polygamous settings. When asked her opinion on social work and what social workers do, one of the respondents who is a school certificate holder but lives in a polygamous family stated:

“how do you use those oyibo (i.e. white man) ways to resolve problems in my family where my husband has four wives and fifteen children? Even if you use those oyibo approaches in a family where there is only one wife and all the children belong to one woman alone and they work, how do you expect them to work in my family ?”

From the foregoing, it can be seen that as useful as these orthodox approaches may be, they cannot be used to their fullest in the typical African situation. Hence, the need for social work methods that are in alignment with the African people's way of live bearing their peculiar culture, values, norms and preferences in mind cannot be overemphasized.

5. Social work practice and the Nigerian society: perspectives from fieldwork experiences in Nigeria

In spite of the existence and use of the Euro-American approaches, social work as a profession continues to face serious challenges and frustrations in Nigeria because the place and roles of social workers have not been fully recognized. This is because in typical African settings, most social problems are handled by extended family members, customary courts, district commissioners' offices, churches (by priests and marriage committees), native doctors, etc. instead of welfare agencies. Rwomire and Radithokwa, (1996) asserted that in traditional African societies, social needs and social problems were dealt with by the families, both immediate and extended. One of our respondents comprehended the above situation thus,

"the white man and his ways cannot bring solutions to our problems because they do not understand our problems in the first place. How can a white man use his methods to resolve issues where there is confusion in a family due to the charms and evil spells cast on that family by evil friends or relations?"

The above assertion implies that there is a general belief among people that there are more to problems in the society such as charms, evil spells, and beliefs and these go deeper than mere attitudes and human personalities. As a matter of fact, the above perception is in tune with traditional African cosmology and belief system whereby the sources of problems are seen as lying beyond the realm of the individual. Even in cases where there are welfare agencies, they are usually set back by structural dysfunction as they are more often than not manned by non-professionals as heads. Furthermore, though there have been attempts to establish governing bodies for social workers both nationally and internationally within the continent, the formation of a concrete unifying body for social workers that is coherent and vigorous enough to voice and convey the roles, interests, goals, and objectives is yet to be achieved. According to Oghenechoja and McLaughlin, (2022), the problems of social work practice in Africa include the involvement of non-social work graduates in social work posts, the lack of a regulating body, and an overall dependency on extrapolated Western methods. Umoren (2016) stated that there is a general lack of professional recognition of social workers in Africa as countries like Lesotho and Zimbabwe are employing people with no training as social workers. The result of this is that welfare offices (even in Nigeria) while purporting to offer social work services often fall severely short of both the expected and the desired. As one of the respondents argued:

"which welfare officer will resolve family and communal issues better than our umunna? The truth is that our society started spoiling since we adopted the Western ways and started bringing in outsiders to resolve issues for us all in the name of welfare officers and social workers"

To buttress the above assertions, another respondent stated,

"do we even have professional social workers here in Nigeria? The people we have in our so-called welfare offices are lawyers, teachers, and in some cases local chiefs. In some other cases, some of them do not even appear educated at all; so how can we conclude that social work is helpful or not when we have never had the chance to see them or have them help us with our problems?"

In some instances, the social workers themselves experience grave confusions on which sphere of the society to focus on due to the enormity of the social ills in society, and this results in their inability to articulate the goals of the profession clearly. An elderly respondent during the interviews stated,

"where will the orthodox approaches start from? Were they formulated to face the kind of evils and corruption we have in Nigeria? Which of the problems will they tackle? Our problems are so complicated that even the student social workers we get to come to our community occasionally do not even know where to start helping us"

According to Ngwu, (2014) and Rwomire and Radithokwa, (1996), the lack of resources for proper training of professional social workers in schools, etc. has contributed to the poor functioning of social work as a profession in Nigeria. Other practices that pose serious challenges to social work practice include funeral rites/widowhood practices deeply rooted in culture and tradition, inheritance practices, male-child superiority, male dominance in typical African settings, and the caste systems amongst others. Interestingly, one of our respondents brought a gender dimension to the issue. According to her:

"the orthodox ways may be good but they can never be able to confront or overcome the problems women face when they lose their husbands. The case is even worse with the case of the superiority of men in our society; how can you convince our typical Nigerian men that their wives are their equals or that the women should inherit their late husbands' lands when they had no sons for their late husbands?"

From the foregoing therefore, it can be seen that though the orthodox approaches in social work practice have been used in dealing with societal and behavioural issues for a long time, they are still inadequate viz-a-viz the Nigerian context. It will therefore not be out of place for social workers to find ways of practicing that will be in alignment with the typical African context as this will help them achieve more as professionals and also impact people's lives in more positive ways.

6. Ways of indigenizing social work approaches

For social work to be indigenized, the philosophy and practice styles have to be adjusted to suit the African and of course, the typical Nigerian society. This will involve adopting the Afrocentric social work approach as stipulated by Graham, (1999). This approach according to the author places the African person in the center of the practice with the aim of promoting empowerment, growth, transformation, and development. On the issue of social work education, new ways of teaching social work in line with the culture, values, relevance, and appropriateness of the needs of the typical African society should be promoted to capture the everyday lives of Nigerians and Africans in general (Okoye, 2014; Oghenechoja and McLaughlin, 2022). According to the authors, though this requires a lot of time, money, commitment by both the government and the social workers, development and explanation of

theories in alignment with the typical African society, an Africanized practice of the profession will lead to the acceptance and professionalization of social work and go a long way in making social work practice suitable for resolving issues in typical Nigerian situations.

According to Okoye (2014) also, social workers being deeply rooted in typical African cultural values and heritage and engaged in genuine efforts towards generating authentic African-reality-driven theories and models for tackling peculiar African social work challenges will also go a long way in creating an African- focused social work. From the foregoing therefore, closing the gap between the ivory tower and the town (social work practice being oriented towards the everyday life of Africans (and in effect, Nigerians) rather than mimicking esoteric Western-oriented practice models) would make for easier and better social work practice in Africa. Furthermore, brand new conceptualizations of the profession bearing the African person in mind as suggested by Graham (1999) will also lead to the indigenization of social work in Africa.

However, beyond mere modifications and adaptive utilization of orthodox approaches (as commendable as this seems), there is need for a radical overhaul of the methods and theories upon which the discipline is anchored in Africa. In the spirit of decolonization, a thorough-going and radical returning of the dominant epistemology of the discipline is overdue. In effect, social work must be made to embody and adumbrate peculiar socio-cultural and structural realities of its context.

This therefore implies that if social work must be useful to the Nigerian man, there needs to be a redefinition of the profession to suit their situations which more often than not are different from that of the Europeans or Americans. This does not mean that the original definitions of social work do not stand anymore, however it simply advocates that social work be amended to serve its purpose to the fullest in Africa using Africanized approaches just as it does in the Western world using the orthodox approaches.

7. Conclusion and recommendations

Though the Euro-American approaches have been used for decades in resolving social issues and helping individuals enhance their problem-solving capabilities, it has been seen not to be very adequate for solving problems in Africa given the peculiar cultural and religious diversities therein. The above realization calls for the need to amend social work practice to fit into typical African situations in order to reposition it as a profession with better success records. Inasmuch as the argument is not for the Euro-American perspectives to be discarded entirely, there is a need for deep-seated efforts be made to make them more adaptable and suitable for Africa and in this case, Nigerians and this can be done by formulating new ways of resolving issues that will be fair to everyone while not eroding or defying the African or Nigerian cultural and religious values.

Finally, on the issue of theories, social work requires that deep professional introspection and knowledge of African/Nigerian cultural heritage and social/Africanized models be adopted to help social workers attend to social issues they encounter in the field with as minimal difficulties as possible. Given that social work is still a struggling profession in Nigeria, there should be a redirection of social work practices towards understanding social issues better and improving the coping capacities of both the social work professionals and their clients in ways that are consistent with African beliefs/orientations rather than using the one-size-fits-all approach by forcing the Western approaches on situations they are not suitable for.

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