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USING AFRICAN UBUNTU THEORY IN SOCIAL WORK WITH CHILDREN IN ZIMBABWE

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ABSTRACT

Using indigenous knowledge systems such as Ubuntu in social work with children empowers them, their families, communities and workers. Yet, the potential of using frames that draw on indigenous ways of knowing, in children's work, remain unrealised since social workers prefer Western models and theories. Ubuntu inspired models of social work view children from family, community, environmental and spiritual perspectives. In contrast, Western models are inspired by individualistic values, governmental policies and professional viewpoints. However, as will be shown in this article, foreign models have failed to live up to expectations because they tend to disempower and diminish the strengths of everyone involved in case situations. For example, the social worker has to administer a model that they are not fully familiar with or which contradicts their own values. The family is forced to adopt values that they do not know let alone believe in. The community becomes powerless in the process. This article discusses the use of Ubuntu theory in social work with children in Africa. The discussion includes five frameworks of Ubuntu: the orature, scholarly, liberation, practice and integrated. The Ubuntu inspired Zera model of child growth and development was used to aid the discussion. We conclude that, given social work's emphasis on using strengths perspectives, i.e., those broader frames that deliberately look for and build on the strengths of clients and client systems, social work practice with children in Africa should engage with Ubuntu, as a matter of principle..

KEY TERMS: *Ubuntu; Africa; Zimbabwe; indigenous; children; social work*

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INTRODUCTION

Ubuntu philosophy, commonly represented by communal relationality, communal ideals and human excellence forms part of the knowledge and wisdom of how African communities and families raise children. Ubuntu represents the worldviews of indigenous black populations of Sub-Saharan Africa, transmitted from generation to generation through observation, experience, language and art. The widely acknowledged maxims *I am because we are* and *A person is a person through other persons* indicate that relationality is a crucial ingredient for human excellence. This suggests that, as with every member of the family, children “develop personhood through other persons,” which means that they must “prize communal and harmonious relationships with others” (Metz, 2016, p.324). One other maxim – *it takes a village to raise a child* – means that meaningful interactions among the child, family members and those outside the family circle are necessary for children to realise human excellence. Interestingly, from this optic, adults play a critical role to create the relational conditions that enable children to realise their personhood. Therefore, there is no doubt that Ubuntu informs ideal child rearing practices in African contexts. Given social work’s emphasis on using strengths perspectives, i.e., those broader frames that deliberately look for and build on the strengths of clients and client systems, one is more inclined to think that social work practice with children in Africa should, as a matter of principle, engage with Ubuntu.

Surprisingly, modern day social work with children does not seem to acknowledge fully the potential of Ubuntu to inform perspectives, theories and models that social workers use in professional practice. Social workers tend to prefer Western models and theories (Rankopo and Osei-Hwedie, 2011). Unlike Ubuntu which represents communitarian ideals, communal relationality, spirituality and excellence, Western perspectives, theories and models tend to be subjective or individualistic or both and heavily legislated by governments or standardized by professionals. Arguably, such perspectives fail to match the aspirations and ideals of the African communities, within which children grow up and realise their personhood. If anything, they tend to disempower and diminish those involved in raising children as well as the social work professionals who work as guardian ad litem (Muwanga-Zake, 2009). As Mushunje (2017, p. 108) said, ‘colonial welfare-based social work, in which the social worker is central to the process, no longer suffices for the wellbeing of vulnerable children’. The social worker has to use a model that he or she is not fully familiar with or which contradicts his or her own values. The family is forced to adopt values that they do not know let alone believe in. When Western models applied in social work encounters, the strength is diminished, making community members powerless to contribute meaningfully to children’s physical growth and social development. For example, in the African ubuntu, child adoption is done by relatives without the intervention of professionals. Further, parents and communities reward and punish children without the need for professionals, courts and juvenile jails. Uncles and aunts provide mentorship, counselling and support to children without the need for professional case workers and other professionals.

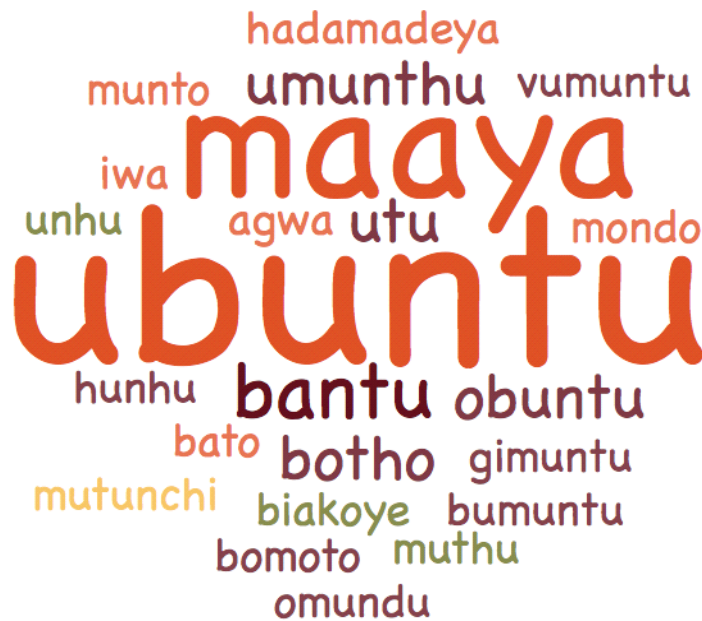
BACKGROUND TO UBUNTU

History of Ubuntu

Ubuntu is a philosophy that originates from Sub-Saharan Africa where Bantu people live. *Buntu or bantu* means a human being while Ubuntu refers to the view, process, content and quality of being a human. Human excellence describes the quality of being human. *Umhuka* is the opposite of Ubuntu and it means to act like an animal and not in ways expected of a human being.

Although the Zulu noun Ubuntu is widely used, other nouns are used in different societies. In Angola, it is known as *gimuntu*, Botswana (*muthu*), Burkina Faso (*maaya*), Burundi (*ubuntu*), Cameroon (*bato*), Congo (*bantu*), Congo Democratic Republic (*bomoto/bantu*), Cote d’Ivoire (*maaya*), Equatorial Guinea (*maaya*), Guinea (*maaya*), Gambia (*maaya*), Ghana (*biako ye*), Kenya (*utu/munto/mondo*), Liberia (*maaya*), Malawi (*umunthu*), Mali (*maaya/hadama de ya*), Mozambique (*vumuntu*), Namibia (*omundu*), Nigeria (*mutunchi/iwa/agwa*), Rwanda (*bantu*), Sierra Leone (*maaya*), South Africa (*ubuntu/botho*), Tanzania (*utu/obuntu/bumuntu*), Uganda (*obuntu*), Zambia (*umunthu/ubuntu*) and Zimbabwe (*hunhu/unhu/botho/ubuntu*). It is also found in other Bantu countries not mentioned here. The word cloud shown in Fig. 1 illustrates the different names for Ubuntu. Ubuntu and *Maaya* are the most popular nouns.

Fig 1: Names for Ubuntu in different countries



In this discussion, more nouns and examples will be drawn from the Shona people predominant in Zimbabwe but also in Mozambique, Zambia and Botswana. Related nouns exist in most of Sub-Saharan communities.

Ubuntu theory

Ubuntu can be viewed from four different frameworks: 1) the orature, 2) scholarly, 3), liberation and 4) practice. These four are discussed first, before an integrated framework is suggested.

The orature framework says that Ubuntu is largely not written but is ‘tacit, sacred and embedded in practices, relationships and rituals’ (Muwanga-Zake, 2009, p. 414). In agreement, Gikandi (2003) argued that orature is passed through the spoken word and thrives in communities when it is practiced or lived. Ubuntu exists in African orature (oral literature) since time immemorial. Most of it is not written, hence the use of the term orature which was coined by Ugandan theorist Pio Zirimu (Gikandi, 2003). In Zimbabwe, Ubuntu is carried in folklore (*ngano*), songs (*nziyo*), stories (*nyaya*), poems (*detembo*), teasing (*zvituko*), epics, jokes or humour (comic/funnies) (*nyambo*), irony (*dimikira*) and proverbs (*tsumo*) and (*zvirahwe*). It is a rich oral tradition and a lived experience which form part of the African culture.

The scholarly framework emanates from the work of different Ubuntu writers and scholars that can be divided into early writers like Mbiti and Samkange and present-day writers. Mbiti and Samkange are regarded as the fathers of written Ubuntu, but not necessarily the fathers of Ubuntu because Ubuntu existed before them, only that it was not in written format. Mbiti’s view, often termed the African view of man says: “What happens to the individual happens to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual. The individual can only say: ‘I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am’, (Mbiti, 1969, p. 106). In support of this view, Samkange and Samkange (1980) defined Hunhuism or Ubuntuism as African humanism classified into three maxims: valuing human wellbeing, respectful relationships and people-centred leadership. For Maphalala (2017), Ubuntu has three pillars: interpersonal values (regard for others), intrapersonal values (regard for self) and environmental values (regard for environment). In their analysis of Ubuntu, Mugumbate and Nyanguru (2013) noted that the philosophy could improve social work education, practice and research concurring with Ramose (1999) and Chilisa (2012)’s frameworks that view Ubuntu as ontological (has philosophical assumptions about the nature of reality), epistemological (a way of knowing) and axiological (it forms ethics and values). Others such as Tutu (2000) have argued that ubuntu is spiritual and theological.

The liberation framework of Ubuntu was advanced during the fight against, and transition from colonial rule. The philosophy of Ubuntu was adopted and popularised as a social and political ideology by Africans (Dolamo, 2014). Fighters, supporters and promoters of the liberation wars would always tell communities that they were fighting so that Africans ‘could become humans again’. To decolonize was to bring lost Ubuntu back. Statesmen and liberators such as Kwameh Nkrumah of Ghana, Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia, Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe and Nelson Mandela of South Africa were among those who used Ubuntu. Carrying on with liberation work, Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu popularised the philosophy of Ubuntu through efforts to reconcile black and white South Africans after centuries of colonialism, dispossession and apartheid (Battle, 1997; Tutu, 2000). The liberation framework emphasise ownership of *nhaka* (inheritance) such as ancestral land; possession (as opposed to dispossession or colonialism); liberty; self-determination, respect,

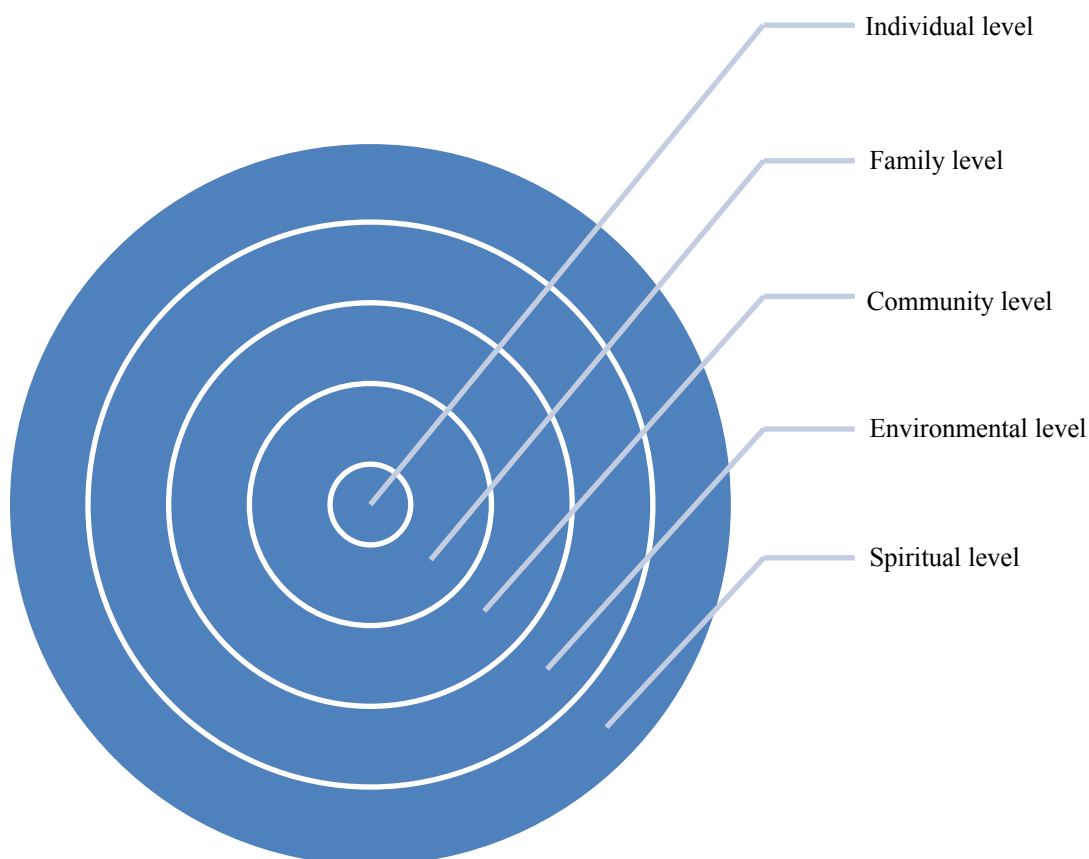
recognition, justice, cohesion, forgiveness and communalism among other virtues. This framework did not end with the coming of political independence, because from an Ubuntu perspective, it is argued that you cannot be a person if you are dispossessed of your inheritance, land, rights or property. Present day leaders and politicians are carrying the same argument.

Ubuntu exists in professional practice. For example, the Code of Ethics of Social Workers in Zimbabwe produced by the CSW describes Ubuntu as humaneness. The Code says “ubuntu/*unhu*/humaneness includes the stipulations of the philosophy that: ‘...places emphasis on values of human solidarity, empathy, human dignity and the humaneness in every person, and that holds that a person is a person through others’ (CSW, 2012, p. 1). It further states that the mission of social work includes promoting social justice, *unhu/ubuntu*, human rights, positive change, problem solving and improvements in individual and community relationships and the development of society in general (CSW, 2012, p. 2). Besides adoption of Ubuntu in Zimbabwe, South Africa’s White Paper for Social Welfare states that social development (as opposed to social welfare or social services used in other countries in Africa) is guided by key principles such as democracy, partnership, Ubuntu, equity, and inter-sectoral collaboration, among others (Government of South Africa, 1996). The Paper describes Ubuntu as the principle of caring for each other’s well-being and fostering the spirit of mutual support. The adoption of Ubuntu in practice settings (as well as pedagogically) has not reached critical levels, perhaps it is still at take-off, but is definitely growing.

An integrated framework of Ubuntu

Looking at all the views on Ubuntu presented under the four different frameworks discussed, it could be summarised that Ubuntu exist at five levels: the individual, the family, the community, the environment and the spirit. Figure 1 illustrates these levels.

Figure 2: An integrated framework of Ubuntu



As shown in Figure 2, the individual is part of a larger system. The individual is about the body, the mind, knowledge, inheritance, possessions and inventions. These belong to the individual but they are only meaningful insofar as they contribute to the betterment of self together with family and community. Two ubuntu concepts can help with further clarity. The *ukama* concept, theorises that an individual belongs to a family while in *ujamaa* theory, individuals and their families belong to a community, and they should respect communal relationships.

The relationships that exist in the community are social, economic or political. The community values the environment and spiritual wellbeing of its people. In other words, the individual is part of a larger group, the family; the family is part of a larger community; the community exists in an environment that, in turn, is part of a larger spiritual world. While the individual and family levels are all important, Rankopo and Osei-Hwedie (2011, p. 138) have argued that “Thus, in search of relevance in social work, the starting point must be the community, the bedrock of culture”. We agree with this assessment.

The integrated framework can be used for assessing needs of children; evaluating programmes; critical analysis of interventions; promoting collaboration and participation; and developing ethics and research methods. In this discussion, we will use the integrated framework of Ubuntu to explore the different roles individuals, families, communities, environments and spirits play in child growth and development.

USING THE INTEGRATED FRAMEWORK OF UBUNTU

Ubuntu theory is about how Africans view themselves, interact with others, their environment, and their spiritual beings and how outsiders ought to interact with them. As shown in Table 1, each of the five levels contributes to child growth and development.

Table 1: An integrated framework of Ubuntu in social work with children

Level	Responsibilities	Contributions available at all levels
Individual (<i>munhu</i>)	The child is responsible for <i>learning</i> and personal <i>hygiene</i>	The individual family, community, environment and spirit are all responsible for: <i>Safety</i> <i>Identity</i> <i>Morality</i> <i>Communality</i> <i>Humanity</i>
Family (<i>ukama</i>)	The family is responsible for <i>conception</i> , <i>basic needs</i> and <i>socialisation</i>	
Communal (<i>ujamaa</i>)	The community is responsible for <i>socialisation</i> and <i>basic needs</i>	
Environmental (<i>nyika</i>)	The environment is responsible for basic needs	
Spiritual (<i>mweya</i>)	The spirit is responsible for <i>companionship</i> , <i>comfort</i> and <i>advice</i>	

Individual level

In Ubuntu, children are thought to pass through different stages of physical growth and social development. Table 2 shows stages of child development in Zimbabwe. We have named this the *zera* (stages) model.

Table 2: The Zera Model of children growth and development in Zimbabwean culture

Zera	Description	What happens at this stage?
<i>Zvichauya</i>	Future baby	<i>Marriage</i> – parents marry and have sex
<i>Mhuru</i>	Foetus	<i>Conception</i> – pregnancy
<i>Rusvava</i>	Baby – from birth to few months old	<i>Birth</i> – baby is born
<i>Mucheche</i>	Baby – upto two years	<i>Training and Learning1</i> – social and biological skills
<i>Ndumure</i>	Post breastfeeding	<i>Independence</i> – child is given room to explore, more self-directed learning
<i>Gondora</i>	Exploring with independence	<i>Training and Learning2</i> – social and occupational skills
<i>Pwere</i>	Exploring with adulthood	<i>Transition to adulthood</i> – adult roles are acquired and mentorship is provided
<i>Mhandara/Jaya</i>	Young adult	<i>Maturity</i> – accepted as an adult and mentorship is continued

In doing social work with children, it is important to acknowledge these stages and how they are conceptualised within African contexts. At *zvichauya* stage, the motivation of any adult person is to get married and have children. An adult in Ubuntu already carries a *zvichauya*, a future baby. Hence, a marriage that gives children is highly valued, and marriages that do not produce children are highly stigmatised or prohibited. In *rusvava* and *mucheche* stages, the concern is to ensure a safer birth, survival of the baby and learning of skills such as eating, walking, talking, listening and safety. At the *ndumure* stage, breastfeeding is stopped, and independence is promoted as the

child becomes a *gondora*. From this stage, more occupational training and learning is expected. Skills gained include cooking, cleaning, farming and caring. The *pwere* stage is the midway between being a 'baby' and a mature child. At this stage, mentorship provided by relatives who have this role such as aunts and uncles, is provided. The final stage that takes children to about 16-20 years is the *mhandara* (for girls) and *jaya* (for boys). At this stage, children begin to transition into adulthood resulting in some of them being accepted as adults, but others still considered to be children.

The implications of these stages for understanding the individual child matter for social work with children. For example, these stages emphasise local understandings of a child's developmental needs and parental responsibility. During the stage of *ndumure*, parents and community members may encourage independence in activities of daily living including toilet training, feeding and communication. At the stage of *mhandara* and *jaya*, the expectation is that the child has developed talents and mastered specific life skills that potentially contribute to further economic independence. Social workers must recognise that each person exists within a cultural setting and a community and that the individual and community shape, influence and benefit from each other (CSW, 2012, p.3). There are obvious methods of casework with children that clash with Ubuntu values. These include fostering and adoption, institutionalisation and probation work. At each stage, the child, family, community, environment and spiritual world have responsibilities of providing protection, identity and connectedness as discussed earlier.

Family level

The family plays a huge role at every stage of the child. The *ukama* view of Ubuntu states that a child belongs to the family, and they are bound together through blood, rules and identity. Family does not only refer to one's spouse and offspring, but all relatives. The concept of extended family has been very useful in offering opportunities for care of orphans and vulnerable children in Africa. In Ubuntu, much value is placed on parents' involvement in children's development. For example, a lot of education, socialisation and mentoring takes place within the home and community to protect Ubuntu values. Parents are often worried about the values their children will obtain from the Western modelled education system (Maphalala, 2017). Often, schools ignore Ubuntu, creating conflict. Another example is the failure of institutional approaches as well as legislated child adoption in Africa. These failures show the discrepancies between foreign inspired models and cultural expectations (Mtetwa and Muchacha, 2017).

Community level

The community is made up of individuals, families, leaders and knowledge holders. In Ubuntu, children belong to the community. Social workers using community-focused approaches when working with children need to take into account community expectations when designing and delivering programs. The community has a role to play to protect children, for socialisation and creating an identity (Mtetwa and Muchacha, 2017). This is strengthened by the Ubuntu belief that *children become human beings through others*.

Environmental level

Environment issues have gained traction in social work since they contribute to achieving sustainable communities (Dominelli, 2014). Ubuntu values the physical environment (Seehawer, 2018). The environment is the provider of food, shelter, beauty and warmth. The individual is part of a natural system comprised of the land, animals, vegetation and other elements from which basic needs are met. Africans use Ubuntu to conserve the environment so as to achieve a balance between current and future needs. For example, *mutupo* (a special animal valued by families) concept is a way to protect animals while *zviyera* (spiritually important places) concept is a strategy to conserve mountains, valleys, forests, rivers, oceans, dams and certain plant and animal species that are considered special. Another Ubuntu concept, *nhaka*, teaches that the environment is an inheritance that came from ancestors, and it should therefore be passed on to the next generation.

Spirituality social work

Ubuntu values spirituality because it plays a huge role in the life of Africans including children (Seehawer, 2018). The child is part of a whole, comprised of God, Ancestors, Elders, family and community. Spiritual issues are often ignored in social work, yet they are important for achievement of holistic functioning. For example, prayer, fasting, prophecy, healers play an important part in the life of Africans. Another example, spiritually it is expected that ancestors or God provide protection but for this to happen the child must be dedicated, baptised, cleansed where necessary and learn spiritual values through prayer, song, reading, stories or dance. So social workers must expect that children will pray before meals or sleeping; attend church on Friday, Saturday or Sunday; attend major religious ceremonies even in the middle of school terms; attend indigenous camps or schools; and hold very strong religious and cultural views.

CONCLUSION

Before concluding, we would like to provide a glossary of some of the major concepts used in this write-up. Ubuntu refers to African knowledges, expectations and practices of how individuals, families and communities must interact with each other, the environment and the spirits. The *unhu* view says that individuals should always act in manners that enhance the wellbeing of their family and community. *Ukama* view of ubuntu says that the individual belongs to the family and whatever they do, they consider the family. The *ujamaa* view argues that individuals and families must always act in the best interest of their community. The *nyika* concept says the individual, their family and their community belong to the environment which they must satisfy always. This is related to *nhaka* concept, which says that *nyika* is an inheritance that must be protected. Lastly, *mweya* concept argues that above all, we have spirits that look after us, and that we should revere. The *zera* model or framework shows the stages of child growth and development in Zimbabwe. With the exception of Ubuntu (which is Zulu) and *ujamaa* (which is Swahili) all the concepts are in Shona language.

African knowledge systems are often neglected because of limited written literature, underutilisation or neglect in favour of Western approaches. In this discussion we have discussed the theory of Ubuntu and used the *Zera* Model of child growth to show the usefulness of indigenous knowledge. We conclude that Ubuntu can transform and indigenise social work with children in Africa. It can empower social workers and provide solutions that acknowledge or increases the strengths of individuals, families and communities and their environmental and spiritual values. Given social work's emphasis on using strengths perspectives, we conclude that social work practice with children in Africa should, as a matter of principle, engage with Ubuntu.

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