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Decolonizing Social Work "Best Practices" through a Philosophy of Impermanence

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Abstract

In the book, Decolonizing Social Work, a common theme is how decolonization requires more than surface level change. In social work, changing theories and intervention practices will not bring true transformation without attending to underlying western beliefs that perpetuate problems. This essay uses Shawn Wilson's metaphor of an island to identify one such belief, explain how it is damaging to social work practice, and propose an alternative (Wilson, 2013). I first explain this alternative through a story of successful decolonization of sacred practices by the Zuni people. I then apply lessons learned from this story to the social work concepts of *best practices* and *evidence based practice*. My overall argument is that these concepts can have destructive effects when informed by a belief in permanence, and that these concepts are better realized through an underlying philosophy of impermanence.

"The physical and mental aspects of decolonization apply equally to Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities."
(Gray, Coates, Yellow Bird, & Hetherington, 2013, Conclusion, para. 1)

INTRODUCTION

As the authors of the edited book, Decolonizing Social Work explain, decolonizing social work requires attention to both ideas and actions (Gray, Coates, Yellow Bird, & Hetherington). Drawing from the island metaphor used by Shawn Wilson in his book chapter to explain "philosophy to action" (Wilson, 2013, "Using Indigenist

Research to Shape Our Future, para. 14), I argue that modern social work contains a philosophical commitment to permanence as the means to achieve *best practices* and *evidence based practice*. This commitment ignores the importance of break down and disintegration in the process of realizing positive, sustainable transformation in social and natural environments. In this essay, I first present Wilson's metaphor as a means of distinguishing between social work theories that lie at a surface level more amenable to change, and the deeper philosophical underpinnings from which the range of possible theories and methods are derived. I then use the metaphor to explain how problems in the operationalization of concepts such as *best practices* and *evidence based practices* as standards for social work practice have grown in part from a goal of permanence. This is followed by a story about the Zuni war gods used to illustrate the problem of philosophical commitment to permanence as a destructive part of colonization. In this story are lessons that can be applied to decolonizing concepts of best practices and evidence based practice in social work. The main lesson is the value of dissolution and impermanence for positive transformation of social environments.

Before I begin, I should explain that I am a descendant of many generations of settlers in the continental U.S. of North America. In some contexts, this means I am an Anglo. I grew up mainly on the East Coast, and since then have lived in a range of places, including France, the West Coast, Pueblo of Zuni, Viet Nam, southern Africa, Ghana, and most recently the Midwestern United States. My academic training has been in the Humanities, Cultural Anthropology, Social Work, Gerontology and Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR). I am writing from what I have learned through academic training, living in Zuni, and reading about successful repatriation work by Native Americans.

ISLAND METAPHOR

In his book chapter on "Using Indigenist Research to Shape Our Future," Shawn Wilson (2013) points out that simply altering theoretical frameworks or choice of research methods is not enough for conducting indigenous research. Using a metaphor of an island, he explains how underpinning theories and methods is a philosophy from which theories and methods emerge and grow. Thus, it may not be possible to decolonize social work research and ways of knowing without addressing underlying philosophy. As he explains,

> Picture an island in your mind... This island is a model of your culture: the visible part of the island is the visible part of your culture – your style of dress, what you eat, your home… and so on. Below the waterline, holding the visible part out of the water is your philosophy, your beliefs and values. This philosophy explains *why* you eat certain foods or dress the way you do. … The clothes I wear do not make me Cree: my beliefs and philosophy do… For most people, (belief systems) are their

> underlying assumptions about the nature of reality and how it is known and understood. (Wilson, 2013, para. 16)

As a person raised in a modern, western belief system, and trained primarily through western academic systems, I find that permanence is part of the philosophy that lies below the surface of academic research and supports professional practice. In graduate school, I was told that, "It is not science until it is published and replicated." Publication and replication are two means of permanence, and copyright restrictions as well as academic norms of citing another's published work are ways of ensuring that knowledge discoveries are made permanent. It is a way of planting a flag in a territory of inquiry, such that an area that once brought curiosity can now be mapped and made known. In addition, the requirement to replicate findings supports a philosophy in which truths are known through repetition and stability over time. The more stable and replicable, the stronger the truth claim.

Both publication and replication are key practices in social work. In creating social work from an island of western philosophy, the value of permanence is found in actions taken to establish best practice standards that are replicated through formal education and licensing practices. These standards are based on scientifically derived evidence, which are defined through academic ways of knowing and analysis. The term best practices itself has been given a clear definition and origin story, as found in such established reference tools as the Encyclopedia of Social Work. Turning to this source of knowledge, "Best practices is defined as the preferred technique or approach for achieving a valued outcome" (Mullen, Bellamy, & Bledsoe, 2008, para. 1). An assumption supporting this concept is that good outcomes are a result of good practices, and thus if one inputs good practices, one will get the desired outcome. And then, if all staff can be trained to perform best practices in the same way, a constant product of good outcomes will result.

As those who work or conduct research in the field of direct practice soon experience, however, there is often a disconnect between such standards and the local environments in which they are supposed to be implemented. In reaction to these disconnections, scholars have established literatures that document and legitimize practice based knowledge gained not through academic training but through direct practice experience. Karen Staller reframes focus to practice by using the term *practice based evidences* (Staller, 2006, p. 503). Her term challenges the privileging of empirical research over practice in the concept of *evidence based practice* Other examples of renaming scientific practice terms include *practice validity* (Parton, 2000, p. 450) as a replacement to statistical validity derived from quantitative research.

In addition to modifying names to center expertise identification on practice, another approach to reforming concepts is through expansion. That is, policy reformers call modifications to the best practices concept, which are more inclusive of active engagement by practitioners as well as clients. The latter is upheld through a professional

admonition to "be there" with the client and to offer client centered practice. However, these efforts have been met with resistance from the academics who conduct scientific research according to western traditions, and those who establish best practice policies. The result, over time, can be a dance between allowing greater expansion to a greater range of knowledge for practice, and reduction to clear standards that can remain permanent over time.

This has been notably found in the evidence based practice (EBP) movement, which grew from evidence based medicine (EBM). EBP can be interpreted as another way to try to bring the philosophy of permanence to the daily practice of social work through insistence on legitimizing one's work by linking it to published research. The success of this idea in privileging scholarly peer review once again brought calls for practitioner and client inclusion. This change can be seen in contrasting earlier and more recent definitions of EBP: For example, the Encyclopedia of Social Work offers an earlier and later definition based on evidence based medicine (EBM) definitions provided by Sackett and colleagues (Mullen, Bellamy, & Bledsoe, 2008, p. 159-161). First, from 1997, evidence based practice is, "The conscientious, explicit, judicious use of current based evidence in making decisions about the care of individual (clients)" (Sackett, Richardson, Rosenberg, & Haynes, 1997, p. 2 quoted in Mullen, Bellamy, & Bledsoe, 2008, p. 159). This definition suggests that all action and agency is on the part of the one who is doing the intervention, and leaves no active role or source of expertise to others. An update then followed in 2000, "EBP is the integration of best research evidence with clinical expertise and (client) values" (Sackett, Straus, Richardson, Rosenberg, & Haynes, 2000 quoted in Mullen, Bellamy & Bledsoe, 2008, p. 159). This change appears substantial but the argument in this essay is that whether it brings real change depends what underlying philosophies support it.

In other words, I do not offer another side or angle or ammunition for debate. Going back to the island metaphor, such debates are taking place at the surface of concept or theory operationalization rather than addressing deeper philosophical questions. In my opinion, theoretical and methodological debates over best practices and evidence based practice will continue in part because social work has not questioned underlying philosophical commitments that may be ironically preventing us from truly helping others. In this essay, I focus on permanence as one such commitment.

Of course, permanence is not the only problem in trying to decolonize the underlying philosophies that support social work as intervention work. The limitations of an essay require some focus of attention, and so the focus here is on one problem that could provide insight in how to decolonize social work. I next explain my point with a story as a way to demonstrate how I learned the value of impermanence for sustainable intervention work. My understanding is taken primarily through academic and journalistic accounts of successful negotiation and repatriation of *Ahayu: da*, referred to in English as the Zuni war gods or twin gods.

THE REPATRIATION OF *AHAYU: DA* AND THE DECOLONIZATION OF SPIRITUAL INTERVENTION

The Zuni people (or *A: shiwi*) have lived in what is now the southwestern part of the United States for centuries (ashiwi.org). Each year, members of Deer and Bear clans carve twin "war gods" (or *Ahayu: da*), which are "deities of great power" that also, "serve as protectors" in times of war and peace (Ferguson, Anyon, & Ladd, 1996, p. 251). They are placed in the landscape to ensure balance and harmony. In the process of doing this work, they are placed in the land and eventually decompose. (Merenstein, 1992). They are communal property that should never be removed (Suro, 1990, p. A13).

As explained by Zuni and Anglo scholars, the year 1846 is important in this story (Ferguson, Anyon, & Ladd 1996). That was the year that the Smithsonian was created to help collect, name, and categorize indigenous cultures in the growing United States, as well as the year that the U.S. conquered land including the areas where the Zuni have lived. Anthropologists were hired to collect Native American cultural practices and objects for preservation and analysis in what became the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. Over 10,000 such artifacts were taken from Zuni alone. The presumption was that the value of cultures could be captured, catalogued, and made permanent through scientific storage and display. Some of these artifacts were saturated with chemicals to ensure preservation (Hawks, 2001). In this way, culture as living practice became an object primarily of scientific inquiry. Multiple harms resulted. In Zuni, for example, so many artifacts were taken that some artistic and cultural practices were lost. Ironically, the work of a museum to preserve had the opposite effect.

In trying to answer from a western perspective why Smithsonian anthropologists and curators believed in what they were doing, one has to consider modern, western knowledge practices. Academics trained in the western tradition separate what is of value from context in order to best understand what it is and how it works. Scientific learning rituals then follow, such as labeling, categorizing, and preserving under glass. In this technical-rational approach to understanding, complex and dynamic social practices are reduced to static models that are then evaluated using standard measures. The intention is to better realize how we can live in the world without recognition that how we learn is also part of this world. And, this world sometimes responds to our ways of learning and knowing in ways that are unanticipated. Our search for universal truths within cultural traditions that assure us we are the best equipped to establish standard practices ironically blinds us from learning more about the universe underlying our perceived universals. And this can cause great harm.

When the Zuni people approached the Smithsonian curators of the 20th century for repatriation negotiation, there was one problem that was particularly egregious. It was caused through *Ahayu: da* removal. This was more than theft of communal property, although that was part of the legal argument that later facilitated peaceful return. The Zuni were particularly concerned about *Ahuy: da* because removal had led the twin gods

to "cause mischief" such that they were "wreaking havoc with the natural environment" (Merenstein, 1992, p. 590). This included "military conflicts, fires, earthquakes, floods, tornados, hurricanes and other violent occurrences" (Merenstein, 1992, p. 590). As the tribe's lieutenant governor told the *New York Times* in 1990, "They can play little tricks and can do destructive things, especially when they are taken from their proper places… there is one in California that maybe has done some earthquakes there" (Lasiloo quoted in Suro, 1990, p. A13). Return was essential not only to right the injustice of U.S. government policy but also to restore peace in the natural and human landscape.

By this time, anthropology had changed from a discipline built in part on a government project of cultural "salvage" to greater collaboration and partnership with indigenous people. While I do not want to diminish the destructiveness of past anthropological endeavors, social work scholars could perhaps learn from how anthropologists have been challenged for several decades to decolonize research practices and scholarly commitments (e.g. Owusu, 1978). In this story, there are positive examples of change. As a contribution to Zuni negotiations, anthropologists used their knowledge to help provide evidence in negotiating with scientific museums and private art collectors for the repatriation of *Ahayu: da*. Since then, not only have most *Ahayu: da* returned but the negotiations themselves contributed to the passage of NAGPRA (Native American Grave Preservation and Repatriation Act) in 1990. In some cases, chemical preservation has made true restoration from cultural artifact to living cultural practice difficult if not impossible (F. Reuss, personal communication, 1997). At the same time, this law has enabled some degree of decolonization and restoration of indigenous cultures.

INTREPRETATIONS AND LESSONS LEARNED

Part of the argument used in successful persuasion was that the *Ahuy: da* caused mischief when removed from their sacred role, and that preservation of this role required not only return but also the ability to decompose and become part of the landscape. I take many lessons from this story but one of the overall lessons is about intervention work that brings positive change and protection of the physical and social environment. Of course, metaphors are not exact representations – social work as intervention is not the same as the sacred practices of the Zuni. However, there is a shared interest in promoting well being within the larger landscape of human life. As instruction for social work practice, the first lesson from *Ahayu: da* is that effective intervention work is responsive and relational rather than self-contained and instrumental. In the Zuni example, it was not that an object was stuck in the ground, and then this object caused good outcomes. The *Ahuy: da* were successful not by remaining a permanent fixture but through breaking down in local context. This breakdown required active response by the larger environment. A lesson for social work is that intervention success depends upon active engagement by those in the social environment such that the intervention itself may

change over time. A social work intervention that looks the same outside of and inside local contexts is probably not a natural fit with the environment.

The second lesson and related lesson is that intervention work must remain local in order to engage effectively. The act of removal itself not only prevents but also distorts any chance to be helpful. To me, this is analogous to how awkward and even unhelpful it can be to take best practices preserved through professionalism in social work and then try to insert them into local environments. And, it helps explain why using the same intervention tool in the same way – replicating effort and conforming to model fidelity – may in fact cause more harm than good, more mischief than well being.

This brings the third lesson, the value of impermanence as seen in allowing break down and disintegration. Impermanence in this case is not disappearance in the sense of total loss. Instead, the value of impermanence allows intervention work to breathe, to change as necessary within context, to actively respond and engage. Impermanence is a means of sustainability. Just as the natural environment is sustained through constant, more micro level change, social environments cannot be controlled but must be allowed to sustain through constant, micro level change and exchange. Insisting that the intervention used in local contexts remain the same could stagnate or distort rather than promote positive change.

Now contrast these lessons with how social workers are trained in best practices. Formal education removes students from context (except in field education) in order to teach them best practices, which are also taught as if they can be isolated from local contexts. Quality assurance comes through treating each student as passive recipient of expertise. Best practices means that each student is trained to administer the same intervention practices in the same way. Those who receive such interventions should respond predictably such that it does not matter who engages in this intervention. If there is diversity, this is labeled and categorized such that it becomes a predictable diversity. Direct dialogue with those we are trained to help is thus unnecessary.

The reason this is supposed to be helpful makes sense when considering the value in western philosophy on permanence, and the presumption that truths are themselves permanent and not relational or contingent, and certainly not temporal. Interventions that are modified too much through adaptation to local environment are held suspect. One fear is that when dynamic exchange and unanticipated change result, then the intervention may in fact have failed. Success requires replication of effort and model fidelity.

The concept of model fidelity means that intervention is evaluated in part simply for remaining the same, for acting like an object stuck into a social environment to predictable effect. Because this is not a natural process, yet another layer of best practice is added, that of fidelity monitoring. Fidelity monitoring is like climate controls in a museum used to ensure that what has been preserved will never be altered. Every consumer of museum knowledge ought to experience the same object as timeless. What if this approach to model fidelity were replaced with an emphasis on relational or

environmental fidelity? Evaluation would then include how well the intervention is transformed in relation to local environment rather than how well it stays the same.

Of course, there has been some modification to the potential rigidity of best practices and evidence based practice concepts. Within more recent definitions of EBP is a potentially relational approach because practice experience and client values and culture are also to be considered. However, if clinical expertise and client values are made into objects, removed from local context and lived experience into categories neatly labeled for external validation, then the value of permanence has once again created unintended effects. Similar to how indigenous cultures were made into static artifacts in the past, practice experience and client response are made into objects that must remain the same once validated as professional social work (and best) practices.

Just as model fidelity is not natural, this objectification also requires a lot of work. Examples include allowing CSWE Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards to control content through required textbook based education, standardizing questions and correct answers in licensing exams, and presenting case studies as best practices rather than as examples of direct practice. Again, the problem raised in this essay is not about whether best practices, evidence based practice, or CSWE EPAS are good ideas. Instead, the problem is how a value of permanence erodes the potential benefit of these concepts for truly helping others by preventing dynamic engagements. The solution is to allow a different kind of erosion, not one artificially imposed but rather naturally occurring in local social landscapes.

HOW TO DECOLONIZE

The Zuni project to recover and repatriate the Ahayu: da took time. Over many years. eighty Ahayu: da returned from the Smithsonian, other museums, and private collections (Ferguson, Anyon, & Ladd 2000). At one point, some FBI agents, "offered to confiscate Ahayu: da from museum collections around the United States" (Merrill, et al., 1993, p. 537). However, this was not the Zuni way. How one intervenes can be as important culturally as the goal and intention. Zuni leaders approached those who had stolen *Ahayu: da* and peacefully requested return, "phrasing their requests in nonconfrontational terms and relying on moral and religious arguments to persuade others to comply with their requests" (Merrill, et al., 1993, p. 537). In Zuni culture, this attempt must be made up to four times. Success meant they did not resort to legal recourse and demand return.

The aggression and destruction of colonization does not have to be met with the same and equal force. A philosophy of impermanence suggests that whatever efforts are made to preserve will eventually dissolve, and my proposal is to allow a natural decomposition by allowing a philosophy of impermanence. This does not mean that social work disappears. A lack of permanent, universal answers does not mean that there are no answers. Instead, answers can be found locally, through repatriation of best

practices and evidence based practices to local environments. If open dialogue and active exchange are allowed, then these interventions can be expected to be transformed in the process of bringing positive transformation. Best practices becomes less of a noun, a set of predetermined things to do, and more of a verb, a way of being, engaging, and respecting active engagement by others. Evidence of what is working can be recorded, shared, and used to make active choices about how to respond next. As case studies, these lived practices can be shared outside local contexts to identify commonalities and differences, perhaps providing insights or suggestions that improve rather than impose upon other environments. This will require a lot of communication and shared responsibility for outcomes amongst outside experts, local practitioners and the people social work intends to help.

This brings another point. The Zuni were not against museums, scientific knowledge, or anthropologists. In fact, negotiations included a Zuni anthropologist (Edmund Ladd), and part of the care taken in negotiation was because the Zuni people hoped to eventually create a museum of their own with help from the very museums holding their artifacts. They were careful in identifying what could stay in those museums and what should be repatriated. I am not against professional knowledge practices, and I am both a social work researcher and an anthropologist. The value of impermanence that I am suggesting does not negate the pursuit of knowledge or ways to transform our environments to promote health and well-being. Instead, it simply allows such efforts more breathing room and the possibility of break down in the process of realizing best practices not as universal but as local, not as permanent but as of the present. In decolonizing the concept of permanence in social work, a more equitable and sustainable concept of best practices and evidence based practice may be realized. This essay is grounded in that effort.

CONCLUSION

Western colonization has been a cultural project with very destructive consequences. As a western form of intervention, social work has been part of this project. Decolonizing social work entails many dimensions, which includes identifying destructive beliefs and practices, reclaiming Indigenous beliefs and practices, and learning from successful decolonization to improve social work practice with Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations (Gray, Coates, Yellow Bird, & Hetherington, 2013). In this essay, I have identified permanence as a destructive belief underlying social work as part of colonizing cultural practices. Using lessons from the Zuni people, I describe how colonization can unintentionally destroy the benefits of intervention, and how allowing impermanence can aid in successful restoration. I argue that allowing a philosophy of impermanence to support the concepts of best practices and evidence based practice in social work can help achieve social work goals. Social work decolonization is then a

practice in which sustainable harmony is realized through active engagement in local environments.

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