



Practicing subversive social work from the standpoint of the ecological theory and social learning theory: A tool for academic learning

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ABSTRACT

Application of theories in social work practice is not new. The profession of social work is a helping one. Subversion on the other hand attempts to transform the established social order and its structures of power, authority and hierarchy. It is the process by which the values and principles of a system in place are contradicted or reversed. So, what is obtainable as social work in the Western world is adjusted in an attempt to indigenize social work in Nigeria. This article reports on an exploratory study of ecological theory and social learning theory in practicing subversive social work. The study found that ecological theory enables the social worker understand the culture while social learning theory helps in understanding the behavioural and adjustment patterns of clients through modeling and imitation. This study recommends that the curriculum of social work has room for subversion and indigenization and also, lenses should be put on core social work theories that promote the core values, principles, methods and roles of social workers.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Application of theories in social work practice is not new. The profession of social work is a helping one. As a helping profession, the primary mission of social work is to help clients meet their needs and enhance their well-being (Gentle-Genitty, Chen, Karikari, & Barnett, 2014). Social workers are “concerned with the interaction between people and their social environment which affects the ability of people to accomplish their life tasks, alleviate distress, and realize their aspiration and values” (Pincus & Minahan, 1973). The practice whether nationally or internationally is hinged on her core values of service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity and competence. Arguably, what is seen as social work in Nigeria differs from what is obtainable in developed countries.

Practicing social work in Nigeria can be tiring and cumbersome as most often the universally accepted values and ethical principles tend to affect what social work should be. According to EDUCALINGO (n.d), subversion attempts to transform the established social order and its structures of power, authority and hierarchy. It is the process by which the values and principles of a system in place are contradicted or reversed. So, what is obtainable as social work in the Western world is adjusted in an attempt to indigenize social work in Nigeria. Subversive social work sees the need of adjusting most social work values and principles to fit the Nigeria system so as to offer the required help needed by clients. Social workers advocate and lobby for clients through promoting a better understanding and acceptance of diversity within cultures. Subversion offers one way in which social workers can practice ethically and in line with their values (Laing & Christopher, 2018). Social workers take the lead in identifying unmet needs of clients. They offer the chance to work with and for people of all kinds: rich or poor, young or old, in hospitals, at home, or at work. Social workers render services to the children, families, elderly, persons with disabilities, persons with needs of health and mental health care, youth, delinquents and schools (Ayangunna, 2010; Okoye, 2013). To carry-out these services subversion must be considered. This type of practice in Nigeria helps social workers practice effectively and efficiently through ensuring that the cultural practices, norms and behavioural patterns of the clients are considered before offering the required service (Ugiagbe, 2014).

In developing countries, government and other bodies charged with the responsibility of offering help and support of client are non-cooperative. So even if social workers apply subversion in practice, they may have issues with efficient and effective practice since they may lack the required financial support and attention needed to practice. However, (Shardlow and Hämäläinen (2015) have reported that practical social work across the world is being implemented on the bases of country specific traditions. The objective of this study is to investigate subversive social work practice from the ecological theory and the social learning theory stand-point.

Relating theories to social work practice, Nigerian social work practice dates back to the colonial era. Historically, kinship system in the traditional Nigerian society provided for family welfare, child welfare, health, mental health and care for the aged, informal education, social planning and development (Ayangunna, 2010). The social welfare and needs of the community depended on the extended family. They met and dealt with problematic behaviours that the community regarded as deviant (Ayangunna, 2010).

Simon (1994) insists that it is crucial for social work practitioners to learn theoretical knowledge because theory can serve as an anchoring frame and a conceptual screen for case assessment, causal explanation, intervention planning, and outcome evaluation. Theories are sets of interrelated concepts and constructs that provide a framework for understanding how and why something does or does not work. Theory is a set of correlated concepts, hypotheses, and constructs grounded in observations, as well as facts, which aim to explain a particular phenomenon (Barker, 1999). Theories give meaning and understanding to phenomenon. They explain a problem and proffer possible solutions to those problems. Social workers are problem solvers hence; they cannot practice effectively if they are deficient in the knowledge of theories and their application. Social workers use broad range of theories from other disciplines and professions in practice (Gentle-Genitty, Chen, Karikari & Barnett, 2014; Yu, 2018). Theories help social workers explain why people behave as they do, better understand how the environment affects behavior, guide interventions and to predict what is likely to be the result of a particular social work intervention (Greene (2008).

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed an explorative design in investigating the ecological theory and social learning theory for subversive social work practices. The information and data used for this study were gathered from online materials.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

3.1 Procedure

Google search engine was employed in putting themes related to the current study. Various articles were assessed and those with relevant information needed for this study were utilized by the researchers. Phrases such as subversion and social work, subverting in social work practice, social learning theory and social work, ecological theory and subversion.

3.2 Ecological theory and subversive social work practice

Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979) developed the ecological theory to understand the reciprocal relationships between individuals and the multiple environments in which they live. Social workers use this theory to study the history and culture of human groups and societies to explain their success, failure, or adaptation (Marten, 2001).

Ecological theory stresses the reliance of organism and environment. In social work practice, we ensure that the person-and-environment concept is not overlooked. This helps the profession enact its social purpose of helping people and promoting responsive environments that support human growth, health, and satisfaction in social functioning (Gitterman & Germain, 2008). (Ashford and LeCroy, 2010). assessed that the ecological theory enables social workers have a whole picture of systems and member functioning; it helps in finding out effective ways to develop reciprocal transactions and relations between clients and their environments. Social workers recognize that people interact with an environment that may provide both opportunities and barriers to their individual development and goal achievement. Most persons are of the opinion that the environment is first encountered in interactions with families, particularly parents who first meet basic needs as children are growing and developing. But other systems, external to families, support families and enhance their abilities to carry out their nurturing, educating, and socializing functions.

The ecological approach "provides a balance between the person and the environment. Clearly, this balance is critical to social work treatment and facilitates practice effectiveness and accountability" (Pardeck, 1988). Ecological theory provides a framework for a "life-model" practice which incorporates an understanding of the experiences of each individual within their historical, societal, and cultural contexts. This life model provides social workers with an insight into assessment and intervention, with respect to individual's difficulty in life transitions, traumatic events, environmental pressures, and dysfunctional interpersonal processes (TRIPOD, n.d). This model, highly representative of an ecological approach, primarily focuses on the person-environment fit. This theory enables social workers discuss on the differences between traditional and current cultural perspectives within a safe, accepting environment. Through Subversion, social workers form multi-cultural family groups where beliefs, values, and perspectives are shared between cultures as well as between varied age groups in helping to eliminate conflicts of opinion within family units. For instance, younger family members may be more accepting of a new culture which may conflict with elder family member's traditions (TRIPOD, n.d).

3.3 Social learning theory and subversive social work practice

In 1977 Albert Bandura expounded the social learning theory. He was of the view that conditioning alone could not account for all behaviors. The foundation of social learning theory holds that people learn from observing others. Thus, social workers who have this understanding about their clients through the social learning theory can better utilize practice models to handle behavioral conflicts no matter the setting or level of practice. It is noteworthy here that, social workers in all fields of practice encounter obstacles and challenges that come with trying to understand human behavior before rendering the desired help (Tropeano, 2015). The social learning theory explains to the social workers that human behavior is learned through modeling, observation and imitation (Bandura, 1977; Tropeano, 2015). According to the theory, the learning process involves observing and experiencing new behaviors that are reinforced through other people or models. The understanding of this theory will help the social worker utilize the use-of-self skill in proffering needed solutions. In

the end, new behaviors are either continued or stopped depending on how those behaviors are reinforced internally and externally within a social environment (Tropeano, 2015). Social learning theory emphasizes that behavior is also influenced by mental states, like motivation or thoughts. Thus for subversive social work practice to be effective social workers must be knowledgeable of the role social learning theory plays in professional practice.

3.4 Discussion of findings

Theories are necessary for better understanding of a phenomenon and the preferring of solutions that a given problem. Our study of subversion of social work practice from the view of the ecological theory and social learning theory revealed some key findings below:

The use of ecological theory by social workers makes it possible for professionals to study the history and culture of human groups and societies to explain their success, failure, or adaptation. When social workers consciously study these aspects of man it makes it possible for them to render the required services needed by clients through adjusting the practicum of social work to fit the cultural norms, values and belief of the client. Arguably, this finding is in congruent with that of Smith, Domenech-Rodríguez and Bernal (2010). According to them culturally adapted treatments employed on clients have greater impacts than standard treatments; they produce better outcomes, and are most successful (Smith, Domenech Rodríguez, & Bernal, 2010).

Again, from the social learning theory, our finding showed that people learn from observing, modeling and imitation; a social work with this understanding will employ the use-of-self skills in proffering needed solutions. Subversive social work here means that social workers will learn the belief and behavioural pattern of the clients while adjusting the values and principles that guide the practice of social work. Congruently, Ray (2012) revealed that the social learning theory when properly utilized adjust the behavioural pattern of people since they learn by imitation. Through these social skills their interactions and behaviour is successfully regulated.

3.5 Benefits of ecological theory and social learning theory to subversive social work practice

From the words of (Chenweth and McAuliffe, 2012), “the Social work profession is lead by theories from social sciences, indigenous and humanities knowledge, which comes with a respect for human rights and diversity and is often thought of as a moral endeavour”.

- a. these theories equip the social worker with the right tool to practice effectively and efficiently
- b. it instills confidence for the social work since they help in explaining the problems faced by clients
- c. these theories points to the profession of social work the need to upgrade her curriculum especially the Nigeria social work curriculum

4. CONCLUSION

No theory can single-handedly define a phenomenon, whilst subversion is known as indigenization in Nigeria, there is need to consider its importance in proffering the required services needed by clients. We acknowledge that ecological theory and social learning theory are vital tools to ensuring that the profession of social work doesn't lose out of its purpose. Thus deep understanding of theories in social work guides practice. Therefore, we recommend that the curriculum of social work has room for subversion and indigenization. Also, lenses should be put on core social work theories that promote the core values, principles, methods and roles of social workers.

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