

IS THIS “WHITE PEOPLE TING”? EXPLORING PERCEPTIONS OF CULTURAL RELEVANCE OF SOCIAL WORK PRINCIPLES IN TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

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Abstract

Social Work occupies a unique role as it aims to enhance individual functioning and generate social transformation. Nonetheless, social workers in developing countries face a distinct challenge in ascertaining the relevance of Social Work to their local contexts, due to the heavy reliance on European and North American literature. In this study, social work educators and frontline social workers in Trinidad and Tobago engage in this said discourse through semi-structured interviews. Using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), perceptions of the relevance of social work principles to Trinidad and Tobago are explored. As participants discuss the challenges and successes faced in applying the principles to their local context, the universalizing tendency of Social Work is placed under scrutiny, and the assertion by many that Social Work practice and education is *white people ting*—an expression used to refer to products of North America and Europe—is discussed.

Keywords: Social work, social work practices, social work education

Is This “White People Ting”? Exploring Perceptions of Cultural Relevance of Social Work Principles in Trinidad and Tobago

Felix Biestek’s (1957) publication of *The Casework Relationship* has been lauded as “a landmark [book] in social work writing that was heavily influential in social work education” (Edmonson, 2014, p. 12) and which “quickly gained universal acceptance by educators” (Siporin, 1980, p. 329). Presently, it remains a critical part of social work education in many Caribbean universities, as it is taught in many social work introductory courses. Biestek (1957) posited seven principles as essential to the casework relationship. They are purposeful expression of feelings, acceptance, non-judgmental attitude, individualisation, confidentiality, client self-determination and controlled emotional involvement. These principles provided clear and simple guidelines for the social work relationship. While they were considered to be generally applicable for persons from various faiths, some of the foundations for Biestek’s views, which were shaped by his religious background, were considered to be potentially “professionally unacceptable to many social workers” (Bisno, 1958, p. 87).

The debate about the applicability of the principles of social work mushroomed in the context of discussions about the Eurocentric bias of social work knowledge. Graham (1999) asserts that although social work purports to be anti-racist and anti-oppressive, “cultural oppression” (p. 255) is maintained in that the ability to develop and present social work knowledge is viewed as residing in specific groups of persons. This, inevitably, disempowers other groups. Thus, the fact that social work principles have been framed in the context of the experiences of countries of the North limits their applicability to other social and cultural contexts (Lam, 1997).

These assertions about the limited applicability of the principles of social work in countries of the South sparked the quest to understand the perceptions of the social workers and social work educators in Trinidad and Tobago of the cultural relevance of Biestek’s (1957) casework principles, which significantly undergird practice in this country.

Trinidad and Tobago is a twin-island nation in the Caribbean, which boasts of a multicultural heritage, birthed in its history of colonisation by Britain and Spain, the enslavement of Africans, the indentureship of East Indians and the migration of Chinese. Although the process of creolisation has led to the intermingling of cultural practices, there are many practices that continue to be predominantly observed by specific ethnic groups. According to the Central Statistical Office (n.d.), Trinidad and Tobago has a population of 1.3 million persons, of which approximately 1.24 million reside in Trinidad and 60, 000 people live in Tobago. The documented history of social work in the Caribbean reveals a profession that has its roots in social welfare service provision by religious organizations to ex-slaves during the late 1800s (Maxwell, 2002). This later morphed into social services which were provided by both the state and voluntary organizations at the beginning of the twentieth century (Maxwell, 2002). Signature in the profession’s development is the influence of the Moyne Commission in 1938, an investigative response to a period of social unrest in many Caribbean countries in the 1930s. At that time, it was recommended that social welfare officers be employed to alleviate the circumstances that were assumed to be the cause of the disturbance. This resulted in persons being trained at the tertiary institutions in both England and Jamaica (Maxwell, et al, 2003). Presently, social work is primarily practiced in government settings and includes medical and psychiatric social work, probation, the Victim and Witness Support Unit, school social work and social welfare. Social work in non-governmental settings primarily provides advocacy services for special groups. Social work education is provided in four tertiary institutions.

For many countries in the Global South, colonisation was a significant historical event which shaped the reality of the lives of citizens. For these countries, colonisation represented a period in which they had limited power over their own interests, and in which the decisions made for their country benefitted an external country. Although most of these countries have attained independence, the influence of the Global North persists through the production of knowledge and its acceptance by countries of the South. “Knowledge has been, and to a large extent, still is, controlled and produced in the North. The power to name, represent and theorize is still located there” (McEwan, 2009, p. 26).

Writers from countries in the South have analysed social work knowledge in the context of colonisation. Social work knowledge has been variously described as a “product of colonialism” (Al-Krenawi & Graham, 2003, p. 75). It has also been accused of producing “intellectual colonization” while simultaneously “devaluing and [marginalising] indigenous and local knowledge” (Coates et al., 2006,

p. 382). Graham (2000) commented that social work knowledge is dominated by Eurocentric knowledge “[that is presented as if it were] devoid of cultural impositions that affect the theorist and theorising” (p. 425). For Al-Krenawi and Graham (2003), the Northern assumptions about individuals and social problems persisted when social work knowledge was accepted and used by formerly colonised countries. These portrayals all suggest the poorness of fit of a body of knowledge when it is implemented in a context for which it was not originally created.

Walton and El Nasr (1988) outlined the process by which countries of the South have wrestled with the use of social work knowledge produced in the North. During the first phase, the transmission phase, knowledge was unquestioningly accepted by countries of the South and applied indiscriminately to practice. The recognition that knowledge did not always cohere with the realities of life in these countries led to the indigenisation phase, during which there was a move to adapt knowledge to the cultural realities of the societies. Some have seen the need to progress beyond adaptation of knowledge to the creation of local knowledge that is rooted in the cultural practices and historical experiences of the country. This stage, the authentisation stage, can occur in a reciprocal relationship with the indigenisation stage. In other words, with the increase of authentisation, there is a concurrent decrease in indigenisation. Al-Krenawi and Graham (2003), with reference to Osei (1996), present the concept of *localization* which includes both the modification of the Northern theories and methods, as well as the creation of new theories/methods or the application of local approaches.

Lam (1997), writing about Hong Kong, noted the tendency to accept social work values as having universal applicability when, in fact, they are rooted in Western values. For him, indigenisation involved understanding the differences between and among societies in defining their aspirations and goals for their citizens. In the context of the Chinese society, Lam (1997) saw the need for the development of a holistic understanding of the culture. However, he admitted that social workers in Hong Kong had not resolved “the questions of what the genuine essences of traditional Chinese culture . . . and . . . Hong Kong Chinese culture” (p. 11). This raised the question of whether it is possible for former colonised countries to move from transmission to indigenisation before they determined their country’s own unique culture and values. He also proposed the need for research into differences between the practice of Chinese and Western social workers to derive a better understanding of the differences between the values of the two societies. For him, this would deepen our understanding of indigenisation.

Biestek’s (1957) principles, which were produced in the North, have sparked discussion and elaboration both in the North and the South. While some scholars in the North accepted and expanded the principles (Hancock, 1997), others wrestled with the philosophical underpinnings which were rooted in Christianity (Edmonson, 2014). Still others identified as problematic the focus of the principles on enhancing the relationship of the social worker with the client instead of addressing structural inequality and oppression (Swain, 2006; Edmonson, 2014).

The principle of client self-determination has sparked rich debate among scholars of the North as well as of the South. Biestek (1957) defined client self-determination as “the practical recognition of the right and need of clients to freedom in making their own choices and decisions in the casework process” (p. 103). He contextualises self-determination within the casework process and emphasises the social worker’s role in ensuring that he/she does not assume a directive role in the process. Biestek

(1957) also alludes to his underlying belief in individualism when he comments, "Like every human being, the client has the responsibility of living his life in such a manner as to achieve his life's goals . . . as he conceives them [emphasis added]" (p. 104).

Perlman (1971), one of the forerunners of social work authorship, appears to have supported the principle of individualism when she indicated that

Self-determination . . . is the very essence of mature humanness; that man's exercise of choice rather than his coercion by his own blind impulses or the power of others is what builds in him his sense of effectiveness, of identity and selfhood, and of responsibility.... Whatever fraction of self-determination is given to us should be exploited to its fullest, for ourselves and for anyone in whose lives we intervene. (as cited in Wesley, 1996, "Client Self-Determination" section, para. 2)

However, other scholars from the North appear to have struggled with the principle of self-determination. Clark (1998) and Taylor (2006) have outlined the importance of protecting clients who, through the use of self-determination, are at risk of hurting themselves and/or others. The central tension appears to be between the freedom of the individual and the security and well-being of the wider society (Clark, 1998; Freedberg, 1989; Taylor, 2006; Wesley, 1996). Freedberg (1989) notes that "social workers . . . strive for a balance between responsibility to the community and responsibility to the self-determination of the individual client system" (p. 33). Clark (1998) elaborates this perspective by presenting the concept of equity. If decisions about client needs were met on the basis of client choice, then social workers would inadvertently support inequity, as similar cases would be treated differently. The social worker's own values may also tacitly influence their relation to the client's freedom to choose (Clark, 1998; Rothman, 1989, as cited in Wesley, 1996).

Scholars from the South also wrestle with the principle of self-determination, indicating that the collectivistic orientation of many countries of the South is fundamentally different from the individualistic approach of countries of the North (Coates et al., 2006; Ewalt & Mokuau, 1995; Leake & Skouge, 2012). In these countries, the needs of the family and/or society supersede those of the individual. Although Rothman (1989, as cited in Wesley, 1996) and Clark (1998) alluded to the influence of family in the operationalisation of the principle of self-determination, this issue takes greater prominence among writers from the South. Work with clients from these backgrounds is likely to be more effective if the family and wider society are integrated in the intervention process (Saleebey, 2012; Ewalt & Mokuau, 1995). Scholars, writing about the context of the South, advocate the need to adopt a more flexible approach to principle of self-determination that recognises that the personal goals of some clients are actually realised when the views of the family or community are incorporated (Hu & Palmer, 2012). Furlong (2003) encourages the need for flexibility in assisting clients to determine the balance between personal and collective interest.

While there has been rich debate about the principle of self-determination, the discussion on the other principles has been limited or non-existent. Clark (1998) explored the principle of individualisation in the context of managerialism. He did not express any concern with the principle itself but focused on the operationalisation of the principle in a context in which social workers have inadequate time to meet the clients' needs. In relation to the principle of confidentiality, scholars have affirmed its importance in enhancing the helping relationship (Colingridge et al., 2001, as cited in

Swain, 2006; Millstein, 2000). Swain (2006), however, criticised the profession of social work for not clearly articulating the limitations of this principle and reconceptualising a more honest presentation of this principle. The limited discussion about the aforementioned principles and the absence of debate about the others raise questions as to whether these principles fit well with social work practice in countries of the South.

Although the Caribbean is considered to be part of the countries of the South, there is a dearth of research on the views of social workers about the applicability of the principles of social work in this context. This research will fill the gap that currently exists and will provide valuable information on the fit of these principles with the reality of social work practice in the Caribbean. The essential question is: How do social workers and social workers educators in Trinidad and Tobago perceive and experience these principles (Biestek, 1957)?

Method

To explore how social workers and social work educators perceive the relevance of social work principles to the context of Trinidad and Tobago, a qualitative study, which utilized semi-structured, single participant interviews, was conducted. Snowball and purposive sampling methods were used, and 10 persons participated in this research. Three of the participants were front line social workers, while the other seven served as both social work educators and practitioners. Their practice areas include Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) advocacy; child protection; substance abuse; offender management; youth work and mental health. All participants were asked the same questions.

During the interviews, the participants were invited to explore the relevance of the principles of social work to the Caribbean. Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (Smith & Osborn, 2008) was conducted on the data. The main purpose of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis is to explore how people interpret their world. Through a “process of interpretative activity”, the researchers’ own conceptions also feature as there is an attempt to make sense of the participants’ perceptions (Smith & Osborn, 2008, p. 53). From the raw data of each interview, themes emerged, and these themes were then clustered with others to form superordinate themes. The list of superordinate themes from the first interview was used to analyse data from subsequent interviews, with sufficient room being left for new and emergent superordinate themes.

Results

The Bible of Social Work

The participants were asked to explore the cultural relevance of the principles of social work practice (Biestek, 1957). Their answers to this question were varied. Some indicated that the principles were quite suitable to the local context and saw them as critical to intervention. In fact, one respondent noted that these principles constitute the “bible of social work” and as such, social work students were mandated to be familiar with them. The principles were also described as “well-coined”, and another respondent indicated that Biestek (1957) was “wonderfully clever” in his conceptualization of the principles. Mention was also made of specific principles that were especially useful in practice. For

example, “purposeful expression of feelings” was deemed to be extremely important as clients, according to one respondent, “need to ventilate.” Furthermore, it was noted that it is necessary for social workers to have a “non-judgmental attitude”, and that this principle (non-judgmental attitude) had universal applicability.

The Principles as a Necessary Catalyst for Change

Two social workers stressed the role of some of the principles in militating against the behavioural norms and values of the local culture. For instance, one social worker, who is employed in Tobago, highlighted that the principle known as “Acceptance” bore special significance in that cultural context, as citizens were not always tolerant and accommodating to others who have different sexual orientations. With a tangentially similar argument, another respondent, who was a social work educator, posited that the principle known as the “Client’s self-determination” was of paramount importance in Trinidad and Tobago because it mandates practitioners to tolerate and accept differences. She noted that in Trinidad and Tobago, there was an assumption that homogeneity of beliefs, behaviour and values are critical to social stability. As she recounted her experience as a social work educator, she stated:

Our [social work] students tend to think this [a specific behaviour] is what has to happen. This is because they have been *culturised* [emphasis added] to believe that there is a mould that everyone [in Trinidad and Tobago] fits into. So, with *self-determination* [emphasis added], they [the students] are allowed to say that if this is what the client wants, then I can’t make them see it my way or do it my way.

This educator also noted the role of “individualization” in the local “communal culture”, which she described as family oriented. She stated that in the local culture, persons often use their families’ values and behaviours as reference points. As such, social work practice becomes necessary to liberate persons from this referencing so that they can chart their own course. She shared that via the use of “individualization”, social workers can give people “permission” to explore behavioural options outside of the familial and communal norms in Trinidad and Tobago. However, this emphasis on individualization, as well as purposeful expression of feelings, is not always well received by clients. For instance, one interviewee divulged the details of a case in which she conducted joint counselling with a mother and a child. As she attempted to elicit the child’s feelings on the challenges, the mother registered her disgust by saying, “Yuh see this white people ting! That she have feelings and thoughts!” [I do not approve of this intervention that is typically for North American or European people only, that is, this focus on the child’s feelings and thoughts].

The Centrality of the Principles to Human Nature

Another worker spoke favourably of the principles and argued for their importance, irrespective of one’s culture. She stated, “I do not think that they [the principles] should be replaced or can be replaced Simply because when we are dealing with human nature, those are some of the foundation [principles]...This is the foundation of human society.” This, however, was not the sentiment of another worker who found that the principles were actually far removed from true human nature. For example, she stressed that being non-judgmental was impossible, as all persons have biases. She opined that

with its focus on being non-judgmental, social work education distanced students from their true nature. She declared that as social workers wrestle with their biases and judgments during intervention, they are forced to believe that they are “wrong” for espousing their attitudes which may not cohere with social work principles. Additionally, in her opinion, social work education and practice ignored the reality of the practitioner as a human being, with lived experiences which shaped one’s biases and positions. Her thoughts and disappointment were captured in the following: “Are you [social work practice] saying that because of the way I feel, I am wrong to feel this way? What about me?”

Relevance of Principles to Various Practice Contexts

The aforementioned worker also presented that Biestek’s (1957) principles were not relevant at all levels of practice. For example, structural social work and other forms of macropractice, which may necessitate a radical shift in policies and systems which oppress vulnerable groups, requires the conferral of judgment on existing systems that may be disadvantageous to large sectors of society. It is this judgment and lack of acceptance that provokes change and action. She also stressed that it was not culture that determined the relevance of the principles, but one’s work context. Another worker shared similar sentiments as she discussed her challenges in applying the principles to the judicial system in which she practiced. She noted that though most of the principles were applicable, “client’s self-determination” and “confidentiality” could not be practiced in her environment, as the demands of Court superseded the principles of social work practice. Clients in that context were mandated to attend counselling against their will and their information was not kept confidential. This occurred despite the worker’s best efforts and consequently, she deemed the practice in this environment to be a “struggle.”

One respondent shared that during his social work training, there was no liberty to explore other principles that may be applicable to social work practice and so, Biestek’s (1957) principles were limiting. He also shared that in the context of his social work interventions with LGBT persons, one of the principles manifested differently in local practice. He reported that the “client’s self –determination” is inhibited by Christianity, a religion that is widely practiced in Trinidad and Tobago. As such, it (Christianity) sets the parameters for self-direction. Finally, another respondent, in her discussion on the principles shared that at least one of them, namely “acceptance”, was difficult for social workers to enact. She opined that this was because after most social workers attain their credentials to practice, they become vain and unresponsive to the needs of the client.

Discussion

The participants offered mixed responses about the principles of social work (Biestek, 1957). Their favourable responses match the sentiments of authors such as Hancock (1997), and are perhaps partially linked to the history and evolution of social work education internationally and in the Caribbean. According to Edmonson (2014), since their introduction into the lexicon of social work education, these principles were “highly influential” as Biestek’s (1957) text on the principles became central to many UK programmes (p.12). These programmes then heavily influenced the region’s social work education in the 1970s, as there was a determined effort by local and foreign academicians to bring Caribbean social work education “more in line with the professional requirements of North

America and Britain” (Maxwell et al., 2003, p. 13). It is not surprising therefore that the high level of appreciation for these principles which existed internationally would have transferred to the Caribbean. In many ways, this is warranted as the principles appeared “novel”, “unambiguous” and “one of the early ‘list’ approaches to setting out principles for practice” (Edmonson, 2014, p. 12). Such favourable descriptors were also articulated by some of this study’s respondents, who noted that the principles were “clever” and “well-coined.”

Noteworthy also, is the way in which some social workers have constructed some of the principles as being contrary to the values of Trinidad and Tobago, yet necessary for effective practice. Here, social work appears to have a culture of its own, and though it does not always harmonise with the prevailing local culture in which it is practiced, it is deemed essential to redeem those who are negatively affected by the local mores, values and practices. One of these practices is arguably homophobia, a feature of Caribbean reality. In such a reality, the counterculture of social work practice appears messianic when principles such as acceptance are practiced with those who exist on the margins of society. It is unclear, however, the degree to which these principles actually result in the social worker’s own personal transformation and consequent enactments of these principles in advocating for and promoting social change, which can result in the actualization and liberation of all people. In other words, the principles may only feature in a practice, which may not go beyond the counselling session. This resonates with Swain’s (2006) assertion that social work has not fulfilled its agenda for social transformation.

Another principle that was deemed to create an enabling context for social work practice in the local culture was “purposeful expression of feelings.” It was believed that this principle enabled clients to ventilate. One would be misguided to ignore the possible cultural underpinnings in that assumption. Culture can indeed affect persons’ willingness to express emotions and tolerate emotional expression of others. Within each cultural context, there are display rules, which refer to “culturally shared norms” which “dictate how, when and to whom people should express their emotional experiences” (Safdar et al., 2009, p. 1). In settings such as North America, the primacy given to individual fulfilment (Hofstede, 2001 as cited in Safdar et al., 2009) sets a context for display rules which accommodate outward expressions of emotions. Emotions “are seen as important experiences and expression is the individual’s right” (Safdar et al., 2009, p.2) Hence, there is an obvious nexus between the display rule and the principle entitled “purposeful expression of feelings.” Such display rules do not exist in all cultures. Countries such as Japan, which have more collectivist cultures, have more conservative and restrictive rules (Safdar et al., 2009, p.1). The fact that expressing emotions was deemed to be of considerable import in Caribbean social work practice points to a need to further investigate the possible display rules that exist in the region and more specifically, Trinidad and Tobago. Certainly, if the rules in Trinidad and Tobago appear to encourage liberal emotional expression, the assumption that Trinidad and Tobago has a communal or collectivist culture cannot easily be made.

One worker’s assumption that the principles are inevitably shrouded in a dominant Christian ethic is striking and possibly indicative of the way in which self-determination and acceptance are understood and communicated in practice. It appears that there are “limits” in which these principles are practiced in this cultural context. These limits can be understood as “parameters of difference” in which only certain lifestyles which are not grossly averse to Christianity are truly accepted in practice.

While these parameters may be created by the larger conservative Christian culture as well as the personal beliefs of practitioners, it is necessary to interrogate the extent to which the parameters are challenged or maintained in social work education. Despite the implicit meaning of acceptance and self-determination, culture, and in this case religion, probably circumscribes social work education and practice.

It was also reported that the principles such as individualization were useful in Trinidad and Tobago’s communal culture as they allowed people to express their individuality in an otherwise restricted space in which community needs trump those of the individual. Once again, the counterculture of social work is pit against that of Trinidad and Tobago in a favourable light. While some see these principles as favourable when juxtaposed against the local culture, such sentiments are not necessarily held in other societies. Silavwe (1995) criticizes Biestek’s principles such as “self-determination” and deems it “inappropriate” for social work practice in other communal societies such as African nations, in which individuality was not an accepted and popular value (p.71). Similar positions have been articulated by Walsh-Tapiata (2010) who argues that self-determination as articulated in social work practice and education espouses an ethic of individualism that does not feature in indigenous cultures in New Zealand. He stresses that there is need to understand that the community places an indispensable role in persons’ well-being. In China, Cheung and Liu (2004) aver that social work principles cannot be “imported without modification” to fit Chinese culture to fit a context in which self-reliance is not prominent. Even Owusu-Bempah (2004) notes that the social work values which align with individuality “undermine support systems based on family and community which provide the resources for problem-solving” (p.31). That which has been regarded as positive to Trinidad and Tobago space is not necessarily deemed so in other contexts where social work practice is deemed to be cultural imperialism (Gray, 2005). Notwithstanding the above, it would also be useful to investigate the extent to which Trinidad and Tobago has a communal culture. While this seemed to be the belief of some of our respondents, this cannot be stated with certainty, as defining the culture of any physical space is highly problematic. Culture is not static, especially in an ethnically heterogeneous society which is constantly exposed to foreign cultures via media and travel. Globalization and “international exchanges” create cultures that are “fluid” and “shifting” (Gray, 2005, p.232).

It is also necessary to interrogate some participants’ assertion that these principles were fundamental to human existence. Indeed, the universality of humans can be argued in many regards. However, the non-applicability of some of the principles to myriad cultural contexts would suggest otherwise. Furthermore, critics argue that the principles of social work are rooted not in the universality of human beings, but in Biestek’s Roman Catholic traditions and Western philosophical paradigms (Edmonson, 2014; Lam, 1997; Walsh-Tapiata, 2010). In his reflection on social work in Hong Kong, Lam (1997) argued that the principles and values of social work are actually based on German Kantian philosophy of human existence, a framework that is not readily accepted by all people and cultures, especially communal ones. Conceptualizations of “being human” vary across persons, time and space. Perhaps, this sentiment is best exemplified by one of the participants who opined that the principles removed social workers from her understanding of “humanness.”

Just as the principles may not necessarily be applicable across cultures, it has been argued that they are not relevant to all levels of practice. Such was the assertion made by one of the study's respondents whose views in this sense seem to mirror Edmonson's (2014) argument that Biestek's principles "fell out of favor" because they ignored the "political context of social work" and the wider structural causes of personal problems (p.13). A practice which focuses on the wider context seems imperative in some societies in which oppression and marginalization have become key features. Gray and Lombard (2008) note such is the reality in countries such as South Africa, a nation still unravelling the injustice of apartheid. Here, social work cannot occupy its traditionally conservative stance and dominant principles but must become oriented toward development and redressing past injustice. Trinidad and Tobago, as well as many nations in the Caribbean, still bears some of the vestiges of slavery and colonialism, which shape social and economic relations today. Despite this, social work in the region has not adequately responded, as advocacy has not featured largely in Caribbean social work practice (Maxwell et al., 2003). Given the region's political past and contemporary reality, one wonders if conservative social work principles are irrelevant in this regard.

The author notes, with interest, one participant's description of the principles as the "bible of social work." A metaphor such as this implies the principles' infallibility and indispensability. The source of this perception may be perhaps rooted in undeniable truisms and relevance of the principles that are discovered by the social workers in their practice. However, it is also likely that the high esteem accorded to these principles have resulted from consistent touting of them as fundamental and critical to effective practice. This would therefore raise questions about the pedagogy of social work education, primarily about the way in which these principles are taught to students in Trinidad and Tobago and the degree to which wiggle room is given for critique and questioning. Given that the principles are subjected to critical scrutiny in other parts of the world, it is healthy to assume that the same should occur in the Caribbean. Yet, the author notes concerns from this research about the limiting nature of the principles and an approach to social work education which has not perceived the necessity of widening the scope of applicable principles and values. Though Janagan et al. (2012, p.20) argue that social work education utilizes "student-centered dialogical classroom teaching-learning" and a critical pedagogy, some sentiments which emerged from this research refute this. If in fact, the spread of North American social work principles to the Caribbean can be configured as a process of cultural imperialism and neocolonialism, the social work educator "stands in the gap" with considerable power to either abate or intensify that process. In that gap lies the opportunity for indigenization and authentisation, as novel insights which are grounded in the cultural contexts can be discovered within a liberating and accommodating pedagogy, which respects grounded knowledge.

Limitations

As a qualitative research study with a relatively small sample size, the results of this investigation are not generalizable. Additionally, Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis bears its own challenges. Researchers often rely on their own phenomenological realities to interpret the data. This not only influences chosen themes but can inadvertently result in omitted themes.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper explored the ways in which social workers perceive the principles of casework and their relevance to social work practice. The findings are instructive to both educators and practitioners. In some ways, the principles taught are not perceived as relevant, but critical to the well-being of those whom social workers serve. As such, they enable worthwhile interventions. However, the challenges faced in operationalizing the principles within the local context are also noteworthy. It would therefore be helpful for students at the tertiary level to be given the opportunity to explore and critically analyse these principles, as obtaining a realistic understanding of them is useful to budding practitioners. Foreknowledge in this regard can prepare students for the world of practice, where implementing the principles is not as seamless as it may appear in textbooks. Being aware of the challenges in implementation can considerably reduce some of the initial distress and discouragement experienced in the workplace and on practicum, where the reality of practice demands critical thinking and creativity grounded in the experiences.

Furthermore, being aware of the areas of poor fit should stimulate social workers to explore other values and principles that are more relevant to the local context. Additional research may be needed in order to furnish Caribbean social work practice with more culturally relevant values to guide practice. There is also a need to research the degree of relevance of other forms of social work knowledge, such as the theories and models which guide practice, the ethics used and the methods that are typically considered core to the helping process. This is inherently a political exercise, where social work practice in the region can become “decolonized” and better suited to the people who inhabit this space. A more relevant practice is a more useful practice.

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