Caring for the People: Role of Social Workers and Sociologists in Assisting Society Members to Cope with the Phenomenon of Social Change in Nigeria

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Abstract

One thing that is permanent in every society is social change. Social change is necessary for more organized and better society. Account of historical periodization of society revealed that society in one stage or another evolved and progressed from one stage to the other. However, this change has short-term negative effect since a gap is created between the old norms and the new norms which made it difficult for society members to cope (adjust) easily. This study was designed to expose the role of social workers and sociologists in assisting society members to cope with the phenomenon of social change in Nigeria. The data for this study was purposely collected through the secondary sources. Both evolutionary theory and strength Approach were employed in analyzing this study. The study revealed that social change is inevitable in every society. Society evolves progressed from simple to more complex stage. Social change could cause short-term social problems between the time of occurrence and adaptation to new norms and values of society. It was recommended that social workers and sociologists should periodically educate and enlighten society members on the inevitable nature of social change with its short-term attendant effects. Government and private owned media should initiate programmes and feature social workers and sociologists. More so, government and donor agencies should create institute of social work and sociology or at least finance the departments of social work and sociology to undertake research in order to uncover short-term negative effect of social change and assist society members to cope with such problems.

Key words: caring, Role, Social workers, Sociologists, Assisting, Society Members, Cope, Evolutionary Theory, Strength Approach.

Introduction

Social change has attracted the attention of scholars since the time of Heraclitus of Ephesus (about 500 BC), Parmenides of Eleas (540-480 BC) as well as zeno. These Greek thinkers were divided in their ideas as to whether reality was determined by change or emotion. Without the use of modern scientific technology these scholars invented instruments aimed at discovering and testing truth by discussion and logical presentation (dialectics). In modern time, there is a consensus among social thinkers and observers that social change is a reality and that one thing that is permanent is social change. Social change is thus "a fundamental alteration in the patterns of culture, structure and social behavior overtime" (Abanyam, 2013:62). Such basic alterations affect the way of life of individuals in the society except coping strategies are initiated.

This fact is acknowledged based on the devastating effects that usually followed when social change occurs. The cardinal assumption here is that every member of the society knows that social change is inevitable and is accompanied by consequences yet society members find it difficult to cope. According to Charles et al (2011:22) "coping is the process of passing through hurdles within the environment".

It implies the ability to adjust (respond) well to the challenges of serious situation. In coping, society members try to overcome problems which may threaten their own survival in a society. Thus considering the dangers associated with the negative effects that accompanied social change and lack of coping skills from society members, social workers and sociologist have significant role to play in initiating strategies and fostering skills that can help society's members to cope whenever social change occurs.

Manifestation of Social Change and Role of Social Workers and Sociologists in Assisting Society Members to Cope With Social Change

Many contemporary social scientists and observers argued that social change produces negative effects that call for attention of professionals and disciplinarians (Abanyam, 2012, Okolo, 2002). Abanyam (2012) revealed the theoretical perspectives on social change and noted that often times when social change takes place in one aspect of social life, other aspects gets out of control. Similarly, Okolo (2002:99) explained that:

At the time of the industrial change which represent changes in the material effects of culture, the social norms available are not sufficient for different aspects of social life to take hold immediately, and make the necessary adjustments and results is usually social problems.

Thus social problem usually occurs when social change takes place and the existing social norms are not sufficient to cope properly to changes. This situation may led to social disorganization resulting to a state of "normlessness in the society and when this happens there is frustration, estrangement and increasing loneliness and indeed meaninglessness of life" (Ottong, 2004:34). The French sociologists, Emile Durkheim called this "anomic suicide". Ering (2001:64) revealed that" anomic suicide is induced by a breakdown of social norms encouraged by situation of rapid social change. Here the individual has been used to the norms that tell them what to do but suddenly the values and norms changed and the individual cannot cope or adjust easily. William, F Ogburn introduced the term "cultural lag" to refer to the period of maladjustment when members of society, culture are still struggling to cope (adapt) to new material conditions.

The logical implication here is that social change and social problem are relational. When social change takes place, social problems result and the consequences of this can be extremely serious and can undermine any attempt at maintaining social stability. For instance, the growth and expansion of industries in an area could produce not only positive effects, but negative effect can also ensued (follows) which may result to social problem. Abanyam, (2012) in Okolo revealed these effects thus:

As industries increase in a particular area, the tendency may be for people to move in large members from other areas, into the areas where these industries are located, for the purpose of acquiring new jobs. With time, the available jobs become too few for the people and the result will be unemployment. Other social problems that may emerge in these areas as effects of social change include: problems of housing, congestion and the growth of slums. This may be followed by crime, prostitution, drug abuse, and so on. Another very disastrous social problem that may follow such social changes as industrial growth and expansion is environmental pollution. Air and water pollution have become common social problem in urban and even rural communities where certain industries are cited. These have continued to endanger human, animals and plants lives. Some of such pollution is even threatening the natural environment.

The major thrust of this thesis is that social change when it occurred create a gap in between the period of occurrence and the period to which people can adapt to the new norms and values. In many societies, people acknowledged that "things are not permanent" yet they find it difficult to accommodate change easily. For instance as individual experiences changes in their body physiology like graying hair, wrinkled skin as a result of aging. They find it difficult to cope with the challenges associated with old age. "They begin to neglect their many responsibilities and become difficult to manage". (Charles et al, 2011:66). Another example is in the area of business. When business operators are making profit things are adjudged to be normal but if the business collapse as a result of other social forces. It becomes very difficult to cope. This can also be seen in the institution of marriage.

It is in view of this manifestation of social change in the society and its social negative consequences (effects) that social workers and sociologists have a major role to play to help society members to cope with social change. In doing so, social workers in collaboration with sociologists have to create awareness on dangerous effects of social change and the need for members of the society to cope. This can be achieved through group discussions (Group Therapy).

Enhancement of social functioning through the use of group is the primary aim of social workers. Yalom (1975) observed that group therapy contains curative facts that hope is gained through other group members and the therapist (in this case social workers and sociologists). Feelings, ideas and problems are ventilated in cathartic relief. Ability to cope is improved by the provision of information or advice from other group members. "The client's expectations of help are explored in leisurely fashion, conveying the massage that there is time to listen and that the worker cares" (Coulshed and Orne, 1998: 162-163). Similarly, Smith (1980) affirms that groups bring about more lasting change than individual work because group provide influence both by feedback, and access to coping skills. Such educative programmes (discussion) should be broadcast on the media through which members of society can share their experiences and gained from others experiences.

Social workers and sociologists can assist the affected members (victims) by providing them with counseling. The essence is to do away with mal-adoptive behaviours and foster adoptive behavior. Social workers and sociologists can also link those affected by social change with relevant social agencies that could help them to tackle their social problems. Charles et al (2011:40) showed that a link can be created between the hopeless and needy clients with humanitarian organizations or non-governmental organizations. Coulshed and Orne (1998: 45) noted that "the capacity to negotiate, with agencies, organizations and individual user and carers, is essential to ensure that appropriate services are made available". Such clients should be given the enablement to get the necessary financial support and assistance. Social workers in corroboration with sociologists can assist government in making or putting adequate machinery in place in order to prevent social problems when social change occur as well as educating them on how to tackle cases resulting to social change.

Theoretical Underpinning of the Study

Two theoretical views were adopted to guide investigation into this study. These are the evolutionary perspective and strengths approach.

Evolutionary Perspective

The pioneering work of Charles Darwin in biological evolution contributed largely to 19th century theories of social change. The pivot of Darwin's approach was the natural selection process. This process encourages the "survival of the fittest". That is continuous life for those that adapt because natural disaster will sweep them off. Schaefer (2008:546) revealed that "social theorists seeking an analogy to this biological model originated evolutional theory, in which society is viewed as moving in a definite direction". Thus Cardinal to evolutionary theorists is the assumption that society was progressing inevitably towards a higher state. Evolutionary theory influences sociologists in a variety of ways, August Comte (1798-1857), the founder of sociology had an organistic view about society, and he saw human societies as progressing in their thinking, from mythology to the scientific stage (method). Emile Durkheim (1893-1933) similarly maintained that society progressed from mechanical solidarity (simple) to organic solidarity (more complex forms of social organizations) and the British sociologists, Hebert Spencer (1820-1903) equally conceived of society as involving from militant state to industrial state. This implies that society like organism changes. Social change is inevitable and unavoidable. Society must move from one stage to another.

Strength Approach

This approach recognizes the importance of empowerment, resilience, healing, and wholeness in working with people. According to Johnson and Yanca (2011) in strength approach the worker moves from looking at deficits to looking at abilities and assets. Membership is seen as essential to well-being. Cardinal to this approach is the assumption that (1) every individual, group, family, and community has strength, and that (2) every environment is full of resources. This approach was developed by Social Work Faculty at University of Kansas, in particular Dannis Saleeby (Johnson & Yanca, 2011). In reacting to the need, social workers assist the client in identifying their strength and the resources in herself and her environment and use this to initiate an appropriate reaction to the need. Again Johnson & Yanca (2011:9) justified reasons for applying strength approach thus:

There are critical reasons for incorporating a strength approach in to the process of meeting needs. Policy changes in human services have resulted in limitations on the length of service and an emphasis on belief, solution-focused intervention. Interventions that focus on deficits and dysfunction and look at the past to understand pathology do not lend themselves to brief interventions. A strength approach is focused on the future and capacities that client and the environment already have rather than relying on the acquisition of new skills and resources.

Thus, a more solid foundation for change is ensured. In addition, the worker can identify and build a support system in the existing environment designed to maintain a new balance in the person-in-environment ecosystem.

The chief point in this approach is that the strength and environmental resources are combined to assists client to cope. Social workers and sociologists can identify the strength of their client (society members) and it environmental resources and assists them on how to cope with social problems that result from social change. This study adopted strength approach because it offers prescription on how society members can assisted to cope (adopt) with phenomenon of social change.

Materials and Methods

The research methodology for this study is qualitative research design and it uses secondary sources of data collected from books and journals.

Results and Discussion

Table 1: Stages of Socio-cultural Evolution

Societal Type	First Appearance	Characteristics
Hunting-and-gathering	Beginning of human life	Nomadic, reliance on readily available food and fibers
Horticultural	About 10,000 to 12,000 years ago	More settled, development of agriculture and united technology
Agrarian	About 5,000 years ago	Larger, more stable settlements, improved technology and increased crop yields.
Industrial	1760-1850	Reliance on mechanical power and new sources of energy; centralized workplaces; economic interdependence; formal education
Postindustrial	1960s	Reliance on services, especially the processing and control of information; expanded middle class
Postmodern	Latter 1970s	High technology; mass consumption of consumer goods and media images; cross-cultural integration

Source: Schaefer (2008:124).

Data presented in Table 1 above indicate that society evolve progress (developed) from one stage to another stage. This implies that social change is not only inevitable in the lives of people but it also relevant for their survival and growth.

Table 2: Comparing Type of Cities

Preindustrial Cities (through 18th century)	Industrial Cities (18th through mid-20th century	Postindustrial Cities (beginning late 20th century
Closed class system-pervasive influence of social class at birth	Open class system-mobility based on achieved characteristics	Wealth based on ability to obtain and use information
Economic realm controlled by guilds and a few families	Relatively open competition	Corporate power dominates
Beginnings of division of labour in the creation of goods	Elaborate specialization in manufacturing of goods	Sense of place fades, transnational networks emerge
Pervasive influence of religion on social norms	Influence of religion limited as society becomes more secularized	Religion becomes more fragmented; greater openness to new religious faiths
Little standardization of prices, weight, and measures	Standardization enforced by custom and law	Conflicting views of prevailing standards
Population largely illiterate, communication by word of mouth	Emergence of communication through posters, bulletins, and newspapers	Emergence of extended electronic network
Schools limited to elites and designed to perpetuate their privileges' status	Formal schooling open to the masses and viewed as a means of advancing the social order	Professional, scientific, and technical personal become increasingly important

Source: Philips in Schaefer (2008:484).

Data in Table 2 demonstrate that social change in natural in the cause development and growth. As society progress from one stage to another there bound to be development in terms of thinking and organization as evidenced in the move from industrial cities (18th century) to industrial cities (18th century-mid-20th century) and postindustrial cities (beginning late 20th century).

The basic tenet of this study was to expose the role of social workers and sociologists in assisting society to members to cope with the phenomenon of social change. Data gathered from the secondary analyzed revealed that social change in inevitable in every society. Society evolves progress from simple to more complex stage. Social change is natural in the course of development, growth and organization. Social change could result to social problems, especially when people are yet to cope with the introduced new norms and values.

The findings of this study are in line with the views expressed by Abanyam (2012), Okolo (2002), Ering (2001), Ottong (2004) and Charles et al (2011) that social change is inevitable in every society and its occurrence result to social problem in society. This idea also corroborate with that of evolutionalists sociologists like Herbert Spencer, Emile Durkheim and August Comte who in their different studies found that society like organism progress form simple to complex stage.

The impression here is that social change is always necessary for organization and survival of the society. Every society undergoes some changes in one or the other. The Greek philosopher, Heraclatus was reputed (known for his popular dictum) as saying that "you cannot step twice in the same river". Society members should not resist change since change is necessary for social order. A society that fails to recognize the inevitability of changes is doomed to failure. However, social change because of it immediate challenges imposed the need for assisting society members to cope. This calls for the attention of social workers and sociologists because of their vast knowledge and ability to forecast and assist society members to cope with the phenomenon of social change.

Conclusion and Recommendations

It is established that social change is a common phenomenon which every member of the society experienced. However, when social change takes place society members find it difficult to cope since such changes are accompanied with many hazardous short-term negative consequences to contend with. This study has exposed the role of social workers and sociologists in caring and assisting society members to cope with the phenomenon of social change. As discipline and profession concerned with the study of human society and how social problems of the society can be solved, sociologists and social workers assist society members to cope or overcome such problems. There is therefore, the need for government to empower and strengthen social workers and sociologists to enable them to prevent the short-term negative effect of social change since prevention is better than cure.

On the basis on the findings, recommendations are made that:

1. Social workers and sociologists should periodically educate and enlighten society member on the inevitability of social change with it short-term attendant consequences. This will go along to prepare the minds of society members with coping the abilities.
2. Relatedly, both government and private owned media should periodically create programmes that relate to social change and feature social workers and sociologists to conscientize society members.
3. Government and donor agencies should create an institute of social work and sociology to enable then to undertake research in order uncover the dimension to which social change short-term effects affect the society and how society members can be cared for and assist to cope with social problems.

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