Chapter 1

Afrocentric methodology: A missing pillar in African social work research, education and training

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■ Introduction

Research plays a critical role in both social work education and practice. As a helping profession, methods used in social work practice should be evidence-based. Research informs practice while at the same time generating knowledge that is used for teaching. This chapter introduces and advocates for the adoption of Afrocentric methodology in social work research as a step towards Africanising the profession. For a very long time, Africans have been researched from a Western standpoint using Western methodologies, some of which do not recognise beliefs, values, traditions, mores and taboos that are central in African life. Askeland and Payne in Mogorosi and Thabede (2018:4) posit that 'the concept of universal knowledge conflicts with the idea that different cultures have different ways of understanding the world'. Social work practitioners should understand that African worldview(s) are different from Western worldview(s). Universal social work has proved to be problematic in some parts of the world. As noted by Thabede (2005), it is not surprising for a Western-oriented social worker to experience cultural shock in Africa which may compromise his or her ability to practice effectively. Western cultures differ from African cultures so do social problems which suggest that intervention strategies generated for the Western world may not be effective in an African context. African life is communal hinged on the *ubuntu* philosophy as opposed to the individualistic nature of Western life. One big question that has been interrogated by few non-Western scholars is the applicability of traditional social work methods, principles and values in non-Western contexts. Is it necessary to have and talk of African social work which is different from social work practice on other continents? Should the answer be yes, how should research in Africa be modelled to generate Afro-knowledge to inform African social work?

Though a lot has been written on the decolonisation of the profession, there is only scanty literature on how social work

research should be indigenised (Mabvurira 2016). Mogorosi and Thabede (2018) note that the indigenisation of the profession is an urgent task. Afrocentric methodology has a big potential to propel the indigenisation of the social work profession. Social science research, particularly Afrocentric methodologies (Asante 1988, 1990, 1995; Mabvurira 2016; Mazama 2003; Mkabela 2005; Pellebon 2007, 2012), is critical in the achievement of development, crafting of appropriate intervention strategies as well as evaluating existing programmes. It is therefore imperative for social work training institutions to educate students on Afrocentric methodology as a method of social inquiry. African students must know the world through African eyes and experience (Prah 2017). This chapter proceeds by conceptualising Afrocentricity, Afrocentric methodology and giving an argument for the need to adopt Afrocentric methodology in social work research. Mogorosi and Thabede (2018) challenge social work educators and researchers to develop theory and training suited to the clients' socio-economic environment if the profession is to remain relevant and effective.

The authors acknowledge that the term 'Africa' must be used with caution in academia as Africa is a vast continent and one may run the risk of generalisation. Esikot (2012) corroborates this point by arguing that no continent in the world comprises a higher degree of multiculturalism than Africa. However, despite diversity among indigenous African life, O'Brien and Palmer (2009:16) have identified the following generic themes:

- *All things in the universe are part of a whole.* There is no sharp distinction between the sacred and the non-sacred.
- *In most African traditions, there is a Supreme Being: Creator, sustainer, provider and controller of all creation*.
- *The human condition is imperfect and always will be*. Sickness, suffering and death are all fundamental parts of life. Suffering is caused by sins and misdeeds that offend the gods and ancestors or by being out of harmony with society.
- *Ritual actions may relieve the problems and suffering of human life, either by satisfying the offended gods or by resolving*

social conflicts. Rituals help to restore people to the traditional values and renew their commitment to spiritual life.

- *Human society is communal*. Ancestors, the living, the living dead and those yet to be born, they all form an important part of the community. The relationships between the worldly and the other worldly help to guide and balance the lives of the community. People need to interact with the spirit world which is all around them.

However, apart from the commonality of African lives, the authors wrote mainly in the contexts of South Africa and Zimbabwe. The authors were also cognisant of the impact of colonialism, imperialism and globalisation on Africa.

■ Conceptualising Afrocentricity

Afrocentricity has been seen as a theory and a practice perspective that has its origins in the United States (US) and has over the years been used with African Americans. The theory focuses on African worldview(s) as opposed to other worldview(s). The founder of Afrocentricity (Molefe Kete Asante) argues that the primary social crisis of black Americans is culture. Afrocentricity seeks to demystify the notion that white cultures are superior over black cultures. It also seeks to challenge the subordination of black people which has been natured and perpetuated by imperialism. According to Sono (n.d.:69), Afrocentricity is the contest of the centrality of conventional scholarship and scientism – a rejection of the Western traditional and modes of analysis in African phenomena. Mkabela (2005) corroborates this by arguing that Afrocentricity is generally opposed to theories that dislocate Africans to the periphery of human thought and experience. She further argues that although the origins of the concept are attributed to black Americans, not all forerunners of the Afrocentric school of thought were black Americans. She notes that the greatest contributor to the origin of the idea of Afrocentricity is the West African Cheikh Anta Diop (1989), through his book *The African origin of civilization: Myth or reality.*

Pellebon (2007) notes that Afrocentricity's growing influence is undeniable. The term has sometimes been used to refer to anything African, such as clothes, pottery and even food. According to Asante (2003), the goals of Afrocentricity are, (1) to expose and resist white racial domination over African Americans, (2) to transform African Americans over their culture centre, (3) to convert African Americans to an ideology of values, spirituality and rituals, and (4) to analyse disciplines such as literature, history, linguistics, politics, science, religion and economics from an African perspective. It challenges Eurocentrism, arguing that it is not universal. More importantly, the primary objective of Afrocentricity is to liberate the research and study of African peoples from the hegemony of Eurocentric scholarship. Mkabela (2005) further argues that the aim of Afrocentricity is to see all cultural centres respected.

Eurocentric research methodologies have failed to consider African cultures. Europeans assumed that the African mind is not capable of any systematic philosophy. Bodibe (1993) argues that Africans have a cosmology, ontology, eschatology, epistemology and axiology that is quintessentially their own (De la Rey & Ipser 2004). The biggest challenge with Eurocentric ideology is that it masquerades as a universal view in many fields such as philosophy, linguistics, psychology, education and anthropology. When the West colonised Africa, there was a total distortion of African values. This is evidenced by Chukwuokolo (2010:31) who reiterates that '[…] imperialism bequeathed Africans with two main unforgettable experiences, namely the denial of African identity and the tendentious imposition of Western thoughts and cultural realities and perceptions'. Furthermore Edwards et al. (2009) note that:

> Converging lines of recent evidence from various disciplines such as genetics, linguistics, palaeontology and archaeology all point consistently to Africa as the cradle of civilisation for all humanity, with homo sapiens evolving some one hundred and fifty thousand years ago and gradually emigrating across the Sinai Peninsula some fifty thousand years later. (p. 1)

■ Afrocentric methodology

Although it started as a paradigm used mostly in humanities, Afrocentricity has been used as a research methodology. According to Pellerin (2012:149), normative social science approaches lack a culturally appropriate and realistic interpretation of African reality and researchers who use them do not take into consideration the historical, social and contemporary experiences of African people. Western research techniques have been criticised for failure to effectively measure African phenomena, as they ignore African cultures. Afrocentricity is a philosophical and theoretical perspective that, when applied to social research, can form the essential core of the idea (Mkabela 2005). One of the proponents of Afrocentric methodology, Ama Mazama (2003) identified seven criteria for the establishment of an Afrocentric methodology:

1. African experience must guide and inform all inquiry.
2. The spiritual is important and must be given its due place.
3. Immersion in the subject is important.
4. Wholism is a must.
5. Intuition is a valid source of information.
6. Not everything that matters is measurable.
7. Knowledge generated must be liberating.

These criteria are very critical for social work researchers. Social workers are ethically obliged to respect diversity and be culturally competent in their practice. One way of ensuring cultural competence should be through using culturally sensitive research methods. For good social work inquiry to occur, the researcher must have an appreciation of the experiences of the people being researched. This means social work researchers must understand concepts from the perspectives of the people being researched. To some degree, the first criterion of Afrocentric methodology (African experience must guide and inform all inquiry) is in tandem with the concept of empathy in social work. Empathy entails that the social workers should put themselves in the client's world. Afrocentric methodology recognises the importance

of the spiritual. Spiritual issues are central in indigenous African life (Thabede 2005, 2008). Africans are a very religious people and their religion is evident in their ways of life, namely, healing, birth, death, hunting, et cetera. Religion is the centre of African existence (Chavunduka 2001; Shoko 2007; Viriri & Mungwini 2010). Social work now recognises the importance of religion and spirituality among its clients (Baskin 2002; Canda 2010; Cascio 2012). This leaves social work researchers with no option but to use Afrocentric research methodology which recognises the centrality of the spiritual among research participants. There is no separation between the spiritual and the material in traditional African life.

Another principle of Afrocentric methodology that is pertinent to social work researchers is that not everything that matters is measurable. African beliefs, motifs and values are very critical in their everyday lives, but may not be quantified in Western science. Africans rely heavily on social capital which may be difficult to measure in scientific terms. A good example may be informal social safety nets in African communities whose value may not seem important to a Western trained social worker owing to different cultures.

Afrocentric methodology also believes that knowledge generated must be liberating. This goes down well with the ethos of empowerment and liberation in social work. Social work research among Africans must generate knowledge that relieves them from the bondage of neo-colonialism and knowledge hegemony. Pellerin (2012) argues that these principles institute a standardised foundation for scholarship on people of African ancestry. In Afrocentric research, Africans should be placed as self-willed agents instead of objects of investigation. The issue of cultural location takes precedence over the topic or data under consideration. Mkabela (2005) is of the view that for immersion to take place, the researcher should emphasise and identify with the people being studied in order to understand how they see things. She went on to argue that if research is to be Afrocentric, African indigenous people must be in control of and participate

in the entire research process from beginning to end. This concept of participation is critical in social work. Social workers engage clients in the helping process. This is in line with strengths-based social work which recognises clients' strengths despite the severity of their problems.

Afrocentricity emerges as a methodology that operates within African ways of knowing and existence, and results in implementation of principles, methods, concepts and ideas that are derived from African cultural experiences (Mazama 2003). Mkabela (2005) opines that the Afrocentric methodology is derived from the Afrocentric paradigm which deals with the question of African identity from the perspective of African people. According to Pellerin (2012:151), the prioritisation of African people's customs, beliefs, motifs, values and conceptualisation is the rubric on which the application of Afrocentric methodology operates. Afrocentricity serves as a foundation for exploratory, explanatory and descriptive research. It is a structural research approach that engenders a reconceptualisation of African phenomena (Jayawardene 2013; Pellerin 2012). According to Pellerin (2012), utilising an Afrocentric methodology equips the researcher with a detailed foundation for employing culturally correct methods, principles and frameworks in analysing phenomena.

In any Afrocentric research project, the researcher must determine a purpose that is not antithetical to African people. According to Pellerin (2012), the Afrocentric research process follows a similar process with normative social science research with several alterations to suit African people's context. She argues that the research design in an Afrocentric study may differ from those used in non-Afrocentric studies in a number of ways. For example, an exploratory Afrocentric design involves investigating African people for the purpose of developing a culturally accurate understanding of them. Further to that, a descriptive Afrocentric design provides a more precise understanding of African social phenomena. Key to Afrocentric studies is the ability to use culturally appropriate lens. Lastly, an

explanatory Afrocentric study should provide reasons and causes of African phenomena. It is critical for any Afrocentric researcher to have a viable and reliable understanding of African thought. It can be deduced that the major point of departure of Afrocentric methodology is its sensitivity to African cultures.

As in any normative social science research, conceptualisation of key terms is crucial in an Afrocentric study. According to Pellerin (2012), definitions of concepts and variables to be studied must be specified in alliance with African people's historical and cultural realities. A good Afrocentric researcher should deliberately and consciously study African people from their standpoint. There are various concepts that differ from one centre to the other. For example, Thabede (2005) argues that the concept of time in an African community may differ from that in a Western setting. It may not matter for an African to be late for a meeting by say 20 min without giving an apology, but the opposite may be true for Western-oriented people.

As noted by Pellerin (2012), Afrocentric researchers are charged with the task of developing new methods that are rooted in African people's histories, cultures and experiences. Tools of measurement used in Afrocentric studies matter a lot, as they should be in harmony with African people's existence. According to Pellerin (2012), the applicable tools should not threaten, intrude upon or disrupt the agency of African people. In the same vein, in a study on the influence of Shona indigenous religion in understanding of chronic illnesses, Mabvurira (2016) used family interviews. The justification was to respect the spirit of unity and oneness that is central in African families by not separating a particular member for one-on-one interviews. In an Afrocentric study, the unity of analysis should not be based on a particular individual as life is understood to be communal. Community members may provide valuable information on a particular phenomenon they are not directly involved in (Mabvurira 2016).

According to Mulemi (2011), in Afrocentric research the researcher and the participants have an interactive role in the

production of theoretical and applied knowledge. This implies that the researcher is not superior to the participants who should be equally consulted throughout the research process. The researcher should identify with subjects to appreciate how they see things and construct reality. In order to fully understand the cultural frameworks, the indigenous people should be actively involved in the research process (Cunningham & Duries 1998). Canons of Afrocentrism underpin Afrocentric methodology. Reviere (2001) identified the following five canons that should guide an Afrocentric research enquiry: *Ukweli* [truth], *Kujitolea* [commitment], *Utulivu* [calmness and peaceful], *Uhaki* [justice] and *Ujamaa* [community]. According to Chilisa (2012:191), the canons are derived from seven cardinal African virtues of truth, justice, rightness, propriety, harmony, order and balance and reciprocity.

According to Mkabela (2005), the principles underlying Afrocentric research are in line with qualitative research in which researchers should actively participate and be involved in the production of knowledge. Afrocentric methodology therefore shares the same characteristics as qualitative research methods. Both methods assume that people use interpretive schemes which must be understood and that the character of the local context must be articulated.

■ Why the Afrocentric methodology in social work?

The Afrocentric methodology is a critical pillar towards the indigenisation of social work in Africa (Gray et al. 2014). For so long, Western ideas permeated social work institutions despite the ethical conflicts between traditional African cultures and values and the Western Judeo-Christian norms on which social work was based (Gray, Coates & Yellow Bird 2008). According to Gray et al. (2014), it was because of these foreign influences that social workers in Africa completely disregarded traditional

cultures and support systems based on collective values. Some borrowed techniques have failed to bring about the desired results owing to different cultural settings. Not all social work principles by Rev. Felix P. Biestek are in tandem with African cultural norms and beliefs. For example, in a Western setting individual confidentiality matters a lot, but it is different in some African communities where confidentiality is shared by the whole family. Family members may want to know the problem confronting their own in detail before they may help. Life is communal, and each person lives for others. No problem is owned by an individual, but by the whole community. Another principle which is questionable is individualism, where each person is treated as a unique person with a unique problem. The question here is how do we individualise in a setting where life is communal?

Africans are incurably religious (Platvoet & Van Rinsum 2003). For them life is religion and religion is life. Almost every faculty of their lives is explained within the purview of religion. For most Africans, there is no clear separation between the spiritual and the physical (Schreiber & Tomm-Bonde 2015). Afrocentric methodology is very conducive for people of African ancestry as it recognises spiritual issues in research. Spirituality is a resource that social workers may exploit during the helping process. Mabvurira (2016) found that some spiritual beliefs among the Shona people of Zimbabwe were of paramount importance in motivating people to care for their sick relatives. He cited fear of *ngozi* [avenging spirit]. Such issues may only be thoroughly interrogated if social workers adopt the Afrocentric methodology.

Thabede (2005), a key proponent of Afrocentric social work, indicates that practising social workers in Africa should understand African concepts of witchcraft, ancestral worship and other rituals that are key to traditional African life, as well as appreciate the difference between Western and African ontologies. In Zimbabwe, for example, the colonial government passed a *Witchcraft Suppression Act*, and what that meant was that white people did not recognise the existence of witchcraft.

It was then difficult for researchers aligned to white education to recognise witchcraft-related information that may be provided by research subjects. Although some people who purport to be Christians do not recognise the existence of avenging spirits, most Africans believe in these spirits (Chavunduka 2001, 2009; Mabvurira 2016; Machinga 2011). In the same vein, Ross (2010) argues that African beliefs are key for social workers practising with indigenous African communities. Twikirize (2014) notes that for indigenisation of social work to take root, the concepts, theories and models adopted should be drawn from the bottom-up. Social work educators therefore cannot afford to continue relying on teaching material generated outside Africa. In a study by Twikirize (2014) in East Africa, only 15% of respondents acknowledged availability of country-specific material used in social work teaching. Social work researchers still have a long way to go in terms of producing local knowledge for teaching purposes.

Most Africans have totems. The use of totems among most Bantu people of Southern Africa is a prehistoric tradition that goes back for centuries. According to Pfukwa (2014), the totem is an animal that a clan takes up to express certain values and virtues. Each totem is buttressed by a string of myths and folklore. The totem serves as a social bond and is an expression of collective identity for a clan or family that carries that totem (Pfukwa 2014). Mabvurira (2016) notes that these totems may be of help to social workers. He proposes the formation of totem-related social work groups where a group may comprise people who share the same totem. His argument was that group conflicts may be limited as members already share something in common apart from their problem. These issues may be effectively interrogated when social workers use Afrocentric methodologies.

Afrocentric research is pertinent in the formulation of a body of knowledge for Afrocentric social work. Schiele (1996) defines Afrocentric social work as a method of social work practice which is based on traditional African philosophical assumptions that are used to explain and solve human societal problems. Social workers

are encouraged to embrace the Afrocentric paradigm because of its emphasis on eliminating oppression and spiritual alienation. Afrocentrists believe that the spiritual component of a human being is just as important and valid as the material component (Whitehead 2017). There is need for a shift from a Western perspective to an African-centred one in practice with people of African ancestry (Harvey 2003). Social work was introduced in most African countries by colonisers and the danger with this is that there was a tendency to view African cultures from the colonisers' perspective and to assess the educational needs in terms of the colonisers' desires (Mkabela 2005). Western hegemony is still visible in social work education of most African countries. Although early African scholars like Hall (1990), Mupedziswa (2001), Osei-Hwedie (1993) and Thabede (2005) have advocated for the indigenisation of the profession, few social work training institutions have walked the talk. Even if these institutions want to indigenise, there is not enough reading material to inform indigenous social work, hence the need to embrace Afrocentric research methods. Africans were and are still judged through a European lens, and social work education in Africa has marginalised Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS).

Without Afrocentric knowledge obtained from Afrocentric enquiries, professionals may assume that the history, cultural practices and social environments of people of African ancestry are the same as those of other races and that same practice methods are appropriate (Hollingsworth & Phillips 2017). Mkabela (2005) corroborates this by arguing that it is absurd to study the indigenous while still hooked to external methodologies. Social work practice in Africa should be informed by social inquiry in African contexts.

A lot has happened in psychology and sociology in line with Afrocentricity. Bodibe (1993) proposed an indigenised model of psychology which he believed was necessary if clinicians are to succeed in appreciating cultural idiosyncrasies. Another laudable initiative in South Africa has been the development of the Forum

for African Psychology and establishment of journals like the *Indilinga* which focuses on IKS. The same should happen to social work practice where IKS should inform practice. It is very pathetic to note that Africans have been conditioned to discard their heritage. Most textbooks used in social work education have been authored and published in the West. African training institutions buy these textbooks, or they get them as donations through development partners such as BookAid. Courses in sociology and social anthropology mostly meant to sensitise students on African cultures and societies are not enough. According to Ose-Hwedie (1993), lack of research by locals has led to continued reliance on Western theories, paradigms and models (Mwansa 2010). Thabede (2005) is of the view that social work is a contextual profession, as it takes place within a given cultural milieu; hence the need for social work researchers to adopt Afrocentric methodology and generate relevant knowledge.

Afrocentric methodology is critical for social work indigenisation. Gray (2005) defined social work indigenisation as the extent to which social work fits local contexts. Opposed to indigenisation are the concepts of universalism and imperialism. Universalism is defined by Gray (2005) as trends in social work to find commonalities across divergent contexts such that it is common to talk about a social work profession with shared goals and values wherever it is shared. Gray and Fook (2004) further define universal social work as:

> [*A*] form of social work that transcends national boundaries and which gives social work a global face such that there are commonalities in theory and practice across widely divergent contexts. (p. 628)

Universal social work assumes that there should be one world and one social work. Imperialism is defined as trends within social work which promote the dominance of Western worldviews over diverse local and indigenous cultural perspectives (Gray 2005).

Afrocentric research is critical for cultural competence in social work practice with people of African ancestry. Many social

work professional bodies expect social workers to be culturally sensitive. Social workers are encouraged to comprehend cultural contexts specific to their clients and how that knowledge is used in the everyday lives of their clients in order for meaning to be known and revealed (Wiedmeyer 2013). It is implied, in Afrocentric social work, that one cannot affect one member of the society without affecting others. In Africa, there is no clear separation between an individual and others (*ubuntu*). Mogorosi and Thabede (2018) argue that:

> [*M*]ore work has to be undertaken – not to reinvent the wheel – but to research and ensure that local knowledge, wisdom and experiences that can enrich the discipline are highlighted and infused into formal teaching curricula. (p. 5)

The authors strongly agree with Mogorosi and Thabede (2018) and further argue that Afrocentric methodology will yield pertinent knowledge on indigenous African communities than Western-biased methods of social enquiry.

■ Conclusion

Research plays an important role in social work education and practice. It generates knowledge that is used for social work education and training while at the same time informing evidence-based intervention. Afrocentric research is critical for social work practice with African clients or people of African ancestry in the African diaspora. The Afrocentric methodology is a cornerstone for the indigenisation of social work in Africa. It fully respects African cultures and can yield valuable data when properly applied. The Afrocentric methodology should be used to generate knowledge so that schools of social work in Africa desist from relying on Western texts for training. African academics should train students on Afrocentric methodology so that they will be able to apply it. Without suitable research strategies, Afrocentric social work, social work indigenisation and decolonisation will ever be a dream in the pipeline.

■ Summary: Chapter 1

Research plays a critical role in both social work education and practice. It informs practice while at the same time generating knowledge that is used for teaching. This chapter introduced and – not advocated for the adoption of Afrocentric methodology in social work research as a step towards Africanising the profession. For a very long time, most Africans have been researched from a Western standpoint using Western methodologies, some of which do not recognise African beliefs, values, traditions, mores and taboos that are central in African life. A lot has been written on the indigenisation of the profession but there is only scanty literature on how social work research should be indigenised (Gray & Fook 2004; Gray, Kreitzer & Mupedziswa 2014; Ibrahima & Mattaini 2018). Therefore, a need exists for the adoption of Afrocentric methods of inquiry if real development is to be realised in Africa. Universal social work has in some instances proven to be problematic, hence the call for Afro-sensitive methods of inquiry to achieve intervention strategies that are friendly to African cultures. Social science research, particularly Afrocentric methodologies, is critical in the achievement of development, crafting of appropriate intervention strategies and evaluating of existing programmes. It is therefore imperative for schools of social work in Africa to educate students on Afrocentric methodology as a method of social inquiry.