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## HUNHU/ UBUNTU PHILOSOPHY AS A GUIDE FOR ETHICAL DECISION MAKING IN SOCIAL WORK

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### ABSTRACT

Often social workers are confronted with situations that require ethical decision making. Due to knowledge hegemony social workers practicing among indigenous African communities may be forced to use western theories and models in solving ethical dilemmas. This paper argues that the ubuntu philosophy forms a strong grounding and scaffolding for ethical decision making among Africans. Most ubuntu ethics are compatible with social work principles, ethics and ethics theories. The ubuntu philosophy as a central philosophy in the lives of most Africans therefore becomes an important guiding tool for social work practitioners practicing in Africa.

**KEY TERMS:** Ubuntu, ubuntu philosophy, ethical dilemma, ethical decision making, social work

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This article appeared in a special issue of the African Journal of Social Work (AJSW) titled *Ubuntu Social Work*. The special issue focused on short articles that advanced the theory and practice of ubuntu in social work. In the special issue, these definitions were used:

- Ubuntu refers to a collection of values and practices that black people of Africa or of African origin view as making people authentic human beings. While the nuances of these values and practices vary across different ethnic groups, they all point to one thing – an authentic individual human being is part of a larger and more significant relational, communal, societal, environmental and spiritual world.
- Ubuntu social work refers to social work that is theoretically, pedagogically and practically grounded in ubuntu.
- The term ubuntu is expressed differently in several African communities and languages but all referring to the same thing. 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.

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## INTRODUCTION

Most theories and philosophical grounding of social work profession are western oriented and this is as if non-western societies especially Africans have nothing to contribute. These societies have rich cultures which may be tapped into for the benefit of the world at large. One of the supreme contributions of the peoples of Africa to the world is the Ubuntu philosophy. The word Ubuntu derives from Bantu languages of Africa hence it is an African philosophy. Ubuntu has no equivalent Western philosophical thought (Kgatla, 2016). The industrial revolution, urbanisation and modernisation in general have led to the erosion of some of the values and norms of Ubuntu (Dolamo, 2013). For Broodryk (2008:17), “Ubuntu is a comprehensive ancient African world-view based on the values of intense humanness, caring, sharing, respect, compassion and associated values, ensuring a happy and qualitative community life in the spirit of family”. The philosophy is shared by numerous Bantu speaking people dotted throughout sub-Saharan Africa. Though the word Ubuntu is Nguni, it has synonyms in indigenous languages of Botswana, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Malawi, Rwanda, Uganda and several other African countries. Ubuntu is summarised in the adage *Umntu ngumuntu ngabantu/ munhu munhu navanhu* which literally means a person is a person through others. While individual African regions and cultures have each developed their own conceptualization of Ubuntu, it is clearly a common thread in sub-Saharan African spirituality, moral thought, and overall way of life (Oppenheim, 2012).

According to Eze (2008), at the heart of Ubuntu is a respect for a diversity of what it means to be human. Mugumbate and Nyanguru (2013) note that in sub-Saharan Africa, the word deeply denotes generally acceptable ideas and deeds. Ubuntu revolves around fairness and justice. According to Ramose (2001:3), to regard another person as non-person because they are perceived to be lacking rationality as Aristotle postulated in his definition of human being is absurdity. Ubuntu is a moral theory that is associated with humanness or being human. Kgatla (2016) argues that the African concept of Ubuntu underlies this message of relationships. Social justice can only be realised through human relationships such as espoused by the teachings of Ubuntu”. This was corroborated by Letseka (2014: 544) who notes that “Indeed in Southern Africa justice is perceived as Ubuntu fairness”. In most African societies, Ubuntu reflects the human characteristics of generosity, consideration, caring and consideration towards others (Tutu, 2000, Mugumbate & Nyanguru, 2013). According to Mungai (2015), Ubuntu’s emphasis on humanity suggests that whatever is good for humanity is Ubuntu and whatever harms humanity is against Ubuntu. In this regard Ng’weshemi (2002:15) says, “For Africans, one is not human simply by birth. Rather one becomes human through a progressive process of integration into society”. One of the maxims of Ubuntu philosophy is, “If and when one is faced with a choice between wealth and the preservation of the life of another human being, one should opt for the preservation of life” (Samkange and Samkange, 1980).

Social work is one of the many other professions that have realised the importance of Ubuntu. The Zimbabwean social work code of ethics for example has Ubuntu as one of its values. Apart from social work, Ubuntu philosophy has been used in management (Karsen, & Illa, 2005), peace and reconciliation (Murithi, 2006), jurisprudence (Cornell & Muvangua, 2012), psychology (Mkabela, 2015) and nursing (Hastings-Tolsma & Downing, 2016). Though Ubuntu has influence in general social work practice, this paper argues that it is an important guiding philosophy in ethical decision making. Ethical solutions in social work practice with people of African descent should be guided by Ubuntu ethics.

## WHY UBUNTU IN ETHICAL DECISION MAKING?

Mugumbate and Nyanguru (2013:99) argued that “Ubuntu brings to the world what western civilisation failed to bring. It brings the human face to every aspect of life. It therefore has its place in social work”. Social workers are often confronted with complex situations that require ethical decision making. In most circumstances, the social workers use Western oriented theories and models in choosing the best course of action (Uriz et al, 2017) when faced with an ethical dilemma. This article premised on Afrocentric theory argues that the Ubuntu Philosophy is an important guiding philosophy in ethical decision making for practitioners working with Africans or people of African ancestry. The author acknowledges that the principles of Ubuntu are compatible with western ethics theories such as deontology, utilitarianism and virtue. Social work is an eminently ethical profession in which ethics are at the root of all professional endeavours undertaken (Idareta, 2013). In recognition of the centrality of ethics in professional social work practice most professional councils and bodies have developed codes of ethics to guide practitioners in their jurisdictions. The same codes of ethics are used by the general public to hold social workers accountable for their actions. The resolution of ethical dilemmas in practice is rarely black and white and Ubuntu has a place in resolving ethical dilemmas. Practitioners have to make spot on decisions as each case and each client is unique and it is hereby argued that the decisions by social workers should be in line with values of Ubuntu. There are numerous situations that prompt ethical decision making in social work. Some of the ethical dilemmas revolve around privacy and confidentiality, conflict of interests and professional boundaries among other issues.

## UBUNTU ETHICS

The overarching Ubuntu ethic is being a *munhu* with *unhu*. This means social workers ought to have the acceptable Ubuntu qualities (*munhu*). The other ethics are but not limited to the following:

1. Consider the good of the majority (community) over personal good (community good).
2. The course of action chosen should treat individuals equally (social justice/fairness).
3. Respect, love, care and compassion for others especially the vulnerable (respect).
4. Should bring no least harm to all the parties involved (no least harm).

Figure 1 below diagrammatically presents some of the ethics.

Figure 1: Some Ubuntu ethics relevant to ethical decision making in social work



As expected by Ubuntu, a person should always consider the good of the majority (community) over personal good. The fairness approach to ethical decision making provides that the course of action chosen should treat individuals equally. This is in line with the Ubuntu philosophy which is a justice theory (Letseka, 2014). Further to that the common good approach to ethical decision propounds that interactions with your community are the basis for ethical reasoning and respect and compassion for others especially the vulnerable are critical. On the same note, the Ubuntu philosophy values love, caring and compassion. An ethical action should bring least harm to all the parties involved.

The word Ubuntu is elastic and pregnant in that it is used in almost every aspect of Bantu people. In the Shona language of Zimbabwe, a person with the qualities of Ubuntu (warmth, empathy, understanding, communication, interaction, participation, reciprocation, harmony, a shared world-view and co-operation) described by Mkize (2003) is a *munhu*. Not every human being is a *munhu* but only those who abide by the Ubuntu ethic. In other words, *munhu* is that person with acceptable behaviour. This is notwithstanding the fact that the word *munhu* can also simply refer to a human being. For a social worker to be acceptable in a typical African society, s/he should therefore be a *munhu* with *unhu*. His/her conduct should demonstrate Ubuntu ethics. This element of a social worker as *munhu* is important in ethical decision making in that the social worker would choose a course of action that will show empathy, understanding, caring, respect and fairness. Ubuntu therefore becomes critical in that it guides social workers practicing among Bantu people to make decisions that are acceptable (that show *hunhu*) when faced by an ethical dilemma. The impact of such a decision on the public good (community at large) takes a centre stage over individual good. It is therefore always important for social workers to have the acceptable

Ubuntu qualities. However, it is of utmost importance to note that Ubuntu philosophy has its share of criticisms. It has been criticized for "...promoting groupthink and uncompromising majoritarianism or extreme sacrifice for society which is incompatible with the value of individual freedom that is among the most promising ideals in the liberal tradition" (Metz, 2011:533). Sceptics of Ubuntu criticize it for being vague, anti-individual and a pre-scientific tribal or clan system that is irrelevant for modern society (Viviers, 2016).

## CONCLUSION

The Ubuntu philosophy has immense contribution to the social work profession among several other professions. Its values are generally compatible with most social work principles, values and ethics. It is therefore a good guiding philosophy in social work practice with Bantu people. A good social worker should possess the qualities of *munhu/umuntu* which is the person with acceptable behaviour. The Ubuntu ethic may therefore be using in resolving ethical dilemmas in social work.

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