



Incorporating Indigenous Knowledge Systems to improve culturally responsive Social Work practices

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that incorporating Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) into social work practice can significantly improve the effectiveness and relevance of interventions for Indigenous communities, thus fostering culturally responsive and decolonial frameworks. Beginning with an examination of the historical exclusion of Indigenous perspectives in social work, the study sought to identify and articulate the values, principles, and practices inherent in IKS that can inform contemporary social work interventions. The research involved a qualitative study with 15 participants from the Greater Letaba Municipality, Limpopo, South Africa. The study included 15 participants with various roles and statuses within the community. Among these, 10 were social workers actively involved in indigenous communities, while 5 were traditional leaders from their respective areas. Data were collected through face-to-face interviews with social workers and community leaders who have experience in indigenous knowledge systems. Thematic analysis of the collected data revealed important insights into the significance of the Indigenous Knowledge System in the practice of social work. The implications of this study suggest that social work education should develop curricula that incorporate Indigenous Knowledge systems to more effectively meet the needs of Indigenous peoples and decolonize practice. The study adds to the scholarly realm by reducing the connection created between the Western system of social work and the indigenous worldview. It confronts the ideas of the prevailing Eurocentric models by stating the worth and usefulness of Indigenous knowledge in feeding more thorough, comprehensive, and successful social work practices.

Keywords: Culturally Responsive, Decolonial Practice, Indigenous Knowledge System, Indigenous People, Social Work.

INTRODUCTION

Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) are extremely valuable for comprehending human behavior, societal dynamics and the healing processes within Indigenous communities. These knowledge systems, based on the close ties between people, land, spirituality, and the natural world, have been handed down through the ages.¹ Integrating IKS into social work provides a chance to create more decolonial and

¹ Augie Fleras, “The Politics of Indigenous Identity: A Global Perspective” (Oxford University Press: Oxford University Press, 2014).

culturally sensitive approaches, especially for social workers who work with Indigenous people.² The incorporation of IKS offers a way forward for a more inclusive, courteous, and comprehensive approach to social work while also challenging conventional approaches historically influenced by Western values.³

Social workers have followed Western paradigms for their practice, although these paradigms center around medical interventions combined with individualistic perspectives and logical sequential thinking methods.⁴ The Western paradigms are often devoid of the cultural, spiritual, and social attributes that constitute the foundational elements of Indigenous peoples' daily experiences and worldviews. Socioeconomic challenges such as family disintegration, along with poverty and mental health disorders, have profound implications for Indigenous communities. These issues go beyond mere psychological or individual concerns; they are deeply rooted in historical contexts, social dynamics, and culturally informed spiritual beliefs. Understanding the interconnectedness of these factors is crucial to addressing the multifaceted nature of the adversities faced by these communities. Indigenous knowledge promotes two essential concepts: restorative care between people and nature, while implementing neighbourhood-level remedies for a collective existence (the Ubuntu spirit).⁵ IKS is based on the unique cultural and spiritual beliefs that indigenous peoples maintain. IKS represents an essential anti-colonial process in its core structure. These systems validate Indigenous systems of experience and existence while fighting against Western knowledge systems that claim supremacy.⁶ Social work practitioners employing decolonial methodologies aim to dismantle systems of colonial discrimination and abuse. The restoration of Indigenous cultural sovereignty and self-determination relies on Indigenous peoples collaboratively identifying the traumatic impacts of colonization on their communities. This approach emphasizes resilience and empowerment while addressing the legacies of colonialism. Social workers must implement approaches that go beyond cultural sensitivity by actively working against colonial ideologies and advocating structural transformations.⁷

The paper articulates the significance of integrating IKS within social work practice, positing that this integration is essential for delivering culturally responsive and ethically sound services to Indigenous individuals and communities. It advocates for the critical necessity of embedding Indigenous knowledge and perspectives within social work education and practice to facilitate the decolonization of the field. By recognizing and valuing these knowledge systems, social work can better address the unique needs and worldviews of Indigenous populations, thereby promoting more effective and respectful engagement within the profession.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptualising Indigenous Knowledge Systems

For thousands of years, Indigenous peoples have developed IKS, which represent their extensive knowledge systems.⁸ Indigenous peoples are the holders of unique languages, knowledge, and beliefs, and possess invaluable knowledge of practices for the sustainable management of natural resources.⁹ Indigenous communities have a distinctive and profound connection to their ancestral lands, which play a crucial role in their collective physical and cultural survival. This relationship underscores the necessity of their land not only as a resource but as a fundamental aspect of their identity and continuity as a people. Given their traditional values, worldviews, needs, and priorities, indigenous peoples often articulate diverse and nuanced perspectives on development, which may differ significantly from the mainstream development paradigms. This variance highlights the importance of considering indigenous

² Chris Lalonde, "Decolonizing Social Work Practice," *Canadian Social Work Review* 34, no. 1 (2017): 1–16.

³ Ray Linton, *The Study of Man: An Introduction*, Century Social Science Series (Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1964), <https://books.google.com.gh/books?id=akr9zQEACAAJ>.

⁴ Lalonde, "Decolonizing Social Work Practice."

⁵ Eduardo Duran, "Indigenous Perspectives in Mental Health and Healing," *Journal of Native American Psychology* 1, no.1(2016):8–16.

⁶ Fleras, "The Politics of Indigenous Identity: A Global Perspective."

⁷ Sarah De Leeuw, *Determinants of Indigenous Peoples' Health* (Canadian Scholars' Press, 2015).

⁸ Fleras, "The Politics of Indigenous Identity: A Global Perspective."

⁹ Neil M. Dawson et al., "The Role of Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities in Effective and Equitable Conservation," *Ecology and Society* 26, no. 3 (2021): art19, <https://doi.org/10.5751/ES-12625-260319>.

knowledge systems and cultural practices in any discussions regarding sustainable development and the stewardship of land.

Local knowledge exists within living traditions that transmit information through oral practices and ceremonial events, as well as social customs, while closely related to spiritual beliefs and cultural practices and environmental knowledge.¹⁰ IKS exists as an interconnected system because it requires deep respect for past wisdom and forthcoming generations, and ties people to land and spiritual dimensions.¹¹ The IKS approach centres on maintaining harmony and ensuring overall wellness, while Western cultural epistemologies work with separate knowledge domains through a preference for personal and scientific methods.¹² IKS focus on knowledge that stems from interpersonal relationships and a total understanding of knowledge between humans, alongside Earth and spiritual forces.¹³ The integration of collective well-being and localized methods, along with a deep appreciation for ancestral wisdom expressed through oral traditions and ceremonies, forms a fundamental aspect of this framework. These components improve community cohesion and underscore the value of traditional knowledge in modern society. Within social work practice, IKS offered a replacement to Western individualistic interventions by focusing on the essential connections between all life and community restoration.¹⁴ The incorporation of IKS within social work practice functions as a mechanism for the deconvergence of the profession, facilitating the development of culturally attuned interventions that respect and uphold Indigenous autonomy and traditional healing practices. This integration not only aligns with contemporary principles of cultural competence but also fosters an environment where Indigenous epistemologies are valued and utilized in the pursuit of holistic well-being.

Through its approach to gaining understanding, it offers new perspectives on the world's perception and comprehension that challenge dominant Western scientific principles. Indigenous Knowledge Systems integrate spiritual healing, community involvement, and land-based traditions, providing diverse methods for understanding and addressing social issues.

Colonialism's impact on social work practices

The impact of colonialism on social work practice is reflected in the curriculum that governs this field. The literature, approaches, theories, and models often mirror colonial perspectives, lacking sufficient integration of indigenous knowledge. There is a significant correlation between these two influences. This confirms that social work has historically supported colonial policies that aimed to subjugate Indigenous populations, frequently through child welfare programs, residential schools, and other tactics that upended Indigenous family systems, culture, and governance.¹⁵ In the organizations mentioned, Indigenous communities suffered from intergenerational trauma and loss of cultural practices due to activities.¹⁶

The discipline of social work needs to embrace decolonizing its practice to critically reassess its approaches and solutions to address its colonial past.¹⁷ To decolonize social work, Western beliefs that have historically dominated social work practices need to be changed and replaced with methods that integrate and validate Indigenous worldviews and knowledge systems.¹⁸

Social work professionals can better support Indigenous communities in addressing the lasting effects of colonialism by understanding their unique cultural contexts. IKS should be included in the curriculum by educators, who should stress the value of Indigenous healing methods, self-governance, and cultural revitalization.¹⁹ Future social workers will benefit from this, as they acquire the skills and

¹⁰ Linton, *The Study of Man: An Introduction*.

¹¹ Duran, "Indigenous Perspectives in Mental Health and Healing."

¹² Rosalie. Horne, "Social Work Practice with Indigenous Communities in Canada." (UBC Press, 2017).

¹³ Marie Battiste, "Indigenous Knowledge and the Politics of Education" (Canadian Scholars' Press, 2002).

¹⁴ Linda Tuhiwai Smith, "Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples," 2021.

¹⁵ Horne, "Social Work Practice with Indigenous Communities in Canada. ."

¹⁶ Lalonde, "Decolonizing Social Work Practice."

¹⁷ Mel Gray and Jane Dalrymple, "Indigenous Social Work: A Global Perspective" (London: Routledge, 2015).

¹⁸ Robert Lavalley, "The Role of Indigenous Knowledge in Social Work Education: Promoting Culturally Relevant Practices" (Vancouver: : University of British Columbia Press , 2017).

¹⁹ Patricia. Monture, "We Are Not the Same: The Significance of Indigenous Knowledge in Social Work Education.," *Indigenous Voices in Social Work* 12, No. 3 (2017): , n.d., 17–30.

information needed to interact politely and successfully with Indigenous clients. Finally, respecting Indigenous peoples' cultural traditions, worldviews, and self-determination, social work education that incorporates Indigenous knowledge upholds the profession's commitment to decolonizing its practices and advancing the welfare of Indigenous peoples.²⁰ This change is not only academic; it is a crucial and practical step to remedy the damage caused by colonial practices and develop a social work practice that is more responsive and inclusive.²¹

The Value of Indigenous knowledge in social work practice ***Culturally Responsive Social Work Practice***

The South African Constitution Act No. 108 of 1996, chapter 2, section 9 & 15 of the Bill of Rights, affirms the right of individuals to engage in cultural practices. This provision enables people to embrace their cultures without fear of rejection or intimidation. As a result, indigenous communities possess value systems that are essential to their daily routines and practices. These cultural practices foster a deeper connection and response to their heritage. A social work paradigm known as "culturally responsive social work practice" places a strong emphasis on comprehending and addressing each person's or community's distinct cultural background, values, beliefs, and experiences to deliver services that are appropriate, effective, and pertinent.²² It acknowledges that a one-size-fits-all approach to social work can be ineffective, if not destructive, and that cultural differences influence how people experience and react to difficulties.²³ The cornerstone of culturally responsive practice is cultural competence. Social workers learn about various cultures and become aware of their own prejudices and presumptions.²⁴ To be culturally competent, social workers must be able to examine their own cultural identity, prejudices, and values; learn about the customs, histories, and practices of various cultural groups; interact and communicate with individuals from a variety of backgrounds; and modify interventions to suit their own cultural contexts.²⁵

Understanding and respecting clients' cultural backgrounds is crucial, as culturally responsive social work practice acknowledges that different values, beliefs, and practices are the foundation of successful interventions.²⁶ IKS provide priceless insights on healing customs, community-based techniques, and ways of knowing that can greatly improve social work practice and education.²⁷ Social work programs better prepare aspiring professionals to interact with Indigenous people in a way that respects their cultural heritage, customs, and worldviews by integrating Indigenous viewpoints. In addition to enhancing culturally sensitive practice, this integration deepens our understanding of how social work may serve Indigenous peoples in ways that are respectful, all-encompassing, and consistent with their values.²⁸ In particular, when dealing with Indigenous communities, acknowledging the importance of IKS can ultimately result in social work treatments that are more egalitarian, successful, and culturally sensitive.

Decolonising Theoretical frameworks, interventions, and Approaches in Social Work Practice

Social work largely draws from Western theoretical frameworks, often neglecting African perspectives and cultural contexts. This Western-centric bias limits the incorporation of indigenous knowledge

²⁰ Raven Sinclair, "Decolonizing Social Work: The Challenge of Indigenous Approaches," *Social Work and Indigenous Communities* 29, no. 2 (2018): 42–57.

²¹ Sarah Wendt and Robin J. T. Fox, "Colonialism and the Role of Social Work: A Critical Perspective," *Social Work Review* 46, no. 4 (2014): 45–60.

²² Horne, "Social Work Practice with Indigenous Communities in Canada."

²³ Muriel Bamblett et al., *"Not One Size Fits All": Understanding the Social & Emotional Wellbeing of Aboriginal Children* (La Trobe, 2012).

²⁴ Linda McKenzie and Susan Wendt, "Indigenous Knowledge and Social Work," *A Call for a Paradigm Shift Journal of Social Work* 50, no. 2 (2019): 129–42.

²⁵ Corinne Brant, "Indigenous Social Work: A New Approach to Indigenous Knowledge and Cultural Awareness in Social Work Practice" (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016).

²⁶ Gray and Dalrymple, "Indigenous Social Work: A Global Perspective."

²⁷ Raven Sinclair, "Culturally Responsive Social Work Practice: The Role of Indigenous Knowledge Systems," *Journal of Indigenous Social Work* 22, no. 4 (2018): 345–62.

²⁸ Lavalley, "The Role of Indigenous Knowledge in Social Work Education: Promoting Culturally Relevant Practices."

systems, underscoring the need for a more integrative approach that includes African viewpoints to improve the relevance and effectiveness of social work interventions. Therefore, incorporating IKS in social work will influence the approaches and theoretical framework to be applied.²⁹ Theories are vital to shaping knowledge and practice. Thus, when choosing theorists for the curriculum, it is important to rethink normative foundations to include those relevant to the South African context and who challenge ongoing coloniality.³⁰ The indigenous people had their approaches and frameworks on how to handle their affairs. Many theories can help decolonize social work practice by shifting from the Western perspective to the African perspective. African-centric perspectives and the diverse indigenous knowledge of South African peoples should be central to intellectual engagement.³¹ This approach challenges the dominance of Western knowledge systems and promotes a more equitable academic landscape that values diverse worldviews. By prioritizing these local epistemologies, scholars can better address contemporary issues rooted in the African context.³² The use of African social work can be encouraged by certain theories. Most African nations still have colonial-style educational systems.³³ To make matters worse, most higher education curricula, including social work, continue to teach interventions and ideas based on the Western knowledge system. The African social work approach has emerged as a result of the discipline's current disregard for the African-centred approach.³⁴ Some theories can be incorporated in social work practice; however, for this article, only two are discussed, namely, Afrocentric theory and African strength theory. These Theories play a crucial role and can guide the indigenous social work practice.

Afrocentric Theory

Afrocentricity is defined as an academic endeavour in terms of the approach, philosophy, and ideology that should be used to achieve its goals to bring about the suggested transformation.³⁵ In terms of methodology, Afrocentricity aims to respond to the intellectual colonialism that supports and legitimizes economic and political colonialism. Theoretically, it centres any examination of African phenomena in terms of behaviour and activity around African people. It aims to uphold the notion that "Africanness" is an ensemble of ethics and is defined as a dedication to the belief that what is best for African consciousness lies at the core of ethical behaviour.³⁶

Based on this theory, Black African people both domestically and internationally need to see knowledge from an African perspective.³⁷ The assertion highlights that our understanding of Africa can be fundamentally flawed when we apply external perspectives and terminology that do not align with the unique context of the continent. This misalignment risks obscuring the complex realities and diverse experiences that define Africa. Instead of seeing themselves as peripheral and on the edge of political or economic experience, Africans perceive themselves as agents, actors, and participants when they see themselves as central and centred in their own history.³⁸ While not the opposite of Eurocentrism, Afrocentrism has emerged as the most contentious and incendiary topic, with both white and black academics debating its feasibility.

²⁹ Smith, "Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples."

³⁰ Linda Harms Smith and Shahana Rasool, "Deep Transformation toward Decoloniality in Social Work: Themes for Change in a Social Work Higher Education Program," *Journal of Progressive Human Services* 31, no. 2 (2020): 144–64.

³¹ Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Epistemic Freedom in Africa: Deprovincialization and Decolonization* (Routledge, 2018).

³² Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Epistemic Freedom in Africa: Deprovincialization and Decolonization*.

³³ Felix Maringe, Simon Vurayai, and Gloria Erima, "Decolonising African University Knowledges, Volume," n.d.

³⁴ Mmaphuti Mamaleka, "African Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Theories in Teaching Social Work," in *Routledge Handbook of African Social Work Education*, vol. 1 (Routledge, 2024), 49–61.

³⁵ Tawanda Majoko, "An Afrocentric Perspective on Inclusive Education and Ubuntu," in *Autism* (Routledge, 2023), 1–5.

³⁶ Zingisa Nkosinkulu, "A Decolonial Curriculum Is Everything: An Afrocentric Approach," in *Research Anthology on Racial Equity, Identity, and Privilege* (IGI Global Scientific Publishing, 2022), 567–84.

³⁷ Oluwatunmise Taiwo Paimo and Omololu Fagbadebo, "Question on Reality: Rethinking the Practice of Decolonisation in African Studies," *African Renaissance* 20, no. 3 (2023): 85.

³⁸ Maringe, Vurayai, and Erima, "Decolonising African University Knowledges, Volume."

African Strength Theory

An Indigenous African theoretical framework known as "African Strength Theory" highlights the cultural assets, resiliency, and qualities of African people, families, and communities.³⁹ The theory is rooted in African worldviews and challenges the deficit-based, Western-oriented models that are frequently employed in social work. These models tend to pathologize poverty, trauma, and marginalization without considering the historical and cultural contexts, particularly the effects of racism, colonialism, and apartheid.⁴⁰ By emphasizing the community's innate abilities, customs, and support networks, African Strength Theory positions these as potent instruments for empowerment and healing.

Scholars like Molefi Kete Asante and Professor Vuyisile Msila have promoted Afrocentric approaches, which put African people and their knowledge systems at the forefront of theory and practice while celebrating African heritage and values.⁴¹ This Afrocentric ideology is supported by the African Strength Theory, which affirms the legitimacy, dignity, and applicability of African cultural traditions in contemporary interventions while opposing their marginalization. It performs a decolonial function in this way by flipping the narrative, making Western systems one of many knowledge systems rather than the norm or the best.⁴²

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study employs two theoretical frameworks: decolonial and anti-decolonial theories. The selection of these frameworks is grounded in their complementary nature, which together advocate for the decolonization of social work practice. The subsequent discussion offers concise insights into both theories.

Decolonial theory

Decolonial theory helps social workers develop essential perspectives that push their practice toward Indigenous and community-centred knowledge systems above Western assumptions.⁴³ Academics Walter D. Mignolo and Aníbal Quijano developed decolonial theory within Latin America to challenge yet persistent colonial influences that run through contemporary institutions while reaching into knowledge and power structures. Decolonial theory in social work challenges the profession's Euro-American foundations and addresses ongoing colonial structures.⁴⁴ It calls for a deep transformation in social work education, moving beyond narrow interpretations of decoloniality focused solely on curriculum or indigeneity.⁴⁵ The approach involves reclaiming narratives about social work history, exploring underlying ideologies, facilitating critical conscientization, and incorporating anti-colonial theorists.⁴⁶ Decolonial theory emphasizes the centrality of life and proposes alternatives to anthropocentrism.⁴⁷ It also critiques conventional cultural competence approaches that maintain the universality of Whiteness.⁴⁸ By turning the postcolonial lens on social work itself, the profession can better support

³⁹ Adaobiagu N Obiagu, "Toward a Decolonized Moral Education for Social Justice in Africa," *Journal of Black Studies* 54, no. 3 (2023): 236–63.

⁴⁰ Luís Cordeiro-Rodrigues, "African Higher Education and Decolonizing the Teaching of Philosophy," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 54, no. 11 (2022): 1854–67.

⁴¹ Evaristus Emeka Isife and Arinze Agbanusi, "Decolonization of the African Mind through Indigenous Education: A Philosophical Proposal," *Nnamdi Azikiwe Journal of Philosophy* 13, no. 1 (2022): 109–18.

⁴² Carol A Mullen, "Pedagogies for Decolonizing Education in Theory and Practice," in *Handbook of Social Justice Interventions in Education* (Springer, 2021), 11–37.

⁴³ James Ojochenemi David, "Decolonizing Climate Change Response: African Indigenous Knowledge and Sustainable Development," *Frontiers in Sociology* 9 (2024): 1456871.

⁴⁴ Harms Smith and Rasool, "Deep Transformation toward Decoloniality in Social Work: Themes for Change in a Social Work Higher Education Program."

⁴⁵ Harms Smith and Rasool, "Deep Transformation toward Decoloniality in Social Work: Themes for Change in a Social Work Higher Education Program."

⁴⁶ Linda Harms Smith and Motlalepule Nathane, "# NotDomestication# NotIndigenisation: Decoloniality in Social Work Education," *Southern African Journal of Social Work and Social Development* 30, no. 1 (2018): 18-pages.

⁴⁷ Esperanza Gómez Hernández and Marisol Patiño Sánchez, "Decolonialidad En Lo Social. Apuntes Desde Trabajo Social," 2018.

⁴⁸ Smith and Nathane, "# NotDomestication# NotIndigenisation: Decoloniality in Social Work Education."

Indigenous struggles for self-determination and social justice while addressing its own colonial origins and continued coloniality.⁴⁹

The theory of anti-colonialism provides a specific framework to understand how colonization continues to affect both Indigenous peoples along other oppressed groups.⁵⁰ Linda Tuhiwai Smith from Aotearoa/New Zealand, together with George J. Sefa Dei from Ghana/Canada, establishes that anti-colonial ideology developed from Indigenous resistance and African anti-colonial movements. According to Dei, social and educational frameworks must integrate African Indigenous knowledge, as he discusses this value.⁵¹ Additionally, Smith addresses Western research criticism and its role in devaluing Indigenous knowledge through his book "Decolonizing Methodologies". Decolonial social work practice requires persistent efforts to eliminate institutional obstacles and then support the self-governance rights of Indigenous communities in maintaining their cultural heritage alongside healing traditions.⁵² The practice of decolonization requires social workers to help Indigenous populations define their needs and build governance structures alongside policy advocacy for the authorization of Indigenous self-determination through culturally suitable policies.⁵³ Culturally rooted social work practice rejects the idea of expert knowledge by recognizing the wisdom and expertise held by Indigenous community members as well as their Elders. That will be decolonising the social work practice. The adoption of these theories allows social work professionals to shift from traditional Western frameworks to Indigenous practices, empowering communities while preserving cultural authenticity and emphasizing Indigenous self-governance.

METHODOLOGY

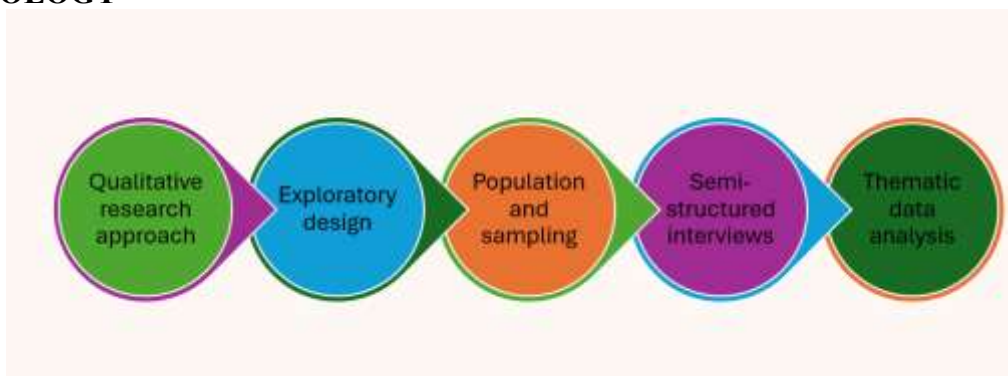


Figure 1: Illustration of research methodology

The study involved 15 participants, comprising 10 social workers and 5 traditional leaders, all of whom possessed knowledge of indigenous knowledge systems. It was conducted with social workers based in the Greater Letaba Municipality, specifically in Mokwakwaila Village, Block 17, and Mawa Village within the Mopani District, along with traditional leaders from the same locales. The participant pool included both male and female individuals, all residing in Bolobedu Ga-Modjadji in the Limpopo province. Data collection was conducted through face-to-face interviews, utilizing a semi-structured format to gather information. This interview technique-maintained flexibility for participants to freely share their information in spontaneous ways, along with key research topics about the Indigenous knowledge System.⁵⁴ The research instrument involved conducting interviews with participants in English. These interviews were held at the residences of the participants and at times that were

⁴⁹ Tanja Dittfeld, "Seeing White: Turning the Postcolonial Lens on Social Work in Australia," *Social Work & Policy Studies: Social Justice, Practice and Theory* 3, no. 1 (2020).

⁵⁰ Svitlana Biedarieva, "Anti-Colonialism vs. 'Self-Colonization,'" in *Ambicoloniality and War: The Ukrainian-Russian Case* (Springer, 2025), 27–61.

⁵¹ Zeus Leonardo, Michael V Singh, and Ziza Delgado Noguera, "Education and Colonialism: Three Frameworks," in *Handbook of Critical Education Research* (Routledge, 2023), 103–21.

⁵² Lalonde, "Decolonizing Social Work Practice."

⁵³ Linton, *The Study of Man: An Introduction*.

⁵⁴ J. W. Creswell and C. N. Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches* (SAGE Publications, 2018).

convenient for them, primarily because they have work commitments that often make them busy during the day. Each interview session lasted between 40 and 50 minutes. The study was guided by these specific objectives: a. To explore participants' perspectives on the importance of integrating IKS into social work practice. b. To identify the challenges social workers encounter when incorporating IKS into their work. c. To investigate Indigenous approaches and interventions beneficial to social work practice.

The data underwent inductive analysis, which permitted natural themes and patterns to develop directly from the observations rather than applying pre-defined theoretical frameworks. The researcher used thematic analysis to discover essential conceptual elements and main topics that emerged from the examination of interviews. The collected data were transcribed, coded, and thematically analysed using Braun & Clarke's steps.⁵⁵ Themes from the data were identified to improve the understanding of IKS in social work practice. Thematic analysis effectively allowed researchers to systematically examine data and interpret participants' experiences related to IKS integration in social work.

Ethical Considerations

First, all participants gave their informed consent, and were aware of the nature of the study, procedures and possible effects of the study and were informed that participation was voluntary. Indigenous community was respected in the research design in line with the Ownership, Control, Access, and Possession (OCAP) to focus on the right of Indigenous people on cultural knowledge and data. Cultural safety was also reflected in the research by adopting culturally sensitive procedures, which included obtaining the consent of elders and traditional knowledge carriers in the community, and elucidating cultural ways of dissemination of knowledge. It did not require any names that would give away the identities of the participants, as records and information were kept confidential, with the only mention being of the pseudonyms. By engaging community members in the analysis of the results and ensuring that the results would have a positive impact on the communities in question, the researchers tried to avoid exploitation or misrepresentation.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 provides the demographic information relating to the participants who were part of the study.

Participant (s) ID	Age	Gender	Role/Status
Participant 1	50	Male	Community leader
Participant 2	87	Male	Community leader
Participant 3	64	Male	Community leader
Participant 4	48	Male	Community leader
Participant 5	60	Female	Community leader
Participant 6	40	Male	Social Worker
Participant 7	45	Female	Social Worker
Participant 8	50	Male	Social Worker
Participant 9	36	Male	Social Worker
Participant 10	54	Male	Social Worker
Participant 11	39	Female	Social Worker
Participant 12	45	Female	Social Worker
Participant 13	45	Female	Social Worker
Participant 14	46	Female	Social Worker
Participant 15	49	Male	Social Worker

The data presented in the table outlines the demographics of the study participants. The cohort included individuals from both genders, comprising a total of eight males and seven females. The ages of the participants varied, with a range spanning 36 to 87 years.

⁵⁵ Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (January 21, 2006): 77–101, <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>.

Theme 1: The Importance of Integrating Indigenous Knowledge into Social Work Practice

The participants underscored the significance of indigenous knowledge in social work, identifying two key values: cultural relevance and trust building, along with the enhancement of community resilience. These values illustrate the need to incorporate indigenous perspectives into practice, resulting in more effective support systems and fostering deeper connections between social workers and the communities they serve.

Cultural Relevance and Trust Building

The study participants held very strong views on the indigenous knowledge systems in practicing social work. According to social workers and community leaders, indigenous knowledge systems create a safe space for the clients to express their lived experiences using their narrative stories, languages, traditional ceremonies, and recognition of the elderly's advice. They negate the Western therapy models that ignore how they have culturally lived and handle their lives. The emphasis was also that indigenous knowledge systems embrace the issues of trust and respect, which promote a safe cultural space for interactions rather than a one-sided approach of imposing solutions. Incorporating indigenous knowledge systems resonates well with indigenous people as they reconnect them with their cultural identity. Indigenous knowledge systems incorporate culturally appropriate procedures to addressing the clients' problems and needs as per the participants' responses.

"Many Indigenous clients feel that Western therapy models do not address their lived experiences. By incorporating traditional languages and engaging Elders, we create trust and a culturally safe space." (Participant 9)

"For generations, social work services were feared in our communities. We need social workers who understand our ways, respect our traditions, and work with us rather than imposing outside solutions." (Participant 2)

"In my practice, I integrate Indigenous storytelling and ceremonies, which have been instrumental in helping clients reconnect with their cultural identity. These practices promote emotional and spiritual well-being beyond conventional therapy." (Participant 6)

"We know what we are doing, and we know who we are. We need to be understood at the personal and community level. The western solutions that are brought forward should align with the indigenous knowledge that we have as a community." (Participant 1)

Therefore, decolonial social work practice requires persistent efforts to eliminate institutional obstacles and then support the self-governance rights of Indigenous communities in maintaining their cultural heritage alongside healing traditions.⁵⁶ The practice of decolonization requires social workers to help Indigenous populations define their needs and build governance structures alongside policy advocacy for the authorization of Indigenous self-determination through culturally suitable policies.⁵⁷ Culturally rooted social work practice rejects the idea of expert knowledge by recognizing the wisdom and expertise held by Indigenous community members as well as their Elders. The study showed that indigenous knowledge systems are valuable in social work practice to facilitate trust, respect, and cultural preservation.

Strengthening Community Resilience

Strengthening community resilience within social work practice involves empowering communities to adapt effectively and recover from adversity. This can be achieved by fostering social connections, promoting preparation, and improving capacity for long-term well-being. Social workers play a vital role in facilitating these processes by engaging with community members, supporting local organizations, and advocating for inclusive decision-making. Both social workers and community

⁵⁶ Lalonde, "Decolonizing Social Work Practice."

⁵⁷ Linton, *The Study of Man: An Introduction*.

leaders recognize that indigenous knowledge systems contribute to resilience by uniting the community. The principles of Ubuntu, such as collective effort, respect, sharing, and care, are invaluable in addressing social issues within communities. These principles not only support the enhancement of physical and mental health but also promote collaboration across various sectors. By incorporating indigenous knowledge systems that foster partnership and collaboration, along with cultural and social activities, social work practices can strengthen bonds and build trust within the community. Using cultural activities, such as rituals and ceremonies, as therapeutic interventions reinforces social cohesion and fosters a strong sense of community identity. The participants confirm this in their responses.

"Programs that integrate traditional practices like conflict resolution and customary leadership and oral history, and storytelling have proven to be effective. They instill pride in identity and strengthen community bonds." (Participant 7)

"The resilience of our people lies in our traditions. By teaching our youth Indigenous knowledge, we are ensuring that our communities remain strong and self-sufficient." (Participant 5)

"The community is a community because it has members; it is important to involve members in activities affecting them and allow them to find solutions." (Participant 1)

"In my community practice and community initiatives, we strive for full participation and involvement of the community." (Participant 15)

The resilience of a community is derived from a strong sense of belonging and ownership. The study found that for community members to cultivate resilience, they must engage in community affairs. The enhancement of community resilience is extensively explored in various fields, including disaster management, sustainable development, and social sciences. The process of building resilience means improving communities to foresee substantial threats and resist and bounce back from quantifiable disruptions.⁵⁸ Social capital, alongside local knowledge, combined with adaptive governance, demonstrates significant research-based importance for resilience development.⁵⁹ Effective strategies include participatory planning alongside capacity-building programs, together with the integration of traditional methods with scientific knowledge.⁶⁰ Experts widely acknowledge that the development of resilience frameworks necessitates collaboration between government agencies, non-governmental organizations, local communities, and academic scholars to achieve sustainable and inclusive solutions. Engaging with communities fosters open dialogue and creates forums where members can safely share their experiences, concerns, and perspectives, thereby fostering understanding and trust. Social work services that prioritize this practice improve community resilience and empower individuals to make informed decisions.

Furthermore, social work that integrates indigenous knowledge systems helps to build social connections and promote social cohesion. This approach encourages community members to cultivate strong relationships and provides vital support, fostering a sense of belonging. As noted by participants, indigenous knowledge systems in social work enhance preparedness and capacity building, equipping community members with the necessary skills and knowledge to respond to emergencies and bolster resilience. By implementing these strategies, social workers can play a crucial role in fortifying community resilience, enabling them to better withstand and recover from adversity.

Theme 2: Indigenous-Led Social Work interventions and approaches

Community-initiated solutions take precedence when Indigenous knowledge systems are incorporated when handling indigenous communities' challenges and problems. By using Indigenous-led approaches

⁵⁸ Jane South et al., "Sustaining and Strengthening Community Resilience throughout the COVID-19 Pandemic and Beyond," *Perspectives in Public Health* 140, no. 6 (2020): 305–8.

⁵⁹ Cynthia McDougall and Mani Ram Banjade, "Social Capital, Conflict, and Adaptive Collaborative Governance: Exploring the Dialectic," *Ecology and Society* 20, no. 1 (2015): art44, <https://doi.org/10.5751/ES-07071-200144>.

⁶⁰ Yanjun, Zhang and Zhaohui Su, "Strengthening the Relationship Between Community Resilience and Health Emergency Communication: A Systematic Review," *BMC Global Public Health* 4, no. 1 (2024): 12.

and interventions, social workers gain more power in their practice while maintaining community values in service delivery. The crucial element for achieving sustainable transformation requires social work initiatives and policies to incorporate Indigenous knowledge systems. The findings show that one cannot achieve decolonization by merely inserting Indigenous components into established frameworks because it requires a total examination of well-being definitions and practices. The effective development of respectful policy solutions requires the inclusion of Indigenous communities during the creation process.

"Indigenous-led approaches of social work emphasize community-driven solution, rather than top-down interventions. These approaches have shown great success." (Participant 6)

"Empowering social workers with indigenous knowledge and supporting their leadership is crucial for sustainable change." (Participant 14)

"Recognition of Indigenous Knowledge Systems in policies would be a game-changer. It would validate our practices and provide resources to support culturally relevant interventions." (Participant 9)

"Decolonization is not just about adding Indigenous elements to social work; it is about fundamentally shifting how we define and approach well-being." (Participant 12)

Indigenous social work healing approaches incorporate traditional activities, such as ceremonies and storytelling, as holistic approaches to support mental, physical, and spiritual well-being, which separates them from typical Western models. The models enable community empowerment by recognizing their valuable assets while advocating their strengths and knowledge rather than basing interventions on deficits. Reliable healing techniques combined with language preservation projects, along with ongoing support between generations, serve as core aspects of Indigenous-led social work practices.

Theme 3: Barriers to incorporating indigenous knowledge systems into social work practice

The institutional barriers and policies, and Cultural Competency and Training Gaps, are identified as the obstacles in the integration of IKS into social work practice.

Institutional Barriers and Policies

The complete inclusion of Indigenous practices in social work faces obstacles within social work structures. Many funding models prohibit Indigenous-led initiatives from receiving funds. Policies such as the National Policy Framework on Indigenous Knowledge Systems, which aims to promote, protect, and integrate IKS to sustainable and national development, are not in place. At the same time, formal institutions resist the adoption of indigenous approaches to practice.⁶¹ Such limitations prevent the development of culturally appropriate intervention programs. It was further revealed that another barrier within institutions is a lack of competency, wherein social work agencies may not have access to the necessary competence working with indigenous communities and IKS to understand and value IKS. The social work education and practice are based on the Western epistemology, which makes it difficult to link their service with IKS. The study further stressed the resources provided to make a good workflow, which restricts the support to the integration of Indigenous knowledge systems.

"Many funding structures do not support Indigenous-led initiatives. The policies in place often make it difficult for us to incorporate cultural elements into our programs." (Participant 13)

"In my place of work, we are working with communities, but sometimes funding and provision of resources to support the indigenous communities become difficult." (Participant 7)

⁶¹ Stacey Kim Coates, Michelle Trudgett, and Susan Page, "Indigenous Institutional Theory: A New Theoretical Framework and Methodological Tool," *The Australian Educational Researcher* 50, no. 3 (July 25, 2023): 903–20, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-022-00533-4>.

“Social workers are trained to work with people, but sometimes their place of work does not have ehh good tools can work with communities.” (Participant 3, 64 Years)

“There is still resistance to recognizing Indigenous ways of healing within the formal social work sector. We need policies that reflect our knowledge systems.” (Participant 5)

“I agree, but at school we were not taught about integration of IKS, and yet we are working with indigenous communities, which makes it a bit challenging, but we are trying to accommodate.” (Participant 6)

“Most policies that we have do not address the integration of IKS.” (Participant 11)

The study revealed that the agencies lack and do not have policies in place that support the integration of social work practice with IKS and the accreditation standards for social work education. The integration of policies alongside institutions creates barriers due to bureaucratic dysfunction and rigid regulations, together with insufficient agency partnership.⁶² The systemic barriers, such as rigid funding structures and policies, hinder the incorporation of Indigenous knowledge into mainstream health services.⁶³ The implementation of policies that overlook both community needs and local perspectives usually produces negative outcomes because they do not support vulnerable demographic groups.⁶⁴ Experts indicate that institutional hurdles become worse because of political resistance and corruption, and due to insufficient funding.⁶⁵ Institutional changes to institutions must include open processes along with cooperative collaboration and policy creation that include all stakeholders to overcome these barriers.⁶⁶ The importance of adaptive governance emerges from the literature since it leads to better sustainable results by permitting policies to transform based on feedback and newly emerging issues.

Cultural Competency and Training Gaps

The education of social workers lacks essential and fundamental IKS training. The training materials are mostly Western dominant, which do not provide social workers with the competency and necessary skills to work properly with Indigenous communities. Participants agree that training is crucial with key informants about indigenous knowledge for the development of proper cultural competence. The study reveals that participants, especially social workers, need integrated learning and training about IKS and social work practice to gain a successful understanding of both concepts. The competence and training will enhance the relationship between the involved parties within the practice. It is of paramount importance for social work practitioners to be fully equipped with knowledge of IKS for better application.

“Most training programs do not equip us as social workers with the skills to work effectively with Indigenous communities. We need more education on Indigenous worldviews.” (Participant 14)

“We do get training, but it focuses on the Western social Work practice most of the time.” (Participant 12)

“We need to bridge a gap by inclusive training wherein social workers are trained about integration of IKS to Social work.” (Participant 2)

⁶² National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, “Strengthening Equitable Community Resilience: Criteria and Guiding Principles for the Implementation of the EnCoRe Framework.” (Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 2023).

⁶³ Anne Poonwassie and Ann Charter, “An Aboriginal Worldview of Helping: Empowering Approaches,” *Canadian Journal of Counselling* 31 (January 1, 2001).

⁶⁴ Robin K White et al., “A Practical Approach to Building Resilience in America’s Communities,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 59, no. 2 (2015): 200–219.

⁶⁵ Nomfundo Patricia Sibiyi et al., “Overcoming Bureaucratic Resistance: An Analysis of Barriers to Climate Change Adaptation in South Africa,” *Climate* 11, no. 7 (July 11, 2023): 145, <https://doi.org/10.3390/cli11070145>.

⁶⁶ Betty Pfefferbaum and Rose L. Pfefferbaum, “Building Community Resilience to Disasters: A Way Forward to Enhance National Health Security,” *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction* 19 (2016): 102–11.

"It is not enough for social workers to just be aware of our culture; they need to be immersed in it. Learning from Elders and participating in ceremonies should be part of their training." (Participant 5)

According to research on professional training gaps and cultural competence in social work practice and IKS, the process of uniting indigenous wisdom with contemporary social work programs faces difficulties.⁶⁷ Many social work programs have yet to provide adequate education on Indigenous worldviews, which leads to culturally inappropriate approaches, according to research.⁶⁸ The lack of knowledge about Indigenous ways leads treatment providers to deliver care that overlooks Indigenous customs.⁶⁹ Authentic acknowledgement of IKS as an appropriate paradigm requires training protocols to embrace experiential learning and Indigenous elder partnerships, along with policy changes and fundamental knowledge acquisition.⁷⁰ Research indicates that insufficient funding and Eurocentric biases, together with institutional resistance, create barriers for achieving successful adoption of Indigenous worldviews into social work education and practice.⁷¹ The creation of decolonized social work procedures that value native epistemologies while supporting ethical collaboration and empowering mutual respect between Indigenous people and their social workers represents the need to eliminate present training insufficiencies.⁷²

RECOMMENDATIONS

Future social work curricula should establish IKS as essential content because this will prepare future social workers to deliver culturally oriented approaches. A collaboration between Indigenous elders and scholars should build training materials that embrace local traditions to achieve this objective. Social work practitioners need to participate in ongoing training about indigenous knowledge systems. Experiential learning combined with workshops and field trips that occur in Indigenous communities assists to close existing training gaps. The transition to decolonial frameworks, along with Indigenous acceptance, is necessary for social work practice. Official policies regarding IKS should be adopted by both government bodies and professional regulatory organizations for social work practice recognition. Social work should support Indigenous-led projects through funding and research on IKS-based interventions while establishing ethical guidelines for interaction with Indigenous communities.

CONCLUSION

Significant findings in the study demonstrate that IKS are valuable in transforming social work practices. Research has revealed that Indigenous communities thrive better when their recovery efforts and general health boost go hand in hand with community-directed approaches and holistic remedies, and cultural sensitivity. Several important challenges maintain their presence, including barriers within institutions and financial restrictions, as well as insufficient training in cultural competency. Social workers and community leaders emphasize the necessity of decolonial practices through Indigenous-led social work approaches and interventions, development, and policy changes that incorporate Indigenous worldview perspectives. Trust-building continues to be a complex issue due to historical wrongdoings, so genuine cooperation funded by long-term relationships remains essential for resolution. Cultural methods are

⁶⁷ Samuel Lisenga Mahuntse, "A Social Work Programme on the Contribution of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) to Child Protection: A Tsonga Case Study" (University of Pretoria, 2021).

⁶⁸ National Association of Social Workers., "Standards and Indicators for Cultural Competence in Social Work Practice." (Accessed February 1, , 2025).

⁶⁹ Sara Marie Cohen-Fournier, Gregory Brass, and Laurence J. Kirmayer, "Decolonizing Health Care: Challenges of Cultural and Epistemic Pluralism in Medical Decision-making with Indigenous Communities," *Bioethics* 35, no. 8 (October 22, 2021): 767–78, <https://doi.org/10.1111/bioe.12946>.

⁷⁰ Louise Baba, "Cultural Competency Training for the Social Service Professions: A Systematic Literature Review," *Journal of Social Work Education* 59, no. 1 (2023): 45–60.

⁷¹ Kathomi Gatwiri, Lynne M McPherson, and Reshmi Lahiri-Roy, "Embedding Cultural Knowledge in Social Work Education: Reflections from Master of Social Work Students at a Regional Australian University," *The British Journal of Social Work* 55, no. 1 (January 1, 2025): 161–80, <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcae132>.

⁷² Mel Gray, John Coates, and Michael Yellow Bird, *Indigenous Social Work around the World: Towards Culturally Relevant Education and Practice* (Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2008).

essential because they help Indigenous communities to find healing through identity preservation and autonomy gains.

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