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Social Work in Ghana: Engaging Traditional Actors in Professional Practices

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Acknowledgements

Abstract

In contemporary Ghana, the traditional system and professional social work operate as two parallel systems within the field of social work. The aim of this study was to investigate if and how the teaching of contemporary professional social work in Ghana takes into account traditional actors and practices. The traditional system includes extended family members and traditional authorities such as chiefs or family heads. It formed the social institution that protected and cared for the vulnerable before (Western) social work was introduced as a formal profession in Ghana. A 10-week ethnographic field study was conducted at the Department of Social Work at the University of Ghana. The study employed a qualitative, social constructionist approach, interpreting the results within a theoretical framework of social world theory. The empirical material consisted of interviews with students and teachers, participant observation at lectures, and various documents. The main findings of the study were that professional social workers and traditional actors can be seen as members of two subworlds – the subworld of professional social workers and the subworld of traditional actors. Students and teachers discuss interventions from the perspective of social workers *and* traditional actors. Their ability to take different perspectives seems to be crucial for localisation – the process by which social work is made relevant to local culture and traditions. The interviewees' accounts reveal how localisation is not only about culture, but also about social structures and practical considerations. The poor state of the social work profession in Ghana affects interventions in a profound way.

Keywords: Ghana, localisation, the traditional system, the extended family system, international social work, social work education.

Introduction

Because of the introduction of Western social work and welfare models that followed colonialism, social work in Ghana is often described as two parallel systems: Western-influenced social work and the traditional African system (Apt & Blavo, 1997; Asamoah, 1997; Midgley, 1981). Traditional actors and professional social workers do a similar type of work in dealing with social issues. What does this mean for social work? How do social workers handle the parallel systems? The aim of this study is to investigate if and how the teaching of professional social work in Ghana takes into account traditional actors and their practices.

Professional social work emerged in the Western world alongside the industrialisation of the 19th century. Before social work was established as a formal profession, all cultures had their own ways of handling social issues and protecting and caring for the vulnerable in society (Kreitzer et al., 2009; Midgley, 1981). In pre-colonial Ghana, social issues were matters for the traditional system, a social institution of extended family members and traditional authorities. The traditional system, based on kinship, was the foundation of social life. A person's position in the kinship determined tasks, obligations and authority. The traditional system is often described as a single system that guided political, judicial, social and religious functions in society, as well as norms, values and the safeguarding of these (Evans-Pritchard & Fortes, 1940; Goody, 1957; Nukunya, 2003; Radcliffe-Brown, 1940). The system had several levels of authority: division, town, village, lineage, compound and household, each governed by its traditional leader. The chief was the highest authority, and his duties and rights covered all aspects of the society. He functioned as executive

head, legislator, judge, supreme ritual head and chief priest, and if needed, a case could move all the way from the household to the chief (Nukunya, 2003: 68; Radcliffe-Brown, 1940: xxi). The extended family is usually defined as a large number of relatives with far-reaching reciprocal duties, obligations and responsibilities. Members of extended families were strongly bound to each other, and the extended family assisted its members in need as well as rendering emotional, moral, financial and material support (Apt & Blavo, 1997: 320; Kreitzer et al., 2009: 146; Nukunya, 2003: 17, 68). The literature, in addition to my informants, mostly refers to members of the traditional system by their respective title such as chief or family head. For stylistic reasons, I instead refer to them as *traditional actors* – as a collective. Traditional practices refer to activities carried out by traditional actors when they handle social issues.

With the advent of the new social order that colonialism brought to Africa in the 19th and 20th centuries, the traditional system was weakened. With industrialisation and urbanisation, social values changed and extended families and community members were dispersed (Apt & Blavo, 1997: 320f; Kreitzer et al., 2009: 146). The colonial powers' introduction of the British welfare system with formal institutions, classroom education, a currency-based economy and Christianity contributed to extensive alterations in the social system and order. With formal institutions such as the government and courts of law, the chiefs lost their power as government and judge. Christianity, which sometimes conflicted with traditional rites and customs, led to people's turning away from their traditional beliefs. New social problems began to emerge, as people were no longer guided by traditional roles and norms and did not have to fear sanctioning from the traditional authorities (Nukunya, 2003: 113-116).

Instead of strengthening the traditional support system, the colonial powers introduced Western social work to help solve the problems that colonialism had caused. Although there is no single unifying Western – or African – social work theory or practice, Western social work, in contrast to most African social work, is often described as having an individualist approach, a psychoanalytic heritage and case work as a major part of practice (Leighninger & Midgley, 1997: 11; Rowlings, 1997: 114). At the time, Western social work was believed to be universal and applicable all over the world. Ghanaian social workers were sent for training in the UK, and later returned to work at welfare institutions in Ghana, upholding Western structures and ideas that the colonial powers had introduced. This started the Western dominance in Ghanaian social work. In the 1940s, a school of social work was established in Ghana, with the objective of training social workers in Ghana rather than in the UK. As the national training expanded, social work became an academic discipline (Asamoah, 1997; Apt & Blavo, 1997: 320-328; Kreitzer et al., 2009: 146; Midgley, 1981: 63; Osei-Hwedie, 1993). Nevertheless, Western hegemony persisted in Ghanaian social work education, and still prevails. Classes use Western literature, and Western knowledge is often regarded as superior (Kreitzer et al., 2009: 154). The traditional system and traditional Ghanaian ways of handling social problems are not prominent in the university curriculum. Today, the traditional system is, however, still a vivid part of Ghanaian society. Despite welfare institutions and the fact that social work exists as a formal profession, traditional actors render services that professionals mainly perform in Western societies. The extended family plays an important role when it comes to caring for and protecting the vulnerable, and chiefs continue to wield political influence and guard traditional culture and customary laws (Nukunya, 2003: 161f, 178).

Localisation

The coexistence of the Western and African systems that followed colonialism has been the focus of various disciplines such as anthropology, medical anthropology, social work, ethnic studies and sociology (e.g. Anyiam, 1987; Camaroff & Camaroff, 1993; Evans-Pritchard &

Fortes, 1940; Goody, 1957, 1977; Radcliff-Brown, 1940; Twumasi, 1979). Early research on social work and the coexistence of Western and African systems centres on critique and the problematic aspects of applying Western practices in Africa (Asamoah, 1997; Apt & Blavo, 1997; Midgley, 1981; Osei-Hwedie, 1993). As the mapping of the difficulties involved in applying Western values or methods in Africa and other countries in the Global South[1] extended, scholars also began to request studies of how localisation and culturally appropriate social work is conducted. Localisation refers to the process whereby social work is adapted and made relevant to the social realities of a local context (Bradshaw & Graham, 2007: 93). Because cultural, social, political and religious contexts affect the definition of social problems and their solutions, modifications must take place during the transfer of social work across cultures (Walton & Abo-El-Nasr, 1988: 135f).[2]

Despite limited research on how African social workers localise practice, studies from other countries in the Global South elaborate on the phenomenon. Nimmagadda and Cowger's (1999) study of Indian social workers shows that local motives direct practice, even when they conflict with (Western) social work values.[3] For example, Indian social workers give advice because they consider it culturally appropriate and because "it works" (ibid 1999: 268), even though advice-giving may conflict with the social work value of self-determination. A study by Al-Krenawi and Graham (2001) reveals how social workers in Israel request help from cultural mediators to develop localised interventions. Cultural mediators have knowledge about how norms, values and practices differ between social workers and community members. In her study at the University of Ghana, Kreitzer (2004) examined the roles of Ghanaian social workers and Queenmothers – traditional leaders engaged primarily in the welfare of women and children – pointing out similarities in the work they do. Kreitzer states that social workers and Queenmothers need each other to enhance and develop their respective work and that collaboration between the two is important for the localisation of social work in Ghana. According to Bradshaw and Graham (2007: 102f), many existing studies on localisation argue that social workers can learn from traditional systems and that it is important for researchers to examine how extended families and traditional authorities can contribute to developing social work practice.

This study aims to fill an existing void in research on localisation and social work in Africa, as little research has focused on localisation processes in everyday work. Furthermore, no research has examined how professional social workers consider traditional actors and practices in social work interventions. This study may interest not only African social workers, but the Nordic audience as well. Looking at Ghana and how traditional actors and practices are considered in professional work may inspire Nordic social workers to develop new interpretations of social work, in addition to acknowledging ways of handling social problems beyond those our formal welfare institutions currently provide.

Method and materials

This study incorporates an investigation from a perspective of social work education. During the spring term of 2010, I conducted a 10-week ethnographic field study – including participant observations and interviews – at the Department of Social Work at the University of Ghana. Since 1956, social work courses have been offered at the University of Ghana (Apt & Blavo, 1997: 328; Midgley, 1981: 63). The Department of Social Work currently

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[1] "Global South" refers to the poorer countries in the Southern hemisphere, often former Western colonies (Askeland & Payne, 2008).

[2] The concept of indigenisation is often used interchangeably with localisation. I do not use the concept of indigenisation because a coherent definition is lacking (cf. Bradshaw & Graham, 2007: 93).

[3] Because of its colonial heritage, Indian social work is Western influenced (Nimmagadda & Cowger, 1999).

offers a four-year bachelor's programme in social work, established in 1987, and a master's programme, established in 2003. During my fieldwork, the department had 12 staff members and approximately 800 students.

By focusing on education instead of practice, this study is not limited to a specific facet of social work (e.g. children or the disabled) or to a specific type of organization (e.g. governmental, NGOs). Data gathered from education shows what is "up-and-coming" in the social work field; moreover, it reveals social work perspectives of values, notions and "truths". Because the aim of the study was to investigate how the traditional system is taken into account in social work, the research material primarily includes interviews with social work students, as well as with teachers in the department. It also includes participant observations during 15 lectures, field notes from my everyday life on campus and various documents such as course outlines, information sheets, laws and acts.

I interviewed five female students and five male students attending the last semester of the bachelor's programme in social work. To identify potential informants, I made a public announcement during a class of about 200 students and asked for their cooperation in the study. Four students registered for interviews that same day, four called me later and two were found through snowball sampling.[4] I combined "ordinary" interview questions with a vignette I had designed – a short case describing a course of events that is often used to study assessments and decision-making (Jergeby, 2007: 9f). The knowledge I gained during participant observations was essential for determining what information to include in the vignette.[5] To assess whether I interpreted the cultural context appropriately, I let my field supervisor, a teacher at the Department of Social Work, comment on the vignette before the interviews. I used the vignette as a "trigger" to start a discussion and encourage the informants to reflect on their work.

I also conducted semi-structured follow-up interviews with five students who seemed interested in the topic and were willing to do another interview. These interviews did not include the vignette. I also interviewed four teachers from the department.[6] These interviews were semi-structured and did not include the vignette; I had 30 minutes with each teacher, which did not allow enough time to use the vignette. To set up the interviews, I visited the teachers in their offices and asked for their cooperation.

I selected the vignette method because I was interested in studying social work perspectives, or constructions, rather than actual practice. According to Schütz (1967), accounts are first-order constructions that show what informants take for granted in their world and what they use to function in it: values, "truths" and local theories. Second-order constructions build on first-order constructions and are abstracted from the empirical findings by the researcher (Aspers, 2007: 42-44; Schütz, 1967). When developing second-order constructions, I started the analytical process in an inductive way inspired by Qualitative

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[4] Five of the students participating in the study were born in rural settings and five in urban settings. Four were aged 30 years or older. They were all raised in Ghana, and they belonged to seven various tribes – groups of people with the same language and culture (Nukunya, 2003: 211).

[5] The greater part of the quotes in this analysis is connected to the vignette used during the interviews. The vignette is about a husband, Kofi, and wife, Joan, and problems regarding domestic violence and child rearing/child abuse. One day, Kofi hits his daughter so hard that her arm breaks. Joan wants a divorce and to report Kofi to the police, but Kofi tells her not to contact the police and that Kofi's family and community will help them instead. In the vignette, Joan turns to a social worker for help, and the social worker has to make a decision about whether to help Kofi and Joan settle the problem within the family/community or whether to turn to the formal authorities.

[6] Teachers who participated in the study had a BA in social work or a similar subject, and the lowest degree was a MPhil or Master's. Some earned their degrees in Ghana, while others did so abroad.

Content Analysis (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Graneheim & Lundman, 2003). I then moved to a more abductive analytic process in which empirical findings and theoretical frameworks are applied dialectically (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2008: 54-65), in this case being repeatedly reinterpreted without losing the original words of the interviewees. The final presentation of the analysis does not explicitly include field notes and documents. Instead, I used them to validate and contextualise data obtained from the interviews.

Theoretical approach

Studying accounts as constructions, or perspectives, does not exclude that accounts can say something about the phenomenon they reference (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995: 124ff). The interviewees' accounts are just one source of information among others, and provide (subjective) knowledge about the social work field, its actors, activities and organisation. The fact that the social work students and teachers in the study construct images of both themselves and traditional actors has implications for the analysis because perspective determines how a phenomenon is interpreted (Shibutani, 1955: 564f). Social workers are described from an *inside* perspective, whereas traditional actors are described from an *outside* perspective. Furthermore, the interviewees have the opportunity to define both themselves and traditional actors. That they asked to participate may indicate that they wanted to affect the results of the study, although it is hard to say in what way.

The idea that actors interpret situations and phenomena differently depending on their perspective is central to Strauss's social world theory, which emanates from symbolic interactionism. The analysis is based on social world theory and Shibutani's interactionist theory on social worlds and reference groups as perspective. According to Shibutani (1955: 564f) and Strauss (1978: 237, 1993: 41, 212), a group of people who share the same perspective share membership in a *social world* or *subworld*. Subworlds are created as social worlds *segment* into smaller units, and they have their own specific perspective (Strauss, 1978: 236). *Perspective* is the person's outlook on the world through which phenomena are interpreted and attributed meaning. The concept of *reference group* describes "that group whose outlook is used by the actor as the frame of reference in the organization of his perceptual field". Perspective can be taken from a group in which the person is *not* a member, and the same person can look out on the world from diverse perspectives (Shibutani, 1955: 565). In the process of *intersection,* perspectives and social worlds meet, and the difference in perspective is often enhanced (Strauss, 1978: 237, 1993: 217f).

Findings
The subworlds of professional social workers and traditional actors

The accounts from the students and teachers form a unified picture of the social work field and its participants. They define phenomena the same way and have an ordered view of the world, indicating a "social work perspective" and that they share membership in a *subworld of professional social workers,* whereas traditional actors supposedly belong to a *subworld of traditional actors* (Shibutani, 1955: 564f; Strauss, 1978: 237, 1993: 41, 212). There are reasons to consider social workers and traditional actors as members of two *subworlds* existing in a larger common social world instead of in separate *social worlds*. The similar type of work, common clients and the problems addressed unite the subworlds. A large part of GASOW's – Ghana Association of Social Workers[7] – definition of Ghanaian social work covers both. For example, they are concerned with "individual and collective well-being" and with "social issues such as poverty, unemployment and domestic violence" (GASOW, 2010).

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[7] GASOW, Ghana Association of Social Workers, was established in 1971 and works to develop, strengthen and unify the social work profession in Ghana (GASOW, 2010).

One student informant, Afia, points out the similarities in the work:

> [T]he family heads are just playing their traditional role by trying to settle disputes among the people, which literally makes them do the work of a social worker [...].

Traditional actors are described as, for example, community leaders, religious leaders, family heads, extended family members and chiefs, all with a mission of caring for the vulnerable in society by giving emotional, moral and financial support, settling disputes, giving advice, mediating and functioning as legislator and judge. That is to say, they fill the same role in the society as they did before professional social work was introduced.

Despite similarities between the subworlds, the interviewees often define themselves and their work in contrast to traditional actors. Values, symbols and discourses constitute subworld borders (Shibutani, 1955: 566f) as is mentioned during interviews: social work values (codes of ethics – obligatory to follow for professionals only), social work symbols (laws and acts – only professionals are obliged to report domestic violence to DOVVSU, Domestic Violence and Victim Support Unit[8] (Domestic Violence Act 2007: item 6)) and social work associations (GASOW – university-educated members only). The subworlds' disparate ideologies and ways of carrying out activities – other features defining and separating subworlds (Shibutani, 1955: 565; Strauss, 1978: 236) – are emphasised. Below, I present the subworlds, which are reconstructed from the accounts of the students and teachers and reflect their own words:

Figure 1 - The Subworlds of Professional Social Workers and Traditional Actors

The Subworld of Professional Social Workers	The Subworld of Traditional Actors
Formal institutions	Informal institutions
Social order maintained by constitutional law and formal institutions	Social order maintained by social control, tradition and personal relations
Educated	Illiterate, non-educated
Advanced	Developing
Modern	Traditional
Western	Pre-colonial/traditional African, Ghanaian
Christianity	Islam, other religions
Science	Superstition, spiritualism, religion (not Christianity)
Objective	Subjective
Now	Then
New, strange (to the Ghanaians)	Old, well-known (to the Ghanaians)
Have resources and formal institutions	Lack resources and formal institutions
Urban	Rural
Global	Local

The subworlds are interesting because of how the interviewees define them. On the one hand, as Figure 1 shows, they contrast their own perspective against that of traditionalists, whom they sometimes describe in pejorative terms. Although it would be possible to say

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[8] *DOVVSU (Domestic Violence and Victim Support Unit) was established in 1998 under Ghana's Police Service. Its objective is "to prevent, protect, apprehend and prosecute perpetrators of domestic violence and child abuse" (Ghana Police Service, 2010).*

that the interviewees see social workers and traditionalists as binary opposites, reflecting colonial images of Africa as inferior and the West as superior (e.g. Fanon, 1967; Mudimbe, 1988, 1994), that dichotomy is not the entire picture. When reasoning out interventions, the interviewees often see the traditional way as favourable and look at interventions from the perspective of both traditional actors and professional social workers. By shifting perspective, they show that the subworlds are neither exclusive nor stable, and that simultaneously seeing things both as traditional actor and social worker is possible. Student informant Kwabena gives an example of this when discussing what to do in the study's vignette after the father hit his child:

> I do not think the police should come in now. You see the man hit the child, and it was really bad. If it was in Europe or North America, it would be a problem for the man. But in Africa […], it is like something treated lightly. [---] Because of our culture, a man can even slap his child […]. Culture will see nothing wrong with it.

Applying Shibutani's (1955: 565) concept, Kwabena uses traditional actors as a reference group or frame of reference. As is customary in the subworld of traditional actors, Kwabena does not want the police to be involved. At the same time, he is aware of how this differs from the values and norms of social workers attributed to the West. Like the cultural mediators in Al-Krenawi and Graham's (2001) study, Kwabena understands and uses the values and norms of both subworlds. This use reflects his ability to see things from the perspective of both subworlds, something which seems to be crucial for the localisation of work.

The ability to shift perspective can be explained by primary socialisation in which the interviewees, as Ghanaians, have internalised the norms and values of the subworld of traditional actors. *Primary* socialisation takes place in childhood, reflecting the attitudes of the child's significant others, thus making it deep and profound (Berger & Luckmann, 1966: 149-166). In contrast, the socialisation of the students and teachers in the subworld of social workers is *secondary*. Secondary socialisation is institution based and involves acquiring role-specific knowledge often attached to labour. It is not as profound as primary socialisation.

The intersection of subworlds

The interviewees not only look at cases from the perspective of traditional actors, they also involve traditionalists in their work. Hence, social work interventions involve an *intersection* of subworlds. In the process of intersection, perspectives and worlds meet, and specialised actors, skills, resources and activities from both worlds are brought into a work site (Strauss, 1978: 237, 1985: 86, 1993: 217f). Consequently, the informants talk about the benefits rather than the challenges of involving traditional actors. Kwadwo, a student, gives one example of what an intersection might look like:

> [The traditional actors] can complement in terms of conflict resolution, especially when the professionals are able to broker peace. Then they can step in to maintain or ensure that what we have done is sustained. [---] They can be assisting the social workers.

When subworlds intersect and actors are engaged in the same type of work, such as that described by Kwadwo, a division of labour usually takes place. The division of labour applies not only to *actors,* but also to *actions* (Strauss, 1985: 72, 78). Distinguishing between activities and actors is significant in obtaining an understanding of social work as the interviewees describe it.

Involving actors and practices

According to the interviewees, work can be organized so that traditional actors and social workers can work on the same case, but in separate ways. In such a construct, different actors come in at different stages in the intervention. The interviewees explain that the first stage involves the work of the social worker and the nuclear family. If their efforts are not enough to handle the problem, the extended family or other traditional actors may become involved. If the case still is not resolved, and if it is serious enough, it can be turned over to the police. In discussing the vignette, a student respondent, Akua, gives an example of what the process can look like:

> [I]n the first place, I will do my paths. I will sit the two [husband and wife] down and mediate between them […] [A]t the end of the day, if I realize that it bears no fruit, I will maybe consult the family of the guy – that this is what is going on in the family, in the marriage – so what are they also going to do to solve it? I tell them, and probably they will sit their son down and advise him. If they do, and this also does not succeed, then I will carry it out to the police.

Another example of when traditionalists and social workers work on the same case in separate ways is Alternative Dispute Resolution. In cases of dispute settling that some interviewees describe, clients can decide whether to adopt the traditional way or to settle the dispute in formal court. In Alternative Dispute Resolution, the case is resolved by traditional actors within the family or community, and social workers are not part of it. The social worker's job is to help clients decide whether to use the traditional way or the formal court by displaying available alternatives and giving advice. When work involves actors from two subworlds, activities must be distributed (Strauss, 1985: 79). These distributions can be negotiated, imposed or assumed without request or command. Judging from the descriptions of the interviewees, activities are not requested or commanded by the actors involved but by clients deciding how they want the case to be resolved.

Some of the students and teachers, however, describe how they would stay with the case even if their clients choose Alternative Dispute Resolution. They would monitor the case until they know the traditional actors can manage on their own. Afia explains:

> I can be a part of [a traditionally resolved case] because perhaps during the sessions that we are having with the traditional people, there might be some decisions the Traditional Head would like to take that I see would not really help the people. So I would educate them and explain to them why I think they should allow this, or why I think they should do this.

Social workers thus assess the work of traditional actors and fill in the gaps. By monitoring and making herself an inspector, Afia claims a position for which the traditional actors are *accountable*. To be accountable is to be responsible for the quality of one's work (Strauss, 1985: 80f). Because more accountability generally means more authority, the monitoring task implies a boost in the hierarchy for social workers. As previously suggested, this type of account – in which the interviewees construct images of social workers as superior and traditionalists as inferior – does not necessarily reflect a genuine disapproval of traditionalists. Instead, it seems to be a way of promoting and legitimising the social work profession. The students and teachers frequently mention how social work is unknown to the public and has little effect on society. Thus, they say that social workers must struggle to establish social work as a profession by promoting their work and making the public develop a positive attitude towards it.

Involving practices but not actors

Other cases involve traditional methods, but not traditional actors. A student, Kwame, shares experiences from a domestic violence case he took part in during an internship. Social workers and other formally trained staff used traditional methods and knowledge about domestic violence to handle the case, without involving traditional actors. The social workers talked separately with the two parties, reminded them of their respective duties as husband and wife, determined who was at fault, made them apologise to each other and educated them on the laws governing domestic violence. By doing this, traditional practices were brought into social work without involving traditional actors *per se*. In their study on Indian social workers (1999: 271), Nimmagadda and Cowger describe the same type of method – talking separately with involved clients and reminding them of their duties as family members – as localised practice.

Methods can constitute profound divisions between members of a profession (Bucher & Strauss, 1961: 250). Usually, they reflect disagreements of the actors involved, though in this study, methods do not seem to reflect divisions or disagreements between traditionalists and social workers. Instead, social workers take over traditional methods and use them as if they were their own. Bringing in traditional methods expands the social workers' repertoire, and gives them opportunities to serve more clients. It also offers a greater variety for interpreting and handling social problems, which makes it possible to adapt the work to the particular context and client. Also, by taking over methods, social workers may claim jurisdiction over features that were previously delegated to traditional actors. This use may promote their profession and expand their power in the common social world.

Three models of explanation

Localisation is often defined as taking local culture into consideration (Bradshaw & Graham, 2007: 93; Walton & Abo-El-Nasr, 1988). Nevertheless, the accounts of the students and teachers reveal that localisation is not only about culture. The rationales they provide for taking traditional actors and practices into consideration can be analytically divided into three models of explanation: cultural, practical and structural.

Cultural model of explanation

The students and teachers describe Ghana as a heterogeneous society with a number of ethnic groups with different traditions and lifestyles. They say that this heterogeneity requires social workers to take cultural expressions and traditions into account when performing their work. Culture should here be understood as a "way of life" related to the Ghanaian tradition.

Cultural sensitivity

According to the students and teachers, being what they call "culturally sensitive" is to understand the clients' culture. To attain this understanding, they say, social workers investigate clients' lives, traditions and values. Through such study, workers find out what belief systems are at play and how they affect the problem at hand. To be culturally sensitive is therefore about acquiring information to be able to understand the world as the client sees it. Aasiya, a teacher, explains how religious and spiritual aspects need to be considered in interventions:

> [W]hen clients present their problems, you may want to find out if they have any spiritual belief systems that are at play. That a client is saying that I am coming to see you – but I believe that God will take care of my problems [affects interventions]. So there is an underneath spirituality system going on there.

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The interviewees describe how culture provides a context that helps the social worker understand a problem from the client's perspective. Clients are used as a reference group – their outlook is used as a frame of reference (Shibutani, 1955: 565) – when the social worker looks upon the situation. To take the perspective of others, and to adjust actions accordingly, may be compared to Lena Dominelli's (2008) recommendations for anti-racist social work. According to Dominelli (2008: 7-35), acknowledging the clients' cultural systems and adjusting interventions accordingly is an important aspect of anti-racist practice. However, she also argues that it is crucial to acknowledge asymmetric power relations among social workers and clients. As a British social worker, Dominelli holds an interesting view in that it seems to differ not only from the view of the students and teachers in this study, but also from the Indian social workers in Nimmagadda and Cowger's (1999) study. The students and teachers do not seem to place cultural sensitivity relative to power positions. Rather, they describe social workers as educators, and giving advice seems to be a common social work activity. Because of their profession and university education, they see themselves in a position to guide and enlighten their clients. Nimmagadda and Cowger (1999: 267f) present similar results. Because giving advice responds to culturally appropriate behaviour in India, the researchers interpreted giving advice as a localisation of practice. Like the Ghanaian interviewees, the Indian social workers saw the method as beneficial and as part of their duty to direct their clients towards the right path. From Dominelli's perspective, it may instead be interpreted as suppression.

The students and teachers do not seem to think that giving advice is inconsistent with being culturally sensitive or with client self-determination, which is stated as an ethical principle by the International Federation of Social Workers and the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IFSW, 2011). The interviewees refer to both advice-giving and self-determination as being important for good practice, and do not see these as values in conflict. After giving advice, they solve the possible dilemma by leaving the decisions to the client. Whether the advice affects their clients' ability to make independent decisions is not discussed. Aasiya explains:

> [I]t is your duty to educate [clients]. And as to whether they will accept what you are saying, it is their decision to make.

The process of educating or giving advice and then leaving decisions to clients is similar to how the Indian social workers act (Nimmagadda & Cowger, 1999: 268). It allows for social workers to follow the value of self-determination, while simultaneously giving advice or educating. To leave decisions to clients seems to be a way to resolve any possible ambivalence among both Ghanaian and Indian social workers.

Giving due respect

Traditional roles and positions are important cultural rationales as the students and teachers argue that traditional actors should be taken into account in professional social work. The term "respect" is frequently mentioned; traditionalists need to be paid their due respect as traditional leaders. The interviewees further describe that they must respect traditionalists because "that is the way things are in Ghana". Kwaku, a student, explains what people would say to a woman who did not turn to traditional leaders for help, but instead contacted the police:

> Why did you leave our father, or uncle, or Imam and all these elders and go to the police station? [---] It is a sign of insult – that she does not respect these people. They could have competently handled the case, whatever problem there is.

To involve traditional actors because "that is the way things are" may be compared to Nimmagadda and Cowger's (1999: 268) findings in which "doing what works" was central to the Indian social workers' practice. "Doing what works" involved doing what was appropriate and what worked in the particular local context, and which was considered by the researchers to be central in the localisation process. The researchers related this way of localising to practice-derived knowledge and Geertz's (1983: 167) notions of local knowledge. The students and teachers relate to their work in the same way. They do not problematise using "that is the way things are" to motivate their actions. Rather, they see it as "doing what works" in this particular local context.

The value of family

The intervieweesdemphasise the value of family. To preserve family, they say, traditional actors should be involved instead of reporting a problem to the police or social workers. A student informant, Abena, explains why she would not report Kofi, the husband in the study's vignette, to the police even though he had hurt his child:

> The police will come in, take over the case, and it can be something worse as Kofi can be presented to court or something for hitting. […] [W]hat if Kofi gets a punishment and comes back home? How are you going to face your husband? [---] [I]t will have a negative impact, a negative effect on Kofi. […] He would not be himself. He would not feel like a father. He would feel restricted.

Abena further contemplates what Kofi's wife Joan would want:

> It is not right, but as I said earlier on, for the sake of the integrity Kofi has built, I do not know. He is an intellectual – he is a graduate, and all that. For the sake of his dignity and integrity – we [social workers] would have to protect that. That is what Joan would want to do. Because no, it happens in the outside world, but in Ghana here, no Ghanaian lady will actually go out and report an abusive husband. They do not do that.

It can be gleaned that the students and teachers would involve traditional actors instead of formal authorities as a way of ensuring not only the maintenance of the family, but also order within the family. To report an abusive husband to the police would mean a disgrace for the wife and family. In the worst case, it could mean that the husband would go to jail, leaving the family without a breadwinner. It could also alter the father's position in the family hierarchy and upset the family order. Either way, reporting would break family bonds, which the interviewees considered to be unfavourable. Instead, to talk, listen and give advice to the husband and wife are suggested as the way to handle domestic violence or family issues. Discussing the case as Abena did, Kwame states that traditional actors should be involved. He explains why and gives his opinion on what actions they should take:

> [The traditionalists] want a peaceful marriage; they do not want to tear the family apart. So once there is understanding and the man has seen his fault and apologised and is willing to take the child to the hospital for the child to be attended to, I think we are heading towards the same cause or the same goal. So there is no need to push what the current laws say, or you might end up destroying the whole thing.

According to Kwame, the case should be settled traditionally by talking, making the husband apologise and taking steps to mitigate his actions. A peaceful marriage is important, and to involve the law might destroy the healing process in the family, he concludes.

To retain social order, or the order within the family, seems to be important to the interviewees. Their view regarding duties and obligations to family shows similarities to Nimmagadda and Cowger's (1999) findings. By acknowledging family order and value, just as Nimmagadda and Cowger (1999: 271) conclude about Indian social workers, the interviewees reproduce societal and family order. Actions shape society, and the interviewees construct and reconstruct social order (Berger & Luckmann, 1966: 70-79). As people interact, they develop shared understandings of the world, which in turn affect their actions and relations.sActions, in their turn, shape social structures. In this study, all rationales categorised under the cultural model of explanation in some way reproduce social order. For example, to not report an abusive husband in order to preserve a family may reproduce notions of men being allowed to abuse their wives, possibly leading to the idea that the phenomenon is simply nature: "that is the way things are in Ghana". When social structures are stabilised, they appear to be part of an external objective world beyond the actor's influence (ibid. 1966: 70-79). The society exists as an objective reality to which people conform and that does not seem possible to challenge.

Practical model of explanation

The students and teachers provide various practical rationales for localising work by involving traditional actors and practices in interventions. Of importance is that traditionalists can be of help by helping community people attain a positive attitude towards social workers. According to the interviewees, traditional actors are well established and familiar to the Ghanaians, whereas social workers are strange, feared or not trusted. A student, Yaw, gives an example of how local leaders help social workers to be accepted into a community:

> Before you enter a community, you need to make the leaders of the community aware – now we are coming with this, we want to help people with this. [---] Then you tell them how they would be of help, and the various reasons why the services you want to render to them will help them. So then they kind of realise that this is a good thing that you want to do. They give you the needed cooperation. [---] They send their town criers[9] around, they beat the gong-gong, […] and people come to gather around and the chiefs tell whatever you want them to do.

Traditional actors can also render services during social work interventions. Borrowing services and skills is often an incentive for the intersection of subworlds (Strauss, 1978: 237; 1993: 217). In this study, service includes symbolic and representative features of traditional actors. When acting as representatives, persons are not acting for themselves but on behalf of, for example, a system (Strauss, 1993: 179). Because of their position in the traditional system, traditional actors are respected and listened to. In Ghana, parents and other elders traditionally play an advisory role, and children are expected to follow the words of their parents, even in old age (Kreitzer, 2009: 151; Nukunya, 2003: 49ff). This seems to be a reason why it is effective to bring in a parent or an elder whose authority is not questioned. Yaw explains the advantage of involving traditional actors in cases of marital problems:

> Those people [traditional actors] have a lot of influences when it comes to issues like this. So when you realise things are not working out, you could invite those people, maybe their parents, family heads, even their reverends or ministers to come and talk to [the couple].

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[9] A person who makes public announcements in the streets.

This type of alliance, in which members of one subworld borrow services from another, is commonly considered useful, and is thus formed when members in a social world are threatened by other worlds (Strauss, 1978: 237). Threatening social worlds does not seem to be a reason for social workers' alliances with traditional actors. Yet in a closely related scenario, the interviewees explain how they would involve traditional actors when a case is getting out of hand. When they need someone to prevent, for example, an abusive man from harassing his family, the traditionalists are those who have the capacity to do that.

A practical reason for involving the extended family has to do with its traditional role in the socialisation and upbringing of children. To let family members serve as babysitters or to invite them to come and live with the family are reasons suggested for involving them in the social work case. Furthermore, the students and teachers describe how the extended family or other traditionalists may serve as witnesses in social work cases, as they can provide the social worker with information about a family and its background that is relevant for handling a situation. Kwaku tells about a child custody case he took part in during an internship:

> [In] that case, the two families, the man's family and the woman's family, were all there [at the social worker's office]. And they were all given the opportunity to say whatever they thought. [---] Their role was to help solve the problem.

Kwaku points at the importance of family for solving problems in relation to disturbances or disorders in family relations. In Ghana, he says,tfamily matters are traditionally kept within the family. The students and teachers often emphasise that parents know their children better than social workers do, and therefore might come up with better solutions to problems. The family's ideas are welcomed and deemed significant.

In the West, extended family members may also play a role when resolving family issues (e.g. Horsley, 1997), and the Ghanaian example may be compared to Family Group Conferences, introduced in Sweden during the 1990s. In Family Group Conferences, family and relatives are invited to the social services to contribute with information or to find ways of resolving the problem (Socialstyrelsen, 2010). To invite the extended family to give advice and assist in a case may also be compared to colleagueship. Sharing interests and common goals of an intervention is characteristic of colleagueship, which is closely linked to positions and hierarchies within a work site (Strauss, 1978: 253f). Recognising traditional actors and their knowledge as contributing to social work interventions puts them on a hierarchic level close or equal to social workers.

Structural model of explanation

Structural factors and welfare regimes highly influence social work practice (Payne, 2006: 49ff). Accordingly, they seem to play an important role when the students and teachers discuss how to take traditional actors into account in work. Here, structural factors refer to issues regarding how welfare is organised within the country and the national economic situation. Central in the interviewees' descriptions is the development of social work as a profession, its position and status within Ghana and the lack of professionally trained social workers, especially in rural settings. Tika, a teacher, explains how traditional actors can be a substitute for professional social workers:

> So you see now we still have a shortage of social workers around, and the few that we have are not even in the remote areas. They are in Accra, Kumasi, Takoradi.[10] So we still use the family, the friends, the community to be each other's keeper in terms of social work in their various communities.

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[10] *Larger cities in Ghana.*

Like Tika, many interviewees describe how work is left to traditional actors because social workers do not have sufficient time or resources. They say that the situation is particularly difficult in the rural areas where social workers and formal institutions are limited or non-existent. In turn, the reason social work does not have the time or resources has to do with the fact that many trained social workers in Ghana do not practice their profession. According to the interviewees, social workers work in other types of institutions, mainly in banks. The suggested reason is the low pay and few social work institutions offering employment.

The lack of trained social workers may be related to the overall state of the social work profession. The interviewees describe social work in Ghana as unestablished and underdeveloped. Afia describes how Ghanaian social workers are "babies in the social work profession". She further states:

> In Ghana, social work has not really gotten a standing, like a ground. Many people do not know really what social work is and the impact of social work in the lives of the people. It is not like outside where everybody knows social work and the social worker is important.

Previous research gives a similar picture of the lack of institutions and the ineffectiveness of existing ones, particularly the Department of Social Welfare (Laird, 2008: 385-391). Kreitzer et al. (2009: 156) acknowledge the poor state of GASOW, and conclude that social work in Ghana is a profession on the periphery, not known by the public.

The financial situation on both the national and local levels aggravates the situation. According to the students and teachers, social workers sometimes pay for transportation from their own pockets to be able to go to the rural areas to work, and they describe how DOVVSU personnel take mistreated children to their own houses because there are no shelters where the children can stay. The interviewees explain the lack of institutions to be especially problematic concerning women's and children's issues, and in rural areas, the situation is worse. They say that a woman who wants to leave an abusive husband has no societal institutions to go to for shelter and help. Choosing to report a husband to the police and sending him to jail simply means that there will be no one to provide for the family. Akosua, a teacher, gives an explanation of how economic factors affect an extended family's ability to help in such cases:

> [T]hese days, poverty and a lot of factors are affecting people's lives. So even if they should go back to the family, the support would not be there, right. The other family members do not have the money or are not in a position to really help. If you had a system that had welfare benefits, like the UK or US, this person can go back to their family home […] then everybody will get a little bit of money to support themselves. Then it will be better. But we do not have that yet, so it is difficult.

Where national finances are not enough, NGOs often enter the arena. There is a recent trend of NGOs becoming growing actors in international development (World Bank, 2010). The interviewees describe how foreign NGOs build shelters and other institutions in Ghana to help fill in the gaps where the government lacks resources. However, NGOs taking over the role of local governments in welfare issues can be problematic (Potter et al., 2008: 119). One problem mentioned during the classes at the University of Ghana is that programmes depending on foreign donors often involve funding directed at a specific issue, for example, HIV/AIDS. In this way, work is not localised because the local work force cannot use the funding for what they consider most useful, such as fighting malaria. Although the Department of Social Welfare is responsible for registering and monitoring NGOs to ensure

that money is used where it is most needed, the poor financial situation of the Department means that the surveillance is inadequate (Laird, 2008: 390).

Discussion

This study shows how traditional actors and practices are taken into account as a natural part of practice when the social work students and teachers discuss interventions. The interviewees are self-conscious about their tradition and society, and they independently form interventions,klooking upon cases from the perspective of both social workers and traditional actors. Thus, localisation is both an active and a creative process.
The accounts of students and teachers reveal how involving traditionalists requires cultural, practical and structural considerations. Furthermore, the three models of explanations are not exclusive; boundaries between them are not clear, and the rationales the interviewees give are interrelated. For example, the interviewees claim that they would involve traditional actors in a domestic violence case instead of the police to give respect to traditional actors (cultural model of explanation), because traditional actors are influential and therefore may be of practical help (practical model of explanation) and because of the lack of formal institutions where the victim can get help (structural model of explanation). Cultureethus gives traditionalists a certain status that makes their practical help beneficial, and their practical help is needed because resources are scarce.

This study further shows how localisation involves the question of whose reality social workers should consider. To localise work is to adapt work to service users' culture and traditions. Yet, who has the right to determine which (cultural) considerations to take into account? Are there any universal truths for which social workers have a responsibility to stand up? Some interviewees in this study suggest that social workers should ignore reporting an abusive husband to the police in order to maintain family order. The institution of family has such a cultural significance that not reporting can be seen as a way to localise work. How should social workers act? If practice is always adapted to the individual, social workers are left with few guidelines. Ethical and professional responsibilities lose their role. The Swedish researcher Eliasson (1995: 58) argues that social work has two principles that will always be in conflict. On the one hand, social workers have a responsibility for their client's well-being, and their task is to interfere, guide and help. On the other hand, social workers must respect their clients' self-determination – their integrity, knowledge and choices. The Ghanaian students and teachers give us one example of how conflict between these principles may be handled. They describe how they educate and give advice, but leave decisions to clients.

In Western social work, the question about the client role in decision-making has been accentuated by the growth of evidence-based practice and service-user involvement in social work (e.g. Beresford & Branfield, 2006; Glasby & Beresford, 2006; Kumer-Nevo, 2005). These issues involve larger questions about the nature of knowledge in social work: What is knowledge? Whose knowledge is relevant or acceptable? Personal and experience-based knowledge, in this study represented by traditional actors (and clients), is often seen as being opposed to formal and professional knowledge (Beresford & Branfield, 2006). In Ghanaian social work, this question also captures the relationship between African and Western knowledge. In Ghana, to be educated is to acquire Western knowledge, as many consider African knowledge to be primitive (Kreitzer et al., 2009: 154). This study will hopefully inspire social workers in the Nordic countries to evaluate what type of knowledge we regard as primitive and how we determine what good practice is. Taking traditional actors and practices into consideration in work means that Ghanaian social workers have a wider range of interventions to offer their service-users. Do Nordic social workers disregard relevant practices or knowledge in striving to be professional? Perhaps there also are traditional, or non-professional, actors or practices in the Nordic countries that could enrich social work

and benefit service-users. Acknowledging what is involved in the concept of professionalism and what it excludes may help us adapt practice to local needs and context, evaluate our view on professionalism and the interventions this view calls for and perhaps make us better equipped to develop the social work profession in the Nordic countries.

If nothing else, by studying social work in other countries, we may learn that despite different social systems and the different social problems workers face, there are similarities in how social work is carried out. Nordic social workers also localise work; they use different methods and approaches depending on clients, their culture and the particular context of an intervention. In addition, we may recognise methods the Ghanaian social workers use. The way the interviewees describe mediation in domestic violence cases, for example, is not that different from how Nordic social workers handled such cases before we had laws and institutions that addressed domestic violence issues. This study will hopefully allow social workers in the Nordic countries to obtain a view of social work in a culturally and geographically distant nation. But above all, we may discover that our ways of handling interventions are similar to those of social workers in other countries. By studying social work in distant countries, we may learn not only about others but also about ourselves.

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