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Mathebane M.S., Sekudu J. (2018). *A Contrapuntal Epistemology for Social Work: An Afrocentric Perspective*. "International Social Work", 61(6): 1154–1168

Purpose and structure of the article

The authors of the article, Mbazima Simeon Mathebane and Johanna Sekudu, criticise international social work in which they claim it reinforces western hegemony. The first part of the purpose of the article is the idea of putting greater emphasis and focus on decolonisation and indigenization within international social work, in order to revitalise the vast indigenous ways of knowing which were destroyed through centuries of imperialism and colonialism. The second part of the purpose of the article is to shed light on some issues that could add value to the debate about the exploration of a universalist approach in international social work, in order to contribute towards an international social work that is inclusive. Therefore, developing a different episteme regarding social work in non-western contexts is also part of the objective, in which the African view will be the centre. In doing so, the authors call for a focus on culture as a primary determinant of how people deal with social problems. This new episteme could solve the riddle of international social work, as it is not clear how globalized and local ideas interact in the sphere of international social work. Thus, Mathebane and Sekudu did not intend to harmonise existing and independent perspectives.

The authors stress the importance of studying this subject, as the importance lies in the fact that we live in a heterogeneous world, but the spread of knowledge production has not been as heterogeneous as the variety of different peoples, cultures and therefore different ways of knowing present in this world. As already mentioned above, this is a result of the history and the forces of colonialism, imperialism, modernism, and globalisation. On the one hand, this gave force to (the spread of) a Eurocentric and "Western" body of knowledge and on the other hand, silenced other bodies of knowledge in the "non-western" parts of the world. It is crucial to return the voices that were once silenced. As knowledge colors the lens through which we see the reality, and, on top of

that, is used in practice, it is of great importance to realize that this leads to a specific way of doing in social work. This way of doing is often seen and stated as being universal, though that is not the case. Thus, it is not applicable to every context and experience as it is based on “Western” knowledge, which is particular for the specific “western” context and societies. This makes it essential to think twice when it comes to the knowledge base of social work, as it influences the practice, which consequently influences the people who are involved with social work.

Now, a few words about the structure of the article will be said. The introduction incorporates an overview of the relevant and existing literature surrounding the topic of the paper, where different voices and views are being heard. This overview is given in a logical way, as they are not just name-dropping, which is a positive point. When we look with a more critical eye to the introduction, we can see how it starts off with a key idea that is important for the topic of the article. However, after this, the authors directly jump to the clarification of the key concepts. This is confusing for the readers as they are not yet informed about the focus of the article. Furthermore, they continue their reasoning that started with this key idea given in the beginning of the introduction, but once again, they interrupt this by clarifying other key concepts. On the one hand, it is positive that the authors make space to examine the key concepts. However, on the other hand they could have placed it somewhere else in the paper, because this disturbs the logical understanding of the text by the reader, although the intention of the authors was definitely to obtain the opposite result. If they had not interrupted their reasoning by explaining the key concepts, it would have been easier to follow the writing of the introduction, which forms the starting point of the rest of the article.

Furthermore, the introduction seems different when compared with other introductions of research papers, as they are not just making a structured overview of the existing literature surrounding their topic, which would normally lead clearly to the research question or main problem of the article. Instead, the authors quite quickly shift the focus on how their reasoning will develop through the rest of the article, which is normally written in the body of an article. Furthermore, regarding the body of the article, the various sections of which it consists ensure a good structure. Here, you can find discussions on different aspects that were already briefly pointed out in the introduction. Thus, to conclude, the introduction could have been constructed in a more logical manner, but the rest of the paper serves as a coherent and structured body. The reasoning is well explained to the readers, which made it easy to follow. However, there are a few barriers to be found in the text that will be discussed in the next section.

The writing of the authors

In general, the writing is pretty clear, although sometimes the sentences are quite long, which makes it frequently difficult to understand what they are trying to say. This is especially complicated because of the topic of the paper, which altogether is challenging

to understand sometimes. To make it easier to read, it may be better to split long sentences and make two out of them. I also think that some ideas could be put more straightforwardly with less ambiguous words. An example of such a long sentence goes as follows:

The iniquitous criticism of indigenisation carries in itself a blindingly obvious contradiction in that it uses the self-imposed supremacy of Western paradigms to define and validate knowledge as well as to set universalised standards and norms against which any knowledge is authenticated, while ignoring significant contextual realities that produce and shape knowledge (Mathebane, Sekudu 2018: 1155).

In addition to the long sentences that are frequently used, I have encountered some grammatical and spelling mistakes. In the next example, you can see how a clause is wrongly connected to the main sentence:

The perspectives put forward vary and range from those that argue that what is touted as ‘universal social work’ is in fact ‘Western social work’ (Askeland, Payne 2006; Brydon 2011; Midgley 1981, 2001; Yip 2006) **and others even arguing** that it is illusive **as there is no such a thing as** international social work (Ife, 2000) (Mathebane, Sekudu 2018: 1158).

Instead of “and others even arguing that”, it should be “and others even argue that” to make this sentence grammatically correct. At the same time, you can see another mistake in this sentence, namely “there is no such a thing as...” should be “there is no such thing as...”.

Another example shows another long sentence with two mistakes that consequently made it difficult to understand the meaning. In the following citation, words are added between brackets and not in italics to suggest how the sentence can be changed to become grammatically correct:

As a form of African subjectivity, Africanity is combative towards the Eurocentric ways of thinking and writing (on)African subjectivity, and it should not be mistaken as either a reactive or corrective discourse, but (as) the affirmation of African subjectivity where African subjects are writing from their own existential conditions (Sithole 2016) (Mathebane, Sekudu 2018: 1162).

Another aspect to look at concerning the writing of the authors is the inclusion of the key concepts. When looking at these key concepts, we can see them well explained in detail in the introduction of the article, as already mentioned above. It is remarkable, though, that they do not explain all the key concepts at the same time in the Introduction, but instead they are spread throughout the paper. An example of such a concept is ‘contrapuntal epistemology’, which is at the core of this article, as it is even part of the title. However, this concept is only tackled for the first time in the second section of the article. This made it difficult to understand the meaning of this concept when it was used in the sections before the authors had given the explanation.

Moreover, I can imagine that for people who are completely new with the subject, which is connected with complex concepts as knowledge production, colonialism, eurocentrism, it might be challenging to understand everything that has been coined in the research paper of Mathebane and Sekudu. The authors sometimes use jargon that is not explained because they may expect the readers to have a certain basic knowledge about the subject. It will not be a problem for people who have the basic knowledge and vocabulary needed to fully comprehend what has been written, but it might be a difficulty for people who are not completely familiar with the jargon used. As the writer of this review, I need to note that I am not new with the subject, therefore, this may have an influence on my perspective on this article. To conclude, if the authors also want to reach people with little background knowledge, it might be a suggestion to communicate their writing in a simpler way.

Evaluation to the editor

The content of this research paper, written by Mathebane and Sekudu, is clear and motivated by many arguments and a variety of resources. The focus of the content is quite sharp, and they add a refreshing, non-mainstream view on the state of (international) social work. However, at the same time this article consists of a collection of different articles from the present scientific literature, so in this manner the authors are not adding any new empirical data. On the other hand, they did something new by making a certain point and sending a new message with the collected resources. In addition, when talking about the writing style of the authors, several suggestions and advice were given throughout this review, which I will repeat shortly. First, the introduction could be reconstructed in such a way that the development of the research question or problem is more logic and clear for the reader. Second, some sentences could be written and communicated in a more straightforward and understandable way. Third, some grammatical and spelling mistakes could be avoided by checking and re-reading the text. In these aspects, the paper could thus be revised. To make a final conclusion, this is definitely a current and crucial topic to research on. The focus of the content is clear, although, to make it even better, the suggestions written above could be taken into account to improve this scientific paper.