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Relevance of activity theory of ageing to the old people - Zambian context

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Abstract

This paper is an extract from the literature review of an ongoing PhD study that is seeking to establish the Relevance of Activity Theory of Ageing to the Old People in the Zambian context. Specifically the paper reviews literature by researchers who encountered issues of relevance while undertaking their PhD Studies in Zambia. The paper concluded that issues of relevance are a reality not only in developing countries but also in developed countries and therefore should be given attention.

Keywords: Relevance concerns, PhD Theses, Activity Theory of Aging, Zambian Context, Developing Countries.

1. Introduction

The old adage *what is good for the Gander is good for the Goose* seems to be extended to human beings by many theorists, and, even, policy makers. While the old adage may work in some situations, it may certainly fail to hold in other situations. For instance while Modernisation Theory of Development worked for the West, it failed to yield desired results in the Third World. In fact the theory is blamed for present day deplorable poverty situation in Africa (Mutunhu, 2011). Whilst the feminist theories worked for the women in the West, they are sadly lacking when applied to non-Western societies (Crowley, 1991) ^[4]. This is, to a great extent, because of the disparities in the contexts of the West and Third World Countries (Brooks, 1991; Matunhu J, 2011) ^[7]. For instance, whilst a First World Liberal Feminist would clamour for equal access to education or higher salaries for women corresponding to that of men in the same position, majority of Third World Women would worry about obtaining basic needs like food and shelter and accessibility of schools to children (Reynaldo, 2012). At this point therefore one would agree with Robert (1984) ^[9] when he asserted that no theory can apply to all cultures and political economic formations.

Generally Relevance is used to determine a degree of appropriateness or effectiveness pertaining to 'the matter at hand' (Jovan *et al*, 2007) ^[6]. In this study the Activity theory is the one whose degree of appropriateness or effectiveness is being sought. And the 'matter at hand' is the Zambian context in which old people live. This paper is an extract from the review of literature for the study in question. However we would like to bring to the readers' attention that due to a dearth of literature on studies in the same field, studies that encountered relevance issues, though from different fields of study, were utilized for the purposes of the literature review. The review is categorised in several themes; they include: Relevance issues in developed countries and in Zambia; discussion on reviewed studies and the study at hand.

2. Relevance - in developed countries

Brooks (1991) observed that relevance has always been a concern not only in the developing countries but also in the Western countries. In the western world, relevance concerns are raised regarding subcultures of the community whose values and social behavior patterns are significantly different from those of the dominant culture (Brooks, 1991). In this regard Brooks gave an example of how the American child welfare services were found inadequate when applied to American Black children. Racism seemed to have affected the organisation's distribution and delivery of services to black children. This was because the underlying philosophy of child welfare system seemed to have ignored the life experience of the black children that is unique as a result of poverty, discrimination and distinctive history. The services that were offered to the American Black children mirrored the mainstream white services but they were always comparatively limited and poor (Billingsley & Giovannoni 1972) ^[2].

3. Relevance - In Developing Countries

Brooks (1991) posed a question: "if concerns about relevance are valid within and between countries of the western world, how much more concerns should there be in developing countries?" According to Brooks (1991) the social contexts in developed countries are so vastly different from those pertaining in developing world as to nullify their possible relevance to the developing countries. When it comes to situations where a completely foreign service is imposed on a society, the concern is even greater. These situations are especially common in developing countries. The major contributing factor to these situations is that most developing countries have been colonies at some point and the services were often literally replicas of their colonial masters. As such the foreign system were imported, and in Brooks (1991)'s words the imported foreign systems:

“...are obviously unsuitable for the developing countries, largely because they were never framed with the intention for application in such environments. For Example in Zambia (the then Northern Rhodesia) the Juvenile Act was an exact replica of that pertaining in England with the minor difference that in Zambia it was only to be applied in urban areas and not the rural areas.” (pg. 3).

But according to Brooks (1991) the reasoning behind this importation seems to have been informed by the assumption that urban areas worldwide have similar characteristics. She argues that this assumption “ignores the fact that economic development in a developing country is at a very different stage and more importantly that the people involved are very different in their historical experience, their pattern of social relations and their value systems” (pg. 4). Brooks further argues that when such “faulty assumptions are made, or major facts ignored, the resultant services are rendered irrelevant or inappropriate” (pg. 4).

4. Relevance issues in Zambia

4.1. Brooks (1991)’s PhD thesis

Brooks (1991) proved her arguments right in her study which sought to establish the relevance of the social work practice in Zambia. The Zambian social work practice was imported from a foreign social welfare system. The essence of her thesis was to explore the implications for social work methodology at the level of interpersonal problem solving among the Luvale people of Kapompo District in North-Western province of Zambia. To achieve her objective Brooks made use of a case study approach. This enabled her to explore the Luvale indigenous problem solving process. A comparison was then made between the indigenous problem solving and the Zambian social work problem solving processes.

The comparison showed that the indigenous pattern was by far the most successful. She also noted and verified that the Western classical social work, on which the Zambian social work practice was based had a bias. To this effect Brooks revealed that “despite the unconscious attempts of Zambian social workers render their services more relevant to the Zambian social context, large areas of discrepancy were shown to remain, and the frustrating failure of Zambian social work was attributed to this discrepancy” (pg. vii). Brooks then concluded “...The imported social welfare systems operative in these countries were developed in social contexts so vastly different from those pertaining in developing countries as to nullify their possible relevance in these new situations. Zambia is presently experiencing such a phenomenon”. From this analysis Brooks came up with guidelines for use in the development of a relevant social work model.

4.2. Ndhlovu (2010) [8] PhD Thesis

Ndhlovu (2010) [8] also encountered a problem when he used the Integrated Support Theoretical Framework, a western biased model, to guide his study in which he sought to determine factors that contributed to poor life conditions of female graduates with mental retardation from vocational training institutions and to identify measure that could contribute to improving their life conditions. According to Ndhlovu (2010) [8] the theoretical frame work was designed for western societies and so it posed problems for him when he tried to apply it to a non-western society like Zambia. At this

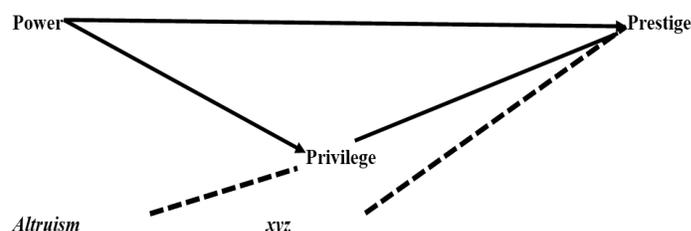
point a lot of questions ran through his mind: “how universal are human actions that a theoretical frame work or study about one society can be applied to a situation in another society? Can a study on factors that affect the life conditions of persons with mental retardation done in the united states of America, Finland and Britain, for example be applied to a situation in Zambia and explain it adequately? Are social phenomena universally defined and understood?” (pg 12). Then the researcher answered his own questions and asserted that it is common sense that not all human actions are universal. Similarly not all social phenomena have universal meanings. His conclusion was that a study in one society cannot adequately explain a situation in another society. These are great questions about relevance.

Therefore to make the theoretical framework more relevant to the Zambian situation Ndhlovu (2010) [8] critically examined the model and in the process identified some theoretical propositions and concepts which could render the frame work more applicable to the Zambian situation. As such therefore the researcher modified the theoretical model by addition aspect of community support. According to him “female graduates with mental retardation live in communities and therefore they need support from their community members to improve their life conditions” (pg 13).

4.3. Chakulimba (1986) [3] PhD Thesis

Way back in 1986, the problem of relevance was also encountered by Chakulimba [3]. While undertaking his PhD Thesis titled” The Status of Teachers: A sociological Study Analysing the Status of Primary and Secondary School Teachers in Zambia”. While undertaking the study the scholar discovered that the theory used to guide his study could not fully explain certain situations in Zambia. Specifically Lenski’s theory whose central argument is that:

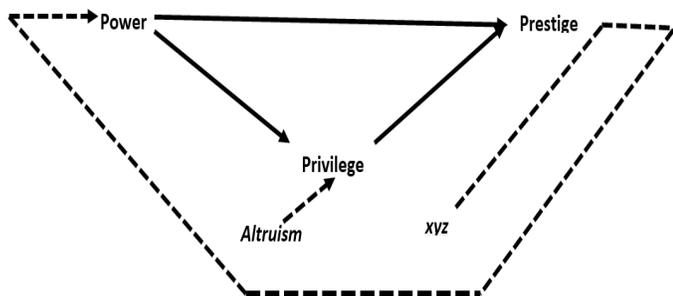
“...power or distribution of Power is the main determinant of the structure of society, in the sense that it determines the distribution of goods and services, or man’s product of labour: and not only goods and services, but also privilege and prestige. Those who have power have prestige, and those who have either power or privilege, or both power and privilege have prestige.”pg. 190. Lensiski’s theory was graphically presented as follows:



In the figure 1, bold lines represent major sources of influence while dashed lines indicate secondary sources.

Fig 1: Graphical presentation of Lensiski’stheory

Figure 2 presents a more accurate representation of various relationship as follows



In this triad, power is the key variable from the causal and explanatory stand point.

Fig 2: A more accurate representation of relationship

But Chakulimba (1986) [3] argues the theory was only applicable to his study only at this point. Thus far it was relevant to his study because it explained the factors affecting the status of teachers in Zambia. But the scholar observed serious omission in the theory. He observed that “although the theory has gone beyond the factors of power and privileges, it does not deliberately deal with other factors which may be the sources of power and privileges, those factors which contribute to high social status in Zambia” pg. 194. At this point Chakulimba suggested that when such situations arise it is better to add or subtract some variables from existing theory so as to make it more applicable to the situation at hand, or, come up with a different theory altogether. As such he was forced to modify the theory so that it could fully explain the situation in Zambia.

Figure 3 presents a graphical representation of the adapted model or perspective of the Lensiski Theory.

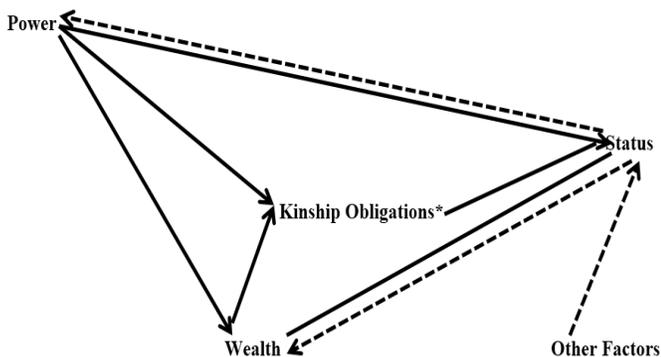


Fig 3: Adapted Model or Perspective

In this adapted model Chakulimba (1986) [3] calls to the attention of the readers the fact that power may be guaranteed by the legal order, but is not always the case. But the legal order enhances one’s chance to hold power. He also explains that power is, in many cases derived from the offices or occupations which individuals hold in the community. The offices or occupations are also the bases of wealth and power which individuals enjoy in the community. To that effect Chakulimba (1986) [3] designed a more complete model which included legal order but more especially occupations as the basis of power and wealth:

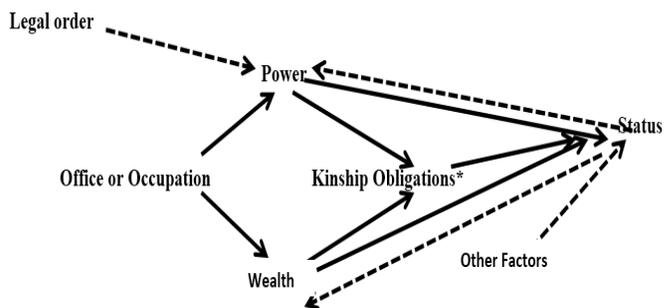


Fig 4: adapted Theoretical Model or Perspective - a more complete model

Chakulimba further clarifies that it is the ability to fulfill kinship obligations, rather than the kinship obligations themselves which is the variable of analysis in this diagram.

4.4. The study at hand

This study seeks to establish the relevance of Activity Theory of Ageing to the old people in the Zambian context. Activity theory was developed in the 60s in the United States of America – about five decades ago. This theory was selected for the study in that Zambia like many other developing countries continues to import practices and policies that have their roots in the Activity theory. The question one asks is; do those practices or policies work well for the intended people; the general population and the aged in particular?

The central argument for activity theory of ageing is that when elderly people maintain the attitudes, values and level and pattern of activities thy acquired in middle age they are sure to have life satisfaction (Havighurst1963; Davies, 1994; Subramanien, 2013). The graphical presentation of the theoretical model would look like this:

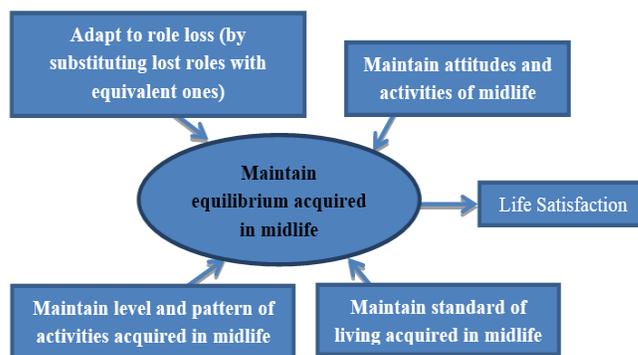


Fig 5: Graphical Presentation of Activity theory of Ageing

Activity theory heavily borrows from the functionalist perspective. It argues that needs acquired in midlife should continue to be satisfied in old age otherwise there will be a deficiency or an imbalance in the equilibrium. If there is an imbalance then life satisfaction will not be attained. At this point this researcher poses a question: Is Activity Theory of Ageing useful or helpful to old people in the Zambian context? Perhaps the question will or will not be answered by the findings of the study. The findings of the study may also dictate if this model should be adapted to the Zambian context or a new model altogether should be developed.

5. Discussion on reviewed studies

As earlier alluded to, this paper confined itself to reviewing studies that dealt with relevance issues. And due to lack of literature on studies that sought to establish the relevance of Activity theory in Zambia, studies that encountered issues of relevance were reviewed. For instance, Brooks (1991)'s study was in the field of Social work, Ndhlovu (2005)'s thesis was in the field of Special Education and Chakulimba (1985)'s study was in the field of Sociology of Education.

Although these studies were undertaken in different fields, they are of significance to this study in that they highlighted the fact that relevance issues in Zambia and indeed in any developing country are real and therefore should be given attention. Most of the policies and practices being utilized in developing countries are based on foreign theory frameworks. Brooks ascribes the reason for this state of affairs to the fact that it is easier to import frame works /practices than to create them from the scratch. Robert (1984)^[9] in his award winning paper warned that no universal theory of Ageing can explain the meaning of growing old for all historical eras, nor can any theory apply to all cultures and political economic formations. Robert (1984)^[9] further asserted that the goal of theory in gerontology is achieved if a researcher can specify the implications of growing old given a certain set of material and ideal conditions in a particular society

Brooks (1991)'s study was the only one among the reviewed studies whose purpose was directed at establishing the relevance of the western based framework that informed social work practice in Zambia. Brooks went into the depth and breadth of the matter and came up with a rich array of information and well informed guidelines for developing a more relevant model for use in Zambia. Ndhlovu (2005) and Chakulimba (1986)^[3] did not directly set out to question the theories in question. They encountered the issues of relevance during the course of their studies. Had the purpose of their studies been directed to question the relevance of the theories, they would have dug out a lot more issues that could have contributed immensely to the question of relevance in developing countries in general and Zambia in particular.

Although there are very few studies that have reported issues of relevance, the few reviewed studies have revealed that issues of relevance are a reality in both developed and developing countries. In Zambia, relevance issues have been found to exist in various fields, which include social work, special education and sociology of education.

6. Conclusion

Issues of relevance should not be taken lightly both by developed and developing countries. This is because implementing a practice or policy that has very little relevance is like administering a malaria treat to a patient who is suffering from cancer. Similarly practices or policies that are irrelevant to the intended people's situations would not be very helpful to them.

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