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Title
Towards a Pragmatic Approach:
A Critical Examination of Two Assumptions of the Indigenization Discourse

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Abstract: The current discourse of indigenization has been dominated by a normative approach that centres culture and social work values in the discussion of how social work is transferred from the West to the rest. Taking a social constructionist perspective, this paper argues that we need to critically examine some underlying assumptions of this normative approach which may have misled the discussion and the understanding of indigenization. Based on these critiques, a pragmatic approach is suggested as an alternative approach to refocus indigenization as a process in which multiple actors with multiple cultural lenses try to select and negotiate different components of western social work to be integrated with and to replace existing local social care practice. The purpose of this integration and replacement is to better serve the needs of the receiving society and its people.

Keywords: Indigenization, Social Construction, International Social Work, Pragmatism, China

International social work discussions conceptualize “indigenization” as a process whereby components (i.e., values, knowledge and skills) of an imported social work, mainly from the West, are filtered, particularly through a cultural lens, to fit the local context. The idea of cultural fitness has also sparked an ongoing interconnected debate about the universality of social work values originating in Western (namely, Judeo-Christian-liberal) cultures. Placing culture and social work values at the centre, a normative understanding of indigenization has dominated the literature. In this paper, drawing on examples of social work development in China, we first critically examine two problematic assumptions of the normatively focused conceptualization of indigenization. We question the unexamined significance of culture in this debate and the assumed unified package of knowledge, values and skills of social work. Taking a pragmatic approach, we argue that different components of social work – values, theories and skills – can be separately imported and adapted in the indigenization process, in which multiple cultural lenses are applied by different actors to negotiate an “appropriate” mix of imported social work components with current conditions in local society. This combination can more effectively address emerging local needs and new social circumstances.

RECAPITULATING THE CONCEPT AND ASSUMPTIONS OF INDIGENIZATION

To many indigenous peoples around the world, the term, Indigenization (with a capitalized I) signals a movement of solidarity against colonization (Gray, Coates, & Yellow Bird, 2008). When this term was “appropriated” by international social work discussion in the early 1970s (Gray & Coates, 2008), it was re-conceptualized as the international transfer of social work from
the West to “the rest”. “The rest” are receiving countries, generally former colonies of the West and/or countries that do not exhibit forms of Western culture.

As Walton and Nasr (1988) articulate, the transferring process involves at least three stages. In the first stage, Western social work is transmitted to receiving countries. After arriving in the local context of the receiving countries, Western social work is adapted, adjusted and modified to fit the local context – social, economic, political and, more importantly, cultural. As Midgley (1981) suggests, this second stage makes the imported social work “appropriate” to the local context (p.170). Walton and Nasr suggest that to be fully integrated into the receiving countries, “authentization” (the third stage) is important so that a domestic model reflecting the local context can be established. In this stage, the emphasis is placed on developing internal theory and practice models that can respond to local conditions and needs, and patterns of economic and social development (Walton & Nasr, 1988, p. 136). However, Walton and Nasr do not provide a detailed explanation of how this third stage works, and thus, as Hugman (2008) notices, authentization has been neglected in international social work literature. Instead, the discussion of indigenization focuses on how Western social work is filtered and adapted to the local context.

Meanwhile a growing body of literature has critiqued this conceptualization of indigenization. Many of these critiques pinpoint some underlying assumptions of this filtering-adapting process. For instance, as Ferguson (2005) points out, this conceptualization assumes that indigenization is a linear and unidirectional importing-adapting process which uncritically privileges and reinforces the centredness of the Western social work paradigm (Haug, 2005), particularly when a global standard is assumed (Gray, 2005). Within this process, both the West and the local context are portrayed as homogenous and monolithic, and the internal political dynamic of the local context goes largely unnoticed (Miu Chung Yan & Cheung, 2006).
Although these criticisms reflect some basic faults of the conceptualization, they still share two of its problematic (but rarely discussed) assumptions. First, in international social work literature, social work is assumed to be a solid whole comprised of three inseparable major components, i.e., values, knowledge and skills. Therefore, importation is assumed to be a package deal. Second, positioning social work values, which are largely cultural, as the foundation of this package deal assigns “culture” centre stage in the indigenization conceptualization (Gray & Coates, 2008).

These two assumptions have not only limited the scope of understanding indigenization but have also cast unresolved doubt on the transferability of social work. Before we further examine these two assumptions and how they may contribute to the (mis)understanding of indigenization, we must first examine three conditions under which the receiving countries import Western social work. More often than not, these conditions are briefly suggested and rarely discussed. The following analysis intends to illustrate that receiving countries have always had a pragmatic and functional consideration when importing Western social work, a consideration imperative to the understanding of indigenization.

**NEGOTIATING A FUNCTIONAL MIXTURE**

In the discussion of social work indigenization, a growing body of scholars has started to draw attention to the existence and importance of local (or indigenous) social care practice. They tend to point out that “Western social work” is not the only form or mechanism of social care practice (e.g., Gray, et al., 2008; Ling, 2004; Walsh-Tapiata, 2008). Since many societies have their own social care practices which are part of the local context, the indigenization process inevitably involves certain negotiation and mixing. However, the conditions that may affect this
mixture have been under-examined. To better illustrate three such conditions, we turn to China’s social work development as a case study.

In the last decade, the rapid development of social work in China has led to a growing set of literature in social work indigenization which provides interesting examples of these conditions. It has been widely recognized in China that Western social work is needed because the existing social service mechanisms, established in the early 1950s, are no longer adequate in dealing with the emerging social problems caused by the economic reform (e.g., Xiong & Wang, 2007; Miu Chung Yan, Ge, Cheng, & Tsang, 2009; Miu Chung Yan & Tsang, 2005). In two studies, social work educators (Miu Chung Yan & Tsang, 2005) and students (Miu Chung Yan, et al., 2009) in China felt strongly that imported Western social work should be integrated with existing service systems. In other words, according to these participants, social work in China should be a mixture of both the imported and the traditional/local. Suggestions of this mixture are largely focused on how existing social care facilities and systems can incorporate social work (knowledge, values and skills) in their daily practice by upgrading existing personnel or hiring professionally trained social workers. The mixture is conceptually understood as social work with Chinese characteristics (Miu Chung Yan & Cheng, 2009).

We recognize that the example of China may be unique and its experience should not be over-generalized to other countries. However, the story of social work development in China reflects at least three conditions in which indigenization takes place. First, a society may not need to import any foreign concepts or practices if its social circumstances are stable. When facing social changes, if existing social mechanisms, such as the social care system, are adequate to assist society in dealing with the emerging challenges, there is no need to import. In other
words, indigenization signals a social condition requiring the importation of a foreign entity that must contribute to resolving the emerging social issues in the receiving society.

Second, striving towards modernization, China has imported not only social work but also numerous other entities from the West such as the high-speed locomotive engine, financial and banking systems, and popular culture. Different entities may mix differently with similar local entities. For instance, in China, local engineers may simply replace domestic rail technology with imported high-speed technology, but local musicians can use traditional Chinese musical instruments to play Madame Butterfly in the Opera House of Beijing’s National Grand Theater. In other words, if there is a similar entity in the local context, the newly imported entity does not necessarily replace the existing one but may either integrate with or be integrated by the local one.

Third, not all imports can be smoothly assimilated. In the 100 years since the late Qing dynasty, China has seen a debate of “corpus and application” among the intellectual circle about how to “modernize” China (Tsang & Yan, 2001). The major controversy tends to be associated with imported entities that come with strong “cultural value” implications. So far, Chinese society seems to have had very few problems and very little resistance when taking on imported material and technological entities such as computers, rocket science, high-speed trains, banking systems, and Starbucks coffee, just to name a few. However, when it comes to value-laden entities such as practice and ideas (particularly in the socio-political arenas), the controversy has been unsettling.

In brief, different imported entities may find different outcomes of indigenization, even within the same local context. The indigenized entity, which is often a mixture of both imported and similar local entities, is supposed to tackle some emerging issues that the local entity can no
longer adequately handle. Entities that involve “value” implications, such as democratic direct
election system and social work practice, tend to be more controversial. Since social work is
always perceived as a value-laden entity, the discussion of social work indigenization inevitably
generates heated debate on how social work imported from the West can fit the local cultural
context.

SOCIAL WORK AS A VALUE-LADEN SOCIAL CONSTRUCT

Nowadays, the idea that social work is a social construct has almost become a cliché. A social
construct is formed largely through the use of language (Berger & Luckman, 1967; Searle, 1998)
and more specifically, through a discursive practice (Foucault, 1989). International social work
literature has uncritically accepted the “discursive fact”, i.e., a “corpus of statements” (Foucault,
1989, p. 30), that value, knowledge and skills are the inseparable parts of social work. Therefore,
when discussing social work indigenization, the importation of Western social work is always
seen as a package deal of these three inseparable components. For a long time, authors have
tended to focus on the cultural biases of social work theories (e.g., Midgley, 1981; Osei Hwedie,
1993). However, the recent heated debate over the Global Standards of Social Work has shifted
the focus to social work values (e.g., Gray, 2005; Sewpaul, 2005; Kam Shing Yip, 2004).

Despite this change, authors still tend to formulate their arguments largely based on an uncritical
assumption that there is an ontologically stable and epistemologically coherent set of values in
“Western social work.”

To critically examine this assumption, we first need to examine the cliché that social work is
a social construct, i.e., that social work is contextually created, justified and maintained to fulfill
a certain social function (Payne, 1997). Thus, since social work theories and skills, which we
categorize together as “application”, are all contextually constructed, diverse forms of social
work application are observed both internationally (for instance, among many Anglophone countries, see S. Banks, 2008; McDonald, Harris, & Wintersteen, 2003) and even locally in the same country (an example of the US, see M. C. Yan & Tsui, 2007).

It is no secret that as an applied social science, social work borrows many of its theories and skills from various disciplines including health sciences, other social sciences and the humanities. In a nutshell, social work application is eclectic (Payne, 1997). This eclecticism involves different kinds of knowledge “traveling” from other disciplines to the practical context of social work, within which the profession selectively borrows and blends them together. The traveling process implies that borrowed theories and skills are contingently and contextually adapted, elaborated and reinterpreted to meet the needs of social work clients in a particular socio-organizational context (Payne, 1997). According to this social constructionist conception, we should not be surprised to see diversity in social work theories and practice within the local as well as global social work communities, both of which are inherently heterogeneous. However, the diversity of social work theories and practice does raise the question of what holds social work together as one profession, particularly when the professional identity of social work is always at stake (S. Banks, 2008).

The answer seems in the claim that social work is a value-laden profession. This claim has long been accepted in social work discourse (Bisman, 2004). Values, placed in the centre of the package-deal of social work, are believed to discursively glue together not only theories and skills but also the social work profession as whole by unifying its social identity (Sarah Banks, 2004). The values of western social work as expressed in its principles and ethics “embody the values of [w]estern industrial society” (Midgley, 1981, p. 85). Certainly, the anti-imperialist
sentiments shared by the international social work community nowadays have cast doubt on the universality of these values (e.g., Gray, 2005; Kam Shing Yip, 2004).

We have no intention of denying either the assertion that social work values are important to the profession or the contention that the validity of the universality of social work values is doubtful. Instead, what we want to argue is that, while arguing that social work is a social construct and that social work is embedded in Western industrial society, most authors ironically do not place values, a key component of social work, under the social constructionist lens for critical analysis. Social work values and their importance in “Western social work” are normalized as historically and ontologically stable. A full analysis of the social constructionist nature of social work values is beyond the limit of this paper. Using the development of social work ethic in the United States as an example, we make an initial argument that, like social work application, social work values are also socially constructed and are therefore contextual and contingent.

Anglo-American social work, according to Reamer (1998), has always had a split value base inherited from the poor-law morality of early charity work and from the social justice emphasis of the settlement-house movement (Reisch, 2008). The development of the social work value framework is largely an evolving process alternating between these two heritages. The existing code of ethics of the U.S. social work profession, the major textual reflection of the profession’s values, is the result of a long discursive process – an ongoing exchange of ideas through a large volume of scholarly publications almost since the inception of the social work profession (Reamer, 1998). During this process, different paradigms were employed to frame the code of ethics as a response to the changing social context in which the old paradigm was no longer sufficient to support constantly evolving social assignments (Popple, 1985). The rigidity and
restrictive nature of a paradigm always makes it inherently unstable (Kuhn, 1970), and the idea of paradigm shift shows that the social work values in the paradigm are unstable, contingent and contextual. In each paradigm, different values are selected and privileged.

Meanwhile, the meaning of different social work values is also in a constant discursively (re)making process. For instance, very few people today disagree that social justice is a key value of social work. However, the idea of justice has always been a controversial topic for political philosophy (Sandel, 2009). As Reisch (2008) points out, although among the social work profession there is a strong consensus on the importance of social justice, members of the profession lack a “conceptual or historical clarity or agreement” of what social justice is (p.349). Social justice has become a banner devoid of any fixed meaning, but one under which the social work profession has continued to march (Reisch, 2008).

If social work applications (theories and skills) and values are both socially constructed, then it is plausible to argue that their togetherness should not be taken for granted as historically stable, ontologically natural and epistemologically coherent. Perhaps, as Parton (2000) argues, the nature of social work “is much better characterized in terms of indeterminacy, uncertainty and ambiguity” (p.460), which requires professionals to creatively blend the applications and values together as a contingent response to meet the needs of a particular helping context (Johnson & Yanca, 2004). Thus, the lack of a fixed relationship between them and their togetherness is a constantly remaking discursive fact which, in response to the changing social context, employs different value frameworks to anecdotally justify the functionality of the profession. Connecting this analysis with the concept of indigenization, we argue that social work applications and values can be separately and selectively imported and indigenized, and
that their togetherness is justified normatively within the local context, of which culture is a key component.

**CULTURAL COMPATIBILITY: AN UNCANNY DEFENCE OF CULTURAL ESSENTIALIZATION**

International social work literature, has always positioned culture, (or more specifically, traditional beliefs and values), as *the* filter for “appropriateness” of applications and values in the indigenization of imported Western social work. The uncritical acceptance of values as the core of an inseparable package deal of social work has further solidified the centralized position of culture in the conceptualization of indigenization (Gray & Coates, 2008) which has led to an intractable disagreement in the debate over the Global Standards. However, taking a closer look at the debate, we notice that the validity of culture as “the filter” has seldom been questioned; neither has the idea of “culture” been properly articulated. Contenders of the debate have repeatedly cautioned that culture is not static and monolithic. However, since most of the discussion adopts a “the West and the rest” dichotomized approach, it is unconsciously trapped in the conceptual cage by presenting two essentialized and homogenized sets: the Western culture, and the culture of the receiving country or even region (Africa, Asia, etc.).

To illustrate how placing culture in the centre of indigenization may lead to a misunderstanding of how indigenization works, we again turn to the case of social work development in China. In a country with a multiple-millennia history of civilization, cultural compatibility has become a key concern in the literature of social work indigenization (Miu Chung Yan, et al., 2009). However, despite the fact that China’s cultural resources are unique, rich and diverse, commentators, particularly those from Chinese cultural backgrounds, often appeal to the Great Learning in Confucianism as the core values of Chinese culture (a major
example please see Kam Shing Yip, 2004). However, centering the Great Learning of Confucianism at the core of Chinese culture oversimplifies the fluidity and complexity of the cultural landscape of contemporary Chinese society. This presents challenges as well as opportunities for the importation of Western social work.

Undeniably, Confucianism has had a great impact on Chinese culture. However, as the state’s preferred school of thought, Confucianism has been reinterpreted numerous times to fit the ideology of ruling regimes throughout Chinese history (Yu, 1992). Such reliance on the state has led to many critiques of the hegemony of Confucianism since the early 20th century. Today, in much social work literature from Chinese scholars still argues against the Great Learning of Confucianism as feudalist, sexist, and patriarchal (Lam, 1997). Meanwhile, China’s vast and varied land area naturally promotes geographical differentiation: the Great Learning of Confucianism has not always been equally influential across different eras and regions (Tan, 1987). The so-called hegemony of Confucianism also ignores the fact that, in China’s cultural landscape, Taoism, Legalism, Buddhism and a few other “isms” have always been significant cultural components embraced (particularly by everyday people) in daily practice and beliefs.

More importantly, this understanding of the Great Learning of Confucianism and of the wisdom of other “isms” is elitist-making, i.e., it is based on reinterpretations of classical writings which were written in a language and style that is largely inaccessible to most Chinese people now (as it was in the past). These elitist reinterpretations are not necessarily relevant to everyday life. Long in the early 20th century, Lin (reprinted in 2000) observed at least fifteen different cultural characteristics of common Chinese people; some are positive (e.g., patient and peaceful) and some are negative (e.g., cunning and conservative). Indeed, everyday Chinese practical wisdom can be very contradictory to the elitist Great Learning. For instance, in contrast to the
tenet of Confucianism that people are naturally altruistic, it is not unusual to hear people justifying their selfishness by saying “shovelling the snow off your own doorstep” (i.e., minding your own business).

Political ideology is always a trump card for the Great Learning of different “isms”. This is particularly true in contemporary Chinese society. After the first 60 years of the communist regime, during which traditional Great Learning (particularly Confucianism) was aggressively attacked, socialist ideology has become a major component of the cultural landscape of China. It penetrates into every level of the socio-political structure and every aspect of people’s daily life. Meanwhile, in pursuing massive economic reforms since the end of the 1970s, the Chinese government has also appealed to cultural pragmatism, as expressed in Deng Xiaoping’s famous “white cat and black cat” motto.

The speedy development of a market economy has also unintentionally transformed the contemporary culture of Mainland China. Adam Smith (1776 (1979)) said it well – the market is possible because of the exchanges of labour among strangers who are striving to satisfy their own self-interests. In a profit-driven market, people’s self-interests (and their desires to satisfy those interests) are promoted and consumption is encouraged. In China, the market economy has indeed led to the rise of consumerism. Recently, the government’s decision to maintain a high economic growth has further hastened consumerism by introducing measures to expand internal consumption as a policy response to the global economic crisis. Consumerism has led to many social problems in China. In particular, by appealing through aggressive advertising to an individual’s desires and interests to spend, consumerism also ironically fosters an “individual-centred” spirit among Chinese consumers. In a tightly controlled and highly politicized society, market consumerism has released the individualistic tendency of the Chinese people and created
a socio-cultural space, albeit limited, for people to renegotiate their individuality outside the political arena.

In sum, there are many cultural filters in receiving countries. From the cultural landscape of contemporary China, we can argue that at least four cultural filters – traditional elitist Great Learning, practical wisdom of the common people, governmental ideologies and market consumerism – are interacting, competing, conflicting and supplementing. Therefore, it is problematic to assume that an essentialized and homogenized elitist cultural configuration is sufficient enough to filter the Western social work values. So, how does the interaction of different components of the local cultural landscape impact the indigenization process?

**TOWARDS A PRAGMATIC UNDERSTANDING OF INDIGENIZATION**

Reflecting on our analysis of the two unexamined assumptions of the existing conceptualization, we have two tentative propositions that may help us better understand the complexity of how social work is imported, adapted and takes root in receiving countries.

**Multiple Actors and Multiple Cultural Lenses**

First, *multiple cultural lenses*, which are not necessarily coherent and/or in agreement, are competitively used to select and adapt imported components. This process is conducted by various actors located in different social positions inside and outside the receiving society. In other words, the transmission and adaptation of social work between the West and the rest is largely achieved by the interaction of different groups of actors. Members of the Western social work community are diverse in terms of their own cultural understanding of the nature of social work, ideological and theoretical orientation, preference of practice approach, personal beliefs and actual practice experience. It is therefore not difficult to imagine that when they introduce
social work to practitioners in the receiving country, they bring different understandings to the table.

Meanwhile, when learning different discursive articulations of social work from foreign counterparts, local social work practitioners (who do not necessarily have one shared interest in the development of social work) may selectively pick a specific articulation or parts of different articulations to formulate a version of social work that serves their own purposes. Yan and Cheung (2006) have already argued that the importation of social work, as demonstrated in China, is a political process within which different groups of actors are in constant competition and negotiation to re-contextualize the imported social work to meet local emerging needs and to serve the interests of their own group.

The interaction between actors inside and outside receiving countries implies that the indigenization process is also a cultural exchange process. Yip (2005) suggests a dynamic cultural exchange model which implies that cultural exchange between two cultures is “vigorous and dynamic”, involving different cultural lenses, and that the impacts of the exchange are mutual and multidimensional. However, without explaining how diverse and competing cultural lenses of the different groups of actors are engaged in the exchange process, this model inevitably falls back into “the West and the rest” dichotomy that simplifies the actors’ cultures into two essentialized, homogenized and incommensurable entities.

The concept of culture is always political (Wright, 1998). Likewise, to capture the complexity of the cultural landscapes in which actors are located, we also need to push this dynamic model one step further by politicizing the cultural exchange process. We need to ask how the complexity of local cultures is simplified; how the elitist interpretation of culture is homogenously and essentially reified; and how different actors discursively justify or reject the
Decentring Values and Be Pragmatic

As we have just argued, the idea of cultural filters has privileged social work values in the indigenization discussion. Subsequent to the first proposition, our second proposition decentres social work values in the understanding of indigenization by proposing a pragmatic approach. The pragmatic approach is not new to international social work discourse. To avoid professional imperialism, Midgley has long proposed a pragmatic approach to indigenization which, unfortunately, has been lost in the discussion of international social work. In Midgley’s (1981) articulation, the pragmatic approach has four elements – direct service meeting local needs, emphasis on practical skills, solutions to the most pressing social problems, and “appropriateness” (pp.168-170). In this pragmatic approach, three of the four elements refer to application, i.e., this approach intends, perhaps unconsciously, to decentre social work values. However, this intention did not seem to affect later discussion of social work indigenization. The last element, “appropriateness”, has been magnified and hi-jacked by the debate of cultural commensurability between the West and the rest. In turn, “appropriateness” is evaluated normatively and the cultural compatibility of social work values continues to dominate the debate.

Reflected in Midgley’s pragmatic approach is a social constructionist tenet – that social work has been constructed and sustained for pragmatic reasons which define its social mandate, assign its social assignments, and in turn justify its very existence. In the indigenization process, receiving countries import and make the existence of social work possible because some people in the countries see that the imported social work can meet specific social needs and address
circumstances that may threaten not only the stability of the receiving countries but, more importantly, also the well-being of people.

A pragmatic approach also emphasizes that it is not social work values but social work applications (i.e., theories, methods, and skills) that social workers use to meet unmet needs and resolve problematic social circumstances. Here we do not intend to minimize the importance of social work values. Instead, borrowing from Chinese pragmatist thinking articulated by Ze-Hou Li (1990), one of the key social philosophers in modern China, we argue that all applications embody certain normative implications. All social work theories as well as many social work skills have a normative base (Payne, 1997). For instance, counselling skills embody the normative value of individualism, and group facilitation skills actualize democratic values.

According to Li (1998), when being used, the embedded values of applications will be manifested, tested, and accepted or rejected. Subsequently and unintentionally, the values of those adopted applications will generate cultural change. As an example, the adoption of a market economy in China has led to both material and normative changes in daily life, even under the tight control of the socialist regime. In other words, unlike the normative approach (which places social work values in the centre), a pragmatic approach suggests that indigenization starts from the importation of selective components to meet local needs and resolve local social circumstances by local different actors who are culturally and institutionally situated in different social positions.

The recent development of social work in China is driven by a pragmatic approach particularly from a top-down process. In China, it is widely accepted that social work development is predicated on the support of the state. The Chinese government’s intention of developing social work is highly political (Miu Chung Yan & Cheung, 2006). As Leung, Yip,
Huang and Wu (2012) observe, knowledge and skills of western social work are selectively incorporated as a technology of government to serve the new political agenda of consolidating social harmony. In this selection process, some liberalist social work values, such as individual autonomy, are adopted rhetorically to justify the new political agenda. This politicized purpose of social work is also widely accepted by social work educators and students in China (Miu Chung Yan, et al., 2009; Miu Chung Yan & Tsang, 2005). It is even pragmatically justified as social work with Chinese characteristic (Miu Chung Yan & Cheng, 2009).

In brief, a pragmatic approach implies an indigenized social work model that is a functional mixture of knowledge, values and skills adapted from imported models, local traditional practice, and emerging practice. Very often, in the receiving country, people who initiate the importation of Western social work may have themselves already engaged directly (providing) or indirectly (researching or articulating) in local social care practice. Therefore, the imported components will be validated, accepted and rejected based on their functional integration with or replacement of local practice and system, i.e., how useful they are in meeting needs and resolving circumstances that traditional social care practices and mechanisms can no longer meet or resolve. As Li (1990) suggests, the inherent values embedded in the applications will be manifested through utilization. The compatibility of these values will likewise be validated, accepted or rejected not by normative debate but by a test of functionality through an experiential and experimental process.

CONCLUSION

We conclude our discussion by returning to Walton and Nasr’s (Walton & Nasr, 1988) articulation of the three stages of indigenization which, as we have argued, seems to be obsessively focused on the issue of cultural compatibility, particularly as manifested in the
normative debate of social work values. As a result, the understanding of indigenization tends to be limited to the first two stages. By decentring culture and social work values, the pragmatic approach offers the conceptual possibility of understanding how the last stage, authentization, may work, but in a more complex way than Walton and Nasr articulate. From the perspective of the pragmatic approach, instead of one model, multiple domestic models of social work are developed due to the competition of multiple “driving forces” in the indigenization process. To compete with other models, actors behind different forces will need to creatively justify three things. The first is what components (values, theories and skills) they will select from different sources in Western social work. The second is how these components can replace or will be integrated with existing local social care practices and mechanisms. The last and most important is how these replacements and integrations can better meet needs and resolve social circumstances. From a pragmatic perspective, their justification cannot rely solely on normative and discursive arguments. Instead, empirical evidence generated by different sources, such as systematic investigation, practice wisdom, personal observation and experience, is necessary to justify the value of these models.
REFERENCES


Footnotes

i The “West” in this paper can also be understood as the “Global North”, “developed” countries or “industrially advanced” countries. Although these groupings are basically similar, each bears different logical and ideological connotations. In this paper, we adopt the term “West” not only for convenience but also to emphasize the continuing imperialist sentiment in the indigenization discourse.

ii In the literature, authors quite often use the adjective “Eurocentric” when they are referring to the predominance of research from Anglophone countries. To be consistent with the label “West”, we have decided to use the adjective “Western”.

iii The word, “indigenous”, carries heavy political baggage from the global Indigenization Movement (Miu Chung Yan & Tsang, 2008). We use the label “local” instead of “indigenous” to better reflect our discussion.

iv The word, entity, is used to simplify the discussion although this word may be mistakenly understood as a reification of social work as an object. The author is cognizant and would like to emphasize that social work is a profession, a social care system and a formal of social practice.

v Being cognizant of the complex relationship among these elements, we use the word “application” here for three reasons. First, theories, practice and skills are all about the functional aspects of social work and tend to be scrutinized under an instrumental rationality. Second, even among social constructionists in the social work profession, theories, methods and skills are highly interrelated (Parton, 2000) and institutionally contextualized (Payne, 1997).