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Indigenous knowledge and social work: Intercultural approaches for sustainable community development.

Saberes indígenas y trabajo social enfoques interculturales para el desarrollo comunitario sostenible

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: The research explores the link between Indigenous knowledge and social work, establishing an intercultural approach to sustainable community development. It acknowledges that traditional knowledge is minimized by social work when it operates under a colonial logic. Therefore, the need for a decolonial change that promotes the epistemological validity of cognitive systems from their places of origin is reaffirmed. **Methodology:** This article conducts a narrative documentary review focused on the critical analysis of narratives. **Results:** The study demonstrates that authentic sustainability prevails thanks to Indigenous principles such as reciprocity, care for the territory, and collective decision-making. Critical interculturality is understood as a methodology that facilitates a horizontal dialogue which renews both the community and professional practice. **Conclusions:** Therefore, social work is reconstructed, facilitating autonomous community processes. This relationship reveals accessible opportunities to consolidate knowledge from a foundation of balance and self-determination.

Keywords: Community Action, Social Work, Community, Ethnic Group, Sustainable Development.

JEL Classification: 035, Q01, Z13.

RESUMEN

Introducción: La investigación explora el vínculo entre los saberes indígenas y el trabajo social, estableciendo un enfoque intercultural para el desarrollo comunitario sostenible. Se reconoce que existe una minimización de los saberes tradicionales por parte del trabajo social al funcionar bajo una lógica colonial. Entonces, se reafirma la necesidad de un cambio decolonial que promueva la validez epistemológica de los sistemas cognitivos de los entornos de origen. **Metodología:** Este artículo realiza una revisión documental narrativa centrada en el análisis crítico de las narrativas. **Resultados:** El estudio demuestra que la sostenibilidad auténtica prevalece gracias a principios indígenas como la reciprocidad, el cuidado del territorio y la toma de decisiones en colectividad. La interculturalidad crítica se entiende como una

metodología que facilita un diálogo horizontal que renueva a la comunidad y la práctica profesional. **Conclusiones:** Por ello, el trabajo social se reconstruye, facilitando procesos comunitarios autónomos. Esta relación manifiesta oportunidades accesibles para consolidar saberes desde el equilibrio y la autodeterminación.

Palabras clave: Acción comunitaria, Trabajo Social, Comunidad, Grupo Étnico, Desarrollo Sostenible.

Clasificación JEL: 035, Q01, Z13.

INTRODUCTION

Historically, the connection between social work and Indigenous knowledge is typified by epistemological gaps (Lin, 2021; OUP, 2022). From its inception, this field was based on a remedial approach (Chen & Borsari, 2024) that denigrated traditional learning. The use of knowledge in social work practice is complex and challenging (Börjesson & Ulmestig, 2023), but a process-oriented approach to training can improve practice and enrich education. This raises questions about the foundations that support professional practices associated with contemporary times. Epistemological tensions arise (Karki, 2016) from the entanglement with Indigenous and Western forms of knowledge in social work research. Following this line, it is recognized that there is currently an intercultural model that seeks to transcend the barriers that have slowed the development and evolution of this discipline (Rowe et al., 2015). Specifically, this new approach verifies the functionality of the cognitive systems of the initial areas, as well as their capacity to confront certain unbalancing events. Social workers emphasize the value of Indigenous knowledge in social work practice and education (Fox, 2021). Therefore, the intrinsic relationship between the knowledge and professional functions of social work is not considered a possibility. It is understood as a priority demand. Involving the knowledge and pedagogy of Indigenous peoples decolonizes social work education and practice (Ryan & Ivelja, 2023), reflecting on the intersectionality of these peoples without marginalizing them within contemporary reality.

This article analyzes the ramifications that arise from the reorganization of community development. Thus, authentic sustainability demands a change in the foundations that typify the prevailing extractive model (Abebe Mamo et al., 2024; Ben-Eli, 2018; Ehrnström-Fuentes, 2022). The collective learning that has emerged, associated with territory, community, and well-being, requires an innovative approach that incorporates novel principles to consolidate a balanced future. A sustainable extractive project requires fostering constructive and mutually beneficial relationships with local communities (Baba et al., 2021), contributing to the paradigm shift necessary to integrate projects into sustainable development.

Models of sustainability transitions can address key aspects, but they need to improve their representation of qualitatively different system states and normative aspects of change (Köhler et al., 2018). The study also focuses on the innovations this link brings to the theoretical and practical foundations of social work. This discipline is reorienting itself toward more dynamic authoritarian models that promote

autonomous community processes. The terminological trajectory offers a new lens through which to understand development. This is not an optimal state to achieve. On the contrary, it presupposes the systematic assimilation of the diversity of territories and communities. Accepting immigrant culture and utilizing professional interventions based on both immigrant and dominant cultures can enhance personal achievement and reduce burnout in social work with immigrants (Tartakovsky & Baltiansky, 2023; Kanjilal & Arnull, 2025).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Social work knowledge co-produced through collaboration and trust can promote community development, address discrimination, exploitation, and violence, and improve social work education (Kanjilal & Arnull, 2025). Social work as a discipline presents an articulation of national organizations and social order projects. The constructs that supported it in its beginnings denote a rooting in welfare approaches that commonly perceived Indigenous territories and communities as pathological. Thus, this perspective overlooked the foundations that guided and defined these people and their learning systems. Therefore, critical questions must begin with this omission in contemporary times.

Following this direction, we see that decolonial theory emerges as a trigger for analyses that favor the exploration of historical contradictions. At the same time, it follows that knowledge is not universal in nature. It is constructed from contexts marked by power relations. Consequently, the modern-colonial project assumes an epistemological hierarchy that relegated those forms of learning that were not perceived as scientific. From this perspective, intercultural social work is articulated as an attempt to dismantle this hierarchy.

Terms such as "ancestral knowledge," which refer to complex and profound cognitive systems, are highlighted in the literature. At the same time, the inclusion of various dimensions, such as the spiritual, ecological, and social, is understood, in which the territory is an active subject and the community focuses on collective well-being (Swanson et al., 2021; Trujillo, 2025). These systems do not fit with the structural division of knowledge typical of Western science and advocate for reciprocal ethics with all living beings. Collaborative sustainable development efforts involving Indigenous communities must be based on local understandings of community well-being, incorporating both Western and Indigenous perspectives (Navarrete & Zohar, 2021).

In another vein, critical interculturality is described as not only the relationship and confluence of various cultures (Mukurazhizha et al., 2023). It entails a political project that seeks to modify the structures that perpetuate asymmetrical ties. Indigenous feminist activism challenges dominant metanarratives (Johnstone & Lee, 2021), highlighting the need for social workers to recognize and document Indigenous resistance, activism, and newly formulated hermeneutical understandings. Thus, it assimilates the existence of conflicts while verifying the construction of a common space respectful of diversity. Critical social work practices can contribute to social change and address neoliberal limitations (Brown, 2021), confronting inequity, marginalization, and oppression in mental health settings. Sustainable community

development, then, does not behave as a term included in the literature of other knowledge. It is a process led by communities, taking into account their own issues regarding well-being and balance. Integrating Indigenous knowledge systems into policy and practice can improve sustainability and relationships with the land, addressing colonialist concepts and demarcations (Perez, 2022).

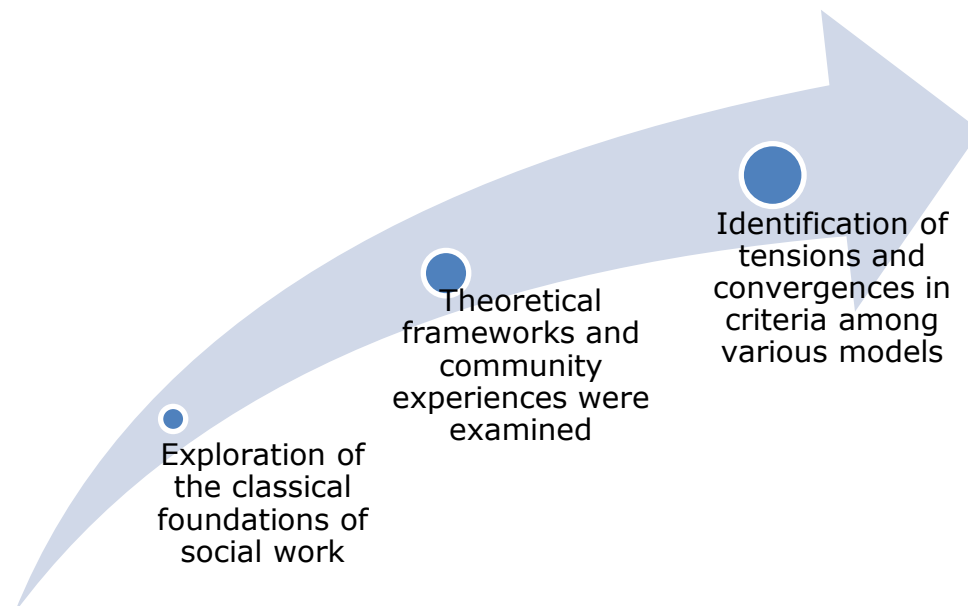
METHODOLOGY

Methodologically, the article was based on a narrative review of the literature. This process facilitated a critical synthesis of the materials consulted, thereby emphasizing perspectives and criteria that are often overlooked in other research approaches. Thus, the process began with an in-depth search of academic and gray area sources, focusing on information produced by Indigenous authors and decolonial studies. Document selection took into account their contributions to the central aspects of the study, for example, the decolonization of social work and the epistemological paradigms of ancestral knowledge.

The study went through several stages and promotes analysis in several directions, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1.

Stages of a narrative review



Source: Own elaboration.

First, the classical foundations of social work, which addressed care-based approaches, were explored. Then, theoretical references and community experiences that shape Indigenous knowledge associated with sustainable practices were

examined. In this way, tensions and convergences of criteria between several of its models and theoretical assumptions were identified.

The research avoided strict, structured synthesis when interpreting the materials. Thus, the internal logic of each learning obtained from the materials was maintained, revealing their dilemmas, but also their productions in various contexts of ambivalence. Taking this narrative approach into account, it was possible to reveal a logical evolution of the dialogue that develops into the search patterns of the intercultural approach.

Finally, it should be noted that this methodological perspective stands out for its validity in terms of transparency and depth of interpretation. Thus, the need to consolidate a solid and consistent foundation that promotes critical reflection was raised. Therefore, it results in a scheme of terms that guides the understanding of a context that is undergoing transformation, in which the practice of social work acquires new meanings and values by identifying other ways of knowing and learning.

RESULTS

Research demonstrates a gap between the theoretical foundations of traditional social work and Indigenous knowledge systems (Hammond & Miller, 2023; Bhangyi, 2023). Thus, the original perspectives of this discipline operate under an extractivist logic and therefore assume communities as contexts for intervention. On the other hand, Indigenous knowledge acts as an epistemological reference that requires symmetrical and equitable validation. The rights and agency of Indigenous and local communities are crucial for shaping effective biodiversity objectives, improving local livelihoods, and promoting human and Indigenous rights in biodiversity policy (Reyes-García et al., 2021).

The article also recognizes certain aspects that typify community practices based on this knowledge. Social work must build on the strengths of Indigenous communities by valuing kinship support systems to promote cultural understanding (Sorby et al., 2024). True sustainability is therefore based on principles such as reciprocity, territorial care, and collective decision-making. Indigenous knowledge systems can enhance ecosocial work approaches by incorporating traditional concepts of planetary well-being (Fox & Enari, 2025). Thus, intercultural social work draws on these paradigms to redefine its procedures and methodological concepts.

This study demonstrated that Indigenous peoples' decolonial critique has a significant influence on community development. Communities are also understood to curate alternatives that advocate for relational well-being and balance with diversity. Decolonizing social work education requires working in partnership with Indigenous knowledge holders and community members to create culturally relevant curricula and promote truth (Moss et al., 2022). In this sense, the current trend associated with unhindered economic success is reflected upon, and paradigms of life are redefined that are grounded in sufficiency and respect. Social work can address these conditions by focusing on environmental and Indigenous ways of knowing, promoting justice, harm prevention, and a prosperous world (Dennis & Bell, 2024). Klymochko (2024) and Nnama-Okechukwu and McLaughlin (2022) agree that, ultimately, the practical link between both fields reveals that the interaction between these

knowledge areas strengthens professional work. Supporting the knowledge systems of Indigenous Peoples and local communities is crucial for preserving biodiversity and promoting sustainable development (Fernández-Llamazares et al., 2021). Therefore, interventions that adopt a territorial worldview tend to be more successful in terms of the permanence and significance of their effects. Indigenous social work is gaining importance in the social work profession, but its conceptualization remains ambiguous, leading to a reluctance to accept Indigenous perspectives and knowledge in education and practice (Jaswal & Kshetrimayum, 2022). Social work is thus renewing its directive function towards approaches aimed at promoting indigenous training. This modification demonstrates a path that allows for the creation of communities whose cultural fabric shapes community resilience.

DISCUSSION

The research denotes a paradigm shift for social work professionals. It is perceived that this renewed approach requires the incorporation of deeper epistemological definitions. Therefore, the need for the discipline to abandon its traditional colonial foundations and incorporate Indigenous knowledge as a valid and reliable source of learning is recognized. Indigenous knowledge systems can be a valuable tool for climate change adaptation in developing world contexts (Mbah et al., 2021), offering more relatable and effective education through critical, place-based, participatory, and holistic methodologies. Indigenous knowledge, such as folkways, power structures, values, norms, traditions, and crafts (Hong & Islam, 2024), is being incorporated into rural social work through collaboration with the local community. The results allow for a discussion about the term "interculturality," which is presented as a respectful and gentle exchange (Berry et al., 2021; Yogeewaran et al., 2023). Therefore, this perspective denies such assimilation and offers the articulation of diverse perspectives from which to understand the world in a coexisting way. The study thus denotes a tense issue, where social work must learn to function in scenarios where the hierarchy of knowledge is oriented and organized collectively (Sim et al., 2021). Stable hierarchical structures promote cooperative and synchronized speech patterns, while unstable structures and the lack of hierarchy increase competitive and interruptive patterns, with gender composition moderating these effects (Picavet, 2024).

Along these lines, it is noted that diagnostic and intervention tools are not sufficient if the community structures its own priorities (Zwaan et al., 2023; Duncan et al., 2021). Whether an alternative is sustainable depends on people's existing capacity to delegate and enable certain group processes. Participatory processes and interventions based on non-formal education can achieve a rapid impact on communities by building human capacity and community resilience (Coppock et al., 2021).

Research identifies a critical point regarding professional training. In this sense, it is noted that traditional academic curricula do not truly offer the necessary preparation for future social workers since they often lack the required theoretical approach. Educators face complexities and pressures when deconstructing social work curricula, which emphasize diversity and social and economic injustice (Akhtar, 2022).

Agbawodikeizu et al. (2024) argue that it is necessary to adopt a pedagogical system that includes the expression of community experiences from ancestral governance within decolonial critique. Incorporating diverse narratives of lived experiences into the mental health social work curriculum can generate compassion, challenge stigma, and enable critically reflective dialogue (Whitaker et al., 2024).

Finally, the study demonstrates that Indigenous knowledge offers social work an articulation of ethical and political principles. Thus, it is understood that it is necessary to assume a position of reflection and critical questioning of Western development constructs (Medina et al., 2022; Velásquez et al., 2024). Integrating community practice, collective impact, and design thinking frameworks can foster innovative solutions to complex social work challenges, benefiting diverse stakeholders (Mandayam et al., 2023). Kurt (2024) argues that decolonizing education involves fostering critical consciousness, agency, and alternative worldviews among marginalized communities through interactive dialogue, problem-posing educational models, and participatory learning practices. Therefore, it is important to understand that the future of societies can be influenced by the willingness to embrace alternatives that come from ancestral memory. According to Sutton et al. (2023), teaching with place through relational learning can lead to ethical and decolonial pedagogies of place by prioritizing Indigenous philosophies, scholarship, and ways of knowing about place.

CONCLUSIONS

The research highlights that contemporary social work needs to undergo a decolonial transformation in order to establish symmetrical links with Indigenous peoples. This transformation must therefore focus on a robust review of its main theoretical and epistemological conceptions. Likewise, the discipline must act as a promoter of community-directed processes.

In this sense, Indigenous knowledge refers to frameworks from which to undertake community action. From its perspectives, the community is understood as an active subject that advocates for maintaining the ethic of reciprocity and collective decision-making. Community development is thus understood through self-determination and contextual balance.

The article also shows that critical interculturality represents the most appropriate methodological approach for this intersection. Thus, it rejects the relegation of traditional knowledge and advocates for the transformation of the community through professional practice. Ultimately, the result is a social work that embraces epistemic humility. From this analysis, it is understood that vocational training must be restructured so that future professionals obtain a more comprehensive and defined preparation. The results demonstrated that curricula must incorporate a critique of the colonial approach and reflect on the lived experiences of communities for students. From this perspective, a professional practice that reduces the asymmetry of community ties is advocated.

Finally, this article argues that the relationship between Indigenous knowledge and social work requires new approaches that favor equitable practices. Therefore, this represents a step forward toward more just and sustainable policies in the

contemporary world. The knowledge of Indigenous peoples provides vital regeneration, with social work serving as the bridge between this knowledge that promotes and empowers transformation.

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