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To cite this article: Augustina Naami & Magnus Mfoafo-M'Carthy (2023) Exploring African-centred social work education: the Ghanaian experience, *Social Work Education*, 42:2, 238-248, DOI: [10.1080/02615479.2023.2174507](https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2023.2174507)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2023.2174507>



Published online: 27 Feb 2023.



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# Exploring African-centred social work education: the Ghanaian experience

Augustina Naami<sup>a</sup> and Magnus Mfofo-M'Carthy<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of Social Work, University of Ghana, Accra, Ghana; <sup>b</sup>Lyle S. Hallman Faculty of Social, WorWilfrid Laurier University, Kitchener, Ontario, Canada

## ABSTRACT

Through the years, there has been regular discourse among African social work scholars regarding the production of indigenous knowledge in Africa. Most of the arguments hold that social work knowledge creation and production is often based on Eurocentric approaches due to the dearth of African-centered social work literature from the continent. This paper attempts to explore the intellectual and philosophical underpinnings of African-centered social work education and practice. Using Ghana as a case study, information is provided on theoretical and conceptual thought processes about African-centered social work education in response to the shortage of insights pertaining to African culture. By means of purposive and availability sampling, we recruited three graduate students to be interviewed. The interviews were analyzed using thematic inquiry. We explored African paradigms and argued that the practice of social work education on the continent of Africa should not be based on the Eurocentric approaches only, to the detriment of traditional African ways of knowing. We believe that for social work education in Africa to thrive, we should embrace indigenous African practices and values of spirituality, collectivity, interconnectedness and reciprocity.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 21 February 2022



Accepted 26 January 2023

## KEYWORDS

Ghana; African-centered; social work education; indigenous; Global South

## Introduction

Social work as a profession has expanded across the globe in an effort to address social problems experienced by increasingly diverse individuals and communities. However, much of the current social work literature has historical ties to Eurocentric worldviews, driven largely by individualistic, competitive, and capitalist perspectives (Ibrahima & Mattaini, 2019; Mabvurira, 2020). This has left little consideration for alternative knowledge-gathering, particularly those of Indigenous populations (Schiele, 1996). In fact, many Eurocentric values often conflict directly with the beliefs and principles held by societies outside of the Global North. Specifically, within the context of African communities, there is increasing questioning of the relevancy of Eurocentric approaches to social work, as these lack consideration for values that are central to Africans. At best, social work education lacking cultural competency is ineffective in addressing issues of social

**CONTACT** Magnus Mfofo-M'Carthy  [mmfoafomcarthy@wlu.ca](mailto:mmfoafomcarthy@wlu.ca)  Lyle S. Hallman Faculty of Social, WorWilfrid Laurier University, 120 Duke Street, Kitchener, ON N2H 3W8, Canada

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injustice and inequality facing marginalized communities. It could do these individuals more harm than good. Thus, efforts to decolonize social work practice through the integration of Afrocentric values and methodologies are needed to address social problems more effectively among African populations.

This paper explores the intellectual and philosophical underpinnings of African-centered social work education and practice. The authors realize that most of the literature and course content on social work lack an African centered focus. Using Ghana as a case study, information is provided on theoretical and conceptual thought processes foundational to African-centered social work education to respond to the dearth of insights pertaining to African cultures. A literature review coupled with interviews with three Master of Philosophy in social work students from a university in Ghana informed this discussion.

## Background

### *Western approach to social work education and practice*

Mainstream social work education dominated by Eurocentric values and worldviews have been adopted in African universities to the detriment of indigenous knowledge systems (Ibrahima & Mattaini, 2019; Schiele, 1996). Despite increasing criticism, social work education in Africa continues to be largely dominated by Eurocentric systems of knowledge. However, as social work education gains momentum in the Global South, specifically Africa, it has become evident that this form of social work as a profession often fails to address social problems specific to the African context due to its foundation on Eurocentric values (Ibrahima & Mattaini (2019); Rankopo & Osei-Hwedie, 2011). In the African context, issues are addressed based on the collective rather than at the individual level. Ibrahim and Mattaini argue that social work was introduced to Africa through foreign influence, specifically through missionaries and colonial administrators, with the intention of reducing White poverty, thereby demonstrating that social work has historically lacked consideration for Africa's indigenous populations. Additionally, Africa's history of colonialism has further contributed to the predominance of Eurocentric ideologies and the separation of Indigenous populations from Africa's traditional cultural values, resulting in the marginalization and assumed inferiority of indigenous practices (Mabvurira, 2020; Schiele, 2017).

In a historical overview of Afrocentric paradigms and their relationship to social work, Schiele (2017) states that this cross-cultural contact has resulted in the cultural oppression of traditional African ideologies and allowed for the stigmatization and dehumanization of the 'cultural other'. This notion is first raised in a previous article, in which Schiele (1996) argues that Eurocentric theories of behavior have historically demonized Black Africans, promoting the perception of this group as 'uncivilized' and unable to offer meaningful contributions to the philosophy of social science. Furthermore, the standardization of social work education has also contributed to the adoption of Eurocentric social work in Africa, despite its basis in values that are considered inherently 'un-African' (Ibrahima & Mattaini, 2019; Osei-Hwedie, 2002; Rankopo & Osei-Hwedie, 2011).

### ***African-centered social work education and practice***

African-centered social work emphasizes social work education that focuses on indigenous African knowledge (Bent-Goodley et al., 2017). Like other disciplines, social work education is underpinned in theories and concepts. Theories used in social work education are mostly Westernized (Rankopo & Osei-Hwedie, 2011). There is consensus in the current body of literature that Western values of individualism, competition, and capitalism are deeply embedded in Eurocentric social work education and theories of behavior (Ibrahima & Mattaini, 2019; Mabvurira, 2020; Mathebane & Sekudu, 2018; Osei-Hwedie, 2002; Rankopo & Osei-Hwedie, 2011; Schiele, 2017). The lack of cultural sensitivity in mainstream social work has given rise to the development of Afrocentric theories built on principles that are centered around African thought and philosophies (Mungai et al., 2014).

Osei-Hwedie (1993) places emphasis on the importance of making use of what is known about the local environment to allow for effective social work education and practice. Rankopo and Osei-Hwedie (2011, p. 139) emphasize the need for indigenization, the search for 'culturally relevant practice and education' that could free social work from the dominance of Eurocentric values and culture which may not be applicable to the local context. Mainstream models of social work education in which behaviors are often individualized and separated from their social and cultural contexts are likely ineffective when applied to African communities. Thus, the introduction of Afrocentric social work education strives to incorporate African centered worldviews into the profession in order to reflect the values shared by African communities. Afrocentric perspectives are embedded in the concepts and assumptions laid out in the global definition of social work. The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) general meeting and the International Association of School of Social Workers (IASSW) General Assembly (2014) approved the definition of social work as follows:

Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing.

This global definition of the social work profession confirms the criticality of respect and the application of 'indigenous knowledge' in engaging people and structures to address life challenges towards enhanced-well-being.

Collectivism and interconnectedness, identified as core beliefs held among African individuals and communities, are relevant to African-centered social work education (Osei-Hwedie, 2002; Rankopo & Osei-Hwedie, 2011; Schiele, 1996). This perspective recognizes the role of the family, the community and its interconnectedness. The belief of interconnectedness also relates to human relations and extends as far as having several generations of families living in compound houses, which are homes for both extended (including grandparents, uncles, aunties, and cousins) and nucleus families (Edwards, 2015). When there is a problem in African societies, the first point of contact is usually the family. The family provides physical, financial, marital and emotional support to members. The focus is on the well-being of everyone and not just the individual. This system of helping human relationships extends to communities supporting members.

The needs of the community take priority over those of the individual, and feelings of satisfaction and fulfillment are derived in reference to one's social group (Ibrahima & Mattaini, 2019; Mugumbate & Nyanguru, 2013; Osei-Hwedie, 1993; Schiele, 1996). Schiele (1996) argues that while Afrocentrism does not reject the notion of individuality, individuals are perceived from their social groups. Whitehead (2018) also explains that collectivism promotes values that encourage collective survival and principles for living, such as reciprocity, cooperation, and social responsibility. Thus, efforts to address issues among African communities and individuals must be of the understanding that the beliefs held by one's social group may have a strong influence over one's behavior or decisions.

Moreover, effective solution to community problems may also have to consider one's social group, as individuals are often only identified in reference to their communities (Osei-Hwedie, 1993; Rankopo & Osei-Hwedie, 2011; Schiele, 1996; Whitehead, 2018). For example, in their analysis of social work challenges in Kenya, Mungai et al. (2014) discuss social support networks in Kenyan communities where they had established structures to assist other members within their groups. Additionally, heads of household, group mentors, and village elders played significant roles in aiding other members in managing problems. Thus, it is recommended that traditional help-seeking be acknowledged in African social work education, as leaders, neighbors, family members, and the community play important roles in the collective well-being of social groups (Whitehead, 2018).

Another key aspect of the Afrocentric paradigm is an understanding of the significance of spirituality within African communities. Historically, Western social work has been heavily influenced by Judeo-Christian values and expectations, as the Church initiated the provision of social welfare services in its earliest form through charity and almsgiving to the 'deserving poor' (Mwansa, 2011). Mwansa goes on to say that the introduction of social work and, by extension, social work education, was not conceptualized on an indigenous knowledge base but rather built on Western assumptions and philosophies and then imposed upon African communities through colonialism. Thus, current models of social work are under criticism for their disregard of African belief systems, despite their relevance to the lives of Black Africans. The literature reflects strong support for social workers to possess an understanding of and respect for the role of African religions and beliefs (Bent-Goodley et al., 2017; Ibrahima & Mattaini, 2019; Mabvurira, 2020).

Many Africans believe in a Supreme Being and the ancestral spirits of family members who are dead. Mabvurira (2020) maintains that many Zimbabweans, and to a large extent Africans, continue to maintain their beliefs in a Supreme Being and ancestry. Ghanaians believe that the Supreme Being created the heavens and the earth and continues to oversee all we do. This Supreme Being is also perceived to repay according to one's deeds (Opoku, 1978). Schiele (2017) further explains this relationship, stating that there is a belief that all beings, living or inanimate, have a spiritual nexus stemming from a single source, and are thus connected through a universal link. This demonstrates that spirituality is the base upon which other Afrocentric values are built, thereby highlighting its vital importance in the lives of Africans.

Mathebane and Sekudu (2018) argue that Afrocentrism views an individual's spirituality as equally important to their physical body. Bent-Goodley et al. (2017) identified

spirituality as a significant protective factor, with practical applications for interventions and relationship building. In contrast, many of the values underlying Eurocentric approaches to social work, such as competition and individualism, can hinder spiritual fulfillment. This brings up further questions of the relevance of a Western social work approach to social issues faced by African communities. Also, spirituality is an important value, and it is considered to foster other important Afrocentric values like collectivism and interconnectedness (Schiele, 1996, 2017).

## Methods

Ghana was used as a case study to provide information on the theoretical and conceptual thought processes about African-centered social work education. The authors reviewed the literature on the subject and engaged three students (two females and one male) in face-to-face interviews about their views on the subject. Although the sample size is small, it is consistent with the tradition of qualitative research. These students aged between 25 and 40 were pursuing their Master of Philosophy degree in social work in a Ghanaian university. The researchers employed purposive sampling and availability sampling, which were used to select participants with specific qualities relevant to a study and selecting from a population because they are accessible (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The authors purposively selected master's philosophy Part II (those who had finished their course work) students who were also working as Graduate Assistants at the university. Those students who met the criteria and were available the day of the interview were recruited for the study. Though the conversations were informal, the students were informed about the purpose of the discussion, confidentiality, and their voluntary participation. Their consent was sought before the interviews. The conversation with the participants were audio recorded. The questions posed to the participants were semi-structured and open ended with the intent of being flexible to the unique responses of the participants.

The Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases of thematic analysis was used for the study. The conversation with the participants were transcribed and then analyzed. The authors initially familiarized themselves with the audio-recorded data, which was transcribed into Microsoft word document. The transcripts were read several times before generating codes. Open codes and categories were created by each of the researchers individually and then generated into final themes by both researchers. The codes were then categorized into emergent themes, which were finalized and reported in this paper.

## Findings and discussions

Osei-Hwedie (1993) emphasizes the importance of making use of African values to allow for effective social work education. Other authors have argued that African-centered social work education could also support and promote social services that reflect African culture (Bent-Goodley et al., 2017; Rankopo & Osei-Hwedie, 2011). The following section discusses how collectivism, social support, reciprocity, and spirituality could inform social work education in Ghana, which could also help students better appreciate African values and to comprehend social work theories and concepts. What are these

values? How can they be taught to enhance social work students' understanding of social work theories, concepts, and models?

### **Collectivism**

An important African value of collectivism is aptly expressed in the Ubuntu philosophy: 'an authentic individual human being is part of a larger and more significant relational, communal, societal, environmental and spiritual world' (Mugumbate & Chereni, 2020, p. vi). In simple terms, Ubuntu can be summarized as follows, 'an individual is human if he or she says I participate, therefore I am' (Mugumbate & Nyanguru, 2013). It implies that every individual lives within a family and that any community can boast of its well-being when every member of the community is faring well. In other words, the well-being of any person depends on others within their communities and vice versa (Mugumbate & Nyanguru, 2013; Whitehead, 2018).

Whitehead (2018) asserts that leaders, neighbors, family members, and the community play important roles in the collective well-being of social groups. The author recommends that traditional help-seeking be acknowledged in African social work education. This claim was supported by the personal conversations in this work. There were calls to ensure that the African collectivist values are not destroyed, as evident in the personal conversation of Student:

African-centered social work education, let us see that sense of community, let us see more like what we want to relegate to the back, but it has always been with us, where we now go to the social welfare office to get help from there. Let's bring the family together, that sense of community to assist each other. Let's not just leave it to the formal system where social welfare agency is here and they offer services to people, no. I mean let us . . . because more like now it is losing its sense of purpose in terms of the family, that network or connection between family members is more like we are not seeing it again. (Student One, Female)

### **Social support**

The collectivist value inspires people to serve selflessly, providing support for both known and unknown individuals. Social support provision, including sharing, caring and service, stems from an African value that emphasizes caring for people who are incapable of meeting their needs, such as the elderly, persons with disabilities, and orphans, willingly and with no compulsion as communicated in the personal conversations below.

The service that we are talking about is about trying to serve the needs of others, provide for the needs of others. Serving people does not necessarily have to do with people that you know. So, when you meet people that may need any kind of help that you have the strength and power to provide, then you have to help the person. (Student Three, Male)

What I have to say is maybe like in terms of the home setting. Yes, you realize that younger people have to help, especially the aged in the family. You have to fetch water, you have to do something, I do not want to use the same word 'serve', you have to do something for the elderly, even to sweep or cook, I would say it is a form of service. (Student Two, Female)

Service, as indicated by the individuals we spoke to, collaborates the argument by Mugumbate and Nyanguru (2013) that Ubuntu recognizes the responsibility of every citizen in promoting societal well-being.

Sometimes, the Ubuntu philosophy necessitates communal support for those in need. The term used for this concept is 'ntubua'. Ntubua is a Twi (Ghanaian language spoken by Akans) word meaning to contribute to support. For example, the chiefs and elders of a community could decide to contribute to support or sponsor a vulnerable but brilliant orphan, as asserted by Mugumbate and Nyanguru (2013), 'this is because, in the African setting, care should be provided in the family. When the family fails, which is often rare, the community provides the support' (p. 94). Communal support, however, seem to be declining. Ebimngbo et al. (2022) reported how in their study on older people participants lamented the loss of assistance from community members. 'The study findings revealed that social support, including financial, material, health, and instrumental support, is more available from a familial network than the community'. (p. 164). They noted that where support is available, it is insufficient (Ebimngbo et al, 2021) and older women tend to receive more support than their male counterparts (Ebimngbo et al., 2022)

Thus, it is important for social work educators to rethink about how to reignite communal—social care for the needy in Africa. Communal social care is one of the core values of Africans as discussed earlier. Africans are encouraged to care for their older adults (Mugumbate & Nyanguru, 2013). This call has become even more necessary as many of these countries lack or have fewer social protection programmes for these populations.

### **Reciprocity**

Although communal support is acknowledged in this and other studies, the family is usually the first point of support for its members in need (Ebimngbo et al., 2022; Ebimngbo, Chukwu, & Okoye, 2021; Mugumbate & Nyanguru, 2013).

Familial support could be reciprocal as with adult children caring for their parents in their old age (Mugumbate & Nyanguru, 2013; Ebimngbo et al., 2022). Families also contribute time and finances to support needy members. Rankopo and Osei-Hwedie (2011) assert that reciprocity is one of the most important values in Africa. The underlying assumption is that a person or his/her relative will receive help in the future after they help others in need.

So, it usually happens in our communities, even daily. You know people can get job opportunities, opportunities in educational institutions, health care or other services provided to them, because one way or the other, their parents, or family members provided for them or did them good. So, they reciprocate that act of goodness. (Student Three, Male)

On the other hand, Ebimngbo et al. (2021) reported that in Nigeria, 'It is a deeply-held cultural value that young family members who (are able but) fail to support their parents/older relatives will reap curses and unpleasant reckoning with their creator' (p. 5). Could this form the basis for social work education to reinforce African values? Maybe this could reinvigorate some sense of fear which will propel the younger generations, who have the needed resources, to support those who are poor and needy as was done in the past.

## **Sources of indigenous African practices**

Spirituality, which plays a key role in Africa, cannot be overlooked in social work education and practice in Africa. For example, the Ghanaians believe in a Supreme Being, called ‘Onyankopong’, who created the heavens and the earth and who oversees all we do. They also believe this Supreme Being repays according to one’s deeds (Opoku, 1978). The belief in the Supreme Being shapes behavior, as echoed in the conversations below:

Okay so, I will say that with spirituality, you know as Africans or Ghanaians we believe that there is a spirit that has power over everything, that controls everything in the world, so whatever that you do, one way or the other you will have some reward. So, the reward can be positive or negative. So, religion influences the way we behave, and somebody may do good to others not necessarily expecting a reward from that person but is expecting a reward from that object of worship . . . And, religion helps shape our lives, shape what we do and even our interaction with people, our interaction with others that we do not know, religion helps us to do that (Student Three, Male).

So, if your grandparent is aging and they need help, you are admonished by your religious obligation to assist your grand mum, so whatever help you can give, you help her to take her to the hospital, providing for her basic needs like food, water, and all that so spirituality. (Student Two, Female)

## **How can we teach African-centered social work?**

### **Use of content-specific examples**

African-centered social work is practiced at all levels of social work, including social work education, social work practice, policy decision-making, and research (Mugumbate & Nyanguru, 2013; Rankopo & Osei-Hwedie, 2011). Using locality/content-specific examples, which students can identify, in social work education, is emphasized (Rankopo & Osei-Hwedie, 2011). For instance, the concept of ‘Ntuboa’, which means contribution, can be used as an example for resource mobilization for development at micro and mezzo levels and for individual and community development. Another example is ‘Nnoboaa’ can explain the importance of self-help and self-help development. This is consistent with the call of Osei-Hwedie (1993) that we must anchor social work training in what is known. ‘Nnoboaa’ literally means supporting one another in their farming.

What we know/experience could also inform practices to address local issues (Osei-Hwedie, 1993). Maybe it is time Africans reexamined fieldwork education to include structured, educational field trips for students to experience firsthand some of the relevant cultural values and how they are practiced in their communities. We are proposing field trips that are intentional, structured and focus on indigenous settlements where core undiluted African beliefs are still practiced.

### **Storytelling and proverbs**

Social work education and practice could also benefit from the use of storytelling and proverbs, which are the embodiment of a group of people (Amoh et al., 2019). Amoh,

Nyarkoh, and Agyekum assert that '... proverb is the medium that parcels the facts, insight, principles, standards, and intelligence of the use society in a brief memorable statement to trickle down generations' (Amoh et al., 2019, p. 12). This assertion is echoed in the narration below:

I think the service for our context stems from two things, it stems from: Our storytelling and then proverbs. From the stories like, 'by the fireside' and all those things, we saw grandparents putting us together and telling us stories, sayings, and proverbs. Some of these things are not written anywhere in the book, but they are conventional, so it comes to them, and they tell us all these stories and use proverbs. The stories that come from them are not straight away telling you this is service; this is respect, but you know that your grandfather or grandmother is telling you this story and the moral lesson you get from it is that you must serve. If somebody calls you and you do not know, the person does not go. They are not giving you a key term like this is safeguarding you or security, but then it comes to you naturally. (Student One, Female)

How can we re-package our stories and proverbs, which are relevant to what we do, in ways that can culturally be relevant to our students and, at the same time, enrich teaching? How could proverbs also be used to enrich actual social work practice? Africa is rich in stories and proverbs. There is a need, therefore to repackage our stories, which are relevant to what we do, in ways that can culturally be important to our students and at the same time enrich our teaching. We can also use proverbs to enrich social work practice and education.

## Conclusion

Ghana, like other countries in Africa is resourced with traditional cultural practices like oral history, proverbs, songs, and storytelling. These cultural practices could inform Afrocentric social work education, impact social work discourse and knowledge production in Ghana. Social work education has faced growing criticism due to its perceived foundation in Eurocentric worldviews which conflicts greatly with African belief systems and the systematic erasure of indigenous knowledge systems (Ibrahima & Mattaini, 2019; Mungai et al., 2014; Mwansa, 2011). Afrocentric social work education is distinct from Western knowledge in that it is centered on principles of collectivism, interconnectedness, and spirituality, among other values (Mathebane & Sekudu, 2020; Schiele, 1996). Despite limited sources in the literature regarding social work education in Africa, Eurocentric ideals continue to dominate the profession (Mabvurira, 2020; Mungai et al., 2014; Ross, 2008). However, scholars support the integration of Afrocentric thoughts into the field, as well as a stronger understanding of the ways in which the distinct culture can inform behavior, relationships, and social issues in African communities (Bent-Goodley et al., 2017; Ibrahima & Mattaini, 2019; Mwansa, 2011; Mathebane & Sekudu, 2018). We hope that as the profession continues to flourish in Africa and the Global South, stronger efforts would be made to establish a connection to indigenous African principles.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## Notes on contributors

**Augustina Naami** is a Senior Lecturer and Head of Department at the Department of Social Work, at the University of Ghana. She holds a BA in Economics from the University of Ghana, Masters and PhD in Social Work from the Universities of Chicago and Utah respectively. Her research focuses on disability and mental health, intersection of vulnerabilities and social policy.

**Magnus Mfoafo-M'Carthy** is a Professor at the Lyle S. Hallman Faculty of Social Work, Wilfrid Laurier University, Ontario, Canada. His research focuses on global mental health and Afrocentric social work practice.

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