# Cultural Differences and Neo-colonialism in Social Work: Negotiating Exchanges Between Ghana and the United States

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*In the following reflection on a 15-year experience with a professional practicum exchange program between Universities in Ghana and the United States, the author presents stories of personal and professional triumphs and challenges. Lessons learned from childhood about prejudice, racism, and neocolonialism in the United States proved helpful in Ghana. The shift in worldviews is necessary, even for someone who is a part of the African Diaspora. Following the introduction, this narrative is divided into three steps: the author's cultural reflections as a Fulbright recipient; developing and enacting an exchange program; and assessing likelihood of sustaining an exchange program between faculty and students.*

## Introduction

It seemed to be a relatively straightforward request: "We have a grant from a large foundation for the purposes of uniting professional schools in the United States (U.S.) with those in African countries. Would it be possible for you to organize an exchange between your school [of social work] and the social work program at the University of Ghana?" Little did I know when I responded to this 1995 request from the University of Michigan Center for African and African American Studies that I was embarking on a 15-year odyssey of progress and setbacks on both sides of the ocean. My journey has offered many reflections about the importance of cultural context, worldview, and the persistence of neocolonial and often not-so-subtle racist attitudes in social work education during the late 20th and early 21st century.

For purposes of clarity, definitions of prejudice, racism, and neocolonialism are addressed first. Much has been written about all three topics, and I have devoted the majority of my 42-year professional career to developing programs, policies, and practices to offset them. It is important to address how these constructs as they affected the joint University of Ghana (UG)/University of Michigan (UMI) social work exchange program. In neocolonial social work education, deification of western economic policies and

practices, language utilization, and cultural beliefs are legitimated and dominate the field (Askeland & Payne, 2006; Midgley, 2007). Theories and practice strategies from countries outside of Europe, Canada, and particularly the United States are seldom integrated into our national social work education. This narrative contains examples of the challenges and triumphs of efforts to engage in social work practice across borders.

## First Steps: My Fulbright Experience at the University of Ghana

As an eight-year-old girl in 1957, I read a special issue of *Ebony* magazine that celebrated Ghana as the first independent nation in post-colonial Africa. It made such an impression on me that I decided I would one day visit the country. This was no small dream for a young, working-class African American girl from Chicago's south side, but it would be almost 40 years before I realized my goal.

I have professors Nana Apt and Howard Brabson to thank for helping me make my first trip to Ghana a reality. I first met Professor Nana Apt in 1994 when she was a visiting professor at the University of Michigan (UMI), working with now-Professor Emeritus Brabson. Through them, I learned about the evolution of social work in Ghana and the crucial role that collaborations—like the one she maintained with Dr. Brabson—could play in expanding our knowledge base of effective

strategies for global practice. Upon learning of my interest, and after consulting with Apt, Brabson suggested that I apply for a Fulbright Research and Teaching position in Ghana. I made my first trip to Ghana in 1995, and it was a life-changing experience.

My goal then, as now, was to engage in what has been called a "Reverse Mission" (Abrams, Slosar, & Walls, 2005); to learn about the strengths of practice elsewhere and examine the benefits and potential applications to social work practice. I have referred elsewhere to this strategy as reversing the flow of information from the Global South to the Global North, an approach that flies directly in the face of neocolonial "power-over" values and approaches. Since the late 1960s, my clinical practice with women in families and communities has emphasized using strategies that have evolved over centuries and are evident in communities of color, offsetting personal, familial, community, and societal stressors.

The University of Ghana has had a social work program for almost three decades. Its principal architect was Professor Nana Araba Apt, a globally recognized gerontologist who has trained thousands of undergraduate social work majors for almost 50 years. She has been, for all practical purposes, "The Mother of Social Work" in Ghana. Under Apt's supervision, the UG Social Work program moved from being administered by the Department of Sociology at UG to a separate program in Social Work Administration. By the time she left UG for her current position as Dean of Students at Ashesi University in Ghana, the social work unit had been granted departmental status. And the professional practicum program had grown to include more than 70 agencies throughout the country with an accredited M.S.W. program. All of this was accomplished with less than four full-time equivalent (FTE) positions in the program and/ or department. While I had been taught from an early age to "make less with more," I'd never seen it done with the skill and perseverance embodied by Apt's efforts.

On my first trip to Ghana, I took the time to acquaint myself with the many Ghanaian women's groups. I also studied the community-building and extended family-intervention strategies they employed that could enrich U.S. social work practice. Having written about this elsewhere, I want to speak in a more general way about insights I have gained as a result of traveling to Ghana for fifteen years.

The Price of Privilege

One of the first lessons I learned was that Ghanaians know much more about the U.S. than U.S. citizens know about the rest of the world. Accra is home to about six daily newspapers of varying qualities and ideological flavors. Since few Ghanaians can afford to buy all of them, those who can afford to buy a paper do so, and the various news items perspectives were discussed, shared, and debated as people waited for public transportation. I was soon participating in these enthusiastic morning groups. I became aware as never before of how this comprehensive global knowledge, actively pursued, shapes the attitudes of entire nations toward the U.S., irrespective of an individual's economic, ethnic, class, racial, or ability backgrounds.

Not only was I involved in the morning debates, but, during my first month in Ghana, I was repeatedly asked to defend the awarding of Honorary Doctorates to Ghanaian government officials. These awards were being given at a time when the UG faculty was on strike to receive back wages. I was taken by surprise by this news, as neither the U.S. press nor U.S. State Department briefings had mentioned either the strike or the awards. Initially, I was unable to adequately respond to the many Ghanaians in academic and social settings who asked, "How could you?" (referring to my U.S. citizenship).

Thinking back, I concluded that the overall quality of international news in the mainstream U.S. media is extremely poor, as Secretary of State Hillary Clinton conceded before a Senate committee on March 2, 2011. It became clear to me that U.S. residents, as citizens of one of the richest nations on earth, enjoy the questionable privilege of being indifferent to the social, economic, and political challenges that plague the rest of the world; some of which are a direct result of actions by the U.S.

government or institutions. In fact, the privilege of indifference is often fueled by the lackluster quality of the U.S. global news.

## Who's Crazy and Why: Water Bottles, Mental Illness, and Mrs. M.

Shortly after my arrival in Ghana, the UG instructor who had taught the Social Diagnosis class became ill and needed to return to the U.S. for medical treatment. He had prepared the final examination for his students before he left, but someone else had to administer and grade over 300 handwritten "blue book" answers. I was enlisted to serve as the first of what would ultimately be several graders from UG and the international African Examinations Board to review the examinations.

There is an Arabic proverb: "Repetition teaches even the donkey." The students' examinations helped me understand how differing cultural perspectives influenced the very definition of mental illness and the nature of subsequent interventions.

One of the first questions on the test asked students to give at least one example of a sign of mental illness. Having a licensed clinical social work practice background as well as having taught courses in interpersonal practice, I was struck by how many of the students listed "people drinking from water bottles outside" in their examination books as indicative of having a mental illness. Clearly, it is necessary to place this answer in context. Water is a precious commodity in Ghana, so much so that there is even a ritual associated with its procurement when one enters a home or public setting. Using a private water bottle in an environment where everyone was hot and thirsty could be viewed as an insult. To do so during classroom instruction could be considered even more outrageous. What students from other countries took for granted as a sign of reasonable behavior was repugnant to those accustomed to offering water to others as a sign of respect and acknowledgement. I've been unable to use a water bottle in Ghana since that time.

In another part of the examination, students were given a case study about Mrs. M., a newly divorced professionally trained mother of a young son. Her work as an accountant was suffering; she was unable to sleep or eat regularly, and her extended family seemed to offer little support. In fact, Mrs. M. and her father were estranged. The students were asked how they might handle the case.

Upon reading the first paper through my U.S.-trained-social-worker lens, I was stunned to note that the primary intervention strategy was to help Mrs. M. *return* to her husband. I put the paper aside, knowing that I would have to write a lengthy comment about the ability of Mrs. Mensah to deal with what I considered classic symptoms of depression without her husband, and moved on to the second paper. That one also listed reuniting with Mr. M. as the solution to Mrs. M.'s problems. On to papers three, four, ten, and twenty. Each exam listed reunification with Mr. M. as a necessary variable for intervention. I should note that the majority of students in the class were men, who might not have been exposed to what some scholars have termed African Feminism (Dolphyne & Ofei-Agoagye, 2001), in which women's lives are viewed in conjunction with, rather than separate from, their extended families.

As a way of testing my hypothesis, I went in search of examinations from three young women students in the class. In each case, the answer was consistent with the hundreds of others I was to read: in order for Mrs. M. to be able to effectively and happily manage her life, she needed to be reunited with her husband. One student prefaced their answer by suggesting that while having Mrs. M. diagnosed for depression might seem to be a worthwhile goal, diagnosis and treatment for depression alone would not settle her estrangement from her patrilineal extended family. Treatment for depression would not allow her to be supported by a community or society in which her church, neighbors, and public institutions expected a respectable woman with a child to be married. This was, indeed, an African feminist perspective, but one placing the societal norms on a level equivalent with those of individuals, families, and communities.

I've been using the case of Mrs. M. in global social work practice courses I've taught

for more than a decade as an illustration of how what seems straightforward in practice in an individually oriented society does not immediately transfer to settings where the extended family's support may be crucial in determining the individual's mental health. I also model for my students the ways in which my own lens and bias (i.e., as a global feminist and African American womynist) have the potential to lead to negative consequences in global practice. Contesting the theories and methods in social work is critical for those interested in practice locally and globally (Askeland and Payne, 2006). Clearly social, historical, and political contexts need to be incorporated into any intervention. While such knowledge is found in the U.S. literature on populations of color, it is not normally integrated into U.S. social work practice classes— primarily because it requires the interrogation of one's worldview before action.

## Middle Steps: Developing and Enacting the Exchange Program;
## Values and Goal Setting in Concert

Along with my research and academic responsibilities, I also sought to honor my University's request to develop an exchange program. As Apt and I got clearances through the administrative bodies on our respective campuses, we thought about the types of students who would most benefit from our proposed exchange. We made a commitment to identify students who might not otherwise have an opportunity to do professional work in another country; particularly first generation college students. Our participant selections would be based on academic achievement, clarity about strengths/limitations of their practice backgrounds, a willingness to engage in colleague—and host country—appropriate work, and their agreement to participate in pre-departure academic training. We also knew that one of our most formidable tasks would be to secure funding for a program that was not central to the agendas of either of our institutions at the time. We wanted for the program to represent a true exchange: one in which students and faculty from each institution *shared* academic resources, collaborated on scholarship, and prepared students for global

practice across a range of practices. Additionally, the students and faculty engaged in the exchange would live like ordinary Ghanaians, not ex-pats or governmental officials who lived behind gates, had chauffeurs, and sometimes could not find their way around their own neighborhoods. Most importantly, this was not to be a 1-2 week "vacation in a foreign country" trip for students. They were expected to commit to working in the country for a minimum of 3 months, accumulating credits based on hours worked. The experience was expected to stress immersion.

These lofty program goals were actually drawn from the work of other UG-associated social work programs from the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom (U.K.). Although I had served as a field instructor for two universities and worked on designing aspects of the UMI domestic field instruction program, I was a novice to global field work development. I greatly benefited from sharing information with colleagues around the world about their hopes and dreams about global social work from a non-deficit perspective. For most of these colleagues, linkages with UG were not considered "gifts" to "uplift the third world country" (Hare 2004; Haug, 2005). They were, by contrast, viewed as opportunities for mutual support and aid in the development of scholarship and service in global social work education.

Strength in Numbers

By 2000, I had joined faculty members from universities in Ghana, the U.S., Canada, and the U.K. to begin drafting a Master of Social Work Program for the UG's approval. This collaborative effort put me in touch with people I would not have met otherwise. Our discussions about the learning objectives and outcomes expected of Ghanaian students were lively, and we were able to see how our different backgrounds influenced the lenses we used in social work education. It was also helpful to review the strategies utilized by others in building collaborations with the UG. By far one of the strongest was with another university in my home state. It entailed a team of faculty members committed to sustained

curriculum development, who were willing to share their resources and expertise in Ghana to promote the MSW program over a period of years. I realized that I had been unable to build such a team with my university colleagues, who were busy and had multiple research interests yet little knowledge of Ghana. During one period, I was referred to as being "THE Ghana Exchange" in my own academic unit. The other teams I worked with in Ghana came from universities and colleges that were also willing to regularly invite, defray the costs of, and engage Ghanaian faculty in collaborative projects in the United States: true exchanges. The commitment and willingness to provide financial and intellectual support was crucial in solidifying the relationships among the two universities (Pettys et. al, 2005). This knowledge was never lost on me as I struggled to help students to find adequate funding for their trips. Most years the costs I incurred came out of my own pocket.

U.S. Students

For me, working with students was one of the highlights of the exchange effort. The roughly 15 students selected by the university admirably met the challenges of fund raising and preparing themselves to enter a new practice context. In preparation for their trips, the majority sought out independent studies and short courses, worked with Professor P.K. Abrefah of UG to design appropriate field placements, and had their learning goals outlined before they left the U.S. They encountered challenges, such as the view from several faculty members that "It is a waste of time and money to send a Master's-level student overseas. Only those pursuing PhDs should have this opportunity." They later reported that the experience had altered their views of practice. As one committed to this professional practicum program, what has been most gratifying to me is the knowledge that all those former students went on to work in global social work settings at some point in their post-M.S.W. careers.

"We Want You to Speak English Like an American"

Four Ghanaian students were able to participate in these exchanges between 1998 and 2011. Three of them completed their M.S.W. degrees at the university. One of those students is now enrolled in a doctoral program. The fourth student, enrolled at the UG, was placed in a U.S. agency for a summer professional practicum. All of the students qualified academically, and none of them failed their English-language proficiency TOEFL tests.

Before arrival, however, university required all students to *once again* prove their proficiency in spoken and written English. The first student enrolled in our program was told by a local English-as-a-second-language center that while she seemed to be able to speak English, "We want you to speak English like an American." The second student to enroll was told she would be required tò leave her job and family early in order to come to the UMI to enroll in English classes three months before her M.S.W. program began.

While it is reasonable to expect that students arriving in the U.S. for study be competent in English, Ghana was a British colony until 1957 and *all* of its formal instruction is in English. Indeed, one cannot complete a degree there *without* fluency in English. It took my repeated intervention to explain that students from Ghana were able to write and speak in English. In some cases, they were better prepared to do so than some undergraduates from the U.S., who had performed well on computer-scored tests instead of written exams. In trying to convince others, I found myself explaining ethnocentrism, and the potential problems of targeting or "tracking" a group because of perceived deficiencies. More than once I thought I was conducting a session of the course I teach on social justice, oppression, and contemporary U.S. cultures.

Ghanaian students consistently served as co-teachers and co-learners for their classmates. In one case, during our weekly meetings, a Ghanaian student noted how astonished he was that behaviors he had read about in textbooks while in Ghana were

common enough in the United States to actually merit the diagnostic labels they had been given. For example, he worked with a family whose house was deemed uninhabitable because the residents exhibited classic OCD hoarding behavior. The student said that he really did not believe that people engaged in hoarding until he saw it firsthand. He concluded that extended family structures in Ghana would have intervened when family members first became aware of someone's over-accumulation of goods rather than waiting until the target relative's home was a health risk. In his final evaluations, this Ghanaian student left a series of recommendations for prevention and early intervention; many of which were adopted by the U.S. agency in which he had been placed.

Back-Translator as Cheerleader

My primary role in this program was to provide supervision for students participating in these exchanges. One of the difficulties in placing students from the United States into other countries is the lack of a "back-translator," one who helps students to clarify their perspectives on practice against perspectives in their new environments. The back-translator or field liaison does not take the place of regular field instruction by faculty from the host institution. Instead, the person supplements, trouble-shoots, and clarifies differences among the expectations of various stakeholders in the educational process. Additionally, the back-translator assists students with the process of entry into the host country, and re-entry into their country of origin.

This latter role became extremely important as all students from the United States reported having great difficulty returning to the cultural expectations or lifestyles they had become critical of during their time abroad. I borrowed debriefing techniques from colleagues in other parts of the world for use in these cases, and needed to remain cognizant that the debriefing was an important part of the overall practicum exchange. For those entering the country from Ghana, my back-translator role required helping students deal with the informality of U.S. interactions, as

well as the slights they experienced while living in the United States. Few had experienced either overt or covert racism, and were astonished at the refusal of service in establishments, or being considered incompetent by virtue of having been born in Ghana. My own experiences of racism as an African-American woman has enabled me to help students and colleagues negotiate their first experiences with it. I found myself engaged in a very delicate process of helping the UG students understand the nature of prejudice against African-Americans, why they were mistaken for African-Americans in the wider U.S. society, and to unlearn their own misconceptions about African Americans.

**Endings**

Getting MOUs between true academic institutions in two countries was, of course, challenging. After 1 1/2 years, I knew the requirements for a sustainable exchange of students and faculty would not be possible for me. It is an extraordinary challenge to move through Healy's stages of growth in global education from tolerance, to responsiveness, to institutional commitment (Johnson, 2004). However, I will continue to work on teaching and research projects as well as developing new educational programs with my Ghanaian colleagues. My greatest lesson of living and working in Ghana during this period has been learning how to be "a guest in the house" of citizens of other countries. By virtue of our power, privilege, and isolation from the rest of the world, U.S. citizens learn how to be ethnocentric, prejudiced, and neocolonialist. My new mission is to recognize and change those characteristics in myself and others who wish to be effective social workers in global practice; here and in other countries. This is difficult, but thankfully, not impossible.

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