

The Relevancy of Postmodernism in Understanding Elder Abuse: Implications on Social Work Education and Practice

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Abstract

This article is aimed at bringing out the relevancy of postmodernism in understanding the phenomenon of elder abuse. The article which is based on review of the available literature on postmodernism and elder abuse argues that postmodernism is an eye opener in understanding elder abuse. Its relevancy in understanding elder abuse rises in its beliefs of recognition of multiplicity, complexity, dynamism, context specificity and having grounded knowledge about any social phenomenon. The article argues further that such relevancy has significant implications on frontline workers like social workers who deal with elder abuse situations. Limitations of postmodernism with regard to understanding elder abuse are also provided.

Key words: Postmodernism; elder abuse; social work

Introduction

Postmodernism thinking is becoming so popular in the social sciences. However, a gap exists in the available literature on the relevancy of postmodernism in understanding the global problem of elder abuse. A systematic review of the available literature [both published and unpublished] shows that such knowledge gap exists. Thus, this article is meant to try to fill up this gap. I do this by linking postmodernism thinking about social reality to the global phenomenon of elder abuse. However, for the sake of simplicity, the article is structured in the following order: First, I define the key concepts which are elder abuse and postmodernism. I then give detailed conceptions of postmodernism about social reality. In the second part, I discuss the relevancy of

postmodernism in understanding elder abuse. In trying to make the relevancy of postmodernism clearer in understanding elder abuse, I first explain the causes of elder abuse using one of the modernist theories of elder abuse namely the situational theory of elder abuse. I then bring out the weaknesses of situational theory in understanding elder abuse. This is done to form the basis for bringing in the relevancy of postmodernism in understanding elder abuse. Third, I draw some implications of postmodernism on social work education and practice with reference to elder abuse. In this part of the article, I also bring out the weaknesses of postmodernism. Finally, I draw a conclusion.

Definition of elder abuse

To start the ball rolling, let me say that there is no universally agreed upon definition of elder abuse. This is because elder abuse is a very broad and complex phenomenon (World Report on Violence and Health, 2002). According to Wolf (2000) elder abuse is a term with broad meaning, including many forms and examples, always describing harm or loss to an older person. Payne (2005, p. 2) argues that the term elder abuse captures virtually any possible harm inflicted on an older person by society, care setting, or individual. World Health Organization (WHO) has also defined the concept of elder abuse. This organization defines elder abuse as a single or repeated act or lack of appropriate action occurring within any relationship where there is an expectation of trust which causes harm or stress to an older person (WHO 2012, p.1).

When I critically look at the above definitions, there are two important things which I am able to see. First, I can see that elder abuse takes many forms. Second, I can see that the common denominator of all these definitions is that elder abuse is an act that hurts or painfully disturb the life of an elder person. Although the meaning of the word ‘elder person’ is not provided in the above definitions, in this article, the term elder person is used to refer to any person who is aged 60 years and above. This conceptualization of an elder person is in line with the United Nations (UN) definition of elder people and it has been adopted because the article has focused on a global problem. The UN agreed cutoff is 60+ years to refer to the elder population (WHO, 2012). Thus, this article should be seen to center on bringing out the relevancy of postmodernism in understanding the global problem of abusing people who are aged 60 years and above. Furthermore, in this article the word elder abuse is defined as any intentional/deliberate act that

involves hurting or painfully disturbing the life of any person aged 60 years and above. The act can be done either by an individual person, institution, community or larger society. This act may also be done either once or repeatedly and the harm may take several forms such as physical abuse, verbal abuse, financial/material abuse, sexual abuse, spiritual abuse, political abuse and neglect among others (Wolf, 2000; Payne, 2005, Iborra, 2009, Kabelenga, 2015). To make the definition of elder abuse clearer, let me shade a little bit more light on what is involved in each of these forms/types of elder abuse.

Physical abuse: this refers to the intentional acts that cause physical harm to the body of an elder person. Examples of this type of abuse may include beating, slapping, hitting, burning, and pushing among others of an elder person (Wolf, 2000; Payne, 2005; Iborra, 2009).

Verbal abuse: this refers to the intentional acts mainly in form of words, which may cause harm to an elder person. Examples of this type of abuse may include insulting or using filthy language, shouting, and unnecessary blaming of an elder person (Wolf, 2000; Payne, 2005; Mupila, 2008; Iborra, 2009).

Financial (material) abuse: this refers to any intentional act which involves illegal or non-authorized use of an elder person's financial and/or any other material resources which result into causing harm to an elder person. Examples of this type of abuse may include deliberate misusing of the elder person's financial or other material things, falsifying their signature which makes it possible for the abuser to begin to use the elder person's resources; forcing them to sign documents which may make the elder person to lose their financial or any material resources (Wolf, 2000; Payne, 2005; Mupila, 2008; Iborra, 2009).

Sexual abuse: this refers to any intentional act which involves forcing sexual activity (ies) that may arouse the sexual feelings of an elder person without his/her own desires or for the perpetrator to gain sexual satisfaction. Examples here could include rape, molest or showing pornographic materials, forcing elder people to commit sexual activities amongst themselves or kissing an elder person (Pillemer and Wolf, 1982; Wolf, 2000; Iborra, 2009).

Neglect: this refers to intentional failure to meet one's own obligations in caring for the elder person. Examples here could include refusing to attend to the needs of the elder people even if

the resources are available; leaving them to stay in soiled clothes or beddings; leaving them alone without anyone nearby to give them help when they need help among others (Wolf, 2000; Iborra 2009; Mupila, 2008; HelpAge International, 2011 and WHO, 2012).

Spiritual abuse: this refers to any intentional act to harm the spiritual well being of the elder people. Examples here include false accusations of elder people as witches/wizards; condemning them to be behind misfortunes in society, condemning them to be lacking faith or being demonized among others (Mupila, 2008; HelpAge International, 2011, Kabelenga, 2015).

Political abuse: this refers to any intentional act to hurt the civil and political life of the elder person. Examples here include forcing or making the elder people to vote for a certain political party or candidate in an election or intentional use of elder people's civic/political documents like national registration cards or voters cards by certain political regimes or parties to make a certain political party or candidate win an election contrary to the desires of the particular elder person (HelAge International, 2011; Kabelenga, 2015).

From the above definitions, it implies that elder abuse is a multidimensional concept. As such it should always be thought about using a multidimensional approach which requires the use of different lenses. Having defined the term elder abuse, I now move to the definition of postmodernism and its beliefs about social reality.

Definition of postmodernism and its conceptions about social reality

According to Fook (2002) postmodernism in its simplest sense, involves a critique of totalizing theories and the structures, boundaries and hierarchies which maintain and enact them. It is both a theory and descriptive framework. Postmodernism in theory and practice represents recognition that traditional (modernist) organizing frameworks are no longer valued or relevant, and that we must acknowledge the existence of diverse and multiple frameworks (Pease and Fook, 1999; Fook, 2002). Gray and Webb (2013) define postmodernism as a range of theoretical orientations that emphasize relativity, plurality and deconstructive forms of analysis. In light of these conceptions, postmodernism has the following beliefs about social reality:

To begin with, postmodernists believe that there are no universal truths. That is, truths that are applicable to every part of the world and in every situation and context are not possible. Instead

truths are seen as relative and subjective which varies from time to time and in different situations and contexts (Gray and Webb, 2013; Mullaly, 2007; Fook, 2002). Two points justify this belief. First, this belief is justifiable on the ground that society is not static. Rather it is constantly in the state of flux. Second, there are multiple cultures in the world. That is, the people globally do not have one culture and as such they have live in different ways according to their own values, beliefs, norms and institutions. Because of this, postmodernism believe in plurality of every reality or truth which can only be understood within its own specific cultures and contexts (Gough, 1999; Gray and Webb, 2013). Even with this conception of reality, postmodernism believe further that reality even within the specific culture or context should not be seen to be fixed, but instead as constantly changing according to the changes going in society. Thus, postmodernists believe that everything is relative and fluid (Gray and Webb, 2013; Mullaly, 2007; Fook, 2002).

Because of the above views about social reality, postmodernists believe in the use of multiple perspectives or lenses in trying to understand any social reality (Gray and Webb, 2013; Mullaly, 2007; Fook, 2002). In light of this belief, they reject for example the preference of expert knowledge at the expense of experiential knowledge in understanding or in intervening in social reality. As used in the context of postmodernism, expert knowledge refers to knowledge of experts such as doctors, nurses, psychologist and social workers among other scientists. On the other hand, experiential knowledge refers to the knowledge of people who have experienced the particular situations, for example, service users, clients or victims of a particular problem. (Gray and Webb, 2013). Thus, the belief in postmodernism is that equal weight should be given to all sources of knowledge because every source and form of knowledge only has relative truths and not absolute truths (Gray and Webb, 2013; Mullaly, 2007; Fook, 2002).

In addition, postmodernists believe that there is diversity within language. For example, it is argued in postmodernism that, when the word 'women' is used, it should not be seen as a homogeneous term but rather as a heterogeneous term. For instance, within the word women, there are young women and older women; rural and urban women; literate and illiterate women; rich and poor women; and also single, married, divorced and widowed women among other social economic categories of women (Gray and Webb, 2013; Kabelenga, 2012). Thus, women for example should not be seen to be one, but rather as different in so many ways. Because of

this conception, postmodernism rejects the idea of generalization, and support the idea of being more specific. They also reject the idea that they call as ‘one size fits all’ (Gray and Webb, 2013; Fook, 2002). This conception is anchored on the social reality that people are never the same. Not even within the same biological family. As such you cannot treat them in the same way. Thus, other key beliefs of postmodernism about social reality are understanding and treating people at their own levels; flexibility and not to be rigid when approaching any social reality, adaptation to reality according to changes obtaining on the ground; critical reflection of what is happening in society; and the need for constant learning. This further calls for constant adjustments in doing things or in thinking about social reality. Thus, postmodernism emphasizes that all knowledge whether theoretical or empirical, and regardless of who originated it or where it originated from and how it emerged and no matter how powerfully they are embedded in social, political, economic, academic and individual ways of viewing the world should be opened up for critical questioning (Gray and Webb, 2013). In light of this, postmodernism further argues that the western theories that claim universal applications are irrelevant to understanding social reality. This is because there is a wider range of understanding of reality at any one time (Gray and Webb, 2013).

In summarizing postmodernism, Mullaly (2007) has provided the following as the main characteristics of postmodernism: it rejects the idea that there is an objective social knowledge containing an absolute truth; it rejects the idea of objective, value free scientific method that makes reality accessible; it rejects the notion of universalism, such as a universal human subject or a universal set of human needs; it rejects attempts to develop overarching frameworks (paradigms, ideologies) or all-encompassing theories (for example, liberalism, socialism, marxism, psychoanalysis among others) that attempt to establish an underlying reality; it rejects the notion that there exists a fixed human identity but rather that there is fragmentation. It also criticizes modernist use of language and dominant discourses that reflect dominant-subordinate relationships.

In light of the above senses, it implies further that postmodernism is more particularly a theory about ways of knowing, rather than a theory of what sort of society we should have and how people should behave with it (Fook, 2002, p.16). Thus, another way of thinking about

postmodernism is that it an epistemological theory. That is, it is all about this idea of ‘how do we know? (Fook, 2002; Mullaly, 2007; Gray and Webb, 2013).

Arriving from the above connotations, the pertinent question to ask is: what is the relevancy of postmodernism in understanding the global problem of elder abuse? Below I attempt to answer this question.

Relevancy of postmodernism in understanding elder abuse

To open up this part of the article for presentation, let me first make it clear here that one cannot adequately understand the relevancy of postmodernism in understanding any particular social phenomenon before first understanding modernism. This is because postmodernism has arisen as a reaction to modernism (Pease and Fook, 1999; Fook, 2002; Mullaly, 2007; Gray and Webb, 2013). Thus, before I discuss the relevancy of postmodernism in understanding elder abuse, let me first provide some insights about modernism in general and then go into detail of modernism by using one of the modernist theories of elder abuse, and in particular situational theory of elder abuse.

The beliefs of modernism about social reality are contained in modernist theories. Modernist theories refer to those theories which claim universal applications (Fook, 2002; Mullaly, 2007; Gray and Webb, 2013). This simply means that modernist theories claim that their arguments are relevant to any part of the world. These theories are western in origin (Mullaly, 2007). These theories also do not recognize diversity when looking at social phenomenon. This is because they look at social reality in homogenous manner. Modernist theorists also consider reality or truth as that which is subject to empirical observation and testing (Ghosh, 2004; Mullaly, 2007). Thus the subjective aspect of social life such as feelings and experiences of service users for instance is ignored in modernist theories. Because of this, modernist theories simplify reality into a few quantifiable variables. For example, when looking at people in the world, they group them into two categories such as man and woman; able bodied and disabled, experts and non-experts (Gray and Webb, 2013; Mullaly, 2007). The idea here is to generalize explanations and interventions for example, of all men; of all women, of all able bodied people; and of all disabled people among other categories of people in the whole world (Gray and Webb, 2013).

Modernist theories also value expert knowledge especially the knowledge established through randomized quantitative research. Experiential knowledge such as knowledge of the service users, or clients is always downplayed (Gray and Webb, 2013). This is because they believe that truth is only established through objectivity and by using the people who are rational. Thus, the knowledge of experts or scientists such as doctors, nurses, and psychologists are always valued at the expense of the knowledge of non- scientists. This is because scientists are considered to be rational and objective people who can establish the absolute truth about any reality. To the contrary the non- scientists are seen as temperamental, emotional people reacting in an emotional and subjective manner because of the situations before them (Ghosh, 2004; Gray and Webb, 2013).

The above all conceptions of modernism are seen by modernists such as Sigmund Freud, Jean Piaget, Adam Smith and Karl Marx among others to be universal and applicable to any part of the world (Osei-Hwedie, Mwansa and Mfunne, 1990; Fook, 2002; Mullaly, 2007; Gray and Webb, 2013). This means that in modernism the idea is to look at the whole world in uniform manner. This implies further that modernists look at social reality in more simplified manner (Fook, 2000). To be clearer about these analyses, let me turn to one of modernist theories of elder abuse and in particular situational theory of elder abuse.

Situational theory of elder abuse

Situational theory of elder abuse is one of the most popular modernist theories developed in the western world to explain the global phenomenon of elder abuse (Pillemer and Wolf 1982; Steinmetz, 1983). The basic premise of this theory is that as stress associated with certain situational and structural factors for the abuser increases, the likelihood increases of abusive acts directed at a vulnerable individual. The situational variables that have been linked with the abuse of the elder people include: firstly, elder- related factors such as physical and emotional dependency; poor health; impaired mental status, and a difficult personality. Secondly, structural factors: these include factors like economic strains, social isolation and environmental problems. Thirdly, care-giver related factors: these include factors such as life crisis, “burn out” or exhaustion with care giving, substance abuse, problems and previous socialization experiences with violence (Pillemer and Wolf 1982; Steinmetz, 1983).

When one takes a careful look at the above theory, a straight forward analysis of it brings out the following conclusions:

First, elder people suffer abuse because of their physical and emotional dependency on caregivers; because they are mentally impaired and because they have a difficulty personality. Second, elder people suffer abuse because they are economically strained (poor) and also because they are socially isolated. Third, it can be deduced that the perpetrators of elder abuse are caregivers. Fourth, the types of caregivers who abuse elder people are those who abuse substance and those with previous experiences with violence.

When I critically take another careful look at the above theory coupled with empirical researches undertaken so far on elder abuse which I have reviewed and my own experiences with incidences of elder abuse in Zambia, I can see that the above modernist theory is weak in so many areas. I bring out some of these weaknesses below with reference to the postmodernism arguments provided above. This is meant to show the relevancy of postmodernism in understanding elder abuse.

First, the above modernist theory has given generalist views on the phenomenon of elder abuse. For instance, it has given the generalist views that elder people suffer abuse because of their physical and emotional dependency on caregivers; because they are mentally impaired and because they have a difficulty personality. These seem not to be true pictures about most of the elder people who have suffered abuse except for some of the institutionalized elder people (McCluskey and Hooper, 2000). To fend this analysis, let me ask two questions which every reader of this article should try to carefully think about and answer before coming to the answers that I will give in response to my questions. The two questions are: (1) Do elder people who do not depend on caregivers suffer abuse? (2) Are all elder people who suffer abuse characterized by mental impairments and difficulty personality? The answer to the first question is yes. They do suffer abuse. This is not just a theoretical argument. My answer has been proved correct using the previous researches on elder abuse which apparently is also the belief contained in postmodernism about social reality. Notable of these researches include the studies done by Iborra (2009) and Kabelenga (2015). These researches have established that elder people who are more energetic and independent of the support of the care givers suffer abuse. The answer to the

second question is no. Empirical studies done on ageing which include those done by Pritchard (1992); Kamwengo (2004); and Ray (2009) have actually established that most of the elder people who have suffered abuse do not have mental impairments and difficulty personality at all. In postmodernism language, both of these answers mean that elder people who suffer abuse are of different categories and not just of one category.

The above modernist theory has also provided a generalist picture that elder abuse is only caused by care givers. The theory has also provided the picture that elder abuse only takes place in elder care institutions. Agreed there are some truths in both of these pictures but with some limitations. This is because the situation that is obtaining on the ground according to previous empirical studies such as those done by Ray (2009), Iborra (2009), and Kabelenga (2015) have established that that elder abuse takes place at different levels of society such as at individual level, institutional level, community level and larger society level and has multiple abusers which range from individual persons to institutions to communities to larger societies. These findings agree with the postmodernist belief of plurality when looking at any social phenomenon (Fook, 2002; Mullaly, 2007).

From the above theory, it can also be seen that situational theory treats the concept of elder abuse as if it is a monolithic concept. For example, situational theory has not specified the types of elder abuse that is being referred to. Empirical researches on elder abuse such as those done by Ray (2009), Iborra (2009), and Kabelenga (2015) have established that elder abuse takes place in many forms which include physical abuse, financial (material) abuse, sexual abuse, verbal abuse, spiritual abuse, political abuse and neglect among others. I have already given some brief descriptions of what is involved in each of these types or forms of elder abuse in the definition of elder abuse.

Thus, from the above, it can be seen that the term elder abuse is not a monolithic phenomenon as shown by situational theory. Rather it is a multifaceted phenomenon as contained in postmodernism (Fook 2002; Mullaly, 2007). No wonder Wolf (2000) has argued that elder abuse is a very diverse and multidimensional phenomenon which is not so easy to understand or explain.

Another weakness of the situational theory is that it has not differentiated elder abuse taking place in developed countries, transitional countries and developing countries; in rural areas, in

urban areas, in political institutions, in financial institutions, in hospitals/clinics and elder care institutions among others. This means that the theory is not context specific. That is, it is insensitive to context and culture. This is because it has generalized the phenomenon of elder abuse. In other words, it means that the theory has provided what postmodernists like Fook (2002), Mullaly (2007) and Gray and Webb (2013) call as “one size fits all” which is unrealistic and nonexistent in this world. It should be noted that elder abuse is context and cultural specific. Thus, using postmodernist perspective, it suggests that elder abuse should be understood within its own context and universal explanations are not applicable to all. This is because elder abuse is embedded in specific cultures, and culture is never the same. For example, the western culture is not the same as the African or Asian culture; also culture in political institutions is not the same as culture in financial or hospital or family institutions. Using postmodernism lens like the one provided by Mullaly (2007), one of the main implications which these cultural diversities raise is that one can adequately understand elder abuse by using multiple perspectives and not with few perspectives as suggested by situational theory of elder abuse.

By deriving knowledge from postmodernists like Fook (2002) and Mullaly (2007), I argue that the aforementioned weaknesses of situational theory of elder abuse are due to the fact that modernist theories do not acknowledge diversity. As a result they look at social phenomenon in homogeneous manner and not in heterogeneous manner which unfortunately is a total contrast to social reality.

In light of the above all, I argue that postmodernism is very relevant in understanding the phenomenon of elder abuse. It is an eye opener which has provided valuable insights on how to think about elder abuse and this is very valuable to frontline workers who deal with the problem of elder abuse like social workers. This argument brings me to the next part of the article which will draw implications of postmodernism on social work education and practice in relation to elder abuse.

Implications of postmodernism on social work education and practice on elder abuse

Critical reflections on the above tenets of postmodernism when narrowed down to social work education and practice in relation to elder abuse raise the following implications among others:

To begin with, elder abuse should not be seen as a monolithic phenomenon. Instead, it should be seen as a multifaceted phenomenon which takes place in many forms. Thus, social workers dealing with elder abuse issues should learn to unpack the phenomenon of elder abuse. For example, they should be specific about the type or types of elder abuse they are talking about. This is because elder abuse is a very broad concept. For example, there is physical abuse, financial/material abuse; verbal abuse; sexual abuse; spiritual abuse; political abuse and neglect among other types of elder abuse (Iborra, 2009; Mupila, 2008; HelpAge International, 2011; Kabelenga, 2015). Social workers should further unpack each of these types of elder abuse to know exactly the form in which it is taking place. For example, if talking about physical abuse, it may take forms such as deliberate slapping, beating and burning among others. When talking about financial/material abuse, it may take forms such as deliberate misusing the finances, or any other material possessions of an elder person and so forth and so forth.

Equally, social workers should not think about elder people as a homogeneous group of people. Instead, they should always think about the elder people as a heterogeneous group of people. For instance, some elder people are in their 60s, others are in their 70s, others are in their 80s, others are in their 90s, others are in 100s and so forth. These people are not the same despite all of them being categorized as elder people. In the same vein, some elder people are disabled, others are not; others are financially/materially rich and others are not; others are cared for and others are not cared for. Here it can be seen that there is big diversity within the concept of elder people. As such relevant and adequate understanding and/or intervening in any elder abuse situation should involve careful and critical examination of the particular elder person who has suffered particular type (s) of abuse by in-depth exploring the various characteristics of the respective elder person. In this way social workers can meaningfully think about the realistic ways of explaining and addressing that particular form or type of elder abuse.

Arriving from the above, it implies that social workers dealing with elder abuse issues should be open-minded when thinking about ways of explaining and addressing elder abuse. Because elder abuse is a very diverse and complex phenomenon, understanding any form or type of elder abuse should involve the use of multiple perspectives and by drawing knowledge not just from academic knowledge, but also from knowledge of many people including people who are closer to the abused elder people and from the abused elder people themselves among others (Pritchard,

1999; Fook, 2002; Gray and Webb, 2013). This implies further that social workers should not approach any elder abuse situation with already preconceived or predetermined answers. Rather, the realistic approach is to look at any elder abuse situation as new and unique which requires new ways of thinking if the situation is to be well addressed. This suggests further that ‘one size fits all’ explanations or interventions as envisaged in situational theory of elder abuse are no longer relevant when dealing with the problem of elder abuse.

Furthermore, social workers should learn to pay particular attention to the context in which a particular form of elder abuse has taken place. For example, if elder abuse takes place, besides knowing the specific type(s) of elder abuse and the specific characteristics of the respective elder person who has suffered abuse, it is also extremely important to know whether it has taken place for instance in an elder care institution and whether it is a formal or informal elder care institution, financial institution, political institution, community and whether it is in developed or developing countries and whether it is in rural or urban setting (Pritchard, 1999; Mullaly, 2007; Kabelenga, 2015). Within these institutions, social workers should also strive hard to understand the cultures of these institutions. In this way, social workers can deal with the real issues precipitating elder abuse at that particular time. In other words, social workers should come up with solutions which are context and cultural specific. In this way social work services will be relevant to particular elder abuse situations, context and culture. This brings in the postmodernism calls for flexibility, constant learning, constant adjustments and adaptability when handling any elder abuse situation (Fook, 2002; Mullaly, 2007; Gray and Webb, 2013). This means again that approaching any elder abuse situation with already prepackaged explanations or interventions cannot work. Perceived from these perspectives, it suggests that elder abuse explanations or interventions should be informed by what Gough (1999) calls as local soils. That is, the real, specific and contextual situations obtaining on the ground at that particular time are the ones that should inform ways of understanding and addressing the particular elder abuse situation.

Further, it connotes that social workers should be constantly questioning and challenging the social work theories developed in the western countries which claim universal applications. From postmodernist perspective such theories have no place in social work practice (Pease and Fook, 1999; Fook, 2002; Mullaly, 2007; Gray and Webb, 2013). This is because the world is

diverse and you cannot have one or few explanations about a particular social phenomenon. In other words, it means that social workers should be very critical about every modernist theory. This requires social workers to be reflective of what is going on in different contexts, places, from their own experiences and experiences of other social workers or professional and non professionals dealing with a particular social phenomenon, for example elder abuse.

The above implications further suggest that when trying to understand the phenomenon of elder abuse, qualitative research approaches should be encouraged among social workers. For example, by using unstructured and semi-structured interviews and using data collection tools such as one-to-one in-depth interviews and focus group discussions and in particular by listening and paying attention to the voices of the abused elder people, care givers, community leaders and organizations dealing with elder abuse issues and perpetrators of elder abuse become very important in understanding and suggesting ways of addressing specific types of elder abuse. In this way in-depth and detailed information grounded in the local soils about elder abuse can be established (Gough, 1999; Creswell, 2003). New insights about elder abuse can also be established which can help social workers broaden their thinking about elder abuse.

In light of the above, it suggests also that experiential knowledge which is often ignored by modernist theories is very important to social workers (Fook, 2002; Mullaly, 2007; Gray and Webb, 2013). Social workers dealing with the problem of elder abuse should never sideline experiential knowledge (that is, knowledge of those who have experienced the phenomenon of elder abuse) at the expense of expert knowledge like those of nurses, doctors, social workers and psychologists among other experts. Rather, equal weight should now be given to all forms of knowledge about elder abuse. This will bring about what postmodernism describe as approaching an issue using multiple perspectives (Fook, 2002; Mullaly, 2007; Gray and Webb, 2013).

Notwithstanding the above all implications, it should be noted that postmodernism has some weaknesses in application to reality as well. This note brings me to another part of the article which focuses on the weaknesses of postmodernism.

Weaknesses of postmodernism

A critical look at the content of postmodernism reveals the following two weaknesses in relation to understanding elder abuse:

First, it has not provided clear guidance about the appropriate ways of addressing any particular type of social reality [elder abuse] (Fook, 2002; Gray and Webb, 2013). All it has done is to criticize modernist theories and by bringing out the ideas of diversity, flexibility, context specific and paying particular attention to reality on the ground among other tenets (Fook, 2002; Mullaly, 2007; Gray and Webb, 2013). Thus, the challenge that social workers using postmodernism may face, for instance, in addressing elder abuse is knowing how to intervene in any particular elder abuse situation. This is because postmodernism does not provide any concrete explanations on what causes elder abuse and how to specifically intervene. Gray and Webb (2013) argue that it is difficult using postmodernism to make a distinction between what is acceptable and what is not acceptable. This is because everything in postmodernism is seen in relative terms and emphasizes equal weight to be given to every explanation or body of knowledge.

Second, it has devalued professionalism. As I have already pointed out, postmodernism does not prioritize the type of knowledge that is needed in society in order to address the multiple social problems faced by society (Mullaly, 2007, p.174; Gray and Webb, 2013). Thus, knowledge possessed by professionals like doctors, nurses, social workers, and psychologists for instance on elder abuse is put at the same level with knowledge possessed for example by the abused elder people and the perpetrators of elder abuse. This devalues professionalism on elder abuse issues. Social workers should always remember that there is certain knowledge which professionals for instance may have which non-professionals may not have, of course, the opposite is also possible. For example, changes in the behavior of an elder person such as being forgetful, repeatedly asking the same questions or begin to talk just alone among others due to living with dementia cannot be known either by the abused elder person or by the perpetrators of elder abuse but can be known by the doctors, nurses, social workers or psychologists due to the academic knowledge acquired on dementia (Ray, 2009).

The above limitations imply that caution should be taken by social workers when using postmodernism in relation to elder abuse.

Having looked at all the parts of the article, I now come to the conclusion.

Conclusion

In this article, I have discussed the relevancy of postmodernism in understanding elder abuse. From everything that I have brought out, it is clear that postmodernism brings about better, richer and varied ways of thinking about elder abuse and any other social phenomena that one may think about. Its relevancy rises in recognition of multiplicity, complexity, dynamism, context specificity and having grounded knowledge about any social phenomenon. This thinking has significant implications on social work education and practice when looking at elder abuse. That is, social workers should take into consideration at all the times the postmodernist beliefs about social phenomena like elder abuse. However, it is also clear that in as much as postmodernism seems to have a lot of strengths in understanding social realities like elder abuse, it has the weaknesses of not providing clear frameworks that social workers can use in explaining a particular situation or in suggesting ways of addressing a particular problem like elder abuse. It has also devalued the professional knowledge which social workers usually use in thinking about ways of understanding and intervening in problematic situations. Thus, social workers should value postmodernism in social work education and practice but should also be mindful of its limitations.

Notes

1. There is no potential conflict of interest regarding this manuscript. However, some of the materials especially references which I have used in this article may also appear in another article [Entitled - Additional types of elder abuse – Empirical evidence from Zambia] that is likely to be published in the Journal of Community Positive Practices in Romania.

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