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'Indigenization' and knowledge development: Extending the debate[1]

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Abstract

This paper attempts to extend the discourse on 'indigenization' from a marginal movement in social work to chart its course as a field of knowledge development that uses knowledge, training and resources that is particular to a culture and in which increasing numbers of leading researchers creatively pursue culturally and locally relevant research. It argues for the development of truly 'indigenized' and culturally appropriate social work knowledges that are free from the restrictions and expectations of positivistic Western worldviews.

Keywords: Indigenous Social Work, indigenized social work, 'indigenization', cultural relevance

Prior writing in social work has viewed 'indigenization' from a practice perspective in which it has largely been seen as a process of importation of Western, mainly US, models of social work into developing non-western contexts wherein attempts are made to make imported knowledge fit local contexts. Within this literature, 'indigenization' is seen as a process of

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[2] In keeping with the lessons learnt from the writers' workshop which led to *Indigenous Social Work around the World: Towards culturally relevant education and practice* (Gray, Coates & Yellow Bird, 2008), leading international writers on 'indigenization' and Indigenous Social Work who contributed to this collection agreed to the limited use of the term 'Indigenous' to First Nations social work and the replacement of 'indigenization' with the more aptly descriptive term of 'cultural or local relevance'. In keeping with these sentiments, in this paper we draw a distinction between Indigenous Social Work and indigenized social work. We have also placed 'indigenization' in inverted commas to respect the integrity of Indigenous Social Work, acknowledging that use of this term is unavoidable with reference to prior literature on this subject.

adaptation. But beyond this narrow and limited view of the 'indigenization' of practice and education lies the broader realm of a truly culturally relevant practice and scholarship.

While historically the literature on 'indigenization' developed mainly in relation to social work practice in developing countries in Africa, Asia and South America (see, for example, Asamoah & Beverley, 1988; Brigham, 1982; Campfen, 1988; Hammoud, 1988; Shawky, 1972; Walton & Abo El Nasr, 1988), China presents an interesting contemporary case study for those interested in international social work or, more specifically, in the transfer of western social work to non-western contexts. While not the central focus of this paper, the Chinese experience has spawned a growing literature on the emergence of culturally relevant social work education in China in the last fifteen years (see, for example, Tsang, Yan & Shera, 2000; Tsang & Yan, 2001; Yuen-Tsang & Wang, 2002) and has reignited debates on the 'indigenization' of social work (see, for example, Hutchings & Taylor, 2007; Gray, 2008b; Jia, 2008; Yunong & Xiong, 2008). As a result, it might be argued that a new field of knowledge development, namely, 'indigenized social work' could be emerging which 'independent of its imported origins … stands on its own in addressing local problems and in providing its own local training and textbooks' (Adair, 1999, p. 415). 'Indigenization' requires sensitivity to local cultures and contexts (Gray, Coates & Yellow Bird, 2008).

This paper examines 'indigenization' and knowledge development and attempts to extend the debate beyond 'indigenization as making social work fit local contexts' (Yunong & Xiong, 2008). It begins with a brief overview of western social work, 'indigenization', indigenous knowledge, Indigenous social work, and internationalization in order to clarify the sense in which these terms are being used. It then examines the ethnocentric nature of the 'indigenization' discourse and the approaches used in knowledge development before reflecting upon what might be involved in extending indigenous research. Thereafter, it

discusses the limitations of ethnocentric approaches to knowledge development and problems with the core concept of culture before advancing the notion that, rather than a strategically planned process of disciplinary development as proposed in the social work literature (see, for example, Yunong & Xiong, 2008), 'indigenization' is also a naturally occurring process when foreign and local cultures come into contact with one another be that within western contexts, between western and non-western contexts or within non-western contexts. It follows that an exclusively ethnocentric form of Indigenous Social Work would be counterproductive to forms of practice that incorporate knowledge and interventions from other cultures. In fact has this not been one of the major concerns within mainstream social work in regards to professional practice in multicultural contexts? It has spawned a variety of approaches to deal with diversity in social work, such as culturally sensitive and culturally competent social work practice but these have more often addressed minority issues in western contexts rather than the development of culturally relevant social work education and practice in non-western contexts (see Gray et al., 2008 for a fuller discussion of this).

'Indigenization' and indigenous knowledge

The literature on 'indigenization' questions the relevance of Western social work as a professional model of practice with universal application. It is part of the profession's continuing struggle with diversity, specifically its inability to work effectively with people from non-western cultures. Calls for 'indigenization' originated – and continue to arise – as a result of the growing realization of the limitations of Western models of research, education and practice (Gray et al., 2008). It has spawned 'a deepening sensitivity to the rich potential that exists in local customs and behaviours peculiarly driven by indigenous traditions' (Adair, 1999, p. 405). A current understanding of 'indigenization' holds that social work knowledge should arise from within the culture, reflect local behaviours and practices, be interpreted

within a local frame of reference, and thus be locally relevant, i.e., it should address culturally relevant and context-specific problems. It calls for indigenous research that emanates from, adequately represents and reflects back upon the cultural context in which problems arise. Thus the development of indigenous knowledge is reflexive and requires that researchers – and social workers – integrate their reflections on local cultures, society and history into their work (see Yang, 2005)

Indigenous social work

Indigenous social work insists upon cultural relevance and culturally specific knowledges and practices, which may or may not be universal or even cross-indigenous (for example, Hart, 2002; Lynn, 2001). There are two streams of literature pertaining to indigenous social work, and both relate to contexts where there is a history of colonization. One arises in developing nations in Africa, Asia and South America and another in developed Western contexts, like the USA, Canada and Australia, where it is associated primarily with professional education and practice relating to aboriginal or First Nations Peoples. However, regardless of origin, an indigenous social work that results from indigenized knowledge development processes is not necessarily only a social work of and for aboriginals or First Nations people nor is it exclusive to developing countries (Gray et al., 2008). It refers to a form of social work which seeks effective culturally appropriate research, education and practice. It also refers to attempts to make dominant or mainstream, in developed Western contexts, models that are relevant to culturally diverse client populations. Family Group Conferencing, which originated in New Zealand, is an example of an Indigenous social work model that has enjoyed crosscultural application.

Internationalization

Juxtaposed against processes of 'indigenization' are attempts by social work to internationalize, i.e., to spread the discipline and profession to as many countries as possible around the world in the belief that social work is useful in solving personal and social problems wherever it is practised. Unlike globalization of trade which relates to the spread of global capitalism, with which it is often confused, *internationalization refers to increased interaction among people and cultures that focuses on mutual understanding and respect* (Yang, 2005). But, as Gray (2005) noted, internationalization is not without its problems for it often leads to, or opens doors to, universalization and adaptation. This often makes it more difficult to develop indigenous theory and practice, as Yang (2005) says, 'free from the tyranny of massive and totalising ideologies' (p. 66). Often, though, those who seek to internationalize, i.e., universalize, social work, fail to question its transportability across cultures and languages or its relevance to the contexts in which it is being transplanted (Yunong & Xiong, 2008). There is too the paradoxical question of how something that is imported can be indigenous, i.e., how a universal social work might simultaneously be culturally relevant (see Gray, 2005; Gray & Fook, 2004). Replicating social work – its theories, concepts, methods, standards of education and so on – does not chart new ground for the development of indigenous social work. It merely repeats forms of education and practice in new contexts or extends the reach of international social work. Thus indigenous social work is not just about making models of education and practice fit new contexts. It is about *the development of local, empirically-based knowledge about culturally appropriate solutions to particular contexts* (see Gray et al., 2008; Gray & Fook, 2004).

Indigenous social work is thus deliberately 'ethnocentric' as it seeks to highlight the unique culture and consequent plight of particular minority cultures and, in so doing, insists upon 'culturally sensitive' and culturally specific knowledges and practices. First Nations'

Indigenous Social Work has in many contexts, but especially in Canada, Australia and the USA, emerged to meet the needs of Indigenous minorities in an effort to overcome the aftermath and injustices of misguided efforts at assimilation, isolation and cultural displacement. It is thus not just an effort to find effective local personal and family interventions, it is also a political process that incorporates history and cultural priorities, seeks to redress colonization, and establish a mainstream model that is effective and relevant for particular populations. As a particular form of indigenized social work, its goal is to make the profession and discipline of social work relevant or applicable to the particular culture of the client.

One can easily see tensions emerging here between models that are exclusive and singularly dedicated to a particular culture, and an approach that seeks effectiveness and cultural relevance. Merely increasing the number of Indigenous case studies or the number of Indigenous social workers or scholarly contributions by them, or research on what is unique and different in Indigenous cultures, does not necessarily lead to Indigenous social work. A theorist or researcher who accepts the need for indigenous social work in terms of one of these models may research culturally unique traits, concepts or practices without regard to how commonly they occur, how widely they are accepted, how they integrate conceptually or how meaningful they are for contemporary research, education and practice (see Adair, 1999).

Ethnocentric approaches

The development of local knowledges and culturally relevant solutions has occurred in many diverse ways (see, e.g., Kim & Berry, 1993; Gray et al., 2008). In his review of the 'indigenization' of psychology, Adair (1999) identified two approaches or strategies to reflect

certain shared emphases in the way in which professions have proceeded toward the development of indigenous, i.e., culturally relevant, practice and knowledge.

Culture-based 'indigenization'

As already mentioned 'indigenization' can be so narrow in focus that it runs the risk of being ethnocentric in the extreme – one that excludes and includes. First Nations' Indigenous Social Work has this tendency as it flows from a long history of oppression where Indigenous Peoples have suffered greatly at the hands of oppressive colonial governments, losing their land, culture, language and livelihoods. First Nations' Indigenous Social Work is thus avowedly political and centres on achieving self-determination and sovereignty for Indigenous Peoples (Briskman, in Gray et al., 2008). This inward focus, based on the belief that only insiders truly understand indigenous experience, leads to approaches which attempt to understand indigenous experience from within the culture leading to linguistic (with a focus on language and meaning) and empirical (with a focus on cultural distinctiveness) approaches.

Discipline-based 'indigenization'

Some writers are calling for a broadening of these culture-based approaches to develop a new field of indigenous knowledge development through an applied, pragmatic approach, i.e., problem-oriented, qualitative, holistic and phenomenological research more consistent with Indigenous worldviews than western method-oriented science (Martin, 2002; Sinclair, 2004; Smith, 1999). This approach includes: (i) *applied* Indigenous research that focuses on local contexts and problems, i.e., problems of local, regional and national concern, (ii) *action* research that is oriented to the solution of concrete problems, and (iii) *pragmatic* approaches

that tailor methods to fit problems. It is more concerned with local and cultural relevance than with universal variables or principles.

What does it take then to increase the pool of indigenous scholarship?

Establishing a new field of knowledge development of indigenous social work in these developing contexts, however, also requires political decisions that encourage the development of indigenous research and scholarship. Such measures are observable in China, for example, where attempts are being made to devise an indigenized Chinese social work education and practice (see Cheng, 2008; Jia, 2008; Gray, 2005, 2008; Yuen-Tsang & Wang, 2002). This has involved the retraining of academics from other disciplines in Chinese universities to teach social work (see Yan & Tsang, 2008; Yuen-Tsang & Ku, 2008). While this method has its limitations, it heightens the possibility for the development of indigenized Chinese models of research and practice. The search for a Chinese social work identity is made ever-more difficult by internationalizing forces within social work, which have given rise to an intense debate on the 'indigenization' of social work in China (Cheng, 2008; Gray, 2008b; Hutchings & Taylor, 2007; Jia, 2008; Taylor & Hutchings, 2008; Yunong & Xiong, 2008). It may be that one way to accelerate indigenized social work is to restrict academic positions to nationals or locals, limit funding to research that addresses national and local problems and encourage the writing of national/local textbooks and teaching materials and the development of national/local scholarly journals which publish culturally relevant research.

To develop as an independent field requires both the political will to support national and local research and knowledge development, and evidence of the effectiveness of locally generated culturally relevant approaches. These are more likely to increase the cross-national fertilization of knowledge and research findings and to generate sound explanatory

knowledge of what works and why. Thus more than the descriptive case study approach currently evident in the Indigenous and indigenized social work literature is needed. The 'indigenization' process within this broadened understanding of the evolving discipline of indigenous social work would then not be merely about transfer, adaptation, authentization and so on. Rather, it would involve, as Adair (1999) points out, a number of scholars sensitive to local ideas and practices who include culturally relevant criteria in their research. Over time their work would form texts, and find their way into curricula and training programs that are no longer dependent on foreign trainers.

The limitations of ethnocentric approaches

Most academics and researchers are trained in Western research methods and they are forced to place 'a greater emphasis on "method-fit" rather than on a problem-centred approach to research' (Adair, 1999, p. 410) if they wish to establish their academic credentials and international standing. These Western-trained academics and researchers may no longer be sensitive to problems within their own culture and may themselves promote western-style social work (Yunong & Xiong, 2008). Thus it is important to develop models for culturally sensitive research within the researcher's native country if an indigenized research culture is to develop: 'As a rule it is the cutting-edge researchers who search for indigenous conceptualisation, and whose work promises to contribute to the advancement of the discipline, both at the national and … international levels' (Adair, 1999, p. 411). These researchers have assessed the deficiencies of their discipline as applied to their culture and perceptively devise and promote indigenous concepts and approaches. This process takes time but these pioneering efforts are leading to an indigenous social work movement in developing countries. But to truly embed culturally relevant knowledge and practice they

need to devise strategies for practitioners that promote the growth and development of culturally relevant, i.e., indigenized, social work.

Adair (1999) believes the indigenous researcher is seen as and becomes an agent of change and, by implication the research process itself is a form of social intervention aimed at change. Calls for 'indigenization' most frequently come from change-oriented researchers who are carving out the newly emerging field. As indigenous researchers evolve new methods and textbooks, research training in indigenous methodologies will begin to develop new graduates who will break new ground producing culturally relevant research. But this stage has not yet been reached.

Though he is writing about the 'indigenization' of social psychology in Canada, Adair's (1999) thoughts are equally pertinent to social work but not without problems. Kjellgren (2003) writing about the social sciences more generally and anthropology in particular, and Yang (2005) writing about the 'indigenization' of educational research, highlight the limitations of ethnocentrism arguing that while the goal of developing culturally appropriate research and practice is laudable, it can lead to a form of cultural nationalism that is insular, exclusionary, and can lead to an 'othering' of all things western.

If the goal is to promote a fruitful understanding of social reality, then research needs to embrace and study cultural differences and similarities providing empirical support for indigenous social work. The challenge to find a balance between dedication to a particular culture while being open to incorporate knowledge and practices that can be effective and culturally relevant is not easy. In particular, it requires that culture be understood as dynamic, complex and emerging, and while historical beliefs, values and practices are highly valued, culture is not seen as fixed and singular.

Problems with the core concept of culture

Calling into question the 'myth of cultural integration', Margaret Archer (1996) effectively overturned the idea of culture as 'clearly delimited, internally homogeneous and wonderfully stable over time … [such] that many social scientists now regard it as not only difficult to use or theoretically misleading but possibly even harmful' (Kjellgren, 2003, p. 150). Park (2006) makes similar comments about the use of the term 'culture' in social work, not least as a euphemism for race. Hence terms like Western or Indigenous, which imply a fixed unchanging cultural identity, have become increasingly questionable and untenable in the social sciences.

Indigenous research and practice is avowedly partisan, biased and political and has as its aim the unashamed correction of past imbalances and injustice (Briskman, 2008). It is, in the eyes of Indigenous scholars, justifiable standpointism and, according to Kjellgren (2003), it has not enhanced cross-cultural understanding. Rather it has intensified and deepened divisions between Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers. Like culture in anthropology, 'indigenization' has become a 'tool for making other' (Abu-Lughod, 1991, p. 139) as well as a 'tool for making native … we have a politicised self-nativisation and a tacit notion of "traditional" native scholars, with native in both cases being a concept tied to crude notions of authenticity and cultural essentialism' (Kjellgren, 2003, p. 152).

Against this backdrop, the 'indigenization' or Sinocization of the social sciences in China can be seen as a movement to 'construct scholarly descriptions and theories based on non-Western precepts and assumptions which would make the scholar's research more relevant to the local arena and less dependent on alien constructs that might possibly obstruct the understanding of Chinese society' (Kjellgren, 2003, p. 153). Thus through the 1950s and 1960s, Chinese scholarship unmasked tacit understanding of US scholarship as universal in nature but the conclusions reached could well have been made without the main framework

of Western scholarship. Rather than a reaction against things Western, Chinese scholarship reflected a sense of cultural displacement and a quest for cultural identity in an increasingly globalizing world. There were and remain tensions between valuing all things modern and retaining traditional customs and practices expressed in notions like 'while the stimulus might be Western, the response will definitely be Chinese!' (Gray, 2005, p. 237) This leaves notions of what is modern (or Western) and traditional (or Chinese) undefined and vague. Since many Chinese social science researchers and scholars have been educated in the West and Americanized there is a sense in which they have lost their unspecified 'Chineseness' (see Sin, 2008). Thus emerged *bentuhua* or indigenous studies, 'which expressed itself as a recovery of familiarity lost, and reflexive action based on the recognition that they themselves were part and parcel of this process' (Kjellgren, 2003, p. 154) of the loss of Indigeneity (see Paradies, 2006; Yan & Tsang, 2008). Thus, as Gray and Allegritti (2002, 2003) noted, 'indigenization' can be seen as a process of cultural reclamation. The problem is that much of the scholarship in the name of 'indigenization' or cultural reclamation tends to oversimplify the content of cultures, dichotomize differences, base part of the presentation on factual mistakes and explain away internal and external phenomena which do not fit the simplistic representation (Kjellgren, 2003). This 'one-sided overemphasis on cultural differences works to legitimise their profession and enhance[s] the need for their [culturally appropriate] services' (Kjellgren, 2003, p. 156). Certainly making culture part of research and practice considerations is a worthwhile antidote to culture-blind research or unfounded assumptions of universality but:

> danger lurks when culture gets pronounced the "master category" of social science [research and overlooks] … more important differences related to class and gender … To build a research platform based on the notion of culture may be a legitimate project but it also has the potential of becoming or supporting modes of nationalism

historically related to the suppression of national minorities, be these based on culture, colour, religion, sexual preference, or other criteria (Kjellgren, 2003, p. 157).

The other in the process of 'indigenization' has always been the West and clearly 'indigenization' in developing contexts or *bentuhua* in China is hardly a global concern: 'Except for some non-western scholars working in the West, American and European scholars are not concerned with the problem of *bentuhua* in the way Chinese scholars have to be when applying Western paradigms to their own societies' (Kjellgren, 2003, p. 160). 'Indigenization' and internationalization, then, are complementary rather than mutually exclusive. They are two sides of the same coin that reflect the way in which Indigenous scholars are trying to devise their own brand of internally recognized social work. Research needs to embrace the political device of 'indigenization' as a starting point for evaluation alongside the much-loathed cultural hegemony of the West in the 'indigenization' discourse and, as Adair (1999) notes, find empirical grounding for cultural similarities and differences.

'Indigenization' as a naturally occurring process

Writing about the 'indigenization' of the city of Colombo, Perera (2002) traces its transformation 'from an exclusive domain of colonial power to a Sri Lankan milieu which supported Ceylonese social and cultural practices' (p. 1703). Perera's interesting study reminds us that 'indigenization' is not always conscious or planned but happens through the interactions between foreigners and locals characterized simultaneously by assimilation and resistance. Perera (2002) provides a study of 'indigenization' as a two-way process simultaneously westernizing subjects and indigenizing social and cultural structures and practices (see Midgley, 2008; Nimmagadda & Martel, 2008 for social work examples of this). We hesitate to generalize as Perera minimizes the difficulties and oppression that colonization created for Indigenous groups, and overstates their capability to assimilate. But

there is no doubt that 'indigenization' is a response to the oppression of colonialism. The response can lead to assimilation and a give and take as two cultures intersect. Thus, he says, 'these processes are neither separate nor direct opposites—indigenisation does not begin where colonisation ends' (Perera, 2002, p. 1706).

In Perera's study locals learned, over time, to familiarize themselves with, adapt to and assimilate colonial ways eventually finding their way into the colonial political, social and economic power structures. Thus to truly understand 'indigenization' we need to shift 'the vantage-point of inquiry from physical and intellectual stand-points to an indigenous realm that provides for agency' (Perera, 2002, p. 1707). Foucault referred to such agency as micropractices – small acts of resistance or defiance. 'Indigenization' then can be understood – as it is in postcolonial studies – as a process of decentring colonial discourse and power structures through tactics that can be resistant or more confrontational. The response depends upon many factors including culture and the degree of political and military repression. Perera (2002) argues that 'indigenization' was "not a goal of any struggle, like national independence, but a combined effect of a variety of local responses to colonialism' (p. 1708). But such assimilation, or more correctly absorption, is not a viable option as it is a disguised and continued disempowerment. The challenge is to create and support indigenized social work to become dominant – just as feminism and structuralism have done, and as spirituality and ecology are in the process of doing. While it may take years, mainstream social work has benefitted from these movements – becoming more capable of addressing the complex of contingencies that modern practice involves. 'Indigenization' can be seen as a movement to ensure a place for indigenous social work, i.e., culturally-relevant practices in mainstream thinking and practice models – such efforts may force open (finally) the lock which western social work worldviews have held on social work practice, and create a profession that is

truly capable of 'holistic practice, and of effective, culturally relevant services' (Gray et al., 2008).

Conclusion

'Indigenization' in the social work literature has been viewed from the perspective of practice and has referred largely to an adaptation process wherein imported Western, mainly US, models of social work are made to fit developing non-western contexts. In this paper we have attempted to extend the discourse on 'indigenization' by examining the possibility that a new area of knowledge development 'Indigenous social work' might be evolving and we have briefly explored what might be involved if it were to stand on its own by developing its own unique knowledge base in which increasing numbers of practitioners and researchers pursued culturally and locally relevant practice and problem-oriented research. We have highlighted some limitations of the ethnocentric approaches employed in indigenous knowledge development revolving around problems with the core concept of culture. Using knowledge development in China as an example, we have proposed that social work scholars tend to overlook 'indigenization' as a naturally occurring two-way process. The development of a culturally relevant and truly indigenized social work, need not necessarily lead to a loss of culture, and can advance the development of effective social work interventions and of a profession more capable of responding appropriately to the cultural diversity of modern multicultural societies.

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