

Neither Theirs nor Ours but Ours within Theirs – A versatile model of professional social work practice in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

The territory of professional social work spans across vastly diverse landscape. Normally, the Western model of social work practice is regarded universal. Yet, the definition of professional social work adopted to be applied worldwide in 2015 is left to be amplified appropriately to local realities. This paper posits that the professionally versatile way of social work practice would be the most appropriate model for Sri Lanka, in view of the country's diversity of community cultures and generational long history of community-based traditional care and share systems. The versatility of practice allows it to be contextual and presenting problem specific. In that the client is viewed as a holism representing that specific contextual situation, and presenting problem too, which is more or less a combination of both local and universal so that the intervention plan for helping the client draws appropriately on both the universal and the local. In this way, professional social work practice in our own context happens to be exclusively neither theirs nor ours but ours within theirs which will be welcomed and accepted by the local community.

Keywords: social work, contextual specific universal, local, community cultures, versatile practice

This article should be cited as: Gamlath S. (2019). Neither Theirs nor Ours but Ours within Theirs – A versatile model of professional social work practice in Sri Lanka. *Sri Lanka Journal of Sociology*, 1(1): 169-187.

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Introduction

The nature of modern professional social work, which is perceived as “Western” mainstream social work, is claimed to be “Universal”, because the understanding is that it promotes a set of universal values and principles fundamental to humanity, with a global perspective on human rights and dignity, respect for all forms of diversity, and the knowledge based on scientific inquiry (IFSW 2015 and 2018). For some professional social work practitioners are in a sense “Human Rights Workers” (Ife, 1996, 2010; 2012a; 2012b) so that the profession is justified to be recognized as universally applicable across societies irrespective of cultural differences. Yet, the unique social and cultural characteristics in the non-Western parts of the world, where such a “Western” model of social work intervention would not be effective in and receptive to the local community was a concern during the mid-20th century sparking a vigorous debate around the profession’s earlier definitions (Midgley, 1981; Dominelli, 2009; Pawar, 2014; Morales et. al. 2015; Gray and Coates, 2016). As a result, the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) met together in Copenhagen in July 2014, and after a long deliberation and consultation, came up with a definition, which says that,

Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing (IFSW, 2015: 3).

The most important aspect of this broad definition is that it respects all forms of diversities and acknowledges the value of indigenous knowledge and therefore leaving it open to be amplified appropriately, if needed, in different socio-cultural contexts. This implicates about an apparent resistance of social work to accept a notion of universal truth being imposed and influenced to be accepted by the Western expert knowledge across the globe. Even though a rapid socio-cultural transformation with the effects of globalization trends is taking place, many of the non-Western societies still maintain some aspects,

in most places many, of their own, generations old, community-based social care practices and systems. The new definition leaves space to be acknowledged and included, and equally recognizes and respects the value of indigenous knowledge and its appropriate application.

Having learnt from that understanding, and also being well aware that the country possesses generations old, community-based care practices and systems, this paper posits and discusses the view that Sri Lanka too, where the demand for professional social work intervention seems to be increasing fast, requires an exploration of alternative methods of professional social work practice. It is assumed that an exclusive application of the Western model of intervention, ignoring local, community-based care practices and systems, would not be effective and may not perhaps be well-received by the local community. On the other hand, “Western-style”, modern professional social work is not to be rejected entirely because it has already gained steady ground across the globalized world and has some significant appeal in specific individual and social circumstances even in non-Western socio-cultural contexts like ours.

Accordingly, the paper concludes that the most appropriate alternative would be an application of modern professional social work knowledge and skills appropriately in a specific client-centered and problem focused way in the local context. It allows accommodation of indigenous and local care practices in a framework of universally accepted values and principles, and enables the professional social work practitioner to adopt a versatile practice style within local, diverse community cultures. The key characteristic of this framework is versatility of practice without any deviation from the universally accepted definition of professional social work. In this way, it will be a culturally competent response to local situations and complexities without being exclusively theirs or ours but ours within theirs.

Dilemma and searching for alternative

Social work, which is widely recognized as the most comprehensive of human service occupations, centers its attention on helping people improve their social functioning (Payne, 2014; Morales et.al, 2015; How, 2009; Connolly and Harms, 2012). It helps people strengthen their interaction with various aspects of their social environment, from family to community and is committed to changing factors in the society that diminish the quality of life for all people,

but especially for those persons who are most vulnerable to social problems (Morales et.al.:2015; Payne, 2014; Dominelli, 2009).

The universal definition of social work promotes social cohesion, social change and social development as to be the ultimate goal of the mission of social work. It also promotes expansion of social work along human rights perspective, global application, indigenous and local appeal, versatile practice, and broad social change and development goals (Askeland and Payne, 2017, Payne and Askeland, 2016; Noble, Strauss and Littlechild, 2014; Gray, Coates and Hetherington, 2008; Cox and Pawar, 2006; Pawar 2014; Midgley, 2013, 2010, 1995; Morales et.ai. 2015; Payne, 2014; How, 2012; Dominelli, 2009; Ife, 2012a, 2012b, 2009, 1996; Kenny and Connors, 2006).

The landscape of social work is essentially vast and diverse. Therefore, social work action has to be a well-thought-out activity of intervention, with significant implications for people's lives so that professional social work practitioners do need to be equipped with creative ideas about what their task is and how to perform, when they encounter spaces that are so diverse from each other in that vast territory (Midgley, 1997; Beckkett, 2006; Payne, 2014; Askeland and Payne, 2017, Payne and Askeland, 2016; Noble, Strauss and Littlechild, 2014; Beckkett, 2006). Social workers are well aware of the fact that the method of diagnosis and the problem diagnosed can be similar but the way in which the client is helped to deal with the problem can be a completely different in different social ecologies (Beckkett, 2006).

This discussion now turns to a quest of a version of social work which suits our community cultures in Sri Lanka, in other words, our own social ecology. We would identify it as "our social work" contrary to the Western style of social work, which is widely proclaimed as universal (IASSW, 2018; IFSW, 2015, 2017; Zastrow, 2015; Payne, 2014; Howe, 2009). The concept of universal social work would probably be strange and abstract to the local community in general, though it would not likely be so for some even among us. For example, local community cultures are vastly diverse, and broadly dichotomized with some inhabiting in Western-styled urban enclaves. Those who are already acclimatized to Western style attitudes and life style would tend to be receptive towards Western style social work interventions. The Western style intervention would be an abstract and unacceptable

phenomenon not only for the vast majority of people who live in rural neighborhoods and are still deeply entrenched in local community cultures but also for those who live in urban fringes and are still sentimentally attached to local traditions. There is a need for a version of our social work which is easily adaptable and acceptable to everyone across our diverse community cultures.

Versatile practice framework

Many reiterate the fact that what is adapted should not simply be “this or that” but, instead, a well-thought-out, widely considered and appropriately constructed framework (Pawar, 2014; Gray, Coates and Yellow, 2008; Cox and Pawar, 2006; Payne and Askeland, 2016; Askeland and Payne, 2017; Noble, Strauss and Littlechild, 2014). Within this localized framework, the problem, the way the problem is diagnosed and the plan of action designed would be as same as in the Western practice or the universal model but the way in which the treatment is contextualized and delivered would be somewhat different in our own community cultural situation and context. It should be acceptable to individuals whose background is identified with attachments to their own social ecologies (Midgley, 1981, 1997; Beckkett, 2006; Noble, Strauss and Littlechild, 2014). For example, the Western model of individual level intervention, such as generic counseling in social work practice may not be receptive to local communities. In that, the “presenting issue” - the clients’ construction of the problem based on her / his experience and the perception, and the way the presenting problem is assessed within the person’s social-environment may be similar irrespective of the contextual differences, Western or Local, but methodological intervention for help could be completely different. Again, we, as a society, have already been dragged into the globalization process in all social, economic, cultural and political aspects and hence our situation in some places, for example, in urban areas, would be socio-culturally mixed in an ambiguous way - a “cultural salad bowl”. On the other hand, universal values such as equality, social justice, human rights, worth of human beings, respect for human dignity and rights, respect for diversity which are presented and promoted in modern professional social work, are in fact undeniable and are embedded in professional social work practice withing a universal human rights perspective (Ife, 2010 and 2012a). At the same time, we appreciate our diverse community cultures, and the unique collective systems which are carried forward through generations to care for

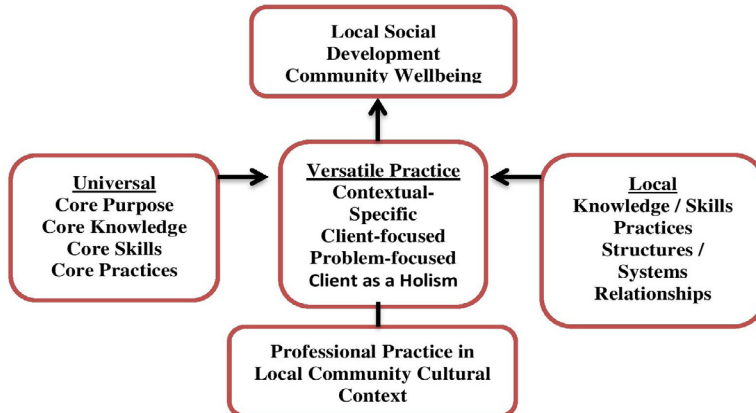
others. The potency of those systems are difficult to be ignored. They are all social constructs which are intrinsically embedded in people's lives. Therefore, the version of professional social work that we are in quest is an appropriate integration, rather a fine blend of the Western and Local, not merely one or the other.

The form of localization or indigenization of modern professional social work intervention that we discuss here is different from the discussion on the concept of localization or indigenization of Western social work in non-Western societies that is currently taking place internationally (Gray and Coates, 2016; Gray et.al., 2016; Payne and Askeland, 2016; Askeland and Payne, 2017). The core argument of that discussion is still unconvincing and it is, localization or indigenization of Western social work itself, again a Western thought to the non-Western world. What the Western social work scholars debate is ambiguous and unconvincing to many in non-Western contexts, possibly because of our own experiences with the realities of the context we live in compared to the conceptual understanding of our context among those who are involved in debate in the West.

However, the discussion on localization or indigenization of professional social work practice currently taking place in the West is not a matter of serious concern as the endeavour here is rather a discussion of how Western style professional social work practice is applied in local personal and contextual domains in an appropriate way to local community cultures adhering to the core meaning of the universal definition of social work. It aims at enabling social work practitioners to implement professional intervention alongside the elements of local community culture including indigenous care practices. It is indeed listening to local voices, appreciating and applying local practices in the intervention for help and healing within a framework of mainstream social work. In other words, it is an ability for "enveloping" relevant elements of knowledge and skills from "universal and local", what is likely to be termed colloquially as their social work and our social work, appropriately for effective use in specific local contextual circumstances. In that, the client is viewed as a holism embraced by both universal and local style of life affairs. And it is dynamic too so that the approach to deal with such a specific context calls for a professionally versatile practice, allowing it to be adaptable and adoptable as appropriate (Figure 1).

Three core elements are highlighted in this framework: (1) universal elements of practice; (2) versatility of practice in specific local community cultural contexts and (3) elements of local care practices / systems. Overall, it presents the idea of integration of local care practices, systems and indigenous knowledge with modern professional social work purpose, knowledge, skills and practices but the most important aspect is the “selection of appropriate elements” to suit specific contextual circumstances, client systems and presenting problems so that the framework itself and the practice will become “versatile”. The versatility of practice enables an intervention, which would be carefully formulated and curtailed to specific presenting problem and client system, so that it essentially becomes “client-centered, problem-focused, and contextual specific. In this way, the broad outcome of the professional social work intervention even in the local social context will be the universal purpose of social work, the positive change, reflected in community wellbeing and local social development.

Figure 1: Versatile Practice Framework



Why versatility is needed?

Globalization process promotes economic, political and cultural interconnections and gradually reduces the strength of national boundaries and national identity (Payne and Askeland, 2016). The permeation of the effects of globalization across traditional societies has resulted in a social transformation, exerting pressure to dichotomize

these societies, for example, the existence of collective community cultures and a mass consumer culture side by side. The common experience across the non-Western world is that such a socio-cultural dichotomization with the effects of globalization process has been taking place, and it is evident that it has triggered a gradual community cultural transformation too, from “collective-dimension” to “individual dimension” of culture, as cultural boundaries continue to weaken and dilute with the endless global communication penetration. In a social context of an individual dimension of culture, mass media continues to promote a “mass consumer culture” which is created for people to accept, consume and continue, based on contractual relationships (Liu, Zala and Gallois, 2015).

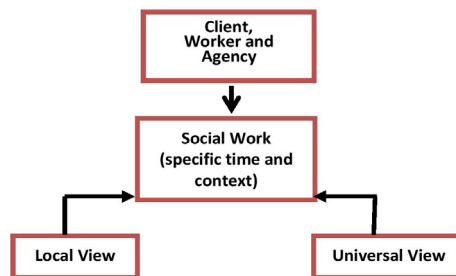
It is therefore a situation where people in these transforming societies live in and interact with a dual form of socio-cultural dimension. Globalization trends constantly promote an individual dimension of growing mass-consumer culture. People consume and become gradually assimilated to it. And they tend to carry with them some elements of small community-cultures to which they are sentimentally attached and retain identity and belonging irrespective of the geographical place they live. Therefore, in a transforming socio-cultural situation of any particular geographical location, people frequently move back and forth between these two cultural domains so that, realistically, they always carry a dual cultural affiliation, one essentially sentimental while the other simply for consumption.

The professional engagement in accurate screening and initial assessment of the client’s presenting issues in such a complex socio-cultural situation becomes a daunting task. Therefore, at the initial stage of engagement with the client, understanding the client’s emotional world and sentimental attachments becomes extremely helpful. The practitioner needs to be competent enough to choose and apply the most relevant tools to understand the origin of the client, “where the client is coming from”, the “sentimental self-concept” that the client is attached to. This can be applicable to any client system, i.e. individual, family, small group, community or societal (policy) systems. This is where our understanding of the form of professional social work practice in dealing with the issues in a complex socio-cultural situation becomes an important question. There will never be a perfect answer to this question because the nature of social work is such that it is socially operated with a constant reconstruction of the purpose and

functions of social work owing to the changing social contexts which is inevitable, unless the framework we adopt does not allow us to be versatile.

Why would versatility of practice be important? The answer to this question could be the idea that the meaning of the action of social work in a particular socio-cultural context can be a social construction. The social construction focuses on commonsense, everyday knowledge - the proverbs, morals, values, and beliefs shared among ordinary people and it examines how knowledge is formed by ordinary people, how it is preserved and altered within a society (Berger and Luckmann, 2011). Together with the clients, the everyday actions of social workers and the agencies they are attached to could be involved in this construction (Gambrill, 2000; Payne, 2014). The construction of social work then emanates from the combination of the worker, client and the agency (Figure 2). This abstract notion is called “social construction” and it emerges from the interaction between worker, client and agency and the meaning assigned to that interaction. Accordingly, the social construction view is that a phenomenon such as social work, which is local in terms of its common knowledge can only be understood in the time and social context in which the understanding and meaning arises. It is dynamic so that people will inevitably reconstruct the meaning within local context as it is affected by social changes (Payne, 2014).

Figure 2: The Social Construct of Social Work



In a context of growing complexities of social transition, new forms of personal and social issues, constantly redefine the existence of social work in a particular time period within a specific socio-cultural context. The differing views of social work to respond to these contexts through action and policy which are always closely influenced by the ideological positions of the social work agencies, and the personal

style of the practitioner, who connects such differing approaches to the client's world as frontline workers, all together in a process of interaction. In that process of constant reconstruction of the meaning and purpose of the profession, universal and local socio-cultural value positions, universal knowledge and skills, local knowledge, practices, systems, structures, relationships etc. are linked together and influence the practitioner and the form of practice in complex ways. The elements of this entire discourse (Figure 2) demonstrate the way they interact and where the action of social work is located within the overall dynamic context. Then what commensurate with this dynamic process of change is the constant reconstruction of social work action according to the time, social conditions and cultural space. These factors contribute to the construction of social work, which is also a dynamic process, as workers, clients and agencies interact with each other (Figure 2).

Universal and local integration

A universally recognized, accepted and collectively shared set of values forms the core of social work and this value base has been significant in the nature of social work's mission throughout the profession's history (Reamer, 2013). The values are guiding principles for human behavior and the different cultures promote values more than others and define them as implicit or explicit concepts, which influence the selection of behaviours (Liu, Zala and Gallois, 2015). The idea of universal values in social work associates with the modernist view of social justice and human rights. The principles of equality, social justice, human rights and respect for human worth and dignity transform the value base of social work into universal action, so that principles become the action of the values of modern professional social work, converting those values into action terminology. In line with the values and principles, the profession then outlines a set of codes of conduct for the practitioners to abide by, which are again accepted across the world as fundamental, considered in a sense of benchmark, for professional social work education, training and practice. As such, in modernist interpretation, core values, core principles and codes of conduct of professional social work are universal.

However, those who reject the idea of modernist universal interpretations disagree with the existence of universalism of social work and claim that the notion of the universal form of social work is imposed on non-Western cultures where multiple of relative constructions of the

meaning, purpose and focus of social work can exist (Payne, Gurid and Askeland, 2016; Gray, Coates and Bird, 2016; Cox and Pawar, 2006; Midgley, 1981). These constructs are always intrinsically embedded in local realities and indigenous knowledge and collectively shared and continued in a dynamic process of reconstruction in response to the social transformation. It emphasizes that the values which are unquestionably shared and continued in local community cultures are part of local knowledge construct. Local people collectively construct them, share and continue unquestioned, and for comprehension, they are inexpressible and unexplainable.

Both views however seem to have contextual legitimacy and have profound influence in setting the professions' dominant views towards the world order and form its practice modalities in different social contexts. The focal position of versatile framework of professional social work practice illustrated in Figure 1 is the place where the chosen tools of universal and local constructs are combined as appropriate to be applied in the contexts of existing social realities in local transforming societies. If it is the right selection, it will then not be an abstract engaging with locals as there will be familiar elements that the local client systems can relate to so that the engaging phase of the intervention plan will not be disturbed. In that engaging, with appropriate tools, reciprocal impacts of the reflexive interaction enable the client to be empowered, aware of the elements of action plan that is going to be implemented and involved in the entire process of the intervention action. Similarly, the reflexive interaction enables the practitioner to become familiar with the client's world and continues to reconstruct the action plan for intervention, if and when necessary, with re-selection of appropriate combination of the elements both from universal social work knowledge and the realities of the client's specific community cultural context.

This is, in essence, a value mixed situation where local practitioners need to creatively ensure an appropriately "constructed practice" as a response to specific presenting problems, client systems and contextual complexities of the transforming local society. Therefore, the practice intervention requires competency in knowledge and skills from both traditions. The constructed response contextualizes professional social work practices, which is not an entirely universal, or local, the existing societal conditions. It is also not somewhere in between, a position where the boundaries are

exactly delineated. It is an innovative creation of practice, a situation in which a practitioner performs “a personal style of an experienced practice”, yet still within a professional framework of practice. It is also certainly about understanding, being knowledgeable and skillful of both views, and alternating in between two extremes constructing practice application as appropriate to the presenting problems, client systems and contextual complexities drawing on the appropriate resources from both traditions.

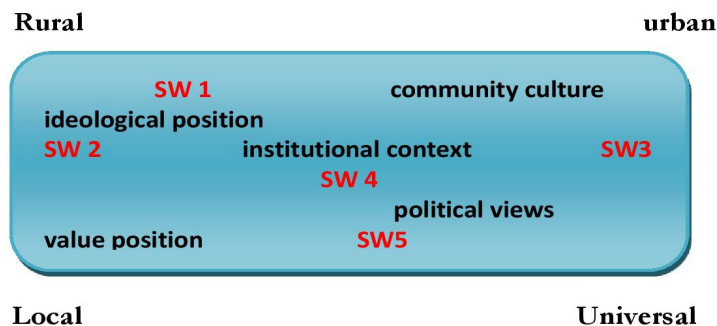
Versatile practice

The most important skill of the practitioner, who uses constructed practice of a complex socio-cultural context, will be “versatility”, or ability to adopt and adapt. It promotes the idea that ‘locally culturally’ relevant social work appropriate to the diverse contexts of community cultures, is a pragmatic alternative so that cultural relevance, a relative phenomenon, enables diversity of social work in diverse community contexts (Connolly and Harms, 2012). Such a practice will take different forms, for example, a combination of different roles of the social worker, being a professional with many facets and different roles, i.e. clinical social worker, generic caseworker, youth worker, welfare worker, social advocate, mediator, campaigner, activist etc. At times, even this constructed practice will be a combination rather than being of strict adherence to extreme ideological positions (Figure 3). Similarly, a combination for appropriate application may include elements from various fields of practice, organizational settings, client systems, types of service, delivery locations, voluntary and involuntary nature of the client’s participation etc. The different positions for the practitioner’s constructed practice (SW1, SW2, SW3, SW4 and SW5) shown in Figure 3 demonstrate representation of different combinations of contrasting ideological and value positions, political views, theoretical affiliations, institutional contexts, community cultures etc., for practice within the localized domain. Each position is viewed as contextually specific and in that, client is considered as a holism, may be representing influences from different aspects of universal and local dimensions in different scales. The practitioner is competent to be versatile so that practice is contextualized in the local but the client still benefits from the appropriately amalgamated universal professional social work applications as well.

With recognition of the specific community cultural situation

where the client comes from, for example rural or urban, a practitioner may tend to obtain more contribution from the modern professional social work action plan of treatment with a predominant universal position of practice (for example SW3 and SW5). In such a situation, the practitioner may focus on the power of the individual person to become healed from life-suffering. This recognition of the freedom of personal sense, or the value of individual emancipation, and its potential power may exceed the existing local support mechanisms but the contribution of local mechanisms in making the individual person capable of using her / his own power is not undervalued at all. It is recognized, acknowledged and included in the work plan, and that is why SW3 and SW5 are not considered as far extremes. Enabling people to understand and use their personal power may be important even in the local context, it may make people to become active partners for achieving their own wellbeing, for example, relying predominantly on their own capabilities with little support from the external sources and rising above the conditions of poverty. Therefore, SW3 or SW5 occupy different positions of local and universal combination, not taking far-extremes and being versatile to adopt and adapt. The position of SW4 is almost balanced, and SW1 and SW2 lean towards local, may be more rural, yet keep space for relevant inclusions from the universal practice as well.

Figure 3 - Versatility of Practice



Both situations of intervention have not been positioned at the extreme ends of values of individual or collective dimensions of a specific community culture. Thus the action plan still remains open to adopt and adapt in consideration of what requires as a response which serves the best interest of the client. Both situations allow the

practitioner to be versatile and conjure appropriate elements from existing traditions irrespective of universal or local as long as it responds to the complexities of the condition of local social transformation and reaches out and becomes receptive to the local people. They all take varying scales of conjunctions from local and universal knowledge, belief systems, pragmatically responsive methodologies, practices or systems that rely on different structural mechanisms of service delivery etc. The scales of amalgamation may be different at different positions and the practice becomes a versatile response to presenting problems, client systems and contextual complexities and finally acceptable to the local as it is presented in familiar, client-friendly, local contexts.

In such a situation, professional social work practice becomes a “profession of versatile practice” which is widely open for different contexts, complex presenting problems and value mixed and dichotomized socio-cultural environments etc. It enables integration of local care practices, systems, local skills, and indigenous knowledge, into modern professional social work, and delivers the action of professional practice through traditional institutional structures, relationships and leadership systems. It will be possible to practice this in both cultural spaces, for example, both in rural and urban and also in very specific circumstances in each context, if the need arises.

Versatile practice enables a “diversity of social work” in “diverse community cultures”. Thus the versatile practitioner becomes socially and culturally informed and sensitive to be appropriately responsive, professionally competent with modern knowledge, skills and methods and capable of moving across different communities with different client systems, using communication skills and intervention methods appropriately. It is the professional social work practice that our local situation calls for, in a context of complex and constant social and cultural transformation. It is versatile, exclusively neither theirs nor ours but our social work within their social work.

Conclusion

We are constantly involved in an intense debate, grappling with complex social and cultural contexts, on what would be the style of professional social work practice for us in Sri Lanka. The debate is twofold. Some believe in the Western style practice, which is said to be universal while the others stand for our own local or indigenous knowledge, which include our age-old, traditional caring and sharing

practices, systems, institutions, networks, relationships and leadership arrangements. Would our need be an exclusive version of either universal or localized social work? Both ends seem to be unable to realistically respond to what we actually need in our own community cultures which have been changing very fast with the effects of contemporary globalization trends.

This discussion concludes that a professionally versatile way of social work practice would be the most appropriate style of practice for Sri Lanka, in consideration of the country's diversity of community cultures and generationally long history of traditional care and share systems. Versatility of practice allows a contextually specific practice in which the client is viewed as a holism representing the contextual complexities and local realities, which is more or less a combination of both local and universal, so that the intervention plan for helping the client calls for appropriate amalgamation of elements from both universal practices and local systems.

Versatile practice enables a “diversity of social work” in “diverse community cultures” and versatile practitioner becomes socially and culturally informed and sensitive to be appropriately responsive, and professionally, adequately competent with modern knowledge, skills and methods and capable of moving across different communities, working with different client systems, using communication skills and intervention methods appropriately etc. It is the professional social work practice that our local situation calls for in a context of complex and constant social and cultural transformation. It is versatile, exclusively neither theirs nor ours but our social work within their social work, which will be welcome by and acceptable to the local community.

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