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## REFRAMING SOCIAL WORK RESEARCH FOR AFRICA'S CONSUMERS OF RESEARCH PRODUCTS: A GUIDING TOOL

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### ABSTRACT

*Social acceptability remains the pinnacle of all research aspirations. This is particularly so for the social work profession that has endured the criticism of being foreign, particularly to Africa. This foreign badge of the social work profession has seen the profession struggling to find its feet on the policy arena. While academics and policy makers have written about reasons behind this limited problem, not many tools have been provided to aid assessment of African research. This article discusses the attributes that could improve social work research in Africa and proposes a model to enhance acceptability and measure potential to influence policy and practice.*

**KEY TERMS:** African research, social work, acceptability, evidence, policy, practice, decolonisation, indigenous

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## INTRODUCTION

Social work research, like any other research, ought to be done in a socially acceptable way to enable outcomes that have potential to improve knowledge, impact policies and practice. African research has been criticised for having limited capacity to achieve these objectives. While academics and policy makers have written about reasons behind this limited capacity, not much effort has been committed to exploring the attributes that could enhance acceptability as well as developing tools that could measure the same in an African context. This article discusses the attributes that could improve social work research in Africa and proposes a tool to enhance acceptability and measure potential to influence policy and practice.

## ATTRIBUTES OF RESEARCH WITH POTENTIAL TO INFLUENCE POLICY AND PRACTICE

### Local and indigenous ways of knowing

For any research product to be palatable to its consumers, it must pass the test of relevance and applicability to local indigenous ways of knowledge. In the context of African social work research, the methods and techniques for what could be considered “scientific” and authentic should be gauged within the context of African norms and traditions regarding what is considered as knowledge from a local perspective. In other words, all research needs to be relevant to indigenous situations and problems whose solutions it seeks to achieve. Emphasising the same point, Brown and Strega (2005) contend that each society has its regime of truths, that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true, the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish between true and false statements. Each community has its own procedures of according value in the acquisition of truth as well as the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true knowledge. As Durrheim, Speare and Harries (2002) say, African research should seek to provide answers to local problems. African research still lacks relevance to indigenous situations because it is largely framed in western thought, a result of its colonial legacy.

Raising the same concern, Chilisa (2012:1) argues that “...current dominant academic research traditions are founded on the culture, history, philosophy of Euro-western thought and are therefore indigenous to western societies and their academic institutions”. Influenced by her personal background as a daughter of Botswana peasant farmers at the same time being a western educated Professor, Chilisa further contends that African academics and researchers should “promote the recovering, valuing and internationalizing of postcolonial indigenous epistemologies, methodologies and methods” (Chilisa, 2012:xvi). Weighing in on the same issue, Mbigi (2012) argued that indigenous knowledge systems and philosophies must have their place in African research. Mbigi said:

*Africa needs suitable and relevant research paradigms. We should create theories and not just be preoccupied with primary production. The Tswanas say it is possible for the flap of a butterfly to cause storms in New York. ... We should create theories and their applications. And we can do better; we can cause storms in New York. Imagine (one of) the most persuasive framework in gender was created by Sarah Longwe, a Zambian (Mbigi, 2014:12).*

Local ways of knowing include the Ubuntu philosophy. In their analysis of Ubuntu, Mugumbate and Nyanguru (2013) implored that the philosophy could improve social work education, practice and research concurring with Ramose (1999) and Chilisa (2012)’s frameworks that view Ubuntu as ontological (has philosophical assumptions about the nature of reality), epistemological (a way of knowing) and axiological (it forms ethics and values). It could be added that ubuntu is methodological (Seehawer, 2018). Despite its richness, Ubuntu is often ignored or dismissed as simple African thinking (Chilisa 2012; Maphalala, 2017).

Social work researchers should therefore embrace African epistemologies in order for their research products to remain appealing to African problems.

### Local solutions to local problems: a focus on community and social development

Community and social development approaches are viewed as the best for social work in Africa. Research must therefore emphasise this local focus. Casework and groupwork are important methods, but they are not truly suited to the African terrain that is characterised by mass poverty, high unemployment and marginalised rural populations. The emphasis on Biestek’s (1957) principles of individualisation, self-determination and confidentiality has further alienated the social work profession, including its interventions and research models from the cultural parameters of Africa. Culturally, most African communities have their own endogenous mechanisms for the provision of casework and groupwork interventions. As such, the current social work interventions are largely borrowed from the West. This paper therefore contends that for African contexts,

community work remains the most preferred and productive method of social work intervention. Community work is valuable as an intervention to achieve social development. This is so because the economic base of Africans has over time drifted away from customary cultural organisations thereby triggering the need for a research orientation that seeks to redefine African communalism within the context of social development. In a study of 50 case studies from developing countries, Court and Young (2003:viii) concluded that:

*The key issue affecting uptake was whether research provided a solution to a problem. Policy influence was also affected by research relevance (in terms of topic and, as important, operational usefulness) and credibility (in terms of research approach and method of communication).*

### **Indigenous philosophy, theories and ethics**

Research in Africa must have checks and balances to ensure relevant local protocols and ethics are followed in the design and implementation. In most cases, so called institutional or government ethics committees are consulted but their ways of work are framed in western methodologies. Institutional committees often lack capacity to deal with intricacies of indigenous research ethics. We recommend indigenous ethics committees to review research proposals and ensure that the accepted protocols are followed and also to promote confidentiality, voluntary participation, risk avoidance, truthfulness, informed consent, including consent to publication of results or storage of responses and avoidance of deception. African researchers must be mindful of ethics and must exude integrity. The same or other local committee can also receive complaints from participants, researchers and consumers of research and deal with them. One ethic that is flouted, argues Court and Young (2003), is the corruption of research results as a result of external influences. These include government, policy makers or western donors.

Just like all peoples everywhere, indigenous Africans have a fundamental worldview, a unified trend of thought on life and world, which inspires their thoughts, words, and actions. It is their window to the world within and without. Their worldview is a powerful compass that guides their everyday interactions in life and world (Mosha, 2000: 7). Ubuntu can indeed be the basis of African ethics. Unlike western ethics that are based on individual thinkers like Plato, Socrates, Aristotle, Kant, Marx, Pythagoras, Dewey, Comte and many others and or eastern ethics-based on Confucius, Buddha and other philosophers, African ethics are based on collectivism as espoused in Ubuntu. Ubuntu cannot be attributed to an individual, but to society as a whole. To that end, African ethics are collective, having been passed from generation to generation orally but now frequently appearing in written form. With ubuntu, the golden rule in ethics could therefore be:

*It is good for me if it is good for my relations, community and society.*

### **Collaborative and participatory approaches**

In a participatory group or *dare* in Shona language, all members are encouraged to speak up and say what's on their minds (Lakaner, 2007: 49). Participatory democracy and group decision making have always punctuated the social, political and economic life of most African communities from time immemorial. Participatory decision making strengthens a group in several ways. Members become more courageous in raising difficult issues. They learn how to share their "first-draft" ideas. And they become more adept at discovering and acknowledging the diversity of opinions and backgrounds inherent in any group. This African virtue should be expressed through collaborative research wherein social work researchers strive to rope in local community members as equal partners.

Without collaboration between the community, policy makers, the implementers and the researchers, research relevance is often limited. Communities who are the intended beneficiaries must have their voice heard in research. Mertens, Cram and Chilisa (2013:1), in reference to indigenous research, argued that:

*The ways of indigenous research are as old as the hills and the valleys, the mountains and the seas, and the deserts and the lakes that Indigenous people bind themselves to as their places of belonging. It is not that Indigenous people are anti-research. They have always conducted research.*

The community helps with needs identification among others while government provides a platform for implementation. On the one hand, industry and the social sector may provide much needed funds for research as well as pointing out to existing needs. There is need for feedback, dialogue and collaboration. Court and Young (2003) argued that there is need to emphasize particularly the importance of feedback processes between researchers and policy makers. This should extend beyond a particular research to include continuous feedback in other researches, policy, implementation and monitoring.

Collaboration should ideally involve working with the community to identify research needs (as opposed to a top down approach), ethical issues (external ethics boards are not more important than indigenous ethics), identify research methods, identify research participants, data collection (instead of having external data collectors), analyse data (instead of having expert analysis), reviewing data (instead of having peer reviewers), co-publishing, selection of publishing media (not only journals that are accessible to the academic community), and ensuring that research results are utilised (not doing research just for academic purposes) (Muwanga-Zake, 2009; Court and Young, 2003).

### **Researcher acceptability and credibility**

Whether research practices are engaged in the seemingly benign techniques of building trusting relationships with its skills of empathy and active listening, or assessing the feasibility of a client's access to services, research is constantly engaged but rarely articulated to make these processes visible. Consequently, there is nothing like a clear demarcation between when a social worker is a researcher or a practitioner providing a service (Brown and Strega, 2005). Whatever the case might be, the researcher and their institution require acceptability credibility for their research to be acceptable and credible. Research carried out by western institutions or researchers or funded by them in Africa is often lacks the acceptability and accessibility it gets in western communities. There are several reasons for this, one them being the philosophies used as discussed earlier. Another reason is that westerners are not considered to have the knowledge and skills to understand the intricacies of African societies. The opposite is also true for Africans studying western societies. Because of the history of colonialism, western driven research is viewed as a neo-colonial. More theoretical research is often considered just academic. This calls for the need for social work research to be more practical and more relevant (Court and Young, 2003). In everyday practice, various "how-to practice social work" tools provide the necessary skills and means to research the margins. These skills tend to neglect the processes of how social work develops, analyses and replenishes itself in the everyday (Brown and Strega, 2005: 129).

### **Clear outputs and policy options**

Research must have tangible outputs, it should not be carried out just for funny. An opportunity is often missed with student research, especially postgraduate research. Student research must aim to be socially acceptable and to influence policy or practice. Outputs for social research include a statement of policy implications, advocacy tools, a new model, a strategy to influence policy makers, new policy proposal e.g. a bill, media attention, new or better plan of doing things among others. Outputs include patents, registered designs, a new product ora commercialisation plan although these are usually outputs in commercial or basic science. As Burton (2006) noted, the policy making process has been modernised and therefore we should make research more relevant by feeding into the policy making process. Burton emphasises the transition from faith-based and politics-based policy making to evidence-based policy making. Research should therefore be seen as a conscious process to influence policy. Research outputs must meet the needs of African communities by providing answers to poverty. It must be innovative to be able to break the cycle of poverty. In relation to this, Mbigi (2014:33) said:

*Poverty is not romantic. Let us use the poverty situation to come up with transformational, break through and cutting-edge ideas. Let us make lemonade from the lemons we have! Let us learn from Chicken Inn (a fast food Zimbabwe business), which, when faced with a critical shortage of foreign currency during Zimbabwe's hyperinflation era (in 2008), they grew crocodiles for export!*

Court and Young (2003) argued that many times researchers are concerned with academic and financial rewards through publications, and not at policy implications of their research.

### **Dissemination of results in accessible formats**

Research should be disseminated in formats that are accessible to the people that we seek to change and not only the researchers and publishers. There is a tendency to publish in what are termed high impact journals, but the audience for these are high level academics with resources or working in resourced institutions. Local publications are desirable. Open source publishers and indexing facilities seem to be more accessible. Further, use of local languages is often neglected at the expense of international languages like English and French. Yet, local languages are understood by the majority of people. Policy makers rarely read journal papers or books for evidence, they pay more attention to workshops and advocacy. Thus, there is need to develop workshop and advocacy tools for policy makers. For the community, group discussions, songs, stories and pictures are good ways to disseminate results not journal papers and books. Publishing the research in international journals and books has obvious benefits from a western perspective but does not benefit local students, community, service

users and ironically, at times the writers do not get adequate access to their own work. Where journal publications are required for academic purposes, it is recommended to have the abstract in a local language too. Mukama and Nkusi (2019, p.1) rightly put it when, in their book titled *Ubushakashatsi mu Bumenyi Nyamuntu n'Imibanire y'Abantu*, they said:

*Researchers in developing countries rarely have the opportunity to use their indigenous languages to design, plan and conduct research. Nor do they communicate in their indigenous languages to share their insights and learnings from other parts of the world with colleagues or students.*

*Utilising the languages that researchers, students and teachers, policymakers, the community, and others interested in research understand better can help to generate new knowledge embedded in local realities where sustainable development needs to take root. That is why this book is in Kinyarwanda.*

*The authors hope that writing this book in Kinyarwanda will increase research capacity in the humanities and social sciences in Rwanda and in the region. And that it will increase interaction between all key stakeholders in the planning and conducting of research as well as in analysing, monitoring and evaluating the research process and its outputs.*

### **Utilisation of research results**

Research has a short shelf life (Mbigi, 2014), therefore results must be utilised before they get redundant. How could this be achieved? By extracting policy implications from researches as quickly as possible. For example, South Africa has the Trade and Industrial Policy Secretariat (TIPS) that screens research to ensure that all research is policy relevant and academically credible (Mbigi, 2014). It provides the link between researchers, academics, think tanks, industry and government (Court and Young, 2003). Research must therefore be conducted, published, disseminated and used to improve social work interventions.

### **Research impact**

The end of a research process must not be the results, but the impact must also be clearly documented. An impact statement must be available to inform the community, researchers and practitioners about the expected and desired impact. This should then be audited and an impact trail recorded. At times the impact is less or more than expected, and at times it is negative. These should all be recorded to inform future research.

### **Research funding**

The researcher needs to be adequately resourced to achieve their intentions. Funding is very important to promote research and development but often African governments and institutions do not fund adequately. This leaves researchers with not or limited resources to carry out their research. In other cases, the researcher is not capable of carrying out the research because of limited training or exposure resulting in low quality research. Without adequate funding, ethics are often neglected and the research process is not finished. Results may be generated but these are neither reported nor implemented to change policy and improve practice.

## **A TOOL TO ASSESS AFRICAN RESEARCH**

The attributes discussed above are important for African social work research but also African research in general. That is why we have named the tool an African Research Assessment Tool (ARAT). The ARAT is a checklist with 11 attributes that can help to determine if research has potential to be socially acceptable and to influence policy and practice.

*Figure 1: The African Research Assessment Tool (ARAT)*

The African Research Assessment Tool (ARAT)								
ATTRIBUTE		SCORE	0	1	2	3	4	5
		POTENTIAL	None	Very Low	Low	Medium	High	Very high
1	Local and indigenous knowledge in non-written (orature) and written form are prioritised.							
2	Local and indigenous problems and solutions are prioritised.							
3	Relevant local philosophy, theories and ethics have been followed.							
4	Collaborative and participatory approaches have been selected.							
5	Researcher acceptability and credibility are available.							
6	Policy implications & options are clear.							
7	Quality review that includes the community, users and policy makers.							
8	Dissemination of results is in formats accessible to local researchers, students, policy makers and the community.							
9	There is a clear plan for utilisation of research results.							
10	Anticipated and actual impact is detailed and there is a procedure to follow up.							
11	Research funding is adequate with no conflict of interest.							
<b>SUB-TOTAL</b>								
<b>TOTAL SCORE</b>								

To use this scale, first score each attribute by putting the corresponding number then add all the sub-totals to get a total score. Divide your total score by 11 to get an average. An average of 5 means the research has very high potential to be socially acceptable and to influence policy and practice while zero (0) indicates no potential. This tool can be applied to any type of research be it that done by students, academics, government or independent researchers. It is applicable to all fields of research, not just social work.

## CONCLUSION

In concluding this article, the authors challenge African researchers to design their researches using the research framework provided above so that it becomes more relevant. Researchers in Africa should lead community focused, policy focused and practice focused research.



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