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# The Role of Social Work Education in Fostering Empowerment of People of African Descent: The Significance of the History of Slavery and Colonialism

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## Abstract

Both historical and contemporary accounts suggest that Africa has been and continues to be a significant player in global affairs through its supply of valued resources in the form of human capital, rich cultural heritage and mineral resources, including gold, diamond, oil, and vast land mass. Indeed, the tremendous resources (both human and natural) and opportunities that Africa and its people possess are what attracted European powers to the continent for exploitation through slavery and colonization. Although, in theory, African countries have achieved independence, the process of geopolitical retreat of European or Western control of African states, has failed to achieve decoloniality in Africa and among descendants of Africa. Guided by empowerment and strength perspective, the chapter applies observations and critical dialog to contend that for an empowering and transformative social work education and practice in Africa and with African descents to occur, the history and narratives around transatlantic slavery trade (TST) and colonialism need to be a critical component of the discourse of social work education and practice.

**Keywords:** social work education, African and African descent, slavery colonialism, decoloniality, empowerment

## 1. Introduction

According to the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) 2018 report, many African countries scored low on the human development indices and indicators—key developmental indicators that measure development from a multidimensional perspective. Indeed, evidence suggests that African countries, sub-Saharan Africa in particular, have consistently been ranked underdeveloped as indicated by poverty, conflicts, war, shorter life expectancy, underutilized resources, and western exploitations [1–4]. Recent analysis of human capital development of 195 countries from 1990 to 2016 along four indicators—educational attainment, learning, functional health, and survival—suggests that African countries are worse performers on these indicators [3]. Accounts of scholars such as Rodney [4] about *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, Griffiths [1] on the

*Scramble for Africa*, and more recently, *Slavery's Capitalism: a New History of American Economic Development* [5] and the expansion of neoliberal capitalism associated with globalization [6, 7] suggest that the continued struggles of the people of the African descent and Africa in general are linked to slavery, colonialism, and imperialistic policies of the western countries. According to Asante [8], the “inferiorization of Africa is a part of the philosophical and cultural fabric of Europeanization”. Asante [8] concurs with other scholars that the fifteenth century transatlantic slave trade and nineteenth century colonization of Africa and Africans are assaults on Africa and Africans that have significantly impacted and continue to influence the people of African descent. Established western institutions including the church, schools, universities, and government supported both of these assaults and continue to do so in varied forms [6, 8, 9]. The political boundaries of Africa emerged 30 years following the Berlin Conference in 1884. Often described as the *scramble for Africa*, the Berlin conference is where European powers gathered to decide on how to divide and conquer Africa and exploit its resources without Africans’ involvement [1]. Boundaries were created mainly on physical and astronomical lines, thereby destroying the cultural and ethnic organization and structure of Africans [1]. The boundaries later became a source of conflict when tribesmen who attempted to relate to tribal groups from neighboring states were labeled as smugglers, fugitive, and illegal immigrants [1].

These geopolitical boundaries, conceptualized as colonialism, allowed a system of political and economic relations whereby the sovereignty of African nations or people rested on the power of Europeans or the Western world [6]. Colonialism in turn facilitated Western coloniality—a long-standing/or enduring patterns of social interactions and of power relations that emerged/established as a result of colonialism, defining culture, labor, knowledge production, and intersubjective relations that go beyond colonial administration [6]. At independence, although some level of European geopolitical retreat occurred, decoloniality was not and has not been realized [6]. African countries inherited European-created structures relative to power, being (identity and culture), and knowledge production and distribution [2, 6, 10]. Africans are, therefore, existing and operating within structures that were established according to the racial hierarchy of Europeans [10]. This means that European racialized formations and the associated subjugation and inferiorization of culture, language, and history of Africa and Africans under slavery and colonialism underlie post-colonial and independent African countries and the identity formation of the people of African descent [6, 7, 10].

Yet, the discourse by the western media and academics, about Africa and its descendants as culturally and intellectually inferior, impoverished, hopeless, politically and socially unstable, violent, corrupt, and lacking of leadership [8, 11–13], rarely connects these tropes about Africa and African people to the role of the west through slavery, colonialism, and neoliberalism. It is estimated that by 2050 one in every four individuals will be of African origin [14]. Additionally, both historical and contemporary accounts suggest that Africa has been and continues to be a significant player in global affairs through its supply of valued resources in the form of human capital, rich cultural heritage, and mineral resources, including gold, diamond, oil, and vast land mass [14, 15]. Indeed, the tremendous resources and opportunities of Africa and its people are what attracted European powers to the continent. However, the narratives of negativity about Africa and Africans seldom highlight the significant role and contributions of Africa and Africans to the world, western countries in particular. In instances where positivity about Africa and people of African origin is highlighted, it is counteracted with negative ones [2, 13]. This projection of Africa and its descendant overlooks the strengths and resources

of this group whose history of marginalization and underdevelopment is linked to their coloniality that has been established by European or Western exploitation through slavery, colonialism, and neoliberalism [7, 16]. Africa and Africans have become target of developmental aids whereby developed countries, majority of whom are from the west, and recently China, are viewed as saviors and facilitators of development through aid [2, 15].

However, in most of the intervention efforts, the history of the people of the African descent's enslavement and colonization and the continued European domination through neoliberalist policies [2, 7] are not considered as key to understanding the contextual realities of these post-colonial societies for conceptualizing contextually appropriate programs and policies. Even education in Africa and of African descendants is dominated by western theories, world views, and scholars, with limited attention to African-centered perspectives, knowledge, and histories [16, 17]. Consequently, the hopes, promises, liberation, and empowerment possibilities inherent in the cultural and historical narratives of Africa and its descendant are overlooked. Additionally, racist ideological patterns that undergird western hegemony are not interrogated and interrupted. Consequently, slavery and colonization's stubborn effects continue to shape the identity formation and subsequent developmental outcomes in Africa and of the people of African descent. This is so because slavery and colonization did not only occupy and transport Africa and Africans from their roots, they also planted an ideological seed of white superiority black inferiority in the psyche of many people of African descent [10, 15, 16] and Europeans as well [8]. This seed continues to germinate and shape Africa and Africans' interactions with the rest of the world. Even in education including social work education and practice in Africa, and with the people of African descent, themes of colonization, coloniality, and western imperialism dominate [6, 17–19]. Thus, Africa and people of African descent remain marginalized and are impacted by the legacy of slavery and colonialism [2, 8, 10].

## **2. Method and approach**

Based on the above historical grounding of developmental paradigms, this chapter further uses exploratory decolonizing methodology, locating the knowledge from indigenous perspective as opposed to western traditions. Indigenous scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith [20] writes in her book *Decolonizing Methodologies*, “the ways in which scientific research is implicated in the worst excesses of colonialism remains a powerful remembered history for many of the worlds’ colonized people.” The devastating impacts of theories and research from western perspective on the indigenous or African population examined by Smith [20] and Kovach [21] show that for the future of empowering and transformative social work education and practice in Africa and with African descents, the history, culture, and narratives around transatlantic slavery (TST) and colonialism need to be critically cross-examined from African perspective. Rowe, Baldry and Earles [22] look into decolonizing social work research using critical social indigenous approaches. They argue that non-indigenous social workers who are oriented to western approaches require a paradigmatic shift to center the unique epistemological positioning of indigenous people to truly engage in social justice and equity-based transformation. Similar to these scholars, this chapter argues that western-dominated ideology and approaches to social change and development have led to the systematic impoverishment and dehumanization of Africa and African descendants. If social work education and practice in and with African descendants are to undone this damage, they must engage in a form of transgressional education that centers African-centered values, perspectives, and orientation



to life and human development. In the sections that follow, we review literature on social work education, practice and research in Africa and with the people of African descent, empowerment and related theoretical frameworks, and the significance of history of slavery and colonialism for social work in post-colonial African contexts. We then provide a discussion of empowerment possibilities of critical dialog on and observation of the transatlantic slavery and European colonization around slave dungeons in Ghana. We conclude the chapter with recommendations for future social work education, practice, and research in Africa and with African descendants including decentering western worldview, indigenization of the western worldview, and application of critical theoretical framework.

### 3. Social work in Africa and with the people of African descent

Social work in Africa and with African descended people emerged from, and is informed by, this European-dominated Africans' marginalization and oppression perspective [17–19, 23, 24]. The human rights framework and the social justice orientation that underpin social work [25, 26] suggest that social work is not only a promising field but also has an ethical obligation to contribute to preventing and addressing racism, oppression, marginalization, and the challenges that Africa and its descendants do confront in an increasing global community. However, social work education and practice in Africa and with African descendants continue to be driven by colonial and Western approaches [17]. According to Harms Smith [6], Social work education is grounded in ideological foundations rooted in the European project of colonial expansion, racist capitalism, and coloniality and its history is grounded in the social engineering of white supremacy. This is evident through the neoliberal policies that influence social work education in Africa with the emphasis on individual responsibility, limited state intervention and lack of social protection for the vulnerable, and the adoption of the free-market ideas as the best practice approach for solving problems [6, 7]. For example, social work education is heavily informed by western theorists and approaches, frameworks, and texts that were written to western audience and practitioners [6, 17]. Social work in Africa is therefore sterile because the graduates of African-based social work education by virtue of the western-dominated education receive and rely on western approaches and methods of social work practice in Africa and with their African-descendant client systems [17].

The question then is whether social work in Africa and with people of African origin is about perpetuating European domination or liberation from the injustices and oppressions associated with European dominations and empowerment of this population? According to Harms Smith [6], for social work education and practice in Africa and with African descendants to deliver its social justice goal, the epistemic colonization and what is termed *epistemicide*, which is evident in the ideologies and discourses of social work, must be excavated and held to account so that a contextually relevant and appropriate African-centered social work can flourish. That is, it is imperative that formal discourses and knowledge development and production and distribution in social work be interrogated, renewed, and transformed [6]. In doing so, it is important that theories, histories, and narratives about and by African descent and anticolonial form of knowledge are reclaimed. Transformative and liberatory social work in Africa and with African descendants aiming at holistic development, well-being, and positive social change in post-colonial African societies will do well to embrace decoloniality and its process as their basis for discourse and knowledge [6].

From the strength and empowerment perspective, this chapter contends that any approach toward the liberation and empowerment of the people of African descent outside of a broader and keener perspective of slavery and colonialism may perpetuate western imperialism and deculturalization of the people of African descent. In the process, social work could end up disempowering rather than empowering. By so doing, the cycle of instability, poverty, social unrest, Africa, and African's marginalization will remain unbroken. To this end, the Council on Social Work Education and social work degree programs, as part of globalization of social work, need to take a critical look into how the profession is training professionals and scholars to engage in practice and research in Africa and with the people of African descent.

## **4. Theoretical framework**

### **4.1 Defining empowerment**

The chapter is grounded in empowerment and strength-based approaches to social work practice and research. According to the World Bank's framework for tackling poverty, empowerment refers to the "expansion of assets and capabilities of poor/vulnerable or marginalized people to participate in, negotiate with, influence, control and hold accountable institutions that affect their lives" ([27], p. xviii). While assets are physical and financial, capabilities are inherent in people and engender the utilization of assets in different ways to increase/improve well-being. This definition of empowerment establishes a synergy between individuals/groups/communities and the state. The contention is that the state creates conditions within which individuals and communities function [27]. With respect to institution, Narayan [27] outlined four key elements as critical for context that support empowerment-based development. These include (1) access to information. This is a two-way communication for the flow of information from government to citizens and from citizens to government to ensure responsible citizens, and responsive and accountable government. (2) Inclusion and participation, which aim to promote the participation of the poor and marginalized group to ensure that limited public resource utilizations are based on local knowledge and priorities. (3) Accountability, which is intended to ensure that public officials, private organizations, and politicians are held accountable for their actions on the well-being of citizens. (4) Local organizational capacity, which supports communities, groups, and individuals' ability to collaborate and organize resources to solve a common problem. These four elements synergistically promote empowerment and liberation of local and poor communities [27].

A capability approach has broader view on empowerment with major focus around freedom. Sen and other scholars of this theory proposed, "capability is thus a kind of freedom: the substantive freedom to achieve alternative functioning combinations (or less formally put, the freedom to achieve various lifestyles)" ([28], p. 75). Accordingly, the freedom is a core parameter of development, more valuable than economic or material wealth. For example, not being enslaved is an important functioning. Sen believes that political and economic freedoms are both significant for our society but that civil and political freedom is essential to fulfill economic needs. The racism that initiated and legitimated slavery curtailed the freedom of many people of African descent and still does so today [29–32], confining many among African descent to remain socio-economically disempowered and poor due to local and global neoliberal policies [2, 19].

These conceptions of empowerment against the processes that have and continue to characterize interactions between the people of European descent and those of Africa as well as the westernization of social work noted in the literature [18, 19, 23], reveal that there is higher probability for social work education and practice in Africa and with African descendant to disempower, rather than empower them. According to Lee and Hudson [33], “social work at it best is an empowerment profession” (p. 143). From this conception of social work, Lee and Hudson contend that social work at any level of practice needs to attend to both the personal and environmental contexts of the client system. They further argued that a true empowerment is indicated by and rooted in the existential conditions of the client system(s). They have identified three interlocking concepts for achieving empowerment-based social work practice: (1) the development of a positive and potent sense of self, (2) the development of critical and comprehensive assessment of the social forces that shape one’s existential experience, and (3) the development of functional competencies that necessitate liberation [34]. From this contention, an empowerment-based social work education and practice in Africa and with the people of African descent need to be rooted in the contextual realities of the people [6, 17]. Slavery, colonization, decolonization, and western imperialism are critical contextual features of the people of African descent [16, 18, 19, 23] and, therefore, need to be crucial part of social work discourse and knowledge about social work education and practice in Africa and with African descendant. A key aspect of social work empowerment process is the assessment of the sociopolitical and cultural context of the communities, families, and individuals who are to benefit from the process and the outcome of social work intervention [33]. It entails multiple perspectives including critical historical analysis where a group’s history of oppression can be learned and understood. It also includes an ecological perspective that incorporates stress and resiliency skills by which groups with histories of oppression and marginalization cope with oppression including internalization of and resistance to oppression [33].

Similarly, from a strength-based practice approach, peoples, families, and communities are seen in the light of their competencies, capacities, hopes, talents, visions, possibilities, and values however distorted these may have become due to circumstances, history of oppression, and traumatic experiences [35, 36]. Rather than focusing on pathologies and ways to eradicate them, the strength perspective posits that social work can bring about positive change through the “identification, use, and enhancement of strength and resources” [37], p. 507. A social worker practicing from a strength perspective takes stock of what people know, and can do, no matter how disorganized they may seem [35]. It requires identification and documentation of individuals, families, and communities’ internal and external resources including narratives about resistance and coping mechanisms to oppression to affect change [36, 37]. Cultural accounts of histories and narratives around survival, development, migration, and problem solving may provide hopes, inspiration, and meaning making that may serve liberatory function [36, 38]. For people of African descent, scholars have noted that the history of the enslavement, colonization, and decolonization is one important source to locate the narratives of hope, healing, liberation, inspirations, and development possibilities [38–41]. The enslaved Africans who were taken from different tribal groups forged families, built communities, and relied on one another to survive and resist slavery [41]. According to Hale-Benson [42], that sense of community, which is reflective of the *Ubuntu* philosophy, is culturally distinct characteristics of the people of African descent. It thus suggests that critical exploration of how enslaved Africans and Africans on the continent have resisted and coped with slavery and colonialism can reveal certain culturally relevant attributes that can



support thriving and thus can be applied to inform indigenous social work practice in Africa and with the people of African descent.

## 5. The significance of the history of slavery and colonialism

The transatlantic slave trade (TST) and European colonization, and the racist ideology that fueled these phenomenon, are not commonly discussed in the US and its institutions (including schools of social work) because of the uncomfortable feelings that the subjects may invoke [41]. Similarly, with the exception of South Africa, most African countries rarely do engage in discussion around the TST and European colonization and coloniality [10]. The discomfort that many feel around the subject of slavery can be explained in part by the dehumanizing and holocaustic nature of this enterprise [41]. While the dehumanization and trauma that characterized slavery and colonization of the people of African descent and continue to do so (see [16, 29, 43, 44]) are indisputable, they do not fully account for the significance of slavery and colonialism. Slavery, an enterprise employed for the development of the United States and Europe, also depicts the entrepreneurial, technological, irrigation skills, innovation, and the ingenuity of the people of African descent [5, 45]. In addition, it illustrates the resilient traits that enslaved Africans displayed: persistence, hard work, compassion, and loyalty to one another. These skills and potentials that Africans are noted to be endowed with were what led the Europeans to exploitatively engage in slavery and colonialism to accomplish the wealth-generating and profit-oriented motives of the Western world.

In [5] edited volume, *Slavery's Capitalism: A New History of American Economic Development*, they reveal these attributes of the enslaved Blacks and their link to the emergence of the United States as an economic power that paradoxically generates and distributes both wealth and poverty. Blacks under slavery were coerced to generate wealth through the plantations and yet, were deprived of their own labor. The accounts furnished by these authors unequivocally point out that while the slavery experiences invoke the feeling of the inhumanity of certain groups of people against others, they also reveal the tremendous human potential of the people of the African descent that can be recognized, nurtured, and leveraged upon for the common good. As speculated by the historian Edmund Morgan [46], the prize of an enslaved African was sometimes twice of what would have been paid for a White indentured slave. The reason was that compared to the European immigrant who was expected to survive slave-like conditions in the new colonies for about 5 years, the enslaved Black was expected to survive longer, which meant long-term profit for the owner.

Thus, the history of Africans' enslavement and colonization presents strength, resources, and capabilities that exploration of and critical dialog around how the people of African descent, those taken into slavery, and the communities devastated by slavery, colonialism, and western imperialism can produce what Saleebey [36] described as *generative factors*. These factors represent "remarkable and revelatory experiences that taken together dramatically increase learning, resource acquisition, and development, accentuating resilience and hardiness" ([36], p. 300). Delving into the narratives of slavery and European colonization of the people of African descent reveals patterns of coping and adjustment that supported thriving and can be identified to foster thriving today. Conversely, the exploration of the narratives can also highlight certain patterns of coping and adjustment that may not be relevant for thriving today (e.g., individual and collective trauma) in order to effectively address them [40]. Other scholars concur that critical and comprehensive understanding of the history of the people of African descent can serve liberation function [39]. Karenga [47] (cited in [39], p. 486) has contended that "History



is the substance and the mirror of people's humanity in others eyes as well as in their own eyes. It is ...not only what they have done, but also a reflection of who they are, what they can do, and equally important, what they can become as a result of the past which reveals their possibilities" (p. 69).

In the health field, the significance of history in assessment, diagnostic, and effective intervention is commonly recognized in the way health professionals ask for patient's history. Social workers have demonstrated the importance of history in understanding individuals' and families' cultural background and how intergenerational and historical patterns are useful for assessing client system and formulating intervention with genograms. Genogram is an assessment tool often used by social workers and counselors to assess complex family patterns from an eco-systemic perspective, including cultural, historical, and time dimensions to understand the link between the past and the present relative to clients' presenting problem [48–50]. We call on social work educators and researchers in Africa and with the people of African descent to apply the logic behind the use of genogram to critically explore slavery and colonialism as well as neoliberalism as the mechanism by which racism has evolved, is evolving, and adapts contextually to produce the same outcomes in post-colonial contexts where precarity, extreme socio-economic deprivation, and collective traumatization characterize human experiences and undermine the notions of human rights and social justice [6]. Furthermore, social workers should explore this history in order to identify and apply the cultural, spiritual, and psychological resources embedded in the resistance to slavery and colonialism to affect intervention in Africa and with the people of African descent. In the section below, we discuss the role of critical dialog in identifying and capitalizing on the empowerment possibilities of the history of TST and colonization of the people of African descent.

## 6. Critical observations and dialog around slave heritage sites

Guided by the three interlocking concepts described by the empowerment perspectives, (1) the development of a positive and potent sense of self, (2) the development of critical and comprehensive assessment of the social forces that shape one's existential experience, and (3) the development of functional competencies that necessitate liberation [34], and the *generative factors* described by the strength perspective [36], the first author engaged in critical dialog on and observation of the slave dungeons in Ghana. More specifically, in the summer of 2018, the first author observed and engaged in critical dialog with people of African descent who visited the Cape Coast and Elmina slave dungeons in Ghana to explore their cognitive and affective reactions to the architectural design of the buildings and the events that occurred there during TST. According to Ledwith [51] (cited in [6], p. 122), critical dialog is a method of equalizing power relationships between people and therefore leads to empowerment, which is about exploring new ways of knowing a paradigmatic shift that allows us to see our identities and realities within a system of competing oppressions. Critical dialog with the goal of conscientization provides opportunity to synergistically link relevant emerging themes to emotions and motivation to release the required energy for people to engage in praxis—the cycle of critical reflection and critical action [6, 52]. This process or strategy of problem posing or problematization rather than problem-solving leads to a new search for solutions to experiences charged with political significance [6]. The purpose of the critical dialog and observations related to TST and colonization through these slave dungeons was to ascertain whether such processes could facilitate *generative factors* and the empowerment possibilities that appeal to social

work and can be drawn upon to engage in liberation and empowered based social work education and practice in Africa and with African descents.

These critical dialogs and observations made at the slave dungeons revealed different emotions, meanings, and attitudes expressed by visitors including African descendants (those in Ghana and that of the diaspora). For the purpose of this chapter, only the findings related to African descendants are discussed. Upon touring the slave dungeons, many of these African descendants, in particular, Black Diasporas, felt angry at Whites for the nature of dehumanization, torture, horror, and deprivation that they subjected the enslaved Africans to. Secondly, upon hearing the role that African tribal leaders played in the slave trade, Black Diasporas felt angry at their African brothers and sisters in Ghana. On the other hand, beyond feeling angry at first, the Black Diasporas did express feeling empowered, liberated, strengthened, and hopeful. For example, upon critical reflections, several of the Black Diasporas disclosed that they felt stronger and empowered because if their ancestors had to go through this unbearable and unimaginable torture and dehumanization to produce them as African Americans, they have a lot to offer, both to appreciate the ancestors and also to advance social justice to create a world that alleviates social injustice. They expressed the need to believe in themselves and their ability to overcome adversity in order to engage in collective struggle for liberation through education. With respect to the Ghanaians who were observed touring the sites, their initial reactions seemed to be somewhat indifference.

However, when Ghanaians were engaged to critically reflect upon the racial hierarchy and the whiteness that characterize the slave dungeons in the context of their lived experiences, they were able to identify continued Western influences in several domains of life that affect their current living circumstances including education, culture, food, identity, politics, and economics. They also did make connection to potential agency, the superhuman abilities, and the spiritual and psychological strength that enabled the enslaved Africans who survived the experiences they endured in the dungeons, on the middle passage, and in the new world. For example, one participants expressed that from the racial hierarchy established by the Europeans, although it seems that Blacks are at the bottom, when one thinks of the contributions of the people of the African descent to the world despite the racial hostilities and dehumanization, people of the African descent are actually *the foundation upon which the rest of the world is built*.

Overall, findings generated from the critical dialog and observations made around the people of African descent's cognitive and affective reactions to the narratives on TST and European colonization of Africa and its descendants can serve liberation and empowerment possibilities. While coloniality and colonialism suggest racist brutalization where there is a systematic attempt to denigrate and deny any attribute of humanity to millions of African descents, an action that transforms consciousness and builds solidarity in and among the people of African descent through critical dialog and exploration of their history can be one effective mechanism to contribute to overthrow the colonial order [16]. It suggests that social work education and practice in Africa and with African descendants that center African perspectives and draw on knowledge, framework, and theories of anti-colonial rather than western scholars to engage with and facilitate such processes, embracing and celebrating cultural practices, historical heritage, and reclaiming of narratives, language, and histories have the potential to achieve liberatory and transformative goals [6].

However, scholars have raised concerns about current modes of social work education, practice, and research in Africa and with African descendants. They contend that social work in Africa is an instrument and a product of colonial and racial history in which foreign thought and theory are imposed over the indigenous people and their modes of helping and receiving help [6, 18, 19, 23, 24].

At independence, Africans inherited the racialized practices that accompanied slavery and colonialism [2, 10]. Current social work practice and research were part of such practices that accompanied slavery and colonialism. These scholars have stressed on the need for decolonizing the processes and approaches to social work education, practice, and research in Africa and with people of African origin. To achieve a decolonized social work in Africa and with African descendants, “we need to know the history of colonialism and its vivid manifestations to date as well as emerging history of culturally responsive indigenous social work” ([18], p. 807). Such an undertaking entails the need to challenge the dominant mode of western-oriented social work and research.

Moreover, it requires the integration of traditional values and practices that have withstood several centuries of oppression and marginalization into culturally appropriate ways of practice and service [18]. Such values and practices are found in the culture and history of the Africans prior to slavery and colonialism [23] as well as in the enslaved Africans [39–41]. For example, when one visits the slave dungeons in Ghana, as was evident in the observations made by the first author, the experiential nature of the tour visibly highlights the dehumanizing nature of the transatlantic slavery and the sociopolitical, economic, cultural, physical, and psychological impacts on Africa and people of African descent. The experiential nature of the visit to these slave dungeons helps situate the psychological trauma and material disadvantages associated with post-colonial African contexts and African descendants within the framework of structural violence [6, 16]. However, beyond the dehumanization and the associated epistemic injustices that TST and European colonization have inflicted on Africa and African descendants, a critical reflection of the enslaved Africans who survived, and the communities traumatized by the kind of structural violence associated with slavery, colonialism, and coloniality, can lead to the identification of the *death and adversity defying repertoire* by which African descents have endured racialized encounters. Such a set of repertoires entails cultural and psychological resources that social workers can capitalize on to effectively engage African descents to achieve liberation and empowerment.

Therefore, it is extremely critical that social workers engage in epistemic decoloniality as an emerging transformative discourse in social work education, practice, and research in Africa and with the people of African descent [6]. Decolonization of social work in Africa requires identification, interrogation, experimentation, and contestation of coloniality and the reproduction of whiteness in the knowledge and theoretical orientations that undergird right-based approach to social transformation in Africa and with African descendants [6]. Thus, critical and comprehensive understanding of the history of slavery, colonization, and continued struggles of the people of African descent is required to develop a conceptual understanding of decoloniality in social work education and practice in Africa [6]. Such historical contextual understanding will help social workers to be aware of the various ways in which western orientation to education, practice, and research manifest in order to interrupt it. Additionally, social workers’ awareness of the history of African’s enslavement and colonialism would improve assessment and ultimately intervention with the people of African descent.

## **7. Recommendation for social work education and research and conclusion**

It is evident that the current mode of social work practice in Africa and with the people of African descent is hampered by the legacy of slavery and



colonialism, which are undergirded by neoliberal policies and practices of the west [23]. Social work in Africa and with people of Africans features American textbooks, inappropriate casework models, and adaptation approaches that seek to modify imported western ideas to fit the local context [23]. In the process, there is a disregard for local culture, which inhibits the indigenization of social work education and practice [6, 17]. Thus, European domination through slavery and colonialism has dislocated African descents from their cultural, economic, and political root. A decolonized social work in Africa and with African descents with the aims of correcting this dislocation and reorienting Africans to their cultural roots and heritage is urgently needed. Empowerment and strength-based approach to social work that delve into the history of cultural genocide of Africa and its descendants are the starting place to inform social work education and research that promote the human rights of people of African descent and advance social justice. Below we provide specific actions to consider in designing global social work curriculum relative to social work practice and research in Africa and with the people of African descent.

### **7.1 Decentering western worldview**

Social work education, practice, and research in Africa and with the people of African descent need to shed the western worldview, focus, and values and encourage the development of Afrocentric frameworks whereby the values of human rights and social justice are conceptualized within the African frame of Ref. [6]. Currently, what is described as global/international social work appears to be a new imperialism privileging western social sciences and advancing Americanization of social science over locally relevant ideas [7, 19]. This form of global social work perpetuates and reproduces western hegemony, which undermines human dignity and the worth of African descents. To interrupt this form of universalizing western models of social work in Africa and with African descents, Afrocentric framework should be incorporated into global social work education and research that target people of African descent.

### **7.2 Indigenization of the western worldview**

Related to the shedding of western values and worldview from social work in Africa and with African descents, we recommend the need to conceptualize western form of social work to be viewed from the perspective of indigenization. Indigenization here refers to the development of local, empirically based knowledge that offers culturally relevant approaches to social work education, practice, and research within a particular context [18]. Social work education based on western values and approaches thus should be limited to practice and research concerns with people of European descent. Then, the Afrocentric framework should be applied when practicing social work and doing research with the people of African descent. The implication is that social work programs in the west's global efforts need to design curriculum that incorporates specific contextual knowledge in the curriculum. In the case of social work in Africa and with the people of African descent, the fifteenth century transatlantic slavery and nineteenth century colonialism should be critical components of the curriculum. This does not mean a complete rejection of everything that is western. However, as the richness of culture, language, and history is embraced and celebrated, that which is of benefit should be considered and incorporated [6].



### 7.3 Application of critical theoretical framework

From the empowerment and strength perspectives, there is the need to apply critical practice framework informed by *Critical Theory*. Such critical practice should include: “(a) being aware of the historical and geopolitical context, (b) being aware of practitioner’s own positionality and values (self-reflection), and (c) engaging in respectful partnership with clients” ([53], p. 9). Although this chapter draws on empowerment and strength perspectives to social work practice in Africa and with the people of African descent, coupling them with critical theories such as critical race theories, critical whiteness, anti-colonial theories, dialog, and consciousness raising can greatly enhance the usefulness of empowerment and strength perspectives to draw out the cultural, psychological, and liberation possibilities inherent in the narrative of the people of African descent [16].

In conclusion, although respect for human dignity and worth and social justice goals of social work are universal themes, local context influences how they are pursued. Despite this understanding, the current form of social work in Africa and with the people of African descent seems to be an imposition of western values, worldview, and hegemony with little attention to the cultural, political, economic, and social contexts and the historical forces underlying these contexts. In attention to the contextual realities of Africa and the people of African origin can severely undermine the ethical principles guided by human rights declarations that inform global social work education, practice, and research in Africa and with people of African descent. Slavery and colonialism are important foundational forces that underlie the structures and experiences of people of African descent. Empowerment and strength perspectives coupled with critical theories can provide strong theoretical frameworks to design culturally relevant social work education and research in Africa and with the people of Africa in ways that draw on the strength, hopes, promises, and possibilities inherent in the narratives of slavery and colonialism for transformative social work.

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