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The challenges of maintaining Social Work Ethics in Kenya

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Abstract

This paper presents an overview of the challenges of maintaining professional social work ethics that are predominantly Western-based in an African cultural context. Social work is yet to establish a profile in most African countries and therefore the meaning and relevance of social work and social work ethics to African people is not well researched. Social workers in Kenya, for example, have to operate in a challenging social environment that includes corruption in service delivery, social norms with overlapping boundaries that could be considered contrary to Western notions of professional boundaries. The ethical dilemmas faced by practicing social workers included the extreme poverty facing their clients amidst corruption and limited referral options, playing the role of gate keepers to limited resources, inflexible rules and lack of support or supervisory structures. In addition to highlighting the challenges, the paper discusses some creative solutions that social workers could apply.

Key words: Kenya; Africa; ethics; dilemma; Afrocentricity; teaching cases.

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Introduction

The challenges of maintaining professional social work ethics that are derived from a Western base of knowledge and practice in the Kenyan African context have not been fully explored, yet they are key to social work identity and standing in the country. It is acknowledged that while social work values may have a Western base they also have potential for international application.

Social workers always emphasise the importance of location and context. This is a value shared by other social scientists. Nyambedha (2008) emphasises the importance of using and adding to local knowledge in research with vulnerable groups like communities affected by HIV/AIDS in Kenya, and using the knowledge gained this way in advocacy. Recognising the importance of socio-cultural issues affecting health and the importance of creating positive relationships with individuals and communities in social research are important ethical aspects in engaging vulnerable communities in Africa (Molyneux et al, 2009). Working with respect with people includes respecting their history and culture.

History and culture for African people are important given the colonial legacy of neglecting the needs of the Indigenous people and disrespecting their cultures. African social workers are faced with the challenge of rebuilding from this difficult past and welcome support and collaboration with other social workers to find solutions to the problems and dilemmas they face as they adapt social work to African conditions (Asamoah and Beverly, 1988). The social work values of mutual respect are the basis of such collaboration.

An Afrocentric paradigm: An important strategy for creative solutions

One complexity for modern social work values and ethics is that the social context within which social work is practiced in Kenya as well as other African countries is greatly influenced by traditional African cultures. Much of this is reflected through cultural practices, traditional beliefs and attitudes as well as through widely accepted customary laws in different communities in Kenya. Whereas some of these practices, beliefs and attitudes may be good and beneficial for the said communities, others are oppressive and contradictory to modern social work values and ethics. Examples include widespread practices of female circumcision, forced early marriages for girls particularly in pastoral communities in remote areas, widow inheritance and the harsh rites associated with it, witchcraft and other religious beliefs that have negative impacts on health. Some customary laws prohibit women from property rights (particularly land) in some communities, thus denying the central social work principle of equal treatment for all. The social worker must be very careful when handling such sensitive issues in order to avoid conflicts with his social work clientele. The late Nobel laureate and environmentalist Wangari Maathai (2009) suggests that while African cultures have to be the foundation of the strength and capacities of the African people, it is important to honestly acknowledge and address some of the negative aspects embedded in the cultures.

For African people the traditional values were more likely to be collective than individualistic, which is similar to many traditional societies around the world. It is argued that for the traditional African societies 'the cosmological and axiological attributes of the Afrocentric worldview underscores interdependency, collectivity, spirituality, and affect' (Schiele, 2000, p.25). These were the values that ensured that people looked after each other in order to ensure their survival and the viability of their natural environment as implied in

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the concept of interdependence between all beings. Mkabela (2005) believes that adopting the Afrocentric paradigm, as advocated by Asante (2007), is one way of rediscovering the underutilized potential locked in the African culture. The Afrocentric paradigm or Afrocentricity is 'an intellectual perspective that privileges African agency within the context of African history and culture transcontinentally and transgenerationally' (Asante, 2007, p.2). Mkabela also argues that utilizing indigenous knowledge in research and practice would ensure that professionals were working with the people and not just for the people.

After many years of colonialism, it is not surprising that there are many Africans who doubt the value of their cultures and traditions. The indigenous knowledge concepts is problematic and contested on the basis that the indigenous knowledge that is uncontaminated by modernity is hard to authenticate (Bar-On, 1999). While indigenous knowledge has been suppressed and devalued over the years by colonial and postcolonial administrations, working closely with the people would identify the traditional values that are still maintained or could be reclaimed. There is also emerging literature that is documenting what the core African characteristics and values are and from which practitioners and researchers can validate on the ground (Ross, 2008). One example is provided by Mazama (2001, citing Karenga, n.d) who noted the core African values as the centrality of the community, respect for tradition, high level of spirituality and ethical concern, harmony with nature, the sociality of self-hood, veneration of ancestors and the unity of being. Combining these African values with social work skills of working with individuals and communities can help social workers to reconnect with African people.

To advocate African solutions to African problems is not based on any notion of racial superiority but on an emancipatory ethic. In South Africa the African knowledge and philosophy is represented in the concept of *Ubuntu*, which emphasises that the 'individual's whole existence is relative to that of the group' (Brack et al, 2003, p.319). Ubuntu constitutes the roots of African belief systems and culture and represents both African philosophy and way of life based on what is good for humanity and recognises the interdependence of all beings (Bamford, 2007; Nkondo, 2007). Social workers recognise that working with people starts with where they are and so for the African people it starts with Ubuntu. This approach recognises the role of culture in emancipatory social work practices (Rankopo & Osei-Hwedie, 2011). As Ochen et al. note, rights may be presented not 'as an external concept imposed upon communities, but rather the enhancement of existing good practice already embedded in families and communities' (2012, p.107). This is important to all people, and not just Africans, as noted by Nabudere who argues that 'it is only by moving toward a new emancipatory ethic that we can liberate humanity from ill-founded prejudices' (Nabudere, 2007, p.32). Culture is a powerful framework but it is not without problems.

As noted above, Maathai argues that African cultures are the foundation and source of African strength and hope to build a better future. The negative role of foreign cultures on colonised and dispossessed people is that they inculcate a sense of inadequacy and an inferiority complex leading to societies being disempowered and vulnerable to manipulation. She concludes that:

> Culture could be the missing link to creativity, productivity and confidence. Ultimately it is critical that Africans dispense with what might be called the culture of forgetting that has developed ever since colonialism and re-collect their history and

culture, and the *kwimenya* [self-knowledge] that comes from both. Without them,

Africa lacks a foundation on which to build for the future. (Maathai, 2009, p.183).

Recognising the importance of culture as a source of strength is not to ignore the problems that have a cultural basis. Many social work clients might explain such problems as family violence and child abuse as part of 'their culture'. A good understanding of that culture would be a help in challenging such assertions as most cultures are nurturing and abuse usually reflects the breakdown of cultural values and norms.

Creative solutions to culturally-based ethical dilemmas

As an exemplar, Female Genital Cutting (also referred to as female circumcision or female genital mutilation) illustrates how an issue that might be claimed to be culturally-based but has negative implications on people can be addressed. Burson (2007) has presented an ethical approach for social workers to address this dilemma. According to Burson, female genital cutting has a very long history dating as far back as ancient Egypt and although it used to be practiced in many parts of the world, it now mainly occurs in parts of Africa, the Middle East and Asia. Burson argues that when addressing a major issue like this one, behaviour, rhetoric or attitudes that are condescending will be met with resistance, even by those who would be either beneficiaries or open to outside intervention. It has to be appreciated that female genital cutting in the cultures where it is practiced is a valued rite of passage. In colonial Kenya attempts by colonial government to ban the practice was met with resistance by the girls who decided to cut themselves when the older women specialists obeyed the colonial administration to stop the practice (Thomas, 1997). Burson also recommends working with

individuals and groups within the society that is the focus of change, otherwise efforts to end female genital cutting will have limited or no success.

A more recent approach in Kenya called *Ntanira Na Mugambo* or 'circumcision through words' offers an alternative and girls undergo a rite that consists of a week of seclusion where they are taught basic anatomy and physiology, sexual education and health, hygiene and other relevant subjects (Chelala, 1998). This approach has resulted from collaboration between the community and community workers. While it is not a social workers' initiative, it is instructive of what social workers can achieve by working closely with the community and appreciating the significance of cultural practices. Burson (2007) suggests that educating people on the health implications is likely to be better received than abstract discussions on human rights. A focus on the individual in the context of feminist concern regarding oppression of women within the cultural environment is another approach recommended by Burson. Finally the basic social work skills of listening and having a dialogue are the starting point of intervention. Burson concludes that if done properly and with the discussion presented here in mind, intervention in cultural issues in other societies and cultures can be justified.

The Kenyan context

The Afrocentric paradigm discussed above is a theoretical starting point, but the challenges for Kenyan social workers is how to maintain the social work ethics of their profession that are predominantly Western-based while working in the Kenyan African cultural context. There is currently a gap in the academic literature regarding social work ethics in Kenya

(during 2012, our preparatory searches of 15 international journal databases relevant to social work gave no results at all). Therefore, a brief review of the international development of social work ethics as well as the general challenges for social workers in Africa opens this section. This is followed by a longer discussion of specific issues for social work training and practice in the Kenyan context, drawn from one of the authors' many years experience "on the ground" in social work in Kenya. The Kenyan contextual issues discussed here contribute significantly to the challenges social workers in Kenya face in maintaining professional social work ethics and highlights the importance of an Afrocentric perspective in responding productively to such challenges.

Social work values, ethics and morality

From its earliest beginnings, social work has been a value-based profession. While the definition and expression of these values has evolved over time, the core value of concern for humanity remains the defining feature of social work. Values are important as they shape our beliefs, emotions and attitudes and equally our beliefs, emotions and attitudes shape our values (DuBois & Miley, 2011).Values then are implicit or explicit beliefs that people consider 'good' and hence guide in the understanding of what is considered correct or right and hence ethical. The behaviour or conduct of people, which is influenced by their values, is regarded as a reflection of their morality. Morality is hard to define but one attempt at the definition suggests that the moral system is 'the system people use, often unconsciously, when they are trying to make a morally acceptable choice among several alternative actions or when they make moral judgements about their own actions or those of others' (Gert, 2005, p.3). Morality appears therefore to be demonstrated through action, or inaction, and the judgements we make of ourselves or others, based on our belief system.

As social work developed as a profession, there was a shift from focusing on the morality of the poor as the source of problems to a focus on the morality or ethics of the social workers and the constraints of social systems. Social work codes of ethics have now been developed in a wide range of developing and developed countries that practice social work. The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and International Association of Schools of Social work (IASSW) note that ethical awareness is a fundamental part of social work practice (IFSW, 2012). Their definition of social work states that:

> The social work profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Utilising theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work. (IFSW, 2012).

By adopting the principles of human rights and social justice, social work emphasises the right of people using social work services to be treated with dignity. Abbot (1999), in a study of social work values in four parts of the world (USA, Asia, Europe and Australasia) grouped them into four categories: respect for human rights, social responsibility, commitment to individual freedom (social justice), and self-determination. The research identified that social workers throughout the world share the values of respect for basic rights and support for self determination but there was no such unanimity on social responsibility or commitment to individual freedom (Abbot, 1999). This confirms that 'social work is an international social movement concerned to promote social justice across the world, and a situated practice that

takes place in a context of national laws, policies and cultures' (Banks, 2008, p.243). It is therefore the context that makes the difference in how social workers in different places will address the issues facing them in the process of helping their clients.

Social work in Africa

In Africa, general challenges for social workers arise from widespread and absolute poverty for large numbers of people, violent conflicts causing mass displacements of people, the legacy of colonization that almost destroyed the cultural fabrics of the people, weak public sectors that are unable to meet the needs of the people, and underdeveloped institutions, including legal institutions, that are unable to guarantee the rule of law (Maathai, 2009). These are broad generalisations and different parts of Africa are affected differently so while some people live in very comfortable Western lifestyles others are in desperate situations in refugee camps. These are problems that cannot be possibly solved by social workers alone but social workers must play their role. MacCormack (1996) notes that it is now recognised that the suffering caused by psychological wounds in war situations not only affects individual's well-being but also that of the society as a whole, hence the need to include the understanding of culture, history, traditions and politics of the affected people in intervention.

Traditional support networks in Kenya

Professional social work education in Kenya started in the early 1960s. Prior to this, the country had a traditional version of social support networks that were embedded within the social cultural practices of different communities. Social responsibilities were clearly defined for different community members through socialization. Different needs of individuals were

largely addressed at the community level. The family unit had clear structures for assisting someone in need and whenever necessary, the community would intervene and address any need affecting an individual or group within the community. Household heads and village elders served many of the roles of modern social workers , particularly with regard to the enhancement of the social functioning of individuals in the society. Heads of age sets and the group mentors equally played significant roles that helped an individual or group to manage problems of living. The individualism that is prevalent in Kenya today did not exist in traditional society and individuals readily accepted counsel, advice or direction from their seniors in the society whenever a problem of living was experienced. Everyone was linked in some way to the society.

Social work training in Kenya: Issues and challenges

The establishment of the first training institution for social work education in Kenya (Kenya-Israel School of Social Work) in 1962 introduced professional social work where only traditional networks had existed. The school was later integrated with the Kenya Institute of Administration, where social work training continued at the Diploma level. The training offered then was limited but it equipped aspiring social workers with skills particularly relevant for interventions in predominantly rural communities still recovering from colonialism.

Social work education at Bachelors degree level started in 1976 at the University of Nairobi in the then department of Sociology. The focus was to equip social work personnel with skills that training at the diploma level could not provide, particularly interventions requiring

research, policy formulations, project planning and management. A combination of factors including globalization impact, weakening of family unit, population increase and rise in awareness levels have since contributed to the further weakening of the traditional support networks and created more space for professional social work practice in Kenya.

There are currently six universities and eight colleges offering Bachelor of Arts (Social Work) degrees in the country (KenyaPlex.com, 2012). At the time of writing this paper no university in Kenya, either public or private, had higher degrees in social work training. This is notwithstanding the fact that social workers with postgraduate social work qualifications could play a significant role in research, teaching and provision of specialized social work services.

A critical analysis of the foregoing observations reveals three linked ethical issues in relation to social work training and subsequent practice in Kenya: insufficient numbers of well-qualified people to do both undergraduate and postgraduate teaching; a difficulty in establishing independent departments of social work with regularly reviewed curricula; and the absence of relevant research to inform both curricula and social work practice.

The lack of suitably qualified people means that frequently academics teach social work with no social work training background beyond a Bachelor of Social Work degree. There have been instances where people with no basic training in social work end up teaching social work units simply because people with relevant qualifications are not available. The problem is more acute in some social work training institutions that are located in remote areas and

hence cannot compete for the limited number of lecturers with relevant social work backgrounds, leaving teaching positions to non social work graduates.

Without the growth of social work departments and/or schools, the training of social workers is likely to be slow, so the limitations of social work education in Kenya may be a significant factor in the slow development of social work in Kenya. Moreover, the lack of internal institutional recognition means that regular updates and revision of existing curriculum may not get much support through the detailed bureaucratic bottlenecks within the institutional structures.

Finally, there is very little Kenyan research that is directly related to social work, yet ideally, the content of what is taught in class should as much as possible be informed by regular outcomes of social work research. Social work curricula that are therefore heavily based on subject matter largely derived from the West but intended for social workers who will work in Africa may raise both relevance and ethical concerns (Mwansa, 2011). All these ethical concerns at the training level raise more ethical issues at the practice level.

Social work practice in Kenya

Professional social work practice in the Kenyan context is largely generic. Specialized social work practice has not fully taken shape in Kenya, probably because the profession is still growing and the needs for intervention are overwhelming. The scope for professional social work practice in Kenya has been changing as the country undergoes different phases of

development and reels under the impact of globalization. Many have now developed fully fledged social work careers in different sectors including child welfare services, probation services, hospital settings, school social work, industrial social work, community development and micro finance institutions. The services cover both urban and rural areas and the mode of service delivery may vary depending on the agency, its focus and mandate and the responsiveness of target beneficiaries to the services provided, among other factors (Wairire, 2008).

Social work has not yet gained due recognition as a fully fledged profession. There is as yet no social work professional association within Kenya which enjoys universal allegiance among practicing social workers and social work academics. This often complicates efforts to bring about tangible changes at the policy and institutional levels which may culminate in sound legislation for social work in the country. Social workers in Kenya have no formal code of ethics mutually agreed upon which guides them in practice. Social work training institutions rely on code of ethics from other associations, particularly the National Association of Social Workers in the United States of America, for teaching purposes. Nonetheless, some training institutions have made some efforts to fill this gap. A good example is the Kenya Institute of Social Work and Community Development (KISWCD) which has developed what is called 'Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct for KISW' to guide social workers and community development workers in the face of ethical dilemmas (KISWCD, n.d.).

Besides this, the relatively low numbers of qualified social work personnel, both practitioners and academics, may also explain the setback in the development of social work in Kenya leading to a situation where many social work jobs and roles are allocated to people with other qualifications. A case in point is Kenya's Vision 2030 where only a few social workers are fully involved even though the said development blue-print is largely interdisciplinary and social workers could contribute to the social development agenda. The social work voice, sentiments and aspirations may therefore not be fully heard, rendering social workers practically powerless to make any significant difference to development (Lombard & Wairire, 2010). The lack of a legislative mechanism that clearly stipulates the professionalism within social work and ensures that qualified social workers are preferred in employment selection processes for social work positions is a structural factor that contributes to ethical challenges for social work in Kenya.

Finally, in Kenya as elsewhere, the influence of neo-liberalism is felt in both research and education through the pressure to meet the needs of the market. The risk of that is the erosion of the basic values of social justice, empowerment, emancipation and community engagement (Wehbi & Turcotte, 2007). South Africa's experience shows that the social work profession is forced to operate within an interaction of three discourses of professional social work, managerialism and the market with the forces of globalisation challenging the post-apartheid community development ideals (Sewpaul & Holscher, 2004). Similar pressures are felt around the world with the most vulnerable including the indigenous people who have historically been marginalised as a result of colonialism being the most affected.

Ethical dilemmas faced by Kenyan social workers

In general terms, the challenges of maintaining social work ethics apparent in the cases below could also be faced by social workers elsewhere in Africa or similar countries. In the African context, such challenges need to be understood against a background of limited social work services and the structural conflict between traditional modes of operating and modern bureaucracies inherited from the former colonial powers. The specific contextual issues in Kenya discussed above, including the limited capacity to provide strong undergraduate training, the absence of postgraduate training, and the lack of a strong professional association with a capacity for promoting high quality work in the field. All these contribute significantly to the dilemmas and challenges Kenyan social workers face in maintaining professional social work ethics that are relevant to the country. Commentary on the cases below aims to highlight the importance of an Afrocentric perspective for productive engagement with such dilemmas.

Methodology: Teaching Cases

To illustrate some of the ethical dilemmas faced by social workers in the field we present some cases drawn from our personal communication with practicing social workers in Kenya. These are not research case studies but rather 'teaching cases'. Yin (2009) makes a distinction between research case studies and teaching cases. The differences between research case studies and teaching cases are subtle and sometimes boundaries are blurred as research case studies can be used for teaching purposes (Ŝtrach and Everett, 2008). In general, however, Yin (2009) suggests that teaching case studies do not have to be concerned with rigorous and fair presentation of empirical data to the same extent as case study

research, rather, teaching cases describe either real or fictional situations that are relevant to the purpose they are used for.

A good teaching case is identified as one that tells a good story, demonstrates empathy and authenticity, is directly relevant to the reader, encourages or provokes decision making, raises issues that can be generalized to other situations, is usually short but still well researched and clearly identifies the decision makers (Jones, 2003). Teaching cases are used in a wide range of disciplines including social work, law, medicine, business and development economics and applied not only in classrooms but other settings where there is need to demonstrate the decision making process (Jones, 2003; Kim et al, 2006; Ŝtrach and Everett, 2008; Pitt & Watson, 2011).

In the context of this paper, the cases used demonstrate ethical dilemmas in decision making experienced by practising social worker colleagues in Kenya. These colleagues were employed by two social work agencies in Kenya. They were working in situations where decision making was part of their jobs. They were purposively selected for their potential to narrate useful cases in the context of this paper. When the social workers were contacted by one of the authors, the context of our paper was explained to them, and they were requested to think of a situation where they felt they faced an ethical dilemma in the course of carrying out their duties as social workers. They narrated their experiences while the author took notes.

Case 1: Child adoption dilemma

In my role as a social worker, I was confronted by a case where James[4] was a child who had been living with adoptive parents for a substantial period of time but had not been legally adopted. The parents had gone extra miles to cater for the child's basic needs and to give him a home where family love was well experienced, but the fact remained that proper adoption procedures were not followed at all. If I follow the law I will have to remove James because proper procedures have not been followed. I am however conflicted because James is being looked after well and removing him will be stressful for him and his adoptive parents. If I don't remove him he will remain improperly documented and this may affect his access to school and employment in future.

Note: Adoption cases in Kenya are generally handled by child adoption societies which, according to the Children Act 2001 (Act No.8 of 2001) are the only authority with a legal mandate to facilitate the adoption process. In some cases however, children are illegally placed for adoption by children's homes, the district children's officers, or local administrators such as police officers.

The dilemma here is whether to make a decision on what is in the *best interest* of the child guided by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child or just follow the law and report the matter to the authorities and risk disrupting the life of the child. Ideally, the child need only be removed if the family is found not to be suitable but the arrangement is formalised. The social worker would need clear guidance in a case like this through professional peers, the supervisor and Code of Ethics or legal professionals. An alternative approach is to consider what the community would have done before the Western-oriented legal systems were foisted upon them. Major decisions were made at community and not individual level. This is because morality and ethics operated at community or communalistic

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[4] All names have been changed or made up.

level and aimed to achieve good outcomes and harmony for the whole group (Agulanna, 2007). Using this approach the worker would consult with the community leaders to work out the best approach to the situation. A ritual adoption, rather than issuing of certificates, would be the process to join the child or adult to the family. Maathai (2009) found that people in Africa in general, and Kenya in particular, had lost confidence in solving their problems as a result of the trauma of colonisation. Working together in a community development approach assisted them in regaining self-confidence, self-knowledge, energy and initiative to solve their problems (Mungai, 2012). In the current situation there could be other considerations like the social workers lobbying for the law to be changed to allow for the support and formalisation of such cases in the *best interest* of the child. However, changing laws is a long process that could take many years and is therefore unlikely to help James in the short term.

Case 2: Service provision dilemma

As a social worker in the Alternative Family Care Program of a Child agency, I am procedurally required to assist children below 18 years to get care givers who provide them with foster care or guardianship. But I had a very needy case of John who was above 18 years but who was still dependent, with no other source of livelihood or any known family members to take care of him, and with nothing about his physical or other development suggesting that he was above 18. Our program is not an option for such a client, so John therefore cannot benefit from the provisions of the program no matter the need that he may be having. I considered reducing the reported age for the best interest of John but I could be in trouble if found out later. The appropriate alternative was to refer John to an agency that would cater for his age group. The problem was that referral agencies were not available yet John was in urgent need of help. Overlooking his age would create a problem of setting a

precedent for the agency as it is not possible to cater for the other needy clients who were

over 18 years of age.

The dilemma for the social worker is whether to falsify the age of John and hence find him a care giver or follow the agency rules and abandon him in the streets. These appeared to be the only alternatives but neither was satisfactory. Falsifying information would amount to forgery so it is unlikely to be a preferred course of action for the social worker. Reverting again to the African tradition would show that it should be the community to decide whether John should be regarded as a minor given his situation. Chronological age was never an issue for the African people. More important were the transition points like initiation and marriage. The challenge for the worker and the agency would be to involve the community to look at children from that perspective and not just the age which does not mean anything if you have no means of supporting yourself. Policies and codes of conduct or ethics could be developed to reflect that African perspective.

One practical function of policy and codes of ethics and practice is to reduce pressure on individual social workers. With proper and clear policy they can get guidance when deciding who receives services. This does not remove all ethical dilemmas for social workers but it helps. An important role that social workers can play is advocacy. While it is more critical to empower social work clients to speak for themselves, advocacy has an important role in furthering human rights and social justice for the users of social work services (Ife, 2012). In this example the social worker could advocate for the continuation of the services until alternatives are found.

Conclusion

This paper has provided an overview of the challenges of maintaining professional social work ethics that are Western-based in an African context, with a specific focus on the Kenyan experience. There is also an argument that supports the view that there exist common themes of traditional African societies that would allow for the generalisation of this discussion beyond the Kenyan situation that has informed the discussion in this paper (Schiele, 2000; Agulanna, 2007). Afrocentricity represents a standpoint that views the world from a standpoint based on African worldview (Schiele, 2000). This worldview, while emphasising African particularity, is also universal as it emphasises the spiritual and collective nature of African people and humanity in general (Swignoski, 1996). Schiele (2000) suggests that Afrocentricity supports moving from knowledge to knowledge-informed action as part of ethics for social workers. From this perspective, social workers in Africa should not stop at identifying problems but should act to address those problems.

The knowledge accumulated by social workers elsewhere is also relevant to Africa as long as translated to make it relevant to and compatible with the needs and cultures of the African people. The danger here is that African cultures were suppressed, demonized or banned outright under colonialism. That meant that even people's names, their languages, their environment, their heritage, their beliefs in themselves and their capacities were derogated (Wa Thiong'o, 1986). It is therefore critically important that social work is not seen as a continuation of this colonial endeavour but as a tool to improve people's lives.

It has been argued that Kenyan and other African social workers might benefit from receiving ongoing professional support around the ethical dilemmas they face in their work. Such support would provide a foundation against which creative approaches to ethical dilemmas might more effectively flourish. The support might be provided by informal professional networks, a formal professional association and continuing education/professional development. More crucially social workers need to be connected to the communities where they work so they work with the people and not just for them. A professional body would be one way of taking the responsibility of translating the internationally produced body of social work theories, at collective rather than individual level, and making it relevant to a country like Kenya. We also throw the challenge to social workers in Kenya and Africa in general to find creative ways of addressing the dilemmas they encounter based on their knowledge of African culture and values but also reinforced by the social work values of upholding human rights and advancing social justice for all their clients.

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