

DECONSTRUCTION OF CHILD RIGHTS AND SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE IN AFRICAN CONTEXT: AN AFRICAN PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Globally, people overwhelmingly celebrate over three decades of the United Nations Child Rights Convention (UNCRC) for positively impacting public and social policies for the welfare of children. On the contrary, there is a lack of evidence in academic discourse to unravel the systematic contribution of the UNCRC on the disruptions of the African childhood epistemic welfare systems. This chapter seeks to contribute towards the narrative of epistemic decoloniality of the child rights philosophy and social work practice in Africa in sync with its unique philosophical epistemologies. In theory and practice, this article agrees that metaphysics, a branch of philosophy that studies the ultimate nature of reality, influences the construction of practical and philosophical narratives in child rights and social work practice. This suggests that studies of the nature of reality, in more ways than one, informed human behaviour and content of reflections on social reality, as in social work practice and child rights philosophy. That being the case, every society in the world has its worldview of both their cultures' physical and social realities. These worldviews and cultural, physical, and social realities influence child rights philosophical systems and any sphere's social work practice. For instance, Western and African philosophies and worldviews manifest as products of cultural systems, significantly affecting social and political spheres. As such, in the world, communities' social and political realities come across different conceptualizations of social behaviours, ramifications and mitigations. This concerns the African epistemological frontiers such as ethnophilosophy, nationalistic-ideological philosophy, professional philosophy and philosophic sagacity. Some of these traditions resonate with Ubuntu's philosophy and have outlived the colonial overlay. This article argues that universalizing and particularising child rights without considering the cultural spheres of any given locality is philosophical criminality. In conclusion, using historical-cultural hermeneutics, this article postulates integrating some enduring African philosophical elements into the grand narrative for child rights and social work practice.

Keywords

Child Rights, Social Work Practice, Childhood, Epistemology, Westernization & Africanization.

1. Introduction

Universalism and particularism are two broad underlying rival philosophical ideologies of the UNCRC of 1989 and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRW), adopted by the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) on 11 July 1999. The ACRW came into force after the African countries discovered that the UNCRC was more akin to the Western philosophy of neoliberalism than the African Indigenous

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Knowledge on child welfare (Faulkner & Nyamutata, 2020). In simple terms, the UNCRC took the universalistic philosophical ideology of disregarding the existence of African philosophies. According to Ikuonobe (1997), Universalists are a group of African philosophers whose point of view advocates that philosophy must have some meaning in all cultures, while the subjects and methods are dictated by cultural differences or the existing environment of the context. The Universalist critically questions the authenticity of African philosophy on a global spectrum. In doing so, the Universalists, mainly composed of professional and Western philosophers, attacked the Particularist (ethnophilosophers, sage and nationalist philosophers) point of view that advocates for the particularisation of African philosophy (Egbunu, 2013). On the contrary, Oruka (1990) argued that Africa, based on its unique culture and worldviews, has a philosophy that influences its social reality and human behaviours. On this basis, the OAU member states promulgated regional human rights instruments to address issues of particular interest and importance to children in Africa and the ACRW and to cushion the neoliberal dominance of the UNCRC in Africa (Ringson, 2019).

Notwithstanding the enactment of the ACRW as an antidote to the dominance of the UNCRC, neo-liberalism in childhood governance had already taken centre stage in most African countries because of the influence of colonialism. As such, by the time of the enactment of ACRW, the Western settlers in Africa had already established the institutions and governance infrastructures that pedagogically spread the Western doctrine of human rights and childhood philosophies. Most African countries inherited the Western legacy in post-independence Africa by ratifying most international conventions promoting Western philosophy and ideologies, including the UNCRC, endorsed by 196 countries except the United States of America (Faulkner & Nyamutata, 2020). The endorsement of the UNCRC cancerously spread Western education, religion and humanitarian interventions promoting their children's rights philosophies. The preceding institutions culminated in establishing higher education institutions and humanitarian organizations that train social workers and practitioners who advance Western perspectives while further subjugating the indigenous systems.

Even with the emergence of African academics promoting the decolonization of education and politics in post-independence Africa, western perspectives are still dominating African institutions in theory and practice. Despite the proliferation of the UNCRC doctrine in Africa, this Western child welfare model has not effectively modelled an African child to the optimum level. Instead, rival philosophies in social workers and practitioners have witnessed some African philosophical elements of childhood welfare enduring and outliving the colonial overlay. Such African doctrines and theories resonated with Ubuntu's philosophy and endured the onslaught of time and the emerging narratives which sought to bury it to oblivion. Predicated on the preceding context, this article hypothesizes integrating some enduring African philosophical elements into the grand narrative for child rights and social work perceptions of the new era.

2. African Philosophical Perspectives and Social Work Practice

As contextually argued in the preceding section, African philosophy can provide an epistemological deconstruction of child rights philosophy and social work practice in Africa. Africa has a unique epistemology in childrearing that is different to the Western context and cultural relativity must apply in social work theory and practice. This article believes that failure to uphold indigenous philosophy's values in social work practice makes social work an elite mass discipline. For many years, child rights philosophy and

social work practice were more deeply entrenched in Western values and approaches than in African values (Mugumbate & Chereni, 2020). An epistemic deconstruction of the child rights philosophy and social work practice starts by acknowledging the existence of African philosophy and its contribution to humanity. Matshabaphala (2015) argues that recognizing the value of Ubuntu and Batho Pele in shaping society within our communities as Africans helps us to steer the patronizing discourse on whether African philosophy exists. Mashabaphala further argues that a philosophical take on philosophy tells us that philosophy is about thinking or the pursuit of wisdom. All people on earth think and have their worldviews and respond in their own ways to improve their lot. An African way of thinking manifests through collective intelligence and not individualism. As such, social work practice and child rights should follow the collective intelligence of the African communities. This collective intelligence resonates with the Ubuntu maxim: “I am because we are”. The society community shapes children's rights and is not detached from one’s cultural values.

On the contrary, the neoliberal UNCRC child rights model has dismantled the African communities' collective intelligence in childhood governance. That being the case, this article intends to draw the lessons from the four trends of African Philosophy proposed by Odera Oruka in his defence of the existence of African philosophy. According to Oruka (1990), these philosophies include ethnophilosophy, nationalistic-ideological philosophy, professional philosophy and philosophic sagacity. Oruka argues that these African ways of thinking seek not to denigrate the colonial legacy but to draw the best homegrown philosophy in every sphere of life, including shaping child rights governance and social work practice in Africa. Table 1 below shows how these African philosophies contribute to the deconstruction of child rights and social work practice in Africa.

Table 1 illustrates the complementary components from the African philosophy that are in sync with the Western UNCRC governance approach. The table indicated that while African philosophies such as ethnophilosophy, national-ideological philosophy, and philosophical sagacity are appropriate in Africa, they may lack professionalism from the UNCRC's professional perspective. Thus, the preceding gap in African philosophy calls for integration with Western professional philosophy to enhance African ethical leadership and social work practice. Ringson (2023) reveals that it is possible to diplomatically mediate the rival philosophies by gleaning the compatible, relevant and appropriate elements from both and making a blended child rights social work practice that is effective and globally competitive. While discussing the deficiency of professionalism and universal standards in African philosophies is commonplace, it has compatible wisdom that can bridge the yawning gaps in the global child rights social work practices.

Table 1. Trends of African Philosophies, Child Rights & Social Work Practice

African Philosophy	Description & Proponents	Child Rights & Social Work Practice Africa
Ethnophilosophy	The philosophers who emerged on the plains of ethnophilosophy in African philosophy, such as Placide Tempels, Leopold Sedar Senghor and John Mbiti, described communities’ worldviews and thought systems as philosophy.	This article has no problem with whether ethnophilosophy is universally accepted, as most philosophical traditions worldwide are born of this process. In terms of this approach, communities worldwide have a way, sometimes through their cultures, of communally agreeing on what constitutes child rights and social work practice. They have a way of deciding on what they regard as good for society and what they consider morally desirable to them. Thus, some cultural-based

		approaches do not agree with some UNCRC and neoliberalist approaches regarding child rights. This article advocates for deconstructing some child rights and social work practices in Africa to accommodate the indigenous ways of childhood governance and social work practices. Ethnophilosophy is a critical component that Western theories and social work practices cannot ignore if social work is to be effective in African communities.
Nationalistic-Ideological Philosophy	The nationalistic-ideological philosophy traces its origins and evolution to the founders of the liberation movements on the African continent. This concerns great leaders such as Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere, Oliver Tambo, Nelson Mandela, Steve Biko, Robert Mugabe and others in their league who presented leadership models worthy of emulation in the social and public spheres.	As reflected in their writings, their contributions provide an epistemological base for further discourse in public leadership and narrative development. The Black Consciousness philosophy, for instance, calls for an informed understanding of the universe of the black people in Africa, as they happen to be the majority populace that receives services from the political leadership and social work practice. Suppose the black consciousness focuses on mobilizing Africans to embrace their African philosophy and tenets for childhood development and social work practice. In that case, it will make social work practices more effective in Africa than only using Western models.
Professional Philosophy	The professional philosophy frontier in African philosophy, led by professionally trained students and philosophy teachers such as Kwasi Wiredu, Paulin Hountondji and Peter Bodunrin, rejected the ethnophilosophy approach as too anachronistic for epistemology.	This approach in African philosophy postulates the adoption of universal practices towards understanding reality. For this article, professionalism in social work and child rights governance is critical. As such, a universal approach towards understanding emerging realities in the universe of child rights and social work practice should be part of the integrated model for social work practice and child rights governance in Africa. This article also agrees with this approach, especially in social work practice, child rights governance and ethics. The basic principles of ethics, good practice and leadership are found to be universal and present in cultural, social, and political systems across the world. Whilst African philosophy is rich in collective intelligence in social work practice and child rights governance, it lacks the professional component that needs to be borrowed from the Western model of child rights and social work practice.
Philosophic Sagacity	Odera Oruka pioneered the philosophical sagacity approach as he tried to preserve the philosophical thoughts of traditional Kenyan sages. The philosophical sagacity approach is predicated on the understanding that in both traditional and modern Africa, literate and illiterate men and women commonly reflect on various problems of human life and nature.	Most of these people are today found to be providing leadership in the organs of civil society, raising issues, especially on child rights governance and social ills in their communities. In leadership parlance, it is said that these are the people providing leadership from below. This article acknowledges that leadership capacity exists in the communities where the public service renders services. In this case, the social workers, no matter how loaded they are with the Western social work theories, must seek knowledge and wisdom from these community leaders for their services to be effective.

Source. Developed by the author from Matshabaphala (2015).

3. Child Rights Governance and Social Work Practice

The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) is a global organization striving for social justice, human rights and social development through the promotion of

social work, best practice models and the facilitation of international cooperation (Agius, 2010; Cemlyn & Briskman, 2003; Europe, IFSW, 2010). According to Europe, IFSW (2010), human rights are at the heart of social work and IFSW was pleased to take a leading role in creating a successful Human Rights Training Manual for the Social Work Profession and Schools of Social Work, first published by the United Nations in 1992 and reprinted in 1994. That manual has been an inspiration for many and is still used worldwide. United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) granted special consultative powers to the IFSW to develop a comprehensive manual standardizing social work and human rights practice in Europe (UNICEF, 2002). Following the mandate as mentioned above, the IFSW 2002 published a professional training manual on the UN Convention “Social Work and the Rights of the Child” to provide stimulation and guidance to social workers, social work students and educators, as well as colleagues in related fields, who wished to live up to the high ideals of the UNCRC and to implement them in their work with children (Europe, IFSW, 2010).

The imperative of the published human rights and social work professional manual by the IFSW was to standardize the social work practice when dealing with children’s rights. According to Europe, IFSW (2010), this manual aims to ensure that children’s human rights, as set out in the Convention, are fully respected and implemented within social work. The manual is helpful to trainee social workers, as well as to social workers and fellow professionals working with children. As a self-advocacy tool, it is also valuable to groups and organizations run by children and young people. Table 2 below illustrates the four main objectives of the IFSW manual:

Table 2. IFSW Professional Child Rights & Social Work Practice Training Manual

Objectives	Description
Objective 1	To promote knowledge, understanding and awareness of the rights of children and social justice among social workers, students, teaching staff and others involved in social care
Objective 2	To provide case examples so that those using the manual can apply the Convention to their everyday social work practice
Objective 3	To introduce some of the dilemmas posed by the Convention, including the potential for tension between children’s rights and adult’s rights
Objective 4	To encourage users of the manual to develop their contribution to monitoring and implementation of the Convention at micro and macro levels

Source. Developed by the author from Europe, IFSW (2010).

Table 2 above demonstrates the central objectives of IFSW professional child rights social work practice standards in the part of the global north, which is alleged to be lacking in the Afrocentric philosophies such as the ethnophilosophy, sage philosophy, and the nationalist-ideological philosophy. Ringson (2019) argues that while the particularist philosophy of child rights governance in Africa resonates with the above-mentioned indigenous philosophies in Africa, the professional philosophers accused it of lacking professionalism to meet the universal philosophical standards. Shanalingigwa (2009) argues that the lack of professionalism in African philosophy or culture to social work practice does not justify the irrelevancy and inappropriateness of some of the universal child rights social work practices that the social workers and child rights

practitioners in African corridors are replicating from the global north. Shanalingigwa further opined that the professional standards of child rights social work practice must respect cultural diversity.

A typical example of this cultural diversity is that families from different cultures employ disciplinary tactics acceptable in their society but may appear odd, backward or cruel to individuals from different cultures. Such differences are often due to varying cultural methods for providing their children sustenance, supervision, discipline and mental stimulation. Anecdotal accounts from the studies by Ringson (2023), Mugumbate & Chereni (2020), and Faulkner & Nyamutata (2020) reveal that traditional African practices that involve marriages, education, gender roles and obedience may look harmful to the global northerners. Some examples include initiation rites, arranged marriages and encouraging independence at an early age. Ringson & Matshabaphala (2022) perceive culture as the underlying framework that helps define the generally accepted principles of childrearing and caring for children. According to Shanalingigwa (2009), the differences in social, cultural, religious and moral values result in variations in what is considered “proper” childrearing. How some cultural groups define and perceive maltreatment plays a crucial role in assessing maltreatment and providing services to families. In trying to address culturally based differences and change through time, the definition of child maltreatment has been broadened to include a range of behaviours. However, scholars in various social science disciplines are still troubled by the link between cultural values, child maltreatment and child rights. This study does not attempt to justify some destructive cultural childbearing tendencies common in the global north and south. Still, it considers those relevant and appropriate cultural elements that can expedite the effectiveness of child rights social work practice globally.

The unique approach that makes Global North’s child rights social work practice is their adherence to their individualistic philosophy of life. Notwithstanding the prevalence of child rights professional social work practice bodies in the global south, they are predominantly replicating and extensions of the global north social work practices. Arguably, the African epistemology in child rights governance through social work practices does not complement African philosophy in childbearing and upbringing but instead condemns it. For instance, Ringson (2019), in his study on child rights cultural contestations, argued that in the global north, children are defined as individuals under the age of eighteen, while in the global north societies, age is an abstract number and thus does not completely define who a child is. In African societies, culture is governed by social rules, including eating habits, labour, sexual relations and other relations between men and women. Thus, if the IFSW is to yield the best outcome in the African context, it must embrace the African epistemology in child rights and social work practice or diplomatically find a way to integrate the rival childrearing philosophies underlying the two philosophies.

4. Methodology

This study adopted a historical-cultural hermeneutical qualitative desktop approach with a literature review and documentary analysis to glean the underlying factors, views, perceptions and experiences that help identify and clarify the feasibility of integrating the particularistic and universalistic child rights governance systems in Southern Africa. This approach followed the subjectivism philosophy, which resonates with the subjective interpretation of the actors' views and experiences based on the existing literature (Saunders *et al.*, 2009; Matshabaphala & Ringson, 2022). Desk

research collects data from existing resources; hence, it is often considered a low-cost technique compared to field research, as the primary costs consist of the researcher's time, telephone charges and directories. This grand narrative for child rights and social work practice can be feasible through an epistemic mediation of the rival philosophies through historical-cultural hermeneutics. This study consulted pertinent literature on child rights social work practice and African philosophies as information-rich sources.

5. Integrated Child Rights and Social Work Practice Model

The relevance and applicability of Okere's cultural hermeneutical heritage in mediating universal child rights governance systems and African social work practice rests on cultural and philosophical mediation, which paves the way for integrating the two rival ideologies. Chinedu (2012) argues that the clash in positions between the Universalist and the Particularist schools of thought is primarily determined by the degree to which a philosopher has been globalized or modernized. Accordingly, Egubnu (2013) defines Universalist philosophy as an African school of thought advocated by educated philosophers trained abroad. The Particularist philosophy is the African indigenous and culturally oriented philosophy embedded in ethno-philosophy, sage and nationalist philosophy (Egubnu, 2013). In addition to colonialism and globalization, Chimuka (2001) argues that the Universalist philosophers have done much to constrict and subjugate the traditional African systems in development.

Influenced by the historical hermeneutics protagonist, Okere propounds a cultural hermeneutical heritage theory to balance conventional African philosophies and Western philosophies (Okere, 1983). In contrast, contemporary perspectives include but are not limited to the Confucian tradition of Asia and the Platonic-Aristotelian tradition of Europe (Jacobs *et al.*, 1995). According to Okere (1983), historical hermeneutics is an epistemological tool for mediating cultures or philosophies. Mediating philosophies that underlie the coping strategies and governance approaches will culminate in integrating the coping process. Okere (1983) argues that historical hermeneutics heritage focuses on interpreting. This common ground is envisioned as developing new knowledge by combining neo-liberalism, African philosophies, and African social work practice.

Ringson & Gwenzi (2023) posit that the historical-cultural hermeneutical heritage appraises indigenous cultural heritage's efficacy by integrating heritage with compatible contemporary ideas. In this context, the cultural hermeneutics method was pertinent to theoretically facilitate the integration of traditional and modern child rights governance coping strategies. Okere's cultural hermeneutics as an epistemological tool appropriately resonates with integration into sustainable development. His idea of mediating culture and philosophy is the present researcher's penetration point into the gap and contribution to the existing body of knowledge. The question to be addressed in the study is explained in the contextual review; the closed child rights governance systems are primarily aligned with the African philosophy of providing governing child rights, while Western philosophy relates to the open child rights governance systems. Okere's cultural hermeneutics are a proven and tested model for knowledge production and development (Kafle, 2011). Thus, the hermeneutics of Okere was methodologically deployed to generate new knowledge beyond the traditional closed system approach by using an open system approach. Figure 1 below shows how particularist and Universalist child rights social work practices can be feasibly integrated to create a competent global social work practice within the African context through historical-cultural hermeneutics.

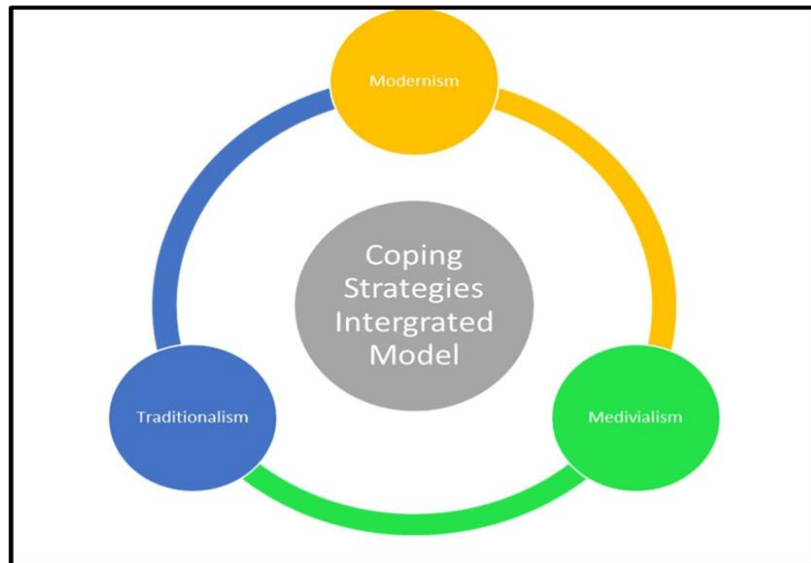


Figure 1. Integrated Child Rights Social Work Practice Model
Source. Ringson (2017) & Ringson & Gwenzi (2023)

The figure above illustrates how historical-cultural hermeneutics as an epistemological tool was used to construct a novel integrated model by deconstructing the African context's predominant global north child rights social work practice. As shown in the diagram above, it was built by blending compatible elements of competing philosophies of traditionalism, medievalism and modernism (universalism and particularism). Ringson (2017) defines traditional child rights social work practices as venerating particularism philosophy. At the same time, modernism denotes neoliberalism and universalism in terms of child rights and social work practices. Medievalism is a particularism or Universalist child rights social work practice akin to ecclesiastical or religious rituals and traditions. The integrated model was created by combining the strengths of the three coping perspectives competing for intellectual and explanatory power. There is a widespread lack of unity in implementing the particularism and universalism child rights social work practices by individual stakeholders aligned to a single philosophy (traditionalism, medievalism and modernism). Premised on this blended model, I argue that the deconstruction of the dominance of universalism over particularism child rights social work practices can only be feasible through diplomatically integrating the compatible relevant elements of African philosophical perspectives. By implication, Okere's hermeneutics theoretically proposes that even if the philosophies, cultures, and methods of doing things are different, there is always common ground to bring them together. As literature has purported, particularism and universalism child rights social work practices may differ, but their congruency and complementarity are in mitigating childhood vulnerability challenges.

6. Discussions of the study's implications for child rights and social work practice

Broadly, this desktop research paper established that the global child rights philosophical rivalry that manifests through the particularism and universalism philosophies is commonplace globally. Faulkner & Nyamutata (2020) argue that seeking intellectual and professional dominance of neoliberalism universal child rights social

work practices is constantly subsuming the particularism of indigenous knowledge of child rights in the African context. Ringson (2019) and Shanalingigwa (2009) concur that the yawning gap in the global child rights social work practices is based on the lack of recognition of the cultural diversity in social work practice and extremism in implementing neoliberalism child rights social work practices by social workers in Africa. Africa is a unique continent with various cultures that revolve around Ubuntu philosophy, which has outlived colonialism, and African philosophies resonate with its tenets. According to Mugumbate and Chereni (2020), Ubuntu's philosophy has the gravitas to propel child rights social work practice in Africa to global competence based on its wealth of communitarian collective intelligence. Ethnophilosophy, sagacity philosophy and nationalistic-ideological philosophy resonate with the African collective intelligence of child rights governance social work practice. Such collective intelligence is demonstrated by the African maxims such as “it takes a village to raise a child” and “you are because we are”. The wealth mentioned above of social fabric imbedded in African philosophy, if executed correctly in child rights social work practice, can help strengthen the global competence of child rights social work.

The other critical aspect of the literature is the lack of professionalism in the particularism child rights approaches, which does not resonate with the universal child rights standards. In this view, Shanalingigwa (2009) argues that the lack of professionalism in African philosophy or culture to social work practice does not justify the irrelevancy and inappropriateness of some of the universal child rights social work practices that the social workers and child rights practitioners in African corridors are replicating from the global north. Shanalingigwa further opined that the professional standards of child rights social work practice must respect cultural diversity. Shanalingigwa further opined that a typical example of this cultural diversity is that families from different cultures employ disciplinary tactics acceptable in their society but may appear odd, backward or cruel to individuals from different cultures. Such differences are often due to varying cultural methods for providing their children sustenance, supervision, discipline and mental stimulation. To bring about an intellectual balance between the particularism and universalism of child rights social work practice, Matshabaphala (2015) suggests that the professional philosophy can help bridge the professionalism gap of child rights social work practice.

The study also established the possibility of integrating the rival global philosophies in child rights social work practices through historical-cultural hermeneutics. Okere (1983) suggests that the historical-cultural hermeneutical heritage in mediating universal child rights governance systems and African social work practice rests on cultural and philosophical mediation, which paves the way for integrating the two rival ideologies. According to Ringson (2017) and Ringson & Gwenzi (2023), the integrated child rights governance social work practice is feasible by pulling together traditionalism, medievalism and modernism, which are the extensions of particularism and universalism (Figure 1). Integrating the rival philosophies helps to pull together the strengths of both child rights social work practice which will ultimately become a global competitive child rights governance social work model in Africa. Arguably, the integrated child rights governance social work practice helps deconstruct universalism's dominance over particularism. Therefore, the study reveals that child rights social work practices can be more effective by diplomatically integrating the compatible relevant elements of the global child rights philosophical rivalries. By implication, Okere's hermeneutics theoretically proposes that even if the philosophies, cultures and methods of doing things

are different, there is always common ground to bring them together. The IFSW professional child rights and social work practice training manual must recognize the culture and philosophy of life around the globe for child rights and social work practice to be effective.

7. Conclusion and Recommendation

This paper was motivated by the intellectual lack of a blended model necessary for mitigating the perennial clashes of neoliberalism and African Indigenous Knowledge Systems in dealing with child rights governance and social work practice. The intellectual paucity is vindicated by global rival philosophical thoughts competing for intellectual and explanatory supremacy in unravelling the mitigatory measures aimed at counteracting child rights and social engagement in Africa. Against this backdrop, a novel theoretical construct, the blended or integrated model, could be constructed through diplomatic mediation and deconstruction of these rivalry philosophies. This could be done using a cultural hermeneutics epistemological tool. In doing so, the theory was built by integrating the compatible relevant elements entrenched in these philosophies. In conclusion, this article postulates combining some enduring African philosophical elements into the grand narrative for child rights and social work practice in Africa. The IFSW professional child rights and social work practice training manual must recognize the culture and philosophy of life around the globe for child rights and social work practice to be effective.

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