The nexus between social norms and the Ubuntu and social work
Professor Paul BUKULUKI

ABSTRACT

What are norms? There are different schools of thought, but there is a general agreement that a norm is a behaviour shared by members of a given group, and this helps us to distinguish between a norm and an attitude. An attitude is something conceptualised at individual level. However, when you talk of a norm, it must be shared by a group. And when a norm is widely accepted within a much larger society, say, a whole region in Zimbabwe or a whole region in Malawi, that's what you can say that it is a meta-norm because it is widely accepted by a much wider group of people. Social norms are influenced by belief systems and perceptions of what others expect and do. So, there is always this notion that what you believe others do is likely also to influence what you choose or decide to do – because you want to belong. So, you want to make sure that the way you behave, the decisions you make are aligned to your group, sometimes beyond your group, aligned group – the community or society where you live. However, social norms are also influenced by what you believe others approve or disapprove. So, you are likely to behave in a certain way or adopt a certain behaviour based on what you believe others you relate with approve or disapprove, or what you believe they consider appropriate or inappropriate. Adherence to these norms is also sustained by social sanction (rewards and punishments) from those people who matter in your life or context in which you live. These are referred to as reference groups. The strengths of social norms are in most cases determined by the severity of its social sanctions. Therefore, since Ubuntu is culturally constructed and displayed through processes of interaction, there is a high likelihood that it is influenced by social norms.

KEY TERMS: *Social norms, agency, social work, Ubuntu*

KEY DATES: *Published: June 2024*

KEY DECLARATIONS: *Funding: None | Conflict of Interest: None*

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Current and previous volumes are available at:
https://ajsw.africasocialwork.net

Professor Bukuluki: Thank you very much for organising such a wonderful session. I would like also to re-echo the fact that it is really important to showcase our cultural resources and how they contribute to solving our problems in Africa. Thanks for the invitation to speak to this audience of social workers and other stakeholders about the nexus between social norms and the Ubuntu and social work.

When our parents and neighbours raised us, there was always emphasised that whoever comes to your home is a visitor and you treat them with respect irrespective of who they are. So, this Ubuntu, which we see in many African countries I think is the very basis of the spirit of being an African. And I think whoever started to put professional lens to the Ubuntu and to use it as resource in our research, teaching, and training of social workers has done an incredible job. But because we are speaking about social norms, I wanted to start by defining what norms are, because I believe that even the Ubuntu we talk about rests right within our culture. It is defined by our culture. It is defined by the way we relate to each other, and the way we relate to each other as human beings, relationships between women and men, and our neighbours. Our relationships with others are regulated by social norms. So, it is hard to imagine Ubuntu without thinking about its relationship to social norms.

But what are social norms? They come from different schools of thought, but there is a general agreement that a social norm is a belief about behaviour shared by members of a given group, and this helps us to distinguish between a social norm and an attitude. An attitude is something conceptualised at individual level. However, when you talk of a social norm, it must be shared by a group. And when a social norm is widely accepted within a much larger society, say, a whole region in Zimbabwe or in Malawi, that's what you can say that it is a meta-norm because it is widely accepted by a much wider group of people. It qualifies to be what we call meta-norms. Some scholars such as Abadeer (2015) argue that meta-norms tend to have very high social value, such that the relatively more collective communities cannot tolerate deviation from sanctioned norms (Abadeer 2015). Quintessentially, Abadeer (2015) argues that in some societies, certain meta-norms can be elevated to a rule. This could be an informal rule (routinely executed without the presence of, or the need for, a written formal law or rule), or a formal rule (sanctioned by the formal legislative and judicial institutions). So, one may argue that Ubuntu is a meta-norm in some African societies. But it is important to note that social norms are influenced by belief systems and perceptions of what others expect and do (Cislaghi and Heise 2018; Bukuluki, Kisaakye, Wandiembe *et al.* 2021). So, there is always this issue; what you believe others do is likely also to influence what you do. And this is partly because you want to belong. So, you want to make sure that the way you behave, the decisions you make are aligned to your group, sometimes beyond your group, aligned to the community or society where you live. But it is also about what you believe others approve or disapprove (Cislaghi and Heise 2018). So, you are likely to behave in a certain way or adopt a certain behaviour based on what you believe others you relate with or those whose opinion matters to you approve or disapprove, what they consider appropriate or inappropriate (Cislaghi and Heise 2018).

So, this is very important to understand social norms because social work research and social work services are designed and provided within specific cultural contexts influenced by social norms. And in the context of social work, it is extremely important because we might engage people to try out new behaviours whether it is in respect to nutrition or mental health, or in respect to sexual reproductive health or peaceful coexistence. But then, these people are going to make their choices and decisions based on what they believe others do or what they believe is approved or disapproved by others within their group or community. So, knowing our context, the context of our clientele is extremely important. But also, very important to note about social norms is that they are held together or reinforced by social sanctions (rewards and punishments), and what we call a reference group (Cislaghi and Heise 2018; Bukuluki, Kisaakye, Wandiembe *et al.* 2021). In terms of a reference group, you might have people in your life who you value and whom you perceive that if they approve your decisions, you would feel happy about it. So, this reference group can reward or can sanction you for not adhering to social norms. So, if you adhere to their social norms, you are rewarded, but if you are seen to be violating a certain social norm in a group or society, you are likely to be negatively sanctioned or punished.

So, we try out innovations, interventions but sometimes we don't imagine or anticipate that there may be pushback or backlash (Igras, Kohli, Bukuluki *et al.* 2021). And especially where we do aim at promoting social change, it is extremely important because social change might come with some shifts in the norms and the early adopters of these new norms may experience social sanctions in form of pushback (Igras, Kohli, Bukuluki *et al.* 2021). That said, one of the important things to note is that actually norms are nested within formal and informal institutions. And of course, they are reproduced through platforms for people to interact, so through socialisation processes, if one might say so. One important thing, of course, to note is that social norms can either be positive or negative (Cislaghi and Heise 2020; Bukuluki, Kisaakye, Wandiembe *et al.* 2021). There are very many positive social

norms, but we also have to be very critical to see if there are harmful social norms. Given that Ubuntu is a cultural phenomenon embedded in social norms, much as Ubuntu may promote several positive norms, there is also a risk that it can promote harmful social norms (Louw 2019), and therefore when people try to stand out and challenge these norms, then they face severe social sanctions. And we should remember that the strengths of a norm are determined by the severity of the social sanctions for not adhering to the norm. So, I think as social work academia, we need to be just more critical to harness the positive social norms, built on them as assets, like say, "I in you and you in me" (Battle 2009), "I am because we are" (Rider 2015), but also look at Ubuntu more critically– have pause and reflect sessions where we think about are there certain harmful social norms that hinder people exercising their agency at individual (Kabeer 1999) and group level (Bukuluki 2013; Delea, Sinharoy, Cheong *et al.* 2021) simply because if you are seen to challenge what is predominant in terms of holding the community together, but you feel this is not aligned to your choices and goals as a person (an individual) or as a group, you are likely to face severe negative social sanctions or backlash. Some scholars have perceived collective agency as the collective's capacity to pursue perceptions of "good" (e.g., goals, values, and rights). They argue that at the collective level, this is the capacity to pursue the collective's perception of "good" (e.g., other-regarding goals, values, rights) (Delea, Sinharoy, Cheong *et al.* 2021). At the individual level, this is the capacity to pursue the individual's own perception of "good" (both self- and other-regarding goals, values, and rights) as a result of membership in a collective (Parimi, Mishra, Tucker *et al.* 2012; Delea, Sinharoy, Cheong *et al.* 2021). But there could be tensions between the individual perception of "good" and the collective perceptions of "good". So being aware of how we respond to these tensions between individual aspirations and collective aspirations is crucial especially as we think about individual and collective rights as well as obligations.

I also want to invite our audience to appreciate the fact that within the broader categorisation of social norms, there is also what is called gender norms, and basically, these are norms that regulate relationships between men and women (Cislaghi and Heise 2020; Cislaghi, Weber, Shakya *et al.* 2022), and they are relative from one group or society to another (Bukuluki 2013). They could be temporal, they could be dynamic, but they play a role in shaping women and men's access to resources, freedoms, to voice, to power, to even self-esteem, self-worth, among others (Cislaghi and Heise 2020; Cislaghi, Weber, Shakya *et al.* 2022), and these are important elements of agency too. So, these gender norms affect the power relations, access and control of resources as well as decision-making among others. We consider gender norms to be sort of a subset of the broader social norms, but they are very important norms because they talk about relationships between men and women that are socially constructed, that could be relatively permanent or more dynamic depending on the context. I think I spoke about this, the difference between a social norm and an attitude. An attitude is relatively more personal, so you couldn't say what I do, what I believe I should do. This is different from what I believe others do and what I believe others think I should do or expect me to do (Cislaghi and Heise 2020; Cislaghi, Weber, Shakya *et al.* 2022). This is important, especially in the context of Ubuntu because we are talking about social cohesion, we are thinking about your humanness, being seen in the other human being, I am because you are, and so on, so the interface then between social norms and Ubuntu seems to be quite obvious. Moving on, I just would like to also note that we should not look at social or gender norms as if they are existing in a vacuum. Norms are part of the system of structural factors that intersect to sustain action. So, norms are just one of those other things to consider, but we should look at them as part of a broader social ecology, which has institutions, issues that are more material – services, infrastructure among others (Bukuluki, Kisaakye, Wandiembe *et al.* 2021; Cislaghi, Weber, Shakya *et al.* 2022; Gardsbane, Bukuluki and Musuya 2022).

That said, I would like to refer to and herald efforts of scholars such as Mugumbate & Chereni (2019) Mugumbate & Nyanguru (2013), Tusasiirwe (2023) for theorising Ubuntu demonstrating its potential to use as a resource in indigenisation and decolonisation of social work research and teaching. It was very instructive to me appreciate that Ubuntu is conceptualised as a collection of values and practices that black people of African origin view as making people authentic human beings including the appreciation of the cultural relativity of the Ubuntu values and practices, but all of which seem to show us that human beings are part of a larger significant relation of communal, societal, environmental and spiritual (Hanks 2008; Mugumbate and Nyanguru 2013; Mugumbate and Chereni 2019; Tusasiirwe 2022). It is that connection, that interconnected in the environment, the interconnectedness between the living and the living dead, because in our African philosophy as clearly articulated by Professor John Mbiti in his 1969 volume titled 'African Religions and Philosophy'. We believe the dead are not dead. So, we don't believe that when people die that they have left us. They have simply changed their form, but they are still part of us.

So, this conceptualisation of Ubuntu is very helpful and it is what I will be engaging here. It reminds me of the

conceptualisation around collectivism by quite a number of scholars who tend to link it closely to Ubuntu. They argue that in the collectivism, an individual is conceptualised to "contribute to the community, not only because it is expected of him or her, but because the community is him or her" (Ikwenobe 2006). I think this is the highest value of expressing Ubuntu where you say that there is no difference between the individual and the community, but the community is him or her. And then also especially when they say that the concept of personhood in the African collectivist point of view is first and foremost that of the community (Ikwenobe 2006).

So, distinguishing the individual from the community especially in collectivistic societies, like those we have in many African countries, like those in Zimbabwe, Kenya, Uganda, in Botswana can be very difficult. Sometimes you are talking about to a person, and you think you are talking to the individual, but actually, the individual is embodying the community. And this is where the Cartesian thinking of "I" that is Western becomes a challenge and not relevant because you think you are talking to one individual, but actually, you are speaking to a community, because the individua is not separable from the community (Bukuluki 2013). So, the individual exhibits a plural self, a collective self. This theorisation is quite interesting for me. Ubuntu connotes an African philosophy that emphasises humanity through other people and support as well as concern about each other's wellbeing. Ubuntu resounds the African thinking of what concepts and works are tolerable, having compassion, respecting others, and togetherness among people and the community (Hanks 2008; Mugumbate and Nyanguru 2013; Mugumbate and Chereni 2019; Tusasiirwe 2022). Ubuntu is not only directional regarding behaviour but also entails goals that societies and people work to attain together. This involves not only notions of belongingness but also the fact that individuals possess a responsibility beyond themselves (Hanks 2008; Mugumbate and Chereni 2019; Tusasiirwe 2022). So, if you are a social work working in the context, Ubuntu is very important to understand and undertake the positive attributes that Ubuntu brings, but also know that because we are talking of collectivism, it is possible that in the interest of social cohesion and people remaining together, and hence, there might be suppression of certain individual rights or individual agency—that is, individuals setting their own goals and converting those goals into action (Kabeer 1999). Like our grandfather (Bishop Desmond Tutu, 1999 cited in (Tschudi 2006; Battle, 2009; Bukuluki, 2013; Mugumbate & Chereni, 2019; Mugumbate & Nyanguru, 2013), prefers to say, "My humanity is intrinsically related to that of others, so we are interconnected." And Ubuntu as an African alternative, of course, the Cartesian thinking of "I think therefore I am" versus I am human because I belong (Desmond Tutu, 1999 cited in (Tschudi 2006; Battle 2009; Bukuluki 2013). So, what makes us human in "Africa" is to belong, but surely the African context, I know it is relative. When I use African, I need to put this in context that we are diverse. But the notion of I'm human because I belong – is a very strong philosophy in terms of our moral and perspectives (Ikwenobe 2006; Bukuluki 2013). I don't know if you can practice social work without thinking of empathy, putting yourself in your client's shoes and being able to understand them better, and also being more people-centred, person-centred among others. Of course, also, that comes with aspects around sharing of resources and inspiring collective progress and collective action.

Now, as we engage with the notion of Ubuntu and its intersections with social norms which regulate behaviour including behaviour exhibited in the context of Ubuntu. It is quite essential to appreciate that social norms are reinforced by reference groups—people whose opinion matters a lot and we want them to judge us positively as much as possible (Cislaghi and Heise 2020; Cislaghi, Weber, Shakya *et al.* 2022). These social norms are also underpinned and sustained by a system of outcome expectations (rewards and negative social sanctions); those who adhere to them are rewarded but there are severe social sanctions characterised by punishments and pushback for those who do not adhere to the revered social norms (Cislaghi and Heise 2020; Bukuluki, Kisaakye, Wandiembe *et al.* 2021; Cislaghi, Weber, Shakya *et al.* 2022). The question is, is there a space for exercising agency whether it is individual or collective agency within the context of social norms that operate within the context of Obuntu? How does agency which is a central concept in social work especially the strengths-based approach to social work (Gray and Collett van Rooyen 2002) either align with the social norms embedded in Ubuntu as a resource for social work theory and practice? And if there is the relationship between Ubuntu and agency, what type of agency would it be? Would this be individual agency or it would be collective agency that leads to collective action(Kabeer 1999). Collective agency is conceptualised in this case as the development of the capacity of a group to enact change (Kabeer 1999). Similarly, Delea et al. (2021) conceptualises agency to operate at both the individual and collective level— as the capacity to pursue perceptions of "good" (e.g., goals, values, and rights)—defined by the individual or collective, respectively. It is argued that agency is nested in the process of empowerment (Kabeer 1999) and described as a process by which individuals expand their aspirations, goals, and gain great autonomy, allowing them to achieve their goals (individual agency). The interesting question here might be, how does this relatively more Western perspective of agency (especially individual agency) align with Ubuntu, that leans more towards the collective? What happens if an individual or group of individuals go

against the collective including the predominant norms that hold the community together?   How does this perspective of agency that leans more towards an individual as a separate entity (separable from the group or community) relate to individuals as groups and individuals who see themselves as part and parcel of the collective, of the community; individuals who feel that actually the community is them, and that there is not much distinction between the community and them as individuals (Ikwenobe 2006; Bukuluki 2013). Sometimes that is where it can get challenging and why promoting indigenisation and framing of literature from an African cultural perspective is important. Recognise the role of external factors, because when you are exercising agency, you are doing it within the perspective of person in environment – group of people but in environment, and so, negotiating the external factors, which could be opportunity structures or facilitators but also could be hindrances in terms of exercising agency of our clients is extremely important (Raj, Dey and Lundgren 2021). Therefore, exercising agency also involves being able to navigate the barriers to overcome them and to also make optimal use of the facilitators to set and achieve your goals. You might start to act and then you face resistance or backlash either from your group or community because what you are doing is not in tandem with their social and gender norms but you do not give up, you keep pursuing your goals. This further implies that agency involves individuals or groups being aware of their ability to make choices, setting individual or collective goals, and acting on those goals, but recognising that these choices, goals, and actions are influenced by internal and external resources, including social norms and other structural factors in one's social environment. For example, it could be women in an association that set goals for themselves and then they seek collective action, and that would be collective efficacy. But they also have the capacities to act; they might have the will, but then they may lack adequate capabilities (Delea, Sinharoy, Cheong *et al.* 2021) to translate their will or goals, into action. So, focusing on skills, abilities, resources, similar to the strengths-based perspective in social work which too has agency as central to it (Gray and Collett van Rooyen 2002) is a crucial part of enabling our clientele to exercise agency.

There is a strong nexus between social norms and agency because social norms influence the ability of people as individuals, groups, or even communities to exercise agency through making choices, setting goals and acting on them. If they are positive social norms, they can facilitate agency, but they could also constrain the exercise of agency particularly if they are harmful or negative norms. Here are some examples that may help to demonstrate the interface between social norms, agency, Ubuntu and social work. Hope by now, it is clear that Ubuntu operates in the context of social norms. These could be positive norms that support human dignity, that give individuals a voice, but they could also be negative or harmful social norms that constrain individuals' ability and groups' abilities to exercise setting goals and acting on their intentions to convert those goals into action. So, let us imagine that we are in a country where majority of the people practice FGM. Let us take an example of a father who is determined not to let his daughter undergo FGM (so he set this as a goal). But he understands the negative social sanctions him as the father, his daughter and the family are likely to encounter if they their daughter does not undergo FGM. For example, they will face stigma and discrimination, and there is a risk that their daughter may not be able to marry yet in some societies with high prevalence of FGM, it is through marriage that women can access any resources of production and also find the protection. The father who is determined not to have his daughter undergo FGM may try but may not succeed to effectively convince the daughter's grandmother, mother and the community or religious leader who form part of his reference group not to have the daughter undergo FGM. So, he made a choice not to cut his daughter, but the social/gender norms could constrain his action if he does not have adequate skills, capacity, and abilities to navigate and overcome these external constraints he has to deal with in his social environment. So, in many cases people have the confidence to set goals (self-efficacy and if they are a group, collective efficacy) but may fail to convert these into action because of internal and external factors that they may lack capacity to overcome.

And then one of the challenging things about the concept of agency is the fact that it has been conceptualised from a more Western individual perspective. And when you come to the collective context where people, even when they feel that although they individuals, actually they have a very strong connection to the community, then it may be more challenging to imagine individual agency and how it operates in this context. So, scholars including Kabeer (1999), Delea et al. (2021) are still trying to figure to conceptualise agency of individuals who feel they have a plural self (they are individuals but identify themselves through the collective or community). What might individual or even collective agency this scenario or context look like when it is happening organically because individuals can hardly define themselves or their goals from a singular individual perspective but largely through thinking as a collective? These individuals who feel more as a collective rather than individuals as understood in the "West", may be more preoccupied by the implications of setting individual action on family, peers, and community. In this case there a lot of aspects of giving back to family and the community as an important moral value when people are thinking about their goals. Does this therefore mean that there is collective agency mindset

even at individual level? If yes, how does this interface with agency exercised by a group or community that identifies a shared challenge, sets shared goals and undertakes collective action? It is these kinds of questions that need further inquiry by social work scholarship in Africa or even the global south as we seek to decolonise and indigenise social work to make it more relevant to our social and cultural context. So, a delicate balance is extremely important. When I think about the nexus between Ubuntu, social norms and agency in the context of social work in Africa, some of the questions that come to my mind are: is it only and always positive social norms that characterise Ubuntu or there could be also harmful social norms embedded in the contexts in which Ubuntu is a moral value that we need to understand. In this case, one can cogitate that where there are positive social norms embedded in Ubuntu– yes, these would be aligned to the social work values and principles or ethics. But what if there are harmful social norms? How do we engage with them to ensure that Ubuntu remains a cultural resource to social work? For example, how do develop tools and strategies to address pushback, backlash and negative social sanctions associated with our clientele who make a choice to challenge predominant norms that they perceive to be at variance with their aspirations? In collectivism and particularly communities that espouse Ubuntu, is there a possibility for power holders to ignore the agency of individuals and some groups that may not align to the social norms that are predominant in communities known to espouse the collective or community over individuals' or specific groups 'goals and aspirations? How does social work respond to this as it problematises Ubuntu as a resource to indenisation or decolonisation of social work? (Twikirize, Luwangula and Twesigye 2019; Tusasiirwe 2022; 2023). How do we deal with these tensions? Hope you find these questions instructive for social work scholarship as we seek to use cultural resources such as Ubuntu in our pragmatic efforts to decolonise and indigenise social work.

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