

AN ANALYSIS OF SOCIAL CASEWORK DIMENSIONS IN AFRICA

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Abstract

Social casework remains relevant as a method of social work in Africa, although it was developed and nurtured in the western world. Its universal applicability continues to be scrutinised, with recommendations that the practice and fieldwork training methodologies, currently in use, need to be transformed in line with the realities of the needs of social work practice and the needs of different countries. And observations are also that this can only happen if the educational framework, the definition of the client –worker relationship and methods used in social casework conform to local social work systems, local culture and social structures.

Key words

Casework, education, methodology, relationship, practice, training, tradition, social work.

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Introduction

The field of Social Work is witnessing tremendous growth and popularity. Fuelling this highly regarded expansion are various practice and training models that underscore how academics and practitioners approach the discipline in various scientific and service based contexts. In Zimbabwe, the profession has its origins in the 1960s when religious group workers and community organisation workers began formulation of conventional social work practice and training approaches. The Jesuit Fathers of the Catholic Church led through the establishment of the first School of Social Work, whose main objective was the training of social work practitioners. The practice and training methods of the day supported individualistic and small group solutions to social problems rather than communalistic solutions. Individualistic solutions were therapeutically and casework oriented, no focus was placed at the reform of institutions and allocative procedures. According to Mupedziswa (1998:29) 'social work (should) come to include almost any activity which is intended to help restore or promote some aspects of the physical, economic or social well-being of individuals groups or communities.'

Today, three basic paradigms guide scientific and service based context in social work, namely casework, group work and community work. Not much is known about the scientific relationships of these paradigms that represent the discipline of social work, except their operational parameters. However there is no common or generally accepted and well codified training model, some confusion still exists concerning the scope and the aim of each approach in such matters as educational philosophy, definition of client practitioner relationship, method of intervention and especially as it relates to cultural and traditional social work interventions. All this translates to a lack of common ground on how practitioners can successfully engage their client in practice.

While the three methods of social work are not exhaustive, they represent an integral dimension to professional social work which aims to increase the student skills and techniques for effective practice. How then can the Schools of Social Work respond to the blurring boundaries between casework, group work and community work?

According to Mupedziswa (1993:158) social work in Africa inherited a western bias because of the legacy of colonialism. Social work theories tend to be adopted wholesale from western theorists and practitioners, reflecting western academic analysis and the culture of individualism. Mupedziswa goes on to say that the intervention strategies used focus on the provision of

remedial services in respect to marginalised groups..... (Mupedziswa, 1991b). In Africa the practice of social casework has been criticised for their lack of responsiveness and sensitivity to local conditions and environment, and critics have called for teaching methodologies to this method to be modified or reoriented so as to be more relevant to local situations. Scholars such as Ragab (1982), Ankrah (1987) and Midgley (1981) have called for authentisation, radicalisation and indigenisation respectively, of social work processes (social casework in particular) in developing countries; if these processes are to become relevant to the needs of people in developing countries (Mupedziswa, 1993). He also observed that social work should shed its foreign character and perhaps recognise its central focus, knowledge and value base.

Ankrah (1987) calls for radical developmental social work of an interdisciplinary nature, guided by informed, forward-thinking professionals and grounded in African realities.....While Midgley (1981) calls for appropriate practice and training levels, which address the demands of social work practice and the needs of different countries. Ragab (1982) also calls for appropriateness in social work training and practice. He calls for authentisation of social which emphasises the identification of local social work systems with local cultures and social structures within which social work is practiced.

In Zimbabwe, some schools of social work have realised that some lay social practitioners should know something about the methodologies employed in the profession. They are therefore effort to exploit this indigenous knowledge in an effort to improve traditional social work methodologies. This approach does develop method specialists with some knowledge of another methodology although this knowledge will be limited if not supported by fieldwork reality and practice.

Social work poses the unique of understanding of practice methodologies formulated in western countries and the challenge of applying them in traditional African situations. A typical example is that of the mismatch of Eurocentric social work practice methodologies as they relate to the principle of confidentiality by Biestek (1957). Conventionally trained social workers make good sense of this principle in theoretical practice methodologies, but identify various practice challenges among indigenous Zimbabwean Africans, who have traditional cultural issues of communalism and sharing, especially in rural areas and some urban communities.

In many parts of Africa, people traditionally share information, even about intimate matters within the extended family through a process of what Campbell and Williams (1990) in

Mupedziswa (1993) call 'shared confidentiality.' Mararike (1998) explains this vividly when he says "members of Shona society are instructed in what they are expected to do by their society and, as a process, it is normally a collective responsibility." Hence in traditional Shona society an problem that affects a family member is also my problem if I belong to that extended family system. Therefore in this respect there is nothing confidential about a family member's problem if we belong to the same family, because the consequences of that problem are understood to most likely to affect, not only the responsible individual, but are considered to also have effect on every member of the clan. This therefore puts a different dimension to social work practice methodologies, which often emphasis individualism, in line with western philosophies. This traditional philosophy poses various challenges to social workers in Africa whose interventions should not only be directed at the individual but should ensure the inclusion of family members and significant others if the intervention is to succeed. In Africa most societies do not see anything confidential about a problem, they see sharing as a way to ventilate and in the process get assistance- this understanding is very common among members in Shona society in Zimbabwe.

In light of this it may therefore be safe to talk of social work jurisdictional disputes as to which of the three traditional methods of practice they fit into. This is because most problems in social work do not come neatly wrapped into individual, group and community- size packages.

While we do not believe that all social workers need to be all things to all people or to know all traditional factors of social work intervention, we do believe that all social workers must at least be social workers to all people. However the social worker should bring to his/her particular identification as a social worker and this identification must have some methodological basis or context or the base or core from which specialisation is taking place.

Undergraduate social work training should consist of liberal social scientific base and field experience. The curriculum should comprise content related to, social work as a profession, social welfare as an institution, methods and skills, and also field experience in order to sharpen one's cognitive understanding, roles and practice skills. There is need to seriously consider evidence based paradigm in social work practice. Gilgum (2006) defined evidence based practice as a mix of learning what treatment work based on the best available research , discussing client's views about treatment to consider cultural and other differences and to honour client's self determination and autonomy considering the profession's clinical wisdom based on work

with similar cases which may provide a context for understanding the research evidence considering what the professional can and cannot provide fully and ethically.

This paper is therefore an attempt to systematically evaluate only one of the three broad social work methods namely social casework and to examine its significance for professional training and practice.

Social Casework

Mary Richmond (1917) in COS (1930) is thought of as the founder of casework and enhanced the progress of social work as from being a vocation to that of a profession she also developed a framework for a more systematic social investigation of clients' problems based of the properly known social casework process of social study, social diagnosis and casework treatment. This initial vision that gave rise to social casework according to Briar (1967:19) "was based on an important insight into the human condition in modern society, namely the realisation that if social welfare programs are to be genuinely responsive to the needs of people, they must be individualized". Briar goes on to say that if this insight is forgotten, the profession as a whole will be the worse for it.

The worst criticism levelled against social work according to Briar (1967) relates to its case-by-case approach to social problems, which most critics say is inefficient and in certain instances said to be harmful and hence not effective. These critics argue that social change and social reform is the most effective way of dealing with social problems and that rather than caseworkers devising methods that are tailor made to the client's needs and expectations have expected the client to adapt to the caseworker's methods. People with problems emanating from psycho-social circumstances are the ones that have tended to benefit most from casework interventions. In developing countries where most problems emanate from poverty the group and community intervention methods have been found to be the most effective social work methods. This is also because of the large numbers of people seeking services of social workers and also among various other reasons there is the issue of limited resources that maybe at stake to assist these clients.

The social casework evaluation under discussion in this paper will include the following:

- Educational framework - with an emphasis on undergraduate education
- Definition of client worker relationship
- Method of intervention

Educational Framework in Social Casework

Social work education is directed at educating the student to be a good practitioner. The education provided should help the student to acquire knowledge, skill and attitudes closely related to social work practice. Social casework is one of the methods of social work that every social work student should be acquainted with during training. The content of the social casework curriculum should be arranged with the following objectives:

- To give students background knowledge necessary for an intelligent understanding of individuals in their society.
- To give students a course on methodology of social work which are intended to establish more positive relations by a conscious use of social work principles in their daily contacts with individuals, with due reference to progressive traditional factors.
- To give students a method which lays emphasis on the principles of prevention and intervention.

The educational framework should promote creation of a social work practitioner who can help clients and significant others to come up with sound psychosocial remedied for themselves or for others which promote collective developmental needs of their respective countries. Appropriate social casework education curriculums in Africa should not totally ignore remedial interventions, but should be directed more at teaching interventions that meet basic needs. There are many examples of this model and also the belief in that competent social workers can inform those seeking help of the worker's facilitative role in resolving social issues. The aim of educational framework in the casework approach is to produce social workers who can be called upon or are able to follow the process of studying, diagnosing and facilitating the client to formulate a plan of action based on the agreed problem with regards to environmental intervening issues.

Client- Social Worker Relationship in a Casework Approach.

The definition of the client-practitioner relationship refers to the identification of appropriate roles of participants in method/model specific professional context. Defining the client-practitioner relationship should answer the fundamental question of "who benefits from the intervention?". The traditional client-worker relationship attributes an individual's malfunctioning to individual responsibility and constitutional make-up, and hence puts the benefits of the relationship to the client, negating the societal benefits. Radical casework critically analysis the client's problems and situations in line with the roles of instigating factors

and bases the client-worker relationship on the issues that need to be resolved. The client and the situation are given the attention they deserve.

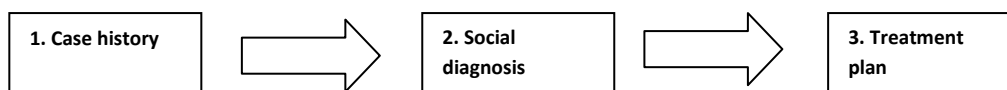
In Africa casework has tended to be remedial and focused on the individual's problem, with less emphasis on cause and effect, prevention or societal corrective measures. The ideal client-worker relationship needs to strengthen traditional systems of care and to also create workable alternatives. The Person In the Environment (PIE) paradigm should be incorporated in the client worker relationship. This paradigm recognises the existence of interpersonal, environmental, mental health and physical health problems as affecting the individual seeking casework services (Woods and Hollis, 2000)

Method of intervention in a casework approach

The method of intervention refers to the conceptual approach through which the professional social worker engages his or her clients. The method then is itself a model of understanding in which the social work profession determines how to most appropriately apply educational and professional tools of social work in a given situation or context. A method is also a comprehensive stock of knowledge that one brings to bear on the question of how best to interact with a given client in a specific intervention based context.

The method of intervention in casework encompasses the available spectrum of conceptual approaches to case study, diagnosis and plan of action or in more medical terms treatment. This model entails a social worker relying on the full assortment of projective, intellectual and personality instruments to evaluate a client (Pincus and Minahan, 1973) but incorporates various casework strategies into the social casework intervention. In the social casework approach all tools of the profession are serviceable and where appropriate designated, are selectively utilised. The client worker professional relationship gives rise to a specific form of non-judgemental intervention. All other factors are crucial and also important to the casework relationship.

The Casework Process.



The casework process starts from observation and proceeds to show how general abstract explanatory principles manifest themselves in a social casework relationship. The approach calls for one to examine the non-verbal and verbal communication symptoms and other diagnostic aids. The social caseworker then weighs up the various indicators and fits them together into a

meaningful code guided by what the caseworker knows about patterns of social problems and traditional factors influencing social problems. Given this interpretation, the caseworker is able to check assumptions and to carry out further investigations and further advice where necessary. In carrying out the interpretation and in giving advice, the social worker makes use of as much knowledge and information about the clients and their social relationships as he/she can assemble also informed by previous encounters, knowledge of social systems and professional training – these are used as a backdrop against which the social caseworker interprets the behaviour and presenting problems of the clients.

Intervention in relation to social worker's organisational context.

The relationship between the social worker and the agency one represents refers to the type and quality of association shared. Defining to the student the relationship entails defining education methodologies that determine the character of role-specific interaction between the social worker and the organisational settings and the expected outcome to go with this relationship. Social work students should be brought to understand that social workers in agencies are likely to represent the social work agency, its broad based understanding of interpreting and treating dysfunctional or problematic social casework. This understanding should be rooted in concern for the client and how the client copes with his or her troubled condition, clearly summarized as the need to address client's human needs.

The model should be taught so as to emphasis the skills of studying clients problems or situations, then diagnosing or coming up with an opinion over the problem or situation and then encouraging the client to come up with a plan of action to respond to the problem or situation with support from the social worker. Students should always be made to understand that a client is a social animal hence his or her problems or situations are influenced by their environments, and hence that environment should be taken into consideration when addressing the problem or situation. Classroom and fieldwork training should therefore ensure that the professional social worker can in a social casework intervention strategy accommodate the psychosocial and environmental needs of the client.

There is need to teach social work trainees about the importance of the “person in the situation” concept. According to Woods and Hollis (2000) the concept refers to three fold configuration consisting of the person, the situation and interaction between them. To fully comprehend the configuration, we borrow the “Gestalt” principle from psychology. Gestalt is the term used to

describe a configuration of phenomena that is so well integrated that the sum cannot be described by its parts alone. Therefore casework intervention should not focus solely on the individual but on the environment and the interaction of the two in order to ensure effective intervention.

Casework Practice Settings

Social workers work in various settings. The social worker working in a social welfare agency commonly known as primary settings, using the casework approach, is referred to as being an insider but is typically an outsider where intervention is applied in a social service agency such as the correctional service, the probation or health services unit which are commonly known as secondary settings. In secondary settings the social workers are viewed as outsiders not simply because of their professional social work intervention techniques which are different from that of agency and because they may not be familiar with the organisational core business of the agency they find themselves being employed by. In such a situation, a social caseworker should apply casework intervention measures that are consistent with his or her training, making such social casework intervention strategy information available to other secondary setting personnel in the organisation.

Demerits of the casework approach.

The casework approach is an established method of social work in which scientific and intervention tools of the discipline are brought to respond on specific individuals' social needs with the ultimate result of benefiting the larger community. The generic nature of most social work education and training often leads social work practitioners to be ill-prepared to address social casework matters at the core of many clients' concerns. The lack of integrated and holistic expertise renders the professional social caseworker limited in scope and type of intervention. Social casework classroom instruction is also restricted due to limitations in the critical academic expertise to offer social casework in the area.

The commonly shared conviction is that social caseworkers do not substantially or dramatically affect the lives of the clients. The absence of more cross-training in other field areas also renders the social caseworker an outsider with questionable implications for broad based professional social work practice.

Recommendations.

The methods used in the field of social work continue to be evolving, no longer does social work rely on casework interventions alone but on other social work intervention methods and other

social sciences intervention approaches. It is therefore evident that other social casework classroom instruction is needed. This instruction relates more to acquisition of indigenous social casework methodologies knowledge that allow for developmental social work strategies, especially in developing countries. The absence of such education provided by the competent well-trained and thoughtful professional social work tutors means that students may not be prepared to confront the practice challenges that await them in their careers.

Conclusion

The various methods for educating, training and practicing social work continue to be systematically explored. Little is known about their comparative utility and their impact for professional practice.

As the field of social work continues to mature on the African continent and as more and better social science and traditional approaches are applied to areas of investigation, to withstand qualitative and quantitative scrutiny, professional social workers will be called upon for expert social casework assistance that conforms to traditional and country specific needs. Institutions should therefore lie ready to provide such specialists with the necessary and relevant education and training for practice. I hope this paper represents the one step in the direction of clarifying these issues as they relate to social casework.

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