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Pulling Together the Threads: Current Understandings of Contextualized Social Work Education

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Abstract

Dominant social work approaches are increasingly problematized. In many contexts mainstreamed social work practices and knowledges are inappropriate and eclipse alternative ways of knowing, being, and doing. Moreover, dominant approaches, promoted through professional imperialism, may be harmful, perpetuating colonial perspectives, ignoring structural conditions, underlining social control, and advancing decontextualized individualism. In order to become relevant to local populations, social work must build on traditional helping strategies and use contextualized worldviews/knowledge(s) to shift focus to parochial concerns. The authors explore alternative social work paradigms, paying attention to Indigenized, Indigenous, culturally authentic, local, developmental and decolonized models. The authors then conceptualize contextualized social work. This synthesized approach allows for the centering of Indigenous/local knowledge(s), an engagement with the impact of colonization and oppression, and responsiveness to local conditions. The authors consider specifically contextualized social work *education*, noting emergent literature regarding practice exists, but less so in the area of education. The distinguishing features of such education are highlighted, and policy supports identified. It is recommended that contextualized social work education be promoted to ensure future social work practitioners are able to work in a meaningful, relevant and respectful manner in all contexts.

Keywords: Social work curriculum and education, contextualization, decolonized social work education, indigenized social work education, indigenous social work education, culturally relevant social work education

Introduction

Dominant social work is increasingly problematized. Post-colonial discourse, global exchanges and interaction, and conceptualizations of international social work highlight the discrepancies that occur between dominant notions of social work and local modes of helping (Razack, 2012). Such concerns have led to the articulation of a range of alternatives, including Indigenized, Indigenous, locality-based, decolonized, developmental, and culturally relevant social work approaches.

Using postmodern critical social work as a conceptual lens and content analysis methodology to interpret findings from a literature review, the authors present the central concerns associated with dominant social work and then explore the rationales for and constructions of non-dominant frameworks. The authors integrate these various agendas into a contextualized social work perspective that emphasizes responsiveness to local conditions, the uncovering of colonization and oppression, and the centering of Indigenous/local approaches. Although knowledge regarding non-dominant practice is emerging, little has been written about alternative teaching content and methodologies. The authors have thus expanded the idea of contextualized social work into education by first, highlighting the essential features of such an educational approach and second, discussing the policy supports required for contextualized social work education.

Conceptual Framework

The authors use postmodern critical social work as a conceptual lens because it directs attention to social justice, knowledge production, dissemination and meaning-making processes, the privileging or silencing of certain voices, and the complex interaction of the micro, mezzo, and macro (Fook, 2002; Healy, 2002; Pease & Fook, 1999). It attends to power, subjectivity, material conditions, narrative and context (Fook, 2002). Collaboration with service users is valued, and the goals of emancipation and transformation are central. Further, in recognizing multi-dimensional social realities, legitimizing difference, and advocating for diverse epistemologies, postmodern critical social work rejects the assumption that the unified theory and practice base of traditional social work or social work is *the truth* (Fook, 2002; Fook & Pease, 1999). As a result, the authors deconstruct dominant social work discourses and legitimating material practices, while highlighting alternative discourses on social work knowledge, practice, and education.

The postmodern critical social work lens considers language. The authors reflect scholarly literature by referring to dominant modes of social work with diverse terms, such as “Western(ized)”, “global North”, “White”, “Anglophone”, and “Eurocentric”, as well as “mainstream”, “hegemonic”, and “traditional” social work. In such constructions, dominant social work does not, for example, include social work in Latin America. This is a non-Anglophone setting and social work there is informed by a strong community work lens (De Urrutia Barroso & Strug, 2013; Saracostti, Reininger, & Parada, 2012). Further, in this paper, the authors capitalize the words “Indigenized” or “Indigenous” when reflecting Canadian First Nations, Metis, and Inuit epistemologies. When acknowledging other traditions (for example, southern African), these terms are not capitalized and may be exchanged with the term “local”.

Methodology

The material presented emerges out of a literature review. This methodology was selected to provide an initial indication of the extent, nature and scope regarding alternative social work practice (Paré, Trudel, Jaana & Kitsiou, 2015). A literature review provides an overview of the extant material and inherent trends relating to a particular subject, and, as such, may lead to the identification of further research questions (Paré, Trudel, Jaana & Kitsiou, 2015). The review was focused on current understandings of social work and ways of being, knowing, and doing which are not moulded in the form of Western/Northern, White, mainstream social work. Additionally, content analysis was chosen to interpret the data because it facilitates an evaluation of the intention, focus, and communication trends within scholarly literature. It also illuminates complex modes of language and thought (Allen-Meares, 1985; Krippendorff, 1980; Weber, 1990). In this case, content analysis provided insight into the particular philosophical conceptualizations of social work as well as associated discourses and agendas. It highlighted, specifically, how non-dominant approaches are being articulated and constructed. Differences and commonalities between these alternative approaches were revealed.

The authors focused on scholarly works that adhere to accepted standards of academic and professional rigour. Published texts, i.e. journal articles and books, were identified through the use of the search words 'indigen*' or 'decolon*' and 'social work' using the following search engines: EBCSO host; Google Scholar; Indigenous Peoples: North America; JSTOR; Social Sciences Citation Index; Taylor and Francis Online; and Wiley Online Library. These particular terms were known to the article's authors as constructing alternatives to dominant social work. As the literature search progressed, the researchers became alert to other language used to denote alternative social work perspectives and expanded the search to include the terms 'culturally appropriate', 'contextually-relevant', and 'localized'. Additionally, researchers relied on relevant texts with which they were familiar. The cut-off point for the literature search was December 2017, but, in this rapidly expanding field, it is possible that not all efforts identified in the literature have been tracked. Themes were elicited and refined through an iterative process (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000), with interpretations geared towards themes related to social work curriculum and education as primary content. Furthermore, informal, reflective, interrogative discussions regarding the value of literature reviews in contextualized research were held.

Alternative views are not consistently represented in mainstream academic publications because other ways of producing, gathering and disseminating knowledge are overlooked; as a result, traditional literature reviews have limitations as the basis of conceptualizing alternatives to dominant social work (Kovach et al, 2015; Schmid, 2017; Smith, 2012). These processes typically result in dominant Western perspectives being privileged and may impact insights.

Deconstructing Mainstream Social Work

Dominant social work has been characterized as a relationship-based intervention that is focused on individual (micro) problems and relies primarily on a diagnostic, problem-solving, and task-centered approach (De Urrutia Barosso & Strug, 2013; Gair, Miles, & Thomson, 2005; Patel, 2015; Saracosti et al., 2012). Further, dominant social work utilizes standardized, homogenized, evidence-based social work definitions and interventions (Dominelli, 2012; Razack, 2012). Drawing on the content analysis, the discussion below highlights that scholars

problematize this mainstream approach and suggest that there are many reasons to seek alternatives to dominant social work. Critiques include the inappropriateness and inherent social control of dominant social work as well as professional imperialism and standardization, expressed in the emergent themes of addressing the mismatch, preventing social harm, and resisting universalism and standardization. It must be noted that critics do not suggest that mainstreamed practice lacks all value, but rather argue for different assumptions to inform social work practice and education and, thus, to shift the predominant forms of intervention (Patel, 2015).

Addressing the Mismatch

Dominant social work appears to be problematic in a variety of circumstances, as a result of both its conceptualization of need and its approach to intervention. The literature identifies the *mismatch between imported conceptualizations of social work and local needs and worldviews* as a primary concern (Al-Makhamreh & Sullivan, 2013; Badwall & Razack, 2012; Baltra-Ulloa, 2013; Kalinganire & Rutikanga, 2014a; Kee, 2008; Patel, 2005). This incompatibility can be attributed to the historic socio-political conditions in which White-centered social work has been developed, limiting transferability to other conditions (Furuto, 2013; Spitzer, 2014). Second, the individualized, deficit-based lens of Western social work (Gair, Miles, & Thomson, 2005) *creates incongruence by ignoring structural*, systemic factors that may have had a significant impact on local populations. The associated privatization of social problems pathologizes the individual, family, or community by locating the problems within them and placing responsibility for remediation on them (De Urrutia Barosso & Strug, 2013; Saracostti et al., 2012). Further, Western *models privilege specialist and remedial* case management interventions, even though generalist approaches are more accessible and have greater social impact (Gray et al., 2008; Mwansa, 2011; Mwansa & Kreitzer, 2012; Patel, 2015). In addition, while micro or individualized interventions may lead to change within and by an individual, they have limited effect on social conditions affecting large numbers of people (Patel, 2015; Spitzer et al., 2014). It is also problematic that Western models *typically engage only the psychological dimension*, ignoring holistic understandings of human functioning (Baskin, 2016). A further critique of dominant discourses is their *limited responsiveness to diversity* and the lived realities of Indigenous, (im)migrant or minority populations (Furuto, 2013; Gray et al., 2008; Sakaguchi & Sewpaul, 2011). Finally, because dominant social work models prize self-determination and individual decision-making, *collective notions of belonging and decision-making are ignored* (Baskin, 2016; Furuto, 2013). The mismatch is exemplified in social work practice in some African countries, where individualized approaches have not been able to reach sufficient affected persons or significantly shift their lived experience around such issues as natural disasters, widespread poverty, or vulnerability among children (Twikirize, 2014).

Preventing Social Harm

Not only do dominant approaches not fit, they often perpetuate harm and oppression, and thereby compromise human rights (Gray et al., 2008; Kovach et al., 2015). Indeed, social work has been used as a form of social control, consistently ignoring or diminishing the voice of those on the margins (Gray et al., 2008; Harms et al., 2011). Further, dominant models eclipse local ways of knowing and being and may facilitate cultural appropriation (Love, 2006; Walsh-Tapiata, 2008).

Such social harm is evidenced in the overrepresentation of marginalized and oppressed groups in systems such as child protection, youth justice, mental health, and corrections (Mandell, Blackstock, Clouston Carlson, & Fine, 2006), or in Canadian Indigenous communities where social work interventions have historically ignored and perpetuated intergenerational trauma (Baskin, 2016). Social workers have also been responsible for reinforcing apartheid racism, injustice, and inequality (Patel, 2015). On a mezzo and macro level, the associated loss of culture, identity and connections, evidenced starkly in Indigenous communities (Young et al., 2013), demonstrates the destructive potential of individualized social work.

Resistance to Standardization and Universalism

Thirdly, the neoliberal discourse currently informing Western practice strongly advances standardized, homogenized, evidence-based social work definitions and interventions (Dominelli, 2012; Razack, 2012). This discourse ensures a focus on risk management, dysfunction, and cure, as opposed to prevention and capacity-building (Harris, 2006; Lombard, 2014; Patel, 2015; Sewpaul, 2014; Weaver & Congress, 2009). Contexts where social work is new or still being strengthened may be particularly susceptible to the uncritical acceptance of seemingly immutable dominant constructions of social work, thereby entrenching universal notions of social work (Gray et al., 2008; Schmid, 2017; Yip, 2013). Additionally, the increased presence of international agencies in the global South (Schmid, 2017) and the greater mobility of social workers (Beddoe & Fraser, 2012) reinforces the argument for universal and, by implication, standardized social work. These trends are exemplified in the case management model actively promoted by international actors such as the Global Social Service Alliance (Schmid, 2017). Indigenous, decolonized helping strategies frequently are an expression of resistance to such aspects of globalization and the uni-directional professional imperialism of Western social work (Dominelli, 2012; Gray et al., 2008; Midgely, 2008; Spitzer et al., 2014; Yan & Tsang, 2008).

Constructions of Alternatives to Dominant Social Work

The preceding discussion explicates the significant concerns regarding the impact of dominant social work. Academics and practitioners have begun to assert the need to employ appropriate, relevant, flexible, and multi-faceted approaches in the local context (Spitzer, 2014). Relying on the content analysis, the authors offer a review of the predominant alternatives to dominant social work. Identifying particular, unique frameworks is though difficult because the alternatives offered are not necessarily discrete or static. Additionally, the ongoing search for meaningful alternatives (Yip, 2013) reflects tensions bound up with longstanding discussions regarding the universality of social work, the desire for common definitions, the relevance of local approaches, and the advisability of melding local and dominant approaches (Gray, Coates, & Yellow Bird, 2008; International Federation of Social Workers, 2018; Spitzer, Twikirize, & Wairire, 2014).

The frameworks for alternatives to dominant social work discussed below highlight varying emphases in seeking meaningful responses to Indigenous or local conditions. It may therefore be useful to briefly interrogate the concepts “Indigenous”, noting that each of these approaches assumes an Indigenous or local group. The meaning, though, is inconsistent. In countries such as Canada, the USA, Australia, and New Zealand, Indigenous refers to first

peoples, who now constitute oppressed minorities (Kovach et al., 2015). A second discourse emerges out of countries such as Botswana, South Africa, and India where the word “indigenous” is associated with previously colonized, disenfranchised, or marginalized local majorities who now govern (Patel, 2015). A third context includes environments such as China, where all local persons are viewed as constituting a heterogeneous but also indigenous population and where imported approaches are viewed as less relevant (Sin, 2008). Exceptions to these categories of “Indigenous” add further complexity. For example, Marsiglia (2013) argues that the transnational groups, such as Mexican Americans, must be recognized for their indigeneity. It should also be recognized that where majority needs prevail what or who constitutes indigeneity or first peoples might be contested and their needs overlooked, as is evident in contemporary South Africa (Laher & Sing’Oei, 2014).

The literature describes a range of alternative paradigms. Despite some overlap, each perspective represents particular world views or agendas (Campbell & Baikie, 2012). *Indigenized social work* is an initial African framing of such an alternative (Ngau, 1987; Osei-Hwedie, 1993) and involves adapting Western approaches to local situations to facilitate local meaning (Gray & Hetherington, 2013; Gray, Coates, Yellow Bird, & Hetherington, 2013; Yip, 2013; Zhanghua & Liqun, 2013). However, this transmission of ideas from a Western context (in)to a non-Western context is viewed by some as furthering the dominance of Western discourse(s), thereby further marginalizing local helping traditions (Gray et al., 2013).

Instead, *culturally relevant* or *appropriate social work* conveys a responsiveness to diversity. This form of social work prioritizes the reclamation of traditional practices (Love, 2006, p. 259) and places local norms and knowledge in the foreground (Gray et al., 2008; Osei-Hwedie & Rankopo, 2008). Prioritizing the same issues, Yip (2013) promotes the term *authentic social work*, pointing to the “primary use of local and traditional wisdom” (p. 232). Culturally relevant or authentic social work affirms national and international heterogeneity among Indigenous groups. It also facilitates respectful and meaningful intervention with other cultural minority groups (Furuto, 2013; Midgley, 2008). As such, it is fundamentally different from technocratic cultural competence (Baltra-Ullo, 2013).

Nimagadda and Martell (2008, p. 142) offer an alternative conceptualization, using the term *localization* of social work practice. Cox and Pawar (2006) also emphasize locality and avoid talking about Indigenization altogether, instead using the phrase *local development*, while Kovach, Carrier, Montgomery, Barrett, and Gilles (2015) talk about *place-based intervention*. Similarly, Young et al. (2013) suggest naming the helping model after the locality, e.g. *Aboriginal and Torres Strait peoples-centred social work* (p. 185).

Indigenous social work is another articulation of an alternative to dominant social work, wherein Indigenous world views are prioritized and fully inform the social work approach. In this formulation, those interested in decolonization and healing are encouraged to centralize Indigenous knowledges, values, and practices in social work education and intervention (Baskin, 2016, p. 4). This approach is entrenched in the United Nation’s *Declaration on the rights of Indigenous persons* (United Nations, 2007).

A potential critique of both Indigenization and culturally relevant social work is that they do not emphasize the material conditions caused by colonialism, imperialism, and globalization

(Furuto, 2013; Gray et al., 2008). Hence, a further proposition is to employ *decolonized* social work, emerging out of Midgley's work on professional imperialism (Gray et al., 2013). While, in certain aspects, the terms Indigenous and decolonized social work coalesce, they differ with regard to their historical antecedents and emphases regarding transformation. Indeed, decolonization redirects critical attention towards deconstructing the influence of Western formulations of social work and articulating themes of colonialism, oppression, sovereignty, racism, sexism, and cultural rights (Gray et al., 2013; Kovach et al., 2015).

In many countries, *developmental social work* has been identified as a theoretical model that encapsulates and incorporates local helping practices (Harris, 2006; Patel, 2015; Spitzer et al., 2014). It is a pro-poor model (Rao, 2013) and acknowledges the community as the primary site of intervention (Mwansa, 2011). This approach is multi-disciplinary and multi-sectoral and (re)constructs the social work role as that of a change agent working on micro, mezzo, and macro levels (Patel, 2015; Spitzer & Twikirize, 2014). It underlines the interdependencies of the local and global economic, social, environmental, and political contexts (Bragin et al., 2016; Gray & Hetherington, 2013; Hong & Song, 2010; Ibrahim, 2017; Koenig et al., 2017). The various conceptualizations of alternatives communicate a range of priorities, although intersections are evident. Thus, the authors recommend an integrated model.

Contextualized Social Work

Contextually relevant practice is the descriptor used by Al-Makhamreh and Libal (2012), who maintain that this term embraces social, political, economic, and health-related dimensions, and is focused on local knowledge. Borrowing from Al-Makhamreh and Libal (2012), the authors bring together the various conceptualizations of alternative social work articulated above under the umbrella term "Contextualized Social Work". This is not simply a gathering of ideas, but rather an integration of concepts. This formulation recognizes locally situated practice, validates local or Indigenous knowledges and wisdom, centres culturally authentic responses, allows for interrelationships between humans and the (natural) environment, recognizes the impact of colonial and oppressive forces, and facilitates a socially just and holistic response. Indigenous issues are not subsumed within a multicultural discussion; instead, they are informed by contextually relevant practice. Indeed, in validating other ways of knowing, doing, and being, contextualized social work requires the educator and practitioner to go beyond notions of cultural competence, humility, and safety in order to prioritize local world views, knowledge production, and helping strategies. Contextualized social work requires active engagement through intentional community interaction with the local context of social work education and service delivery. Further, in recognizing the links between individuals and their physical, social, and spiritual environment, contextualized social work facilitates holistic frameworks and responses.

Contextualized social work extends the tenets of critical social work. Thus, contextualized social work explicitly articulates and makes visible the ways in which local ways of life, i.e. knowing, doing, and being, construct challenges and appropriate interventions. Although critical social work acknowledges that "[i]f practice is truly contextual, there is no longer an opposition between practice and environment" (Campbell & Blaikie, 2012, p.78), contextualized social work suggests the demands of the context are primary. Moreover, such contextualized social work allows educators and practitioners to adopt the epistemological emphasis that is most relevant to their current context, without foregoing or diluting other

perspectives. Therefore, while attending to the interaction of local and global factors, local discourses are privileged. Additionally, contextualized social work specifically problematizes professional imperialism. Finally, it emphasizes the confluence of historical and contemporary oppression in shaping local conditions and meaning. Contextualized social work is, thus, a multidimensional construct.

Contextualized Social Work Education

Having conceptualized contextual social work, it becomes important to identify how to educate student social workers so that they can master such a framework. This is also crucial in that while there is emergent literature regarding alternative practices, very little has been formally documented and assessed with regard to relevant and appropriate education.

Just as contextualized social work resists dominant understandings and practices of social work, contextualized social work education on both a content and pedagogical level must present a form of education that is distinct from the norm. The authors postulate that contextualized social work education is distinguished by specific features, drawn from observations in the literature regarding the teaching of the alternatives identified earlier and formulated as an integrated description of contextualized social work education. These particular characteristics include a specific value base, the intentional acknowledgement of colonization and its consequences, the incorporation of Indigenous/local culture and knowledge, a response to local conditions, and a reliance on Indigenous/local materials.

Values

Contextualized social work acknowledges, integrates, and, ideally, uses overlooked and devalued world views as a foundation for practice. Indeed, alternatives to dominant practice are guided by the desire to seek reconciliation, right previous wrongs, attend to the flow of power, and avoid replication of harmful and oppressive practices (Harris, 2006; Gair et al., 2005; Love, 2006; Mandell et al., 2006; Weaver & Congress, 2009). Social justice as well as collective world views and decision-making are emphasized. Further, contextualized social work advances self-determination, democracy, and civic participation (Hochfeld, 2010; Weaver & Congress, 2013). These values are congruent with the first set of the Global Social Work Standard of Ethical Principles (IFSW, 2018), including the recognition of the inherent dignity of humanity, the promotion of human rights and social justice, and the advancement of the right to self-determination and participation. The values guiding contextualized social work have not always been distinctly represented in international ethics and their inclusion represents a shift in the international construction of social work.

Impacts of Colonization

In addition to the values cited above, in recognizing the impact of colonization and oppression, contextualized curriculum encourages understanding of the critical and damaging role of colonization on Indigenous peoples and local populations (Patel, 2015; Tamburro, 2010; Walsh-Tapiata, 2008). This approach reflects the frequently serial nature of colonization (Marsiglia, 2013) and its perpetuation in(to) contemporary times. Transmitting critical understandings of trauma is also emphasized, acknowledging the pervasive intergenerational

role of loss and the erosion of connections between the people and their land, language, culture and spirituality, as well as the physical, cultural, economic, sociopolitical, and psychological consequences of that erosion (Gray et al., 2008; Mokuau & Mataira, 2013). This emphasis affirms resiliency and dispels negative stereotypes (Gray et al., 2013; Harms et al., 2011; Weaver & Congress, 2009). Additionally, the tensions between universality and specificity, dominance and minority, and traditional and contemporary ways of being are introduced, allowing a decolonized social work curriculum to maintain an in-between but authentic space (Yip, 2013).

Further, contextualized curriculum decolonizes social work history, deconstructs social work knowledge and roles, and articulates the destructive impact of many historical and contemporary social work interventions (Gray et al., 2008; Harms et al., 2011). Accordingly, progressive critical social work's theoretical perspectives and pedagogies address structural oppression, human rights, emancipation, and empowerment. (Hochfeld, 2010; Lombard, 2014; Rao, 2013). Contextualized social work curriculum promotes reflexivity; encourages students to insert their own narratives of trauma, silencing, and oppression (Baskin, 2016; Bruyere, 2008; Mokuau & Mataira, 2013); and recognizes the way in which oppressions might be played out in the classroom (Koenig et al., 2017).

Cultural Knowledge and History

Further, contextualized curricula reflect a deep appreciation of Indigenous epistemology (Harris, 2006), and incorporate cultural knowledge and history (Harms et al., 2011). Valuing cultural practices is especially important where social institutions are fragile, such as in areas of conflict (Bragin et al., 2016). Appropriate curricula advance the appreciation of and reliance on different knowledge(s) and affirm alternative ways of learning, such as hands-on learning and learning through story telling/oral traditions. Contextualized social work education resists adopting fixed notions of Indigenous culture and recognizes that Indigenous/local ways of knowing and doing are heterogeneous (Rao, 2013; Sin, 2008; Spitzer, 2014; Tauri, 2005; Yip, 2013). Hence, depending on context, students are taught to value diverse ways of being that first, underline collective identity, sense of belonging and decision-making processes that include family, clan, and tribe (Furuto, 2013); second, acknowledge the spiritual as well as the contiguity of individuals with the land, animals, plants, and ancestors; and third, adopt a holistic approach (Tamburro, 2010). Further ways of knowing, doing, and being may also include an appreciation of children as fully spiritual beings (Baskin, 2016; Love, 2006) and the valuing of the intimate ties and interdependence between identity, the individual, the land, place, and the spirits of all life (Baskin, 2016; Coates, 2013; Harris, 2006; Love, 2006; Tanemura Morelli et al., 2013; Walsh-Tapiata, 2008). In some cases, matrilineal rather than patrilineal relationships might shape the society (Baskin, 2016). One may need to consider extended conceptions of time, such as locating individuals in the past, present, and future, but with a present-orientation. Ways of knowing and learning may include non-binary thinking and the transmission of knowledge through sacred stories/teachings (Love, 2006; Walsh-Tapiata, 2008).

Contextualized modes of teaching also recognize embodied knowledge and adopt an integrated, holistic learning approach (Kovach et al., 2015). Connections with self, kin, and the land are enhanced, and oral history, story-telling methods, and "learning by doing" are introduced into the classroom (Bruyere, 2008; Kovach et al., 2015; Twikirize, 2014). Instructors celebrate local practices and affirm their role in the development of belonging and identity by

promoting student participation in local rituals or ceremonies (Baskin, 2016). The affirmation of Indigenous ways legitimizes Indigenous students sharing their knowledge and experiences without tokenizing them (Bruyere, 2008).

Reflexivity is central to contextualized practice and thus to the contextualized curriculum. This process requires social workers to develop a critical appreciation of their own culture in order to understand the complexities of other cultures (Baltra-Ulloa, 2013; Patel, 2005). Students need to have insight into the flow of power, distribution of wealth and land, notions of privilege, and the internalization of subjectivities (Baskin, 2016; Coates, 2013; Ives & Loft, 2013; Mwansa, 2011). Engaging in the above processes allows future practitioners to serve their own communities and/or more fully understand the particular belief systems and practices of the community with which they are engaged (De Urrutia Barosso & Strug, 2013; Omona, 2014).

Local Conditions

Additionally, contextualized instruction imperatives are directly informed by local social conditions derived from particular political, socio-economic, and cultural environments (Spitzer & Twikirize, 2014). Such social problems might include mass poverty, the movement and resettlement of refugees, armed conflict, safe water delivery, vulnerability of children, HIV and AIDS, gender-based violence, and land and ethnic conflict, including women's access to land. To appreciate how people locally construct and prioritize prevailing conditions, contextualized curriculum and practice promote community ties, facilitate partnerships with elders, and build capacity (Baskin, 2016; Bruyere, 2008; Hart, 2008; Mandell et al., 2006; Tamburro, 2010).

These issues inform the types of modules included and skills taught. Modules might focus on political activism, gender equality, human rights, holistic approaches, spirituality, trauma, green/ecological social work, and rural social work. Associated skills might include community development, peace-building, facilitation of dialogue and solidarity, and training of volunteers (Baskin, 2016; Baltra-Ulloa, 2013; Coates, 2013; Kalinganire & Rutikanga, 2014b; Kebede, 2014; Spitzer, Murekasenge, & Muchiri, 2014; Rao, 2013; Tamburro, 2010; Yin, 2013). As well, social workers increasingly find themselves both in conflict and natural disaster zones and need to know how to respond in these situations (Bauwens & Naturale, 2017; Jang & Lamendola, 2007).

Relying on Indigenous/local Materials

Further, local materials inform contextualized social work education. Though not irrelevant, the inclusion of local case studies or presentations by local speakers, for example, is insufficient to transform the curriculum (Gray & Hetherington, 2013). Rather, effective social work instruction relies on Indigenous materials and research that capture parochial knowledge, contextualize external perspectives, and, by implication, inform social work assumptions (Bennett & Blackstock, 2006; Gray et al., 2013; Harms et al., 2011; Kee, 2008; Rao, 2013; Yan & Tsang, 2008). Relevant materials that address local socio-political realities may be presented in local languages (Rao, 2013) and employ local lenses. Further, the lived realities of not only Indigenous persons but also other minority groups are reflected (Midgely, 2008).

Including Indigenous materials requires the accumulation, distillation, and articulation of local helping models and the transformation of these into theoretical discourse (Harris, 2006). Significant strides have been made in identifying and accessing alternative knowledges and in formulating appropriate research methodologies (Kovach, 2009; Kovach et al., 2015; Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2001). To uncover Indigenous perspectives, contextualized social work education and practice are developed in partnership with Indigenous communities (Gray et al., 2008; Patel, 2005), with knowledge gathered through relationships with kin, peers, elders, the creator, and the land (Kovach et al., 2015). Local partnerships allow for curricula to be informed by Indigenous lived reality, experience, language, and metaphors (Hochfeld, 2010; Kee, 2008; Kovach et al., 2015; Zhangua & Liqun, 2013). Partnerships also facilitate an appreciation of oral history; who the traditional helpers have been; what local processes and mechanisms of communication are—especially as these may not replicate Western forms (e.g. making the construct of a professional ‘contractual’ relationship redundant); and how interventions might now be delivered (Kee, 2008). It must be noted that Indigenous, local knowledge is fluid and context specific, evading reification (Kovach et al., 2015) and by implication, requires ongoing exchange with local communities.

Supporting Contextualized Social Work Education

Thus, contextualized social work education is informed by a particular set of values, a thick understanding of colonization, knowledge of culture, and familiarity with local conditions. It relies on Indigenous materials; however, it also requires a range of supports if it is to counter the dominant narrative. The literature review reveals that contextualized social work education is situated in a political and policy nexus (Patel, 2015; Sewpaul, 2014; Spitzer, 2014; Yan & Tsang, 2008; Yip, 2013), this having a number of implications. For example, an appropriate political mandate, via welfare policy, such as in the South African White Paper on social development, or processes, such as the work of the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission, can support contextualized social work education (Androff, 2010; Hochfeld, 2010; Lombard, 2014; Patel, 2015; Schmid, 2012). The politics of the university environment are also crucial: Leadership buy-in, faculty commitment, an understanding of the nature and purpose of social work, clarity regarding the role of instructors, and the hiring of (sufficient) faculty with social work training are some of the essential factors in sustainable contextualized social work education (Furuto, 2013; Kreitzer, 2013; Pawar & Tsui, 2012; Tanemura Morelli, Mataira, & Kaulukukui, 2013; Yuen-Tsang & Ku, 2008; Zhangua & Liqun, 2013). Additionally, minimum standards may guide curriculum development (Bragin et al., 2016; Harms et al., 2011; Hochfeld, 2010; Pawar & Tsui, 2012). Regulatory bodies might support social work identity (Kebede, 2014) and ensure that educational standards match the local vision for social work (Mwansa, 2011; Mwansa & Kreitzer, 2012). However, an emphasis on standards of quality, evaluation, conduct, and the code of ethics may be counterproductive if these standards reinforce a paternalistic, neo-liberal approach (Sakaguchi & Sewpaul, 2011).

Even with support, instructors may gravitate back towards a Eurocentric model because of this model’s familiarity as well as university expectations to meet so-called universal, world-class standards (Hochfeld, 2010; Mandell et al., 2006; Osei-Hwedie & Rankopo, 2012; Osei-Hwedie & Rankopo, 2008; Rao, 2013). Hence, ongoing reaffirmation of intent, guidance from community representatives, and the hiring of and support for instructors and field supervisors who represent the local population and hold insider knowledge should inform university dialogue

(Gair, 2008; Gray et al., 2013; Hochfeld, 2010; Kovach et al., 2015; Tanemura Morelli et al., 2013; Young et al., 2013). The university environment can further strengthen contextualized curriculum by appointing elders, thus enhancing students' connection with their culture, and reasserting the position of elders as leaders in the community (Bruyere, 2008; Kovach et al., 2015). Moreover, the university must decide which students should be engaged in contextualized education: Is the goal to enable Indigenous people and those directly affected by social work interventions to construct relevant notions of social work, thereby offering separate education (Gair, 2008; Gair et al., 2005), and/or is it to ensure all social work students are equipped to deliver contextualized practice? Further, to facilitate trust (Baskin, 2016), the university might encourage non-indigenous instructors to use Indigenous mentors, and to engage in cultural immersion, co-instruction models, self-reflexivity and partnerships with local communities (Gair, 2008; Hochfeld, 2010; Ives & Loft, 2013; Silver, 2017). University supports are also needed in contexts where it is difficult to access field placement and job opportunities (Furuto, 2013; Yuen-Tsang & Ku, 2008; Zhangua & Liqun, 2013). Finally, universities should facilitate access on the part of not only urban, but also rural students (Pawar & Tsui, 2012).

In addition to macro and mezzo political support, other mechanisms encouraging contextualized social work education include regional, continental, and international engagement and partnership between academics and NGOs (Spitzer et al., 2014). Given the shortage of qualified social work instructors, such partnerships may allow universities to build instructor capacity, particularly when locals co-instruct alongside international lecturers (Spitzer et al., 2014) or when curriculum is shared (Midgely, 2008). Further, partnerships offer credibility and facilitate knowledge transfer from the global South to the North if they promote, acknowledge, and disseminate local research by local scholars and Indigenous research approaches as equal to Western forms of knowledge, (Kebede, 2014; Kovach et al., 2015; Midgley & Conley, 2010; Nimaggadda & Martell, 2008). However, partnerships must be scrutinized to ensure the agenda is not one of internationalization of social work or professional imperialism (Gray & Hetherington, 2013; Midgley, 2008; Razack, 2012; Schmid, 2017). Multi-level, intentional support is thus needed to facilitate contextualized social work education.

Conclusion

In gathering conceptualizations of contextually relevant practice from scholarly literature, the authors have identified concerns associated with dominant social work and described the ways in which alternatives are currently understood. Noting intersections between these various frameworks, the authors offered contextualized social work as a means of integrating these various agendas towards a more inclusive, dynamic, flexible and nuanced response to dominant social work. The authors then extended this concept into the notion of contextualized social work education, identifying essential features and means of supporting such education.

The literature provides few examples of such contextualized curriculum and methodology. Indeed, it appears that social work departments continue to struggle to transform curriculum towards decolonized, contextualized lenses and have made insufficient place for Indigenous/local perspectives (Hamilton, 2017; Harris, 2006; Schmid, 2014; Zhangua & Liqun, 2013). There are also challenges regarding the centering of evolving, local, indigenous ways of knowing, being, and helping (Gray et al., 2013; Kovach et al., 2015; Spitzer, 2014). These challenges point to future research directions.

First, this observation suggests that, in the same way that practice examples are collected internationally, a next step might be gathering examples of social work departments or even individual instructors currently transforming curriculum. This process of collection would involve articulating the ways in which such approaches differ in teaching content and pedagogy. It would also require identifying the driving epistemologies and examining whether educators are focused on a single alternative approach or are teaching from an integrated contextualized social work perspective. Revealing examples of success and sharing such innovation may encourage other social work educators to actively engage in contextualized curriculum and teaching methodology. Such investigation might also highlight knowledge production that presents decolonizing and Indigenous thinking and ways of doing. In this regard, the degree to which contextualized social work is centered and why and how this occurs might be explored. Second, it is expected that various neo-liberal developments have constrained contextualized social work education. It may therefore be useful to explore the conditions under which resistance to neo-liberalism and the ensuing transformation to dominant social work content and pedagogy are able to take root and flourish, and how neoliberal influences are countered. In conclusion, adopting a paradigm of contextualized social work education allows educators to expose students to effective, appropriate, and meaningful alternatives in their efforts to address local conditions while honouring and centering Indigenous/local helping strategies and culture.

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