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Abstract

Social Work in the English-speaking Caribbean has adopted a generalist perspective that tends to obfuscate the Caribbean socio-cultural-political of peoples in the region. This brief calls for the development and of a Caribbean-centric perspective with Caribbean people as a means of resolving this dilemma.

Introduction

Social work students and practitioners in the English-speaking Caribbean often encounter challenges in applying generalist social work frameworks to their practice in Caribbean settings. Their struggles emerge from not seeing themselves or their clients represented in the theories and perspectives developed by European and Anglo-American theorists. This means that practitioners often use external lens to understand the social issues affecting persons of Caribbean heritage, which tends to obfuscate a contextual analysis of the issues. Students and practitioners respond to the emergent disconnect by ‘jigsaw puzzling’ theories to fit into local settings and interventions, sometimes with mixed results. Several attempts to address the gap have led to regional scholarly investigation on indigenous practices, or discussions around Caribbean innovation in social work. Although several Caribbean social work scholars (Cambridge, 2011; Rock, 2013; Rock & Buchanan, 2014) have highlighted the challenges encountered by students and practitioners in applying western-based theories to Caribbean practice, the issue remains unresolved.

The concept of internationalisation and the establishment of the Global Agenda for Social Work (2012) have permeated social work literature for almost a decade. Scholars within the Caribbean have often challenged the universality of The Agenda and the assumption that the Global Standards’ representation of the Western viewpoint is a universal one. This assumption of universality continues to obscure a contextualized and historicized understanding of the Caribbean identities in social work education and practice. Sogren and Nathaniel (2015) caution that “country-specific mandates must be maintained as the primary determinants of how The Global Agenda should be integrated into social work practice, education and policy development” (p. 273).

Many Caribbean schools of social work have purposefully infused the international standards and The Global Agenda into the curriculum. Although The Global Standards for the Education and Training of the Social Work Profession (2004) notes that schools of social work should focus on the “recognition and development of indigenous or locally specific social work education and practice from the traditions and cultures of different ethnic groups and societies” (p.5), the additional integration of community experiences has been very limited. The few exchange programs which exist in the region also often focus on students’ learning best practices which emerge from the global North, perhaps minimising the strengths of local and regional practice.
This brief recognises that Social Work in the English-speaking Caribbean has mainly been influenced by frameworks emerging from the global North which are grounded in ideologies that do not fully integrate the Caribbean context into practice. The brief posits that the way to resolve this issue is to develop a Caribbean-centric perspective for social work practice with the persons of the Caribbean as well as the sizeable Caribbean diaspora. The paper proposes the imperatives for consideration in developing a Caribbean-centric social work perspective.

The Development of Social Work in the English-Speaking Caribbean

The territories in the English-speaking Caribbean share a common colonial history which has influenced, and in some cases, replicated the nature of social work practice and the administrative settings within former British West Indies territories and mainland Guyana and Belize (Maxwell, 2002). Social work education became a twentieth century phenomenon, with its early history traced to the emergence of the Central Council of Voluntary Social Services (CVS) in the 1940s. This body sought to co-ordinate mainly voluntary delivery of social welfare services and offer limited training to persons delivering these services. The move towards the independence and self-governance of Caribbean countries resulted in several persons being appointed social welfare officers who performed functions.

Professional social work education in the English-speaking Caribbean commenced in 1961 (Rock & Buchanan, 2014) and has developed into the current state with colleges and universities offering training at the certificate, bachelors, masters and doctoral levels. Since the early origins of training of social welfare officers in the Caribbean, social work education has continued to be heavily influenced by the global North. As noted by Cambridge (2010), many textbooks used in social work schools and by students in the Caribbean are North American or British based. Additionally, many of the social work educators in the Caribbean have acquired their training from North American and British institutions. As educators, many have replicated the Western hegemony of values, perspectives, theories and skills learnt in the global North and have influenced the social work curriculum over the past decades. According to Rock and Buchanan (2014), several epistemological challenges have emerged since students are not sufficiently grounded in the theory of the Caribbean reality that would allow for a greater understanding of the social issues that exists in their territories.

The lasting psychological effect of colonialism and the belief that things that are ‘foreign’ or emerging from the global North are superior, have also clouded the development of indigenous social work theories in the Caribbean. Additionally, the Western representation of the Caribbean as a paradise covering a small geographic population, has also minimised the growing social needs of the population, and overlooked the increasing size of the Caribbean diaspora.

Social work practice with persons of Caribbean heritage has mainly been done from a generalist perspective, in ways that do not always intentionally integrate the historical, socio-political or cultural values of Caribbean people. Beyond the use of strengths based or anti-oppressive theories which recognize the strengths of clients and integrate cultural sensitivity into practice, the social work theoretical approaches have largely omitted the worldviews of Caribbean peoples.

Imperatives of a Caribbean-centric Social Work Perspective

A Caribbean-centric Social Work perspective for the English-speaking Caribbean should appreciate the fundamental worldviews and cultural values of the Caribbean, including:

1. An understanding of the diversity which exists in the Caribbean. The Caribbean is comprised of nations with diverse geography, language, political structures, economies, cultures, language and history. Therefore, to understand the nature of Caribbean people, practitioners must appreciate the diversity which is represented in the Caribbean. The diversity also includes the ethnic heritage of the peoples of the region and the appreciation for the different cultural traditions within these groups. Thus, any Caribbean-centric perspective will necessarily include a critical intersectional analysis of the imperatives for practice with different ethnicities, including those with indigenous, Afro and Indo-Caribbean heritage.
2. The history of Caribbean nations and the emergent concerns which are peculiar to each territory and the circumstances which shaped them. The history of the English-speaking Caribbean has a history of invasion and domination by European/North American nations. This must be understood in terms of the early history and near annihilation of indigenous peoples, the European settlers, slavery and indentureship, colonialism, slave resistance, emancipation, labour uprisings, the influence of North America, pre and post-independence movements and post-colonial experiences.

3. The lasting impact of colonialism in shaping values and perpetuating systemic barriers in the Caribbean. The legacy of colonialism has shaped the economies, social systems, family structures and cultures of each Caribbean territory. The history of subordination has both directly and indirectly influenced Caribbean identity formation, historical trauma and the collective self-esteem which permeate the mental health needs of the population to this day.

4. Caribbean family and kinship structures. The Caribbean has a diverse range of family structures including the extended, nuclear, single parent, ‘common-law’ and visiting type relationships. The matrifocal nature of many families in the Caribbean should be understood as demonstrating some inherent strengths and values rather than be cited by scholars with Western-lens as dysfunctional in form.

5. Caribbean-centric social work should re-examine the ways resilience is viewed from a Western individualistic perspective which fails to acknowledge the culturally embedded definitions and manifestations of the collective resilience of Caribbean people. An exploration of resilience must include appreciation of the culture of the Caribbean and the ways in which cultural traditions and talents can provide the space for ingenuity and innovation based on indigenous cultural activities.

6. The recognition of Caribbean indigenous traditions and community strengths as resources that can be harnessed to improve the living conditions of Caribbean people. Caribbean communities can be a source of power, offer protection to those in need and a vehicle of social change.

Implications for Social Work Practice, Education and Research

1. Caribbean social workers need to openly examine the extent to which their practice is limited using social work models emanating from the global North. In so doing, they should also explore the potential that a Caribbean-centric perspective may hold in providing an alternative means through which Caribbean problems can be viewed and addressed.

2. The Social Work curriculum in the anglophone Caribbean should be interrogated to determine the extent to which social work education is confined to Anglo-American and Eurocentric theorising. Caribbean social workers can challenge the hegemonic and taken-for-granted knowledge base in the Caribbean social work curriculum. There must be a move to counter the pathologizing of Caribbean traditions and practices, in ways that contextualize the lives of people of Caribbean heritage.

3. Caribbean Social work educators must develop their own cultural competence by understanding and appreciating Caribbean-centric perspectives and the communities that their students live in. Furthermore, social work educators who have been primarily educated in countries outside of the Caribbean should not privilege western based models over Caribbean indigenous strategies, nor ascribe the rise in social problems to the failure to implement Anglo-American practices. They must also integrate content and experiences from students who represent the identities and diversity of Caribbean people into classroom discussions and resources.

4. Caribbean social workers should examine the influence(s) on research practices in the region. Social work research is heavily influenced by the persons (researchers) who identify and define the social phenomenon under study. As a result, the direction of the research agenda may be coloured by the investigator’s worldview. The use of critical research practices is therefore integral to knowledge-production in the Caribbean.

5. The need for a movement of social work educators, scholars and practitioners to decolonize social work education and practice in ways that challenge the core assumptions of existing theories and challenge taken for-granted curriculum and practices as the standard.

Conclusion
This brief is meant to spark renewed attention to the gaps which exist in applying social work frameworks with Caribbean people. It also highlights the multiple possibilities that Caribbean-centric knowledge hold for social work education and practice especially in addressing the minimisation of the lived experiences and social realities of Caribbean peoples. The author supports the creation of a critical alternative to the current discourses and practice in Caribbean social work. The use of a Caribbean-centric perspective in Social Work holds the promise of addressing the needs of the population of the Caribbean and the diaspora.

References


