

Decolonizing Social Work: Strategies Toward Inclusive and Context-Sensitive Practice

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Abstract

This article examines the importance of decolonization in social work, highlighting the need to move beyond the influence of colonial thought on the field's practices. It emphasizes the value of adopting a situated approach to social work, one that responds to the specific needs of Latin American contexts marked by marginalization and discrimination. The article further argues that working closely with local communities can help build alternatives for self-determined development, while emphasizing the need for the discipline to advance its knowledge production and maintain its ethical and political commitments. This approach seeks to advance social transformation that is counter-hegemonic, inclusive, reflexive, and adaptive.

Keywords: epistemology, decolonization, cultural inequality, social inequality, social work.

Resumen

Este artículo examina la importancia de la descolonización en el ámbito del trabajo social y destaca la necesidad de superar las influencias del pensamiento colonial que han moldeado sus prácticas. Asimismo, subraya la urgencia de adoptar un enfoque de trabajo social situado que responda a las necesidades específicas de los contextos latinoamericanos marcados por la marginalidad y la discriminación. Además, propone la inmersión en las comunidades de base como medio para construir alternativas de autodesarrollo y enfatiza que el trabajo social debe transformar sus formas de construir conocimiento, manteniendo un compromiso ético y político. Este enfoque busca contribuir a una transformación social antihegemonica, incluyente, reflexiva y adaptable.

Palabras clave: epistemología, descolonización, desigualdad cultural, desigualdad social, trabajo social.

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Introduction

Using decoloniality as a key analytical lens entails a profound critique of the colonial elements embedded in Latin American societies and in the development of the social and human sciences, including social work. BlackDeer and Beeler (2025) argue that decolonization in social work must confront the impacts of colonization on practice, education, and the communities it engages. In turn, the University at Buffalo School of Social Work (UBSSW, 2022) maintains that this process goes beyond superficial change; it involves identifying harmful beliefs, recovering ancestral practices, and learning from successful decolonization efforts.

Such efforts require a critical examination of Western epistemologies and the deliberate integration of Indigenous knowledge systems to achieve genuine cognitive justice and social transformation (Guzmán Cáceres et al., 2020; Henriksen et al., 2019; Muñoz-Arce, 2022). Zapata Silva (2018) describes decolonization as an epistemological engagement by marginalized groups that runs parallel to political action with transformative potential. This perspective highlights the need to dismantle established power structures and knowledge hierarchies that perpetuate colonial influences within the discipline (da Luz Scherf, 2023).

Within social work, decolonial theory aims to disrupt epistemic colonization by exploring alternative frameworks that align with the lived experiences of diverse communities (Tusasiirwe, 2024). This process involves not only altering theoretical frameworks but also addressing the underlying colonial philosophies that shape Western conceptualizations of practice, thereby decentering whiteness from professional hegemony (Crudup et al., 2021).

Sustained reflection on knowledge and practice in social work, together with the profession's close engagement with social practices and related debates, strengthens the field through a

reflection-action-reflection cycle. This approach prioritizes subaltern, contextualized, and collectively constructed knowledge, foregrounding insights that have been marginalized by positivism, modernity, and capitalist and academic systems. Some of this knowledge addresses long-standing contested issues and questions that emerge from communities' own reflections.

From a decolonial perspective, Martínez and Agüero (2018) argue that knowledge is constructed collectively through close community interactions. This view reflects an epistemic standpoint grounded in assumptions fundamentally different from those of colonial thought: knowledge is produced within a web of historical subjects whose interactions shape situations and intersubjective relationships that constitute a "we" far removed from modernity's "I." This collective production of knowledge contrasts sharply with the individual-centered epistemologies historically privileged in Western academic traditions, and instead supports a more inclusive and relational understanding of truth and reality (Del-Villar, 2021; Van Katwyk & Guzik, 2022).

This emphasis on relationality and community-informed practice is central to destabilizing structures of inequity, contrasting sharply with the individualistic assumptions embedded in Western paradigms (Selvamani & Mangaleswaran, 2026). Indeed, decolonizing methodologies frequently emphasize grassroots perspectives, drawing on community memories and accumulated knowledge as valid sources of insight, rather than relying solely on academic expertise (Crudup et al., 2021).

Accordingly, social workers recognize the importance of strengthening collective ties rather than reproducing the individualism promoted by modernity. From this standpoint, such an approach values the diversity of social groups that are often overlooked by policies centered on individualistic, consumerist, and capitalist solutions. Such policies disregard community needs, local ties, and traditions.

Building on this point, a decolonial perspective requires attention to local contexts, social memories, community knowledge, beliefs, and established social and cultural representations. These elements give meaning to professional practice and guide it toward social justice through knowledge sharing and a compassionate perspective, which Ramos (2020) describes as a way of feeling through the heart and emotions while connecting them to thought.

Consequently, this perspective offers a different approach to action research, one that departs from linear, conventional approaches to social research and intervention. This framework fosters an “ecology of knowledges,” resisting universalizing theories and promoting pluriversality within a relational ontology (Ciofalo & Watkins, 2023).

Building on these considerations, this framework aligns with forms of social mobilization that promote critical thinking about social issues in local, regional, national, and international contexts. It allows for the transformation of Western-colonial ways of thinking and requires social work to reexamine its practices.

Many of these theoretical frameworks have historically been centered in Europe and North America and shaped by ideas such as positivism, functionalist sociology, and welfare-based approaches. As Gómez Hernández (2020) observes, it is important to understand that the discipline’s foundations have been shaped by scholarship grounded in Christian, liberal, Marxist, functionalist, positivist, and materialist traditions, as well as by various social theories.

The integration of these bodies of knowledge has enabled social work to engage with society through critical reflection, in-depth analysis, and interdisciplinary exchange, allowing the discipline to develop its own scientific and practice-based theories.

Methods

This study was designed as a critical literature review focused on the guiding question: What does decolonization mean for social work? Critical appraisal was adopted as the central methodological strategy because it supports rigor in evidence-based practice and enables a systematic assessment of the trustworthiness, value, and relevance of research evidence in social science fields (Asenjo-Lobos & Manterola, 2014; Burls, 2009). This approach is consistent with definitions of critical appraisal as a structured process for evaluating research to support informed professional decisions, as advanced in evidence-based practice frameworks.

First, a search was conducted in scholarly databases and search engines, including Scopus, Google Scholar, Dialnet, and Redalyc, using keyword combinations in English and Spanish. Boolean search strings included the following: (decolon OR decolonis* OR decolonización OR descoloniz*) AND (“social work*” OR “trabajo social” OR “servicio social”) AND (2000-2025)* and decolonization NEAR/3 (social work OR trabajo social) AND PY>=2010. Priority was given to sources that explicitly linked decolonial perspectives to social work, with particular attention to recent debates on field education, contested decolonial projects, and transformative practice.

Second, the selected sources underwent a critical appraisal process aligned with evidence-based practice guidance, which recommends carefully and systematically examining research to assess its trustworthiness, methodological quality, and contextual relevance. Each source was evaluated with attention to the clarity and relevance of the research question, the coherence between the epistemological stance and methodological design, the quality and transparency of data collection and analysis procedures, and the validity of the conclusions in relation to the evidence presented (Asenjo-Lobos & Manterola, 2014). The authors’ expertise and track record

in decolonial and critical social work research were also examined as indicators that contribute methodological rigor and credibility to the analysis of the literature.

Third, the information was synthesized through an interpretive and thematic process. The synthesis sought to identify convergences, tensions, and gaps in the literature by grouping the findings into thematic categories that brought together contributions from global debates and Latin American perspectives on decolonization in social work.

This process included examining patterns, trends, and discrepancies across sources, as well as the relationships among different conceptualizations of decolonization, experiences in field education, and proposals for transforming curricula and practice (Clarke & Yellow Bird, 2020; Jensen & Arnfjord, 2024; Schmid & Morgenshtern, 2019).

The resulting thematic structure provided the basis for developing a coherent and well-supported response to the research question. It also helped ground the conclusions in the available evidence and identify promising avenues for future research and decolonial social work practice.

Results

First, it is important to note that Mosquera Hurtado (2022) argues that decolonization in social work must be understood in relation to its historical roots. The profession has been shaped by colonial power relations that normalize exclusion and epistemic hierarchies; from this perspective, decolonization is understood as a critical process of questioning dominant narratives and professional practices that have traditionally marginalized ethnic, cultural, and social diversity within intervention frameworks.

This perspective makes it possible to reflect on how social work has been perceived as a

neutral profession without recognizing how it may reproduce systems of domination. This historical analysis shows how certain practices have become linked to colonial logics through standardized interventions and epistemic exclusion, in contrast to the emancipatory practices that social work needs to advance.

In turn, Martínez and Agüero (2018) state that the decolonization of social work calls into question positivism and its claims to neutrality, objectivity, ahistoricity, and universality. From this perspective, social work is understood through subalternity and dissent, which anchor the profession in an explicit ethical and political commitment.

In this sense, social work interrogates the Western epistemic framework and begins to transform this vision of reality from the Global South. This perspective on social work focuses on emancipatory social processes aimed at endogenous development. In Fals Borda's (2001) words, this is the *Kaziyadu*, meaning "the dawn," or the autonomous awakening of a people.

Accordingly, Martínez and Agüero (2018) critique dominant narratives that frame development as a linear and externally driven process. Their analysis challenges positivist epistemology and highlights the importance of considering local communities as protagonists rather than recipients of intervention.

The decolonization of social work also requires incorporating ethical perspectives that critique universalist and technocratic ethical models. Gómez Hernández et al. (2020) emphasize that conventional ethical frameworks often function as instruments of normalization, masking asymmetrical power relations under notions of neutrality and professional objectivity.

Similarly, Aristizábal and Castaño (2020) highlight that social work ethics must move beyond abstract humanism to embrace plural understandings of the human that emerge from the lived experiences of diverse communities. This implies recognizing ethics as a situated,

relational, and dialogical praxis rooted in social realities rather than imposed normative systems.

In addition, Mosquera Hurtado (2022) argues that decolonial social work must actively resist epistemic monocultures by valuing community-based, ancestral, and experiential knowledge. This view is reinforced by Vásquez Arenas and Muñoz Franco (2020), who state that a decolonial ethical framework requires social work to engage critically with racism, gender hierarchies, and socioeconomic inequalities embedded in institutional and professional practices. This approach views social work not as a mechanism of social regulation, but rather as a counter-hegemonic practice that challenges the notion of what constitutes legitimate knowledge within the discipline.

Building on the preceding considerations, decoloniality takes tangible form through action-oriented methodologies and participatory theories, such as popular education, liberation theology, and participatory action research, among others. This approach aims to support struggles against various social issues affecting diverse groups in areas such as education, health, housing, the recognition of gender and sexual diversity, and the protection of communities' social, cultural, political, and economic rights.

In fact, these methodologies put decolonial theory into practice and recognize the importance of viewing communities not only as sources of information but also as active participants in collective reflection aimed at producing knowledge and promoting social justice. In this context, social perception is described through the building of social bonds and the ways communities develop and interact from a sociohistorical perspective, which contrasts with colonial principles marked by inequality and the lack of equal opportunity among actors.

According to Quijano (1995), inequality is not only a biological classification but also a subjective and intersubjective one that has developed in Latin America through the imitation of

development models from countries in the Global North. Such imitative processes often neglect the unique sociocultural contexts and historical trajectories of these regions, perpetuating a cycle of dependency rather than fostering authentic, endogenous development (da Luz Scherf, 2023).

The limitations of imitative development models highlight the critical need for pluralistic frameworks that are sensitive to varied knowledge traditions and move beyond assimilationist policies in social work education and practice (Selvamani & Mangaleswaran, 2026). Decolonizing social work, therefore, involves challenging the neoliberal and neocolonial approaches that have shaped community programs, particularly in contexts such as Chile since the return to democracy in the 1990s (Muñoz-Arce & Rain, 2022).

Social work must first develop a critical view of knowledge and its impact on social relations, emphasizing participation in social processes and cultural diversity. The reproduction of Western development models in Latin America has only deepened inequality and exclusion, underscoring the importance of a decolonial reading for transforming this situation. Social workers should therefore consider both internal and external influences, with attention to multiculturalism and community experiences.

At the same time, decoloniality should not be understood as a new universal truth that supersedes all those that came before it; rather, it is another option (Martínez & Agüero, 2018), one that recognizes previous conceptual contributions and opens new paths for interpreting social reality. Along this path, practitioners, students, and educators can develop new readings of context through the analysis of social phenomena related to the development of various social actors and the understanding of power structures and relationships within the capitalist system.

Based on Patiño Sánchez's (2014) understanding of how law, authority, participation, and democracy are conceived and practiced,

social workers can intervene in various situations that arise in contemporary life while analyzing subjective and intersubjective aspects.

In social work, the process of decolonization represents a return to the moral and political principles that have guided the field's evolution while also considering its contextual and territorial dimensions.

This vision aligns more closely with Latin American development. It is therefore necessary to work toward the transformations needed to build relationships based on equity, respect for diversity, and non-discrimination (Molina, 2004). Reexamining the profession's development therefore reinforces its historical, social, and political commitments.

Universities play an important role in the modern world because, despite their many difficulties, one of their functions is to recognize epistemic diversity and the plurality of knowledge traditions as conditions for imagining more plural futures, as De Sousa Santos (2021) argues. In light of these developments and conflicts, Learning and Knowledge Technologies (LKTs) are being used to respond to these challenges.

However, because responses to modern forms of domination may themselves reproduce capitalist patterns, it remains necessary to critically examine the tendencies and tensions involved in the adoption of both Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and Learning and Knowledge Technologies (LKTs).

For this reason, academia must embrace the decolonization of knowledge as a historical process that, in Maldonado-Torres's (2016) terms, is grounded in the logic, metaphysics, ontology, and matrix of power needed to initiate processes capable of breaking the "theoretical and methodological patterns inherited from the colonial project" (De Sousa Santos, 2021, p. 239).

Accordingly, higher education must recognize the social and historical character of the profession, taking into account the need to understand its multidisciplinary theoretical foundations and

the new readings that are continuously constructed through professional work in light of the diverse and complex social realities that shape professional life.

In this sense, ignoring the need for qualitative and quantitative changes to teaching staff and curricula results in the transmission of standardized knowledge to students that is far removed from their realities and the problems they face (Meneses, 2016).

Therefore, thinking about the decolonization of social work requires reflecting on professional training and teaching in higher education. It means working collaboratively in and with the community, as well as with key social groups, on the basis of access to the university for both students in training and faculty throughout their academic careers.

Likewise, it involves strengthening processes of formative research and contextual interaction, overcoming the subject-object dichotomy, creating disciplinary nodes of knowledge, and establishing interdisciplinary work circles at the territorial level. Within these territorial and interdisciplinary spaces, teaching and learning methods are articulated with contextual agency, institutional structures, and university governance in response to the needs of society as a whole.

Deepening the decolonization of knowledge within social work thus means recognizing the sociohistorical process it has undergone within the university, where students and teachers, through their experiences, formalize and support various social processes.

These processes seek to prevent the reproduction of extractive knowledge and instead promote the collective appropriation of knowledge and experiences through participatory practices at local, regional, national, and international levels. These include action research, popular education, liberation theology, the systematization of experiences, and alternative media, among others.

In addition, the decolonization of knowledge places at the center of reflection the

epistemological, theoretical, analytical, and methodological relationships that emerge from subaltern contexts. In De Sousa Santos's (2021) terms, it refers to decolonized contexts, cognitive processes that arise from endogenous or organic needs, and the epistemic dimension understood through political violence, invasion, looting, and destruction.

This means recognizing distinctions among forms of knowledge in terms of their elimination, refoundation, reconfiguration, and reconstruction, so that they may serve anticapitalist, anticolonial, and antipatriarchal struggles within Western traditions and in the construction and intervention of knowledge among South-North populations.

Based on the above, the principle of Good Living helps recognize the existence of these internal forms of conditioning without erasing difference, while allowing alterity and interculturality to inform and constitute the self (Gómez Hernández & Patiño Sánchez, 2018).

This view of alterity is framed within Cortina's (2013) philosophical proposal of an ethics of care, which implies caring for oneself and for others. It encourages relationships with others and promotes a culture of care for both human beings and the planet, seeking to "forge a good character, which increases the probability of being happy and fair, by helping to estimate the best values and opt for them" (p. 13).

The social and human sciences, including social work, must consider the positive and negative dimensions viewed from the Epistemologies of the South, which seek to unveil the Eurocentric roots of the social sciences and are based on the construction of practical scientific knowledge committed to social struggles and resistance at environmental, ecological, political, cultural, and educational levels in traditionally excluded contexts.

Table 1 presents some key contributions from contemporary authors who address decolonization in social work from diverse epistemological, ethical, and political perspectives.

Table 1. *Different Perspectives on Epistemological and Decolonial Practices in Social Work*

Authors	Epistemological perspectives	Decolonization practices
BlackDeer and Beeler (2025)	Critical	Critique of colonial legacies in social work education, practice, and community engagement, as well as the impacts of colonization on professional structures and interventions.
UBSSW (2022)	Indigenous and restorative	Identification of harmful colonial beliefs. Recovery of ancestral practices and learning from concrete examples of decolonization.
Muñoz-Arce (2022)	Epistemologies of the South and cognitive justice	Examination of Western epistemologies and deliberate integration of Indigenous knowledge systems to achieve cognitive justice and social transformation.
Guzmán Cáceres et al. (2020)	Critical-decolonial	Emphasizes the need to dismantle colonial knowledge hierarchies through a critical reexamination of social work.
da Luz Scherf (2023)	Critical theory and decoloniality	Dismantles established power structures and epistemic hierarchies that reproduce colonial influence within the discipline.

Authors	Epistemological perspectives	Decolonization practices
Tusasiirwe (2024)	Contextual and decolonial	Proposes disrupting epistemic colonization by developing alternative frameworks aligned with the lived experiences of diverse communities.
Crudup et al. (2021)	Antiracist and decolonial	Emphasizes decentering whiteness from professional hegemony by addressing colonial philosophies embedded in Western social work practice and valuing grassroots knowledge.
Zapata Silva (2018)	Political-epistemological decolonial approach	Understands decolonization as a process that combines the epistemological engagement of historically marginalized groups with political action oriented toward social transformation.
Martínez and Agüero (2018)	Relational and collective	Supports collective and intersubjective knowledge production as an alternative to individualistic and Eurocentric academic traditions.
Del-Villar (2021)	Relational	Advocates for community-informed and relational epistemologies that challenge the individualism embedded in Western academic paradigms.
Van Katwyk and Guzik (2022)	Community-informed	Advocates for collaborative and relational knowledge creation rooted in community experiences rather than expert-driven academic models.
Selvamani and Mangaleswaran (2026)	Relational and anti-individualist decolonial stance	Highlights relationality and community-based practices as central to destabilizing institutions of inequity shaped by Western individualism.
Ramos (2020)	Ethics of care	Proposes a compassionate and affective way of knowing that integrates emotions and reflection, guiding social work practice toward social justice.
Gómez Hernández (2020)	Critical, ethical, and decolonial	Critiques universalist and technocratic ethical models, arguing that conventional ethical frameworks function as instruments of normalization that conceal asymmetrical power relations under notions of neutrality and professional objectivity.
Aristizábal and Castaño (2020)	Intercultural, relational, and decolonial ethics	Argues that social work ethics must move beyond abstract humanism to embrace plural conceptions of the human emerging from lived community experiences, recognizing ethics as a situated, relational, and dialogical praxis rather than an imposed normative system.

Note. This table was developed by the authors based on their analysis of the reviewed literature.

Discussion and Conclusions

The decolonization of social work is both crucial and urgent, requiring an examination of colonial legacies in our societies and in the social sciences. This process demands challenging harmful notions rooted in colonization that have become embedded in the profession.

It emphasizes the critical reexamination of social work education, arguing for methodologies such as project-based, cooperative, critical, play-based, personalized, and autonomous learning. These strategies seek to encourage deep and contextual reflection in disciplinary training, promoting a praxis that questions power structures in collaboration with local actors.

From a decolonial perspective, the discipline must value community histories and experiences while maintaining an ethical and political stance that critically engages with Western epistemic norms. Ultimately, this approach seeks to transform knowledge production by prioritizing local perspectives and South-to-North knowledge flows.

The decolonial approach also calls for rethinking the role of the university in the era of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, highlighting the importance of a curriculum that engages in dialogue with diverse forms of knowledge and connects with social contexts, thereby moving beyond a Eurocentric vision and engaging with social struggles. In this way, social work can be humanized and made more relevant and meaningful to the communities it serves.

This implies fostering autonomous thinking, in which critical anticolonial thought converges with antipatriarchal thought as part of a formative and reflective process in response to neoliberal capitalism, while working toward the empowerment of collective subjects now understood as social movements.

Therefore, the ethical and political vision of social work aligns with Walsh's (2013) view of

education not only as a formative process but also as a means of promoting change and addressing social problems through decolonization that values the diversity of social actors. García-González (2021) highlights the role of educators in changing paradigms to decolonize knowledge, thereby enriching pedagogical practice and strengthening social workers' critical engagement with these problems and possible solutions.

Freire (1970) emphasizes that teachers must embrace questioning as a fundamental democratic practice, transforming teaching and learning into simultaneous and active processes that move beyond the mere transmission of knowledge. Solano-Alpízar (2015) extends this view, arguing that decolonizing education involves creating strategies that promote a more humane and critical perspective of the world, inviting readers to understand territory as an opportunity to define human existence and overcome the limitations imposed by Western paradigms.

Finally, the decolonization of social work is essential for examining and challenging colonial legacies in our societies and disciplines. This process involves questioning harmful notions ingrained in the profession as a result of colonization and advocating for social work education that incorporates methodologies such as project-based, cooperative, critical, play-based, personalized, and autonomous learning.

Based on the comparative analysis of the sources examined, it becomes evident that decolonization in social work does not follow a linear path but instead encompasses a series of epistemological, ethical, and political approaches that converge around the need to move beyond the colonial legacies embedded in the discipline. Across critical, Indigenous, relational, and decolonial perspectives, there is a shared commitment to questioning Western epistemic dominance, universalist assumptions, and technocratic models that have historically shaped social work education and practice.

Authors such as BlackDeer and Beeler (2025), Guzmán Cáceres et al. (2020), and da Luz Scherf (2023) emphasize the urgency of critically revising professional structures and knowledge hierarchies. Others, including the UBSSW (2022), Muñoz-Arce (2022), and Crudup et al. (2021), foreground the recovery of ancestral knowledge, cognitive justice, and the decentering of whiteness as essential components of genuine decolonization.

Theoretical perspectives grounded in relational epistemologies and the ethics of care (Aristizábal & Castaño, 2020; Del-Villar, 2021; Martínez & Agüero, 2018; Ramos, 2020) underscore the importance of collective knowledge production with communities for transformative social work praxis. These approaches position communities as co-creators of knowledge and agents of social change.

Taken together, the findings suggest that decolonizing social work requires not only epistemological critique but also sustained ethical engagement and political action oriented toward social justice, plural ways of knowing, and the

reconfiguration of power relations within the discipline.

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