



Editorial

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The Importance of Social Workers in Communities: A Global Perspective

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Abstract

Global socioeconomic, ecological, and political challenges result in, among others, diverse communities where intolerance and injustices such as oppression and marginalization are visible. The very nature of social work is to provide services to individuals and groups within their natural settings to promote the well-being of the community and its members. From a developmental approach, the profession aims to encourage community participation and social cohesion, self-determination, the use of indigenous knowledge and practices, and self-reliance. This discussion focuses on the importance of social work in communities and explores how community participation and social cohesion can be encouraged to support community psychosocial well-being. The philosophy of Ubuntu and the concept of conviviality as guiding frameworks for social work in communities are considered to propose an innovative approach to build convivial communities through creative arts-based initiatives where principles of reciprocity and relatedness guide a way of living that supports solidarity and social change.

Keywords: conviviality, developmental approach, social work, Ubuntu

Introduction

Social work, as an applied profession, aims to promote social change, cohesion, and the liberation of people (Twikirize, 2022) through micro, meso and macro interventions (International Federation of Social Workers, 2014). Globally, social transformations have led to changes in community structures that further require social workers to acknowledge how diverse cultural and contextual aspects impact the psychosocial well-being of individuals and groups in communities (Julkunena et al., 2022; Louw & Van Schalkwyk, 2021). Jones (2018) refers to the person-in-environment focus of social work that emphasizes the interrelatedness between individuals and their social and natural environments. Working in diverse contexts, the developmental approach to social work accentuates social change within these environments to promote community well-being (Midgley, 2014). This discussion explores the importance of social work in communities to support the psychosocial well-being of its members on the one hand, and community well-being on the other hand.

Discussion

The term 'community' was derived from the Latin words 'com', meaning together, and 'munis', meaning to serve (Pradeep & Sathyamurthi, 2017). In social work, the term refers to services to individuals and families who share certain commonalities including socioeconomic, age, religious and cultural groups (cf. Schininà et al., 2019; Pradeep & Sathyamurthi, 2017). Social structures within such communities are further influenced by differentiation due to urbanization, migration and globalization. Although these differentiations often result in diversity-related complexities such as social intolerance and oppression, diverse communities have the potential to encourage positive social change through the inclusion of multiple sources of ideas and innovation. Social inclusion and participation are, however, required to ensure positive social change (World Economic Forum, 2017). As such, social work services in communities require the inclusion of diverse individuals and groups to work together toward the well-being of the whole community; the greater good (Pradeep & Sathyamurthi, 2017). In this sense, social work in communities accentuates the social-relational aspect of 'being a community'. Schininà et al. (2019) explains the social-relational aspect of communities as a way in which individuals, their families, sub-groups and the larger community interconnect, and assert that the collective and social dimensions of the arts could contribute to the development of social structures that supports social cohesion as a way of life within communities.

Through this discussion, a link is drawn between the developmental approach to social work, the principles of Ubuntu, the concept of conviviality to support social cohesion as a platform for community development, and creative arts-based initiatives as an innovative practice example of how the social work profession can contribute to social cohesion in communities.

Social Work in Communities

Social work is a broad profession that works with vulnerable people and groups within their social and natural environments, including community initiatives that encourage participation and ownership to support self-reliance (Dhavaleshwar, 2016). Working in and with communities, social work emphasizes self-help, voluntarism and collective responsibility to ensure the well-being of all community members. The role of the social worker is empowering in nature; facilitating a connection between different systems within a community (Pradeep &

Sathyamurthi, 2017). Working with communities, social workers facilitate opportunities for interactive and collaborative shared decision-making and capacity building processes through the strengthening of relationships and the development of the community as a whole (Tankink et al., 2019). The developmental approach to social work supports the collaborative nature of social work with communities.

A Developmental Approach

The developmental approach to social work acknowledges the impact of global socioeconomic trends on individuals, groups, and communities. These trends that affect community well-being include human rights abuses, practices of exclusion/oppression/discrimination, poverty and unemployment, and exposure to crime and violence (Van Breda, 2018). Addressing community well-being from a developmental approach, social workers on the one hand promote the dignity of people exposed to structural injustices that lead to, among others, limited inclusion and participation in the development of strategies to address psychosocial and economic challenges (Jones, 2018). On the other hand, spaces are created for communities to build resilience to address local challenges, and to achieve community-based self-sufficiency (Van Breda, 2018).

Development in communities, according to Weyers (2011), takes place when there is a willingness to take ownership of a situation and to join hands to find solutions. Therefore, a developmental approach asks for the facilitation and mobilization of stakeholders and key role-players in a community to develop networks and partnerships where a variety of skills, knowledge and resources could contribute to collaborative actions toward sustainable change. Collaborative action, however, requires a focus on the social-relational components within a community. Social workers that work with communities implement strategies that empower individuals and groups to experience ownership, build resilience and find collaborative solutions for the challenges they face (Manyama, 2018).

Encouraging Community Collaboration

To emphasize social-relational concepts for collaborative solution-driven processes for social work in communities, the concepts of Ubuntu and conviviality were considered.

Ubuntu in Communities

Within the philosophy of Ubuntu, individuals and families live in a communal way that is influenced by social, environmental, and spiritual functioning. The interrelatedness of the individual and the environment is acknowledged; what happens to individuals happens to groups, communities, and society and vice versa (Mugumbate et al., 2023). Social work that is aligned with Ubuntu acknowledges the concept of collectiveness as opposed to individualism, and is framed by principles of reciprocity, relatedness, social justice, solidarity, and social change (Bilotta, 2022). Working from a developmental approach in communities, social workers use the above principles to guide strategies where those aspects that affect the well-being of the community and its members are addressed in a collaborative manner. In this way, community members are being made aware of how their own decisions and actions can contribute to their own well-being and the well-being of the community at large; emphasizing interconnectedness and collective responsibility as a way of living (Mayaka et al. 2023) that relate to the concept of conviviality.

Creating Conviviality in Communities

The term 'conviviality' was coined by Ivan Illich (1977, p. 78) as "...autonomous and creative intercourse among persons, and the intercourse of persons with their environment". Haugen (2014) describes conviviality as the art and practice of living together in an ever-increasing diverse society. To create conviviality in communities through the philosophy of Ubuntu, social workers enhance solidarity through principles of inclusion, social justice, autonomy, self-determination and human dignity. From a developmental approach, conviviality contributes to the implementation of the principles of Ubuntu.

Vipond (2012) explains the advantages of a convivial community as inclusive of the interests of all the members of the community, valuing variety and diversity as a vibrant character of the community, and understanding that engagements can break down barriers. The latter contributes to solidarity and social cohesion. Social workers coordinate and facilitate activities that aim to achieve these advantages, and success is achieved when the social worker is no longer needed to facilitate collaborative actions. Shorthose (2002) draws a link between the developmental approach and conviviality by describing convivial practices in terms of a focus on the everyday lives of people and the choices they make, the existential resources available for them to experience well-being, knowledge and skills available in the community to be able to do things for themselves, and the respect for diversities through considering all interests when creating a way of life that is good for the whole community. By working towards conviviality from the development approach, social work activities are based on the relational nature of the person (i.e. a need to belong and to be accepted), respectful views towards diverse people and groups in communities (i.e. inclusive work), and reciprocal relationships of give and take between people as a foundation for life together (Addy, 2013). Creating convivial communities and including the principles of Ubuntu, however, requires an innovative approach of which the inclusion of arts is proposed as a practice example in this discussion.

An Innovative Approach towards Ubuntu and Conviviality: An Example for Practice

Social work in communities aimed at conviviality, and in line with the philosophy of Ubuntu, requires an innovative approach to build collaborative relationships in diverse communities. The potential of the arts is highlighted by Schininà and Ghiglione (2019) who assert that various forms of art such as music, theatre, storytelling, dance, photography, and video-making are diversity-focused, and can be used to provide vulnerable communities with psychosocial support. The arts, according to these authors, have the capacity to connect individuals through societal dimensions to address vulnerabilities and to build resilience, solidarity, and cohesion.

As a practice example, individuals or groups are brought together; each participant bringing their own unique contribution into the proposed four-step process: 1) The members create artistic presentations of who they are, what is important to them, their strengths, motivations and own cultural beliefs and practices. 2) They share their presentations and collectively explore similarities and differences. 3) They search collaboratively for a common goal that includes both similarities and differences. 4) A collaborative presentation is developed, followed by a discussion of how the artistic collaboration could be used as a platform to address a shared social concern (Van der Westhuizen & Greuel, 2021).

Schininà and Ghiglione (2019) assert that “with their metaphorical yet recognizable language, they can at times voice the unspeakable, and link the unlinkable” (p. 74). Greuel (2019) refers to the social dimensions of collective artistic productions as a form of social work in communities that includes creating spaces for people where they function as equals and each contribution is valued, come into contact, and collaborate with one another, hear each other and become aware of each other, synchronize physical activities and emotional experiences, and experience social cohesion through a sense of belonging.

Conclusion

This discussion considers the sociocultural changes and increasing socioeconomic vulnerabilities of individuals, groups, and communities globally, and explores the relevance and importance of social work in communities. The broadness of the profession provides the opportunity to bridge gaps between micro, meso and macro interventions through networks and partnerships, and supporting communities to find solutions that reflect the diverse and unique nature of each context. From a developmental approach, social work values the central role that community members can play in addressing vulnerabilities. However, collaboration requires that all members are valued, respected, and provided opportunities for participation. Social work’s contribution can be increased through the inclusion of the principles of Ubuntu, and strategies to create convivial experiences through innovative strategies such as the arts. The importance of social work in communities, thus, relies on an awareness of the resources within communities that can assist them to experience social cohesion, which is required to participate in collaborative efforts to support community well-being.

Conflict of Interest

No personal or financial relationships, affiliations, or connections between the author and companies that may be related to the topic of this article exist.

Author Contributions

The author is the sole contributor to the article.

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