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Editorial: Now, the theory of Ubuntu has its space in social work

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Editorial: Now, the theory of Ubuntu has its space in social work

Abstract

In this issue, we published short articles that show application of ubuntu in social work. We prioritized articles that showed how ubuntu could be used and applied in social work as well as those with a visual model representing ubuntu. Advances in technology and rapid growth of social media requires that we promote and use visual learning tools for social work especially for the young learner. This special issue's objective was to accelerate use of concepts, models, theories and approaches that fill the gaps left by western approaches that are being put aside as Africa decolonises social work. Another objective was to encourage participation of young writers in decolonisation and indigenisation. In this editorial article, we define ubuntu, summarise existing ubuntu models in social work before sharing information about this special issue of the African Journal of Social Work (AJSW).

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EDITORIAL

NOW, THE THEORY OF UBUNTU HAS ITS SPACE IN SOCIAL WORK

MUGUMBATE, Jacob Rugare and CHERENI, Admire

ABSTRACT

In this issue, we published short articles that show application of ubuntu in social work. We prioritized articles that showed how ubuntu could be used and applied in social work as well as those with a visual model representing ubuntu. Advances in technology and rapid growth of social media requires that we promote and use visual learning tools for social work especially for the young learner. This special issue's objective was to accelerate use of concepts, models, theories and approaches that fill the gaps left by western approaches that are being put aside as Africa decolonises social work. Another objective was to encourage participation of young writers in decolonisation and indigenisation. In this editorial article, we define ubuntu, summarise existing ubuntu models in social work before sharing information about this special issue of the African Journal of Social Work (AJSW).

KEY TERMS: ubuntu, social work, Samkange theory of ubuntu, OPW-N framework, ubuntu model, decolonisation

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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 TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE

How about promoting African knowledges, theories, ethics, models, frameworks, stories, oratures, voices, languages and methods of telling? How about writing those aspects of social work you wanted to write about but you felt they wouldn't be published? How about developing a theory from your analysis, from the bottom up, instead of using existing theories that might not be very relevant? Those knowledges you did not learn at college but they define the type of social work happening in your village, suburb, town, community, chiefdom or home? Those impactful personal experiences no-one except us will write about? Ubuntu has emerged as the overarching theory that describes African social work. In this special publication, we seek to give a voice to ubuntu. By doing so, we hope to address one challenge we have encountered as AJSW, that of over use of western values, ethics, approaches, theories, textbooks, articles, examples or models by our writers. In this issue, we provided short articles that show application of ubuntu in social work. We prioritized articles that showed how ubuntu could be used in social work application as well as those with a visual model to representing ubuntu. Advances in technology and rapid growth social media requires that we promote and use visual learning tools for social work especially for the young learner. This special issue's objective was to accelerate use of concepts, models, theories and approaches that fill the gaps left by western approaches that are being put aside as Africa decolonizes social work. Another objective was to have more, and to include participation of first time but also young writers in decolonization and indigenization. In this editorial article, we summarise ubuntu models that have been previously advanced for social work in the first section and in the second section, we summarize models advanced in this issue of the African Journal of Social Work (AJSW).

DEFINING UBUNTU

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. We were also cognizant of the fact that ubuntu is found in several countries in Africa but is known by different names. 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. We accepted all these names, and we even did a mapping of these names as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: The geographical and linguistic spread of Ubuntu



We were cognizant of prior work in the area of ubuntu and social work. A few of these will be discussed in the next section.

SELECTED THEORIES, FRAMEWORKS AND PERSPECTIVES ON UBUNTU SOCIAL WORK

Samkange’s theory of ubuntu (Samkange and Samkange, 1980)

Whose fault is it if no one knows about the philosophy of your grandfather and mine? Is it not your fault and mine? We are the intellectuals of (Africa). It is our business to distill this philosophy and set it out for the world to see (Samkange, 1980).

Though not a social worker, Samkange’s theory of ubuntu offers numerous lessons for social work. Stanlake Samkange was born in Mariga village, Zvimba area of Mashonaland region of Zimbabwe (named Southern Rhodesia by the colonial regime) in 1922, about forty years after the area was taken over by British South Africa Company (BSAC) that was founded by Cecil John Rhodes, a British colonialist. His parents were ministers of religion in the Methodist church. He was educated at Waddilove Methodist Mission in Zimbabwe and Adams College in South and University of Fort Hare. He worked as a teacher at Mzingwane Government School, but later left to start his own school, the Nyatsime College in Chitungwiza, near Harare. After that, he was a political activist, nationalist, scholar and writer. One of his books, *Hunhuism or Ubuntuism: A Zimbabwean Indigenous Political Philosophy* (1980), was the first book dedicated to ubuntu (Gade, 2017). In this book, he did not claim to have invented ubuntu because it has been there before him. He acknowledged that ubuntu existed as orature (oral literature) and was passed from generation to generation through experience, art, song, dance, poetry and many other non-written means. He presented three maxims as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Samkange’s maxims of ubuntu

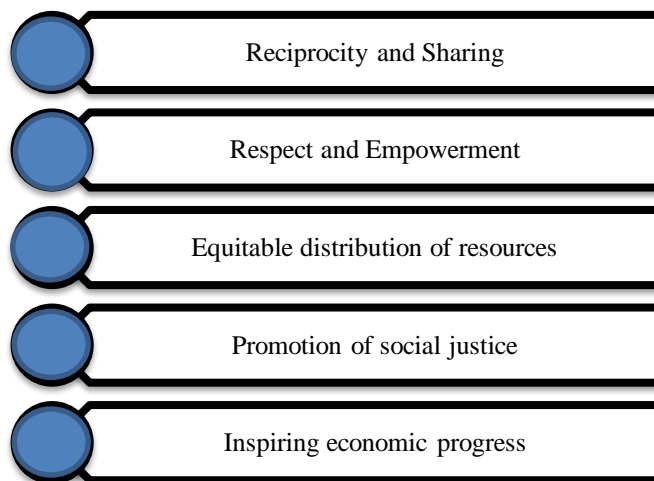
Summary	Maxim
Human relations	<p>“To be human is to affirm one’s humanity by recognizing the humanity of others and, on that basis, establish respectful human relations with them” (Samkange and Samkange, 1980, p. 6</p> <p>“The attention one human being gives to another: the kindness, courtesy, consideration and friendliness in the relationship between people; a code of behaviour, an attitude to other people and to life, is embodied in <i>hunhu</i> or Ubuntu” (Samkange and Samkange, 1980, p. 6).</p>
Sanctity of life	<p>“If and when one is faced with a decisive choice between wealth and the preservation of the life of another human being, then one should opt for the preservation of life” (Samkange and Samkange, 1980, p. 7)</p> <p>This is an ethical principle.</p>
People-centred status	<p>“The king owes his status, including all the powers associated with it, to the will of the people under him” (Samkange and Samkange, 1980, p. 7)</p> <p>Here, a king refers to a leader of a home, family, school, work place, village, community, organisation, country, nation or international. It also means a professional like a social worker because of the power they have when working with service users, community or clients.</p>

Samkange and Samkange (1980) argued that Africans need to learn, write and practice ubuntu. Just as westerners use philosophies of their ancestors, Africans should find pride in the philosophies of their ancestors like ubuntu.

Ubuntu social justice framework (Rankopo, Osei-Hwedie and Modie-Moroka, 2007)

The authors argued that reciprocity is important in Africa which is why people support relatives, neighbours, and community members. They share with the hope that one day they will be in need, and they will receive help. (Rankopo, Osei-Hwedie and Modie-Moroka, 2007). But the authors also say empowering others earns one respect, resources ought to be equitably distributed and social justice must be promoted. Lastly, the authors argued ubuntu (not politics) should inspire economic development. The elements of their framework are shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Ubuntu social justice framework



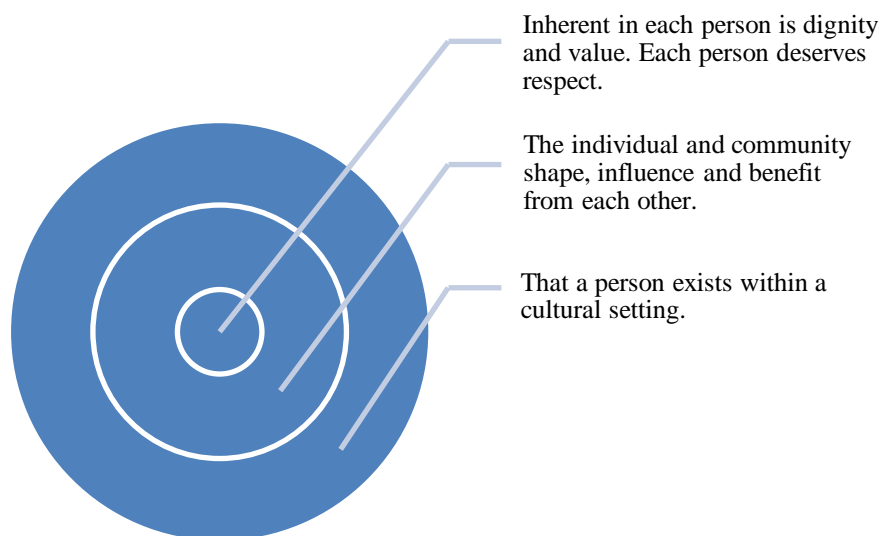
As shown in Figure 3, ubuntu is about economic progress, social justice, distribution of resources, respect and empowerment and reciprocity and sharing.

Unhu ethical model (Council of Social Workers Zimbabwe (CSW), 2012)

The *unhu* model is credited to the CSW that introduced ubuntu in the Zimbabwe Social Work Code of Ethics by-law of 2012. They have an ethical principle which calls for the recognition and promotion of the values of *unhu* or *ubuntu* which is a refreshing departure from the traditional Eurocentric social work values and ethics. The principles, based on the core values, and which facilitate the accomplishment of the mission of social work and which set forth the ideals all social workers must aspire to, include the expectation that:

a Social Worker recognises and promotes unhu/ubuntu, she knows that inherent in each person is dignity and value, and that each person deserves respect and that a person exists within a cultural setting and a community and that the individual and community shape, influence and benefit from each other.

Figure 4: Unhu ethical model



Inherent in each person is dignity and value. Each person deserves respect.

The individual and community shape, influence and benefit from each other.

That a person exists within a cultural setting.

This CSW ethical principle urges social workers in Zimbabwe to uphold the core values of *ubuntu* in their day-to-day professional practice with clients and employers with emphasis on culture, community and dignity.

Ubuntu as a philosophical framework for African social work (Mugumbate and Nyanguru, 2013)

The authors argued for *ubuntu* as a social work philosophical framework. They argued that, in the same manner *ubuntu* has been used in education, theology and business, it could be equally applied to social work. They outlined how *ubuntu* is applicable in all methods of social work: individual social work or casework, social work with groups, social work with communities, administration of social services, and social work research.

Ubuntu as a pan-African philosophical framework for social work in Africa (Mupedziswa, Rankopo and Mwansa, 2019)

The authors argued that to be Afrocentric relates to African ethos (p21). They went further to say:

The philosophy of *ubuntu* promotes teamwork and collaboration, meaning this principle promotes group cohesiveness and group support. Its cornerstone is a deep sense of belonging to a group, be it the extended family, the clan, or the community. This principle further seeks to promote the worth and dignity of all human beings, with an emphasis on self-respect. *Ubuntu* works on the premise that everyone must contribute towards community initiatives and aspirations and, by implication, towards national development. Based on the spirit of *ubuntu*, human service professions like social work are expected to assist their clients to harness their energies and knowledge in the promotion of the goals of social development (p. 23).

And further that:

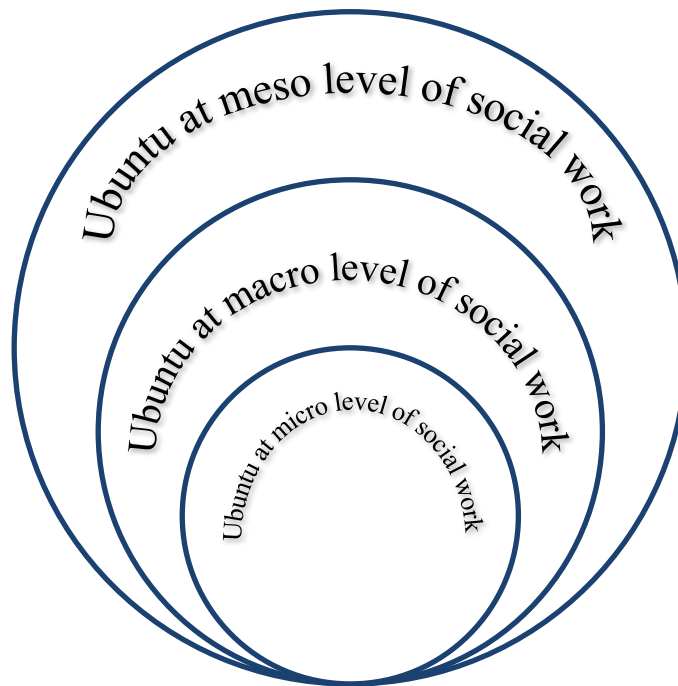
A perusal of the relevant literature suggests that there might be a natural relationship between *ubuntu* and aspects of the profession of social work as practiced in Africa. This suggests that *ubuntu* has enormous potential to serve as a framework for social work in Africa. There is potential for a perfect fit between social work and *ubuntu*, as the guiding principles of the two are similar ... The expectation, therefore, is that teachers and practitioners of social work in Africa ought to recognise and adopt the concept of *ubuntu* as a guiding framework for training and application.

And lastly, the authors had this to say in support of their position:

Ubuntu, as a concept and approach, provides for considerable opportunities for social work practice in Africa, both in the context of its academic and its practical endeavours. In short, it does provide a framework for social work across the continent. Learners and practitioners alike can develop their competencies, techniques and skills based on the framework of this philosophy. Many interventions for the promotion of human potential at individual, family, group, community and organisational levels, particularly in the context of Pan-Africanism, can be guided by the *ubuntu* philosophy. It is, therefore, pertinent for schools of social work across the continent to incorporate the notion of *ubuntu* into their curricula while practitioners take the opportunity to adopt this philosophy in their daily professional activities (p.31).

The ideas presented by the authors can be presented graphically as shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5: Ubuntu as a Pan-African Philosophical Framework for Social Work

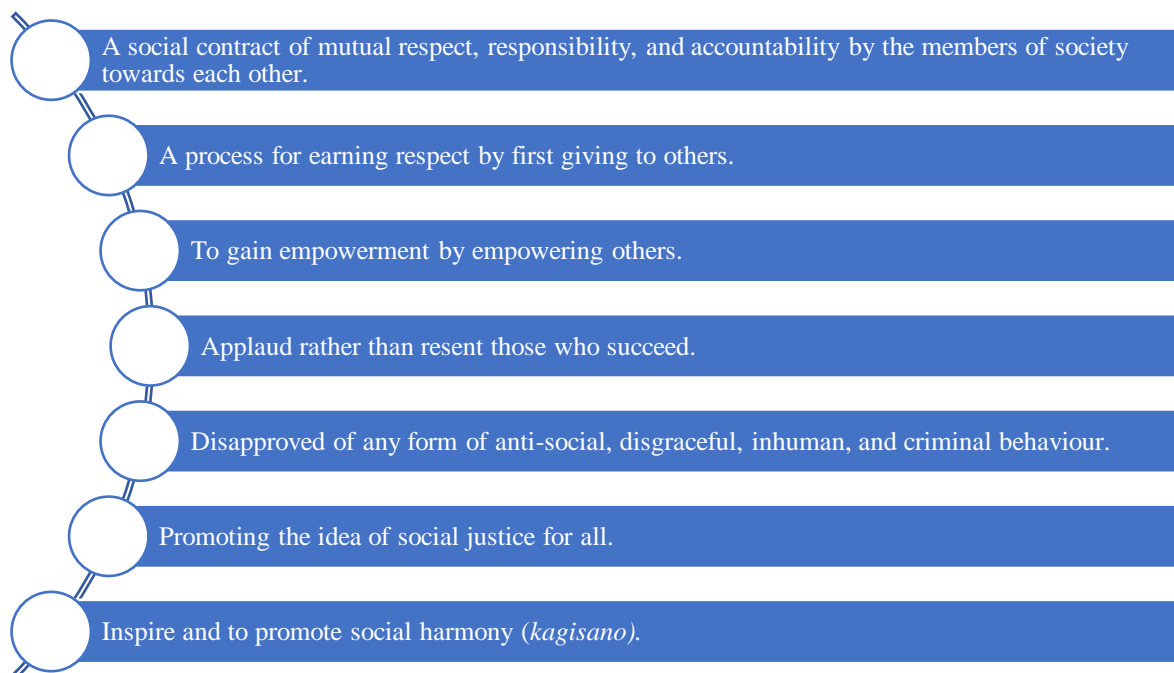


As Figure 5 shows, the authors’s arguments are centred around the different levels where ubuntu could be used as a guiding principle of social work. These are the meso, macro and micro levels.

The Tswana Kagisano framework (2016)

In Tswana language ubuntu is *botho*. In 2016, the country developed Vision 2016, initiative to help propel Botswana’s development forward. In the Vision, *botho* is viewed as a guiding etho as shown in Figure 6. *Kagisano* means social harmony.

Figure 6: The Tswana Kagisano framework



The Vision expected *ubuntu* and *kagisano* to exist at different levels including home, the community, the education system, and the workplace (Government of Botswana, 2016).

Anti-poverty and social protection model of ubuntu (Metz, 2016)

In this model, the author views ubuntu as a social protection and anti-poverty framework. This resonates with submissions by Rankopo, Osei-Hwedie and Modie-Moroka (2007). Ubuntu is a mechanism that provides a social safety net for individuals through several ways: individual giving, family support, community support or societal support as a whole.

In addition, communitarian ideals salient in indigenous sub-Saharan Africa (i.e. in ‘pre-colonial’ or ‘traditional’ black cultures as they were not influenced by those from other continents such as Europe) have in the past 5 years been on the rise when thinking about social protection and related economic matters. These ideals are often tersely captured by the term ‘*ubuntu*’, a southern African (specifically, Zulu, Xhosa and Ndebele) word for humanness (Mertz, 2016, p2).

Writing about both ubuntu and the capabilities approach, and offering a critique of western approaches, Metz (2016, p3) said:

Utilitarianism, Kantianism and the basic needs approach (western approaches) are largely individualist or subjective or both; they prescribe forms of social protection in light of values that make no essential reference to others besides a given poor person and (in the former two cases) that enable her to realize her particular preferences and aims. In contrast, the newcomers are more objective and relational, focusing on particular abilities to live well considered to be apt for human beings generally, and, at least in the case of *ubuntu*, ones that systematically make an essential reference to interacting with others in specific ways.

These ideas are supported by other authors, Whitworth and Wilkinson (2013) who view child poverty from an ubuntu perspective and Tshoose (2009) who view informal social security from the same perspective. Putting all these ideas, it could be argued that ubuntu is a development model.

Ubuntu ecological and eco-spiritual perspective (van Breda, 2019)

The author presents three dimensions of ubuntu in social work. These are:

1. “First, ubuntu calls us to embrace the whole of humanity as part of our global community or clan, not only those who are related to us or those who are like us (van Breda, 2019, online)”
2. “Second, ubuntu calls us to consider our history (in our ancestors) and our future (in our descendants) and to live our lives in the world in a way that honours the former and ensures the wellbeing of the latter. African worldviews, unlike western worldviews, see both ancestors and descendants as present beings, not merely memories and hopes. They are actual persons, who are permanently present, though not usually visible. Such a view of our lineage inspires greater commitment to the sustainability of human and socioeconomic development (van Breda, 2019, online)”.
3. “Third, ubuntu calls us to consider the earth as a member of our community, both because we are made from earth and because earth is a divine being with whom we have a reciprocal relationship. These ideas, which are rooted both in traditional African and in Judeo-Christian and Islamic perspectives, contribute significantly to the requirement that we take care of the earth, not only for future generations, but also for the earth's own sake, and out of respect for our interconnectedness with earth. Such a view reinforces ecological and eco-spiritual social work perspectives (van Breda, 2019, online)”.

This view of ubuntu becomes important in this era where spiritual and ecological social work are being revalued.

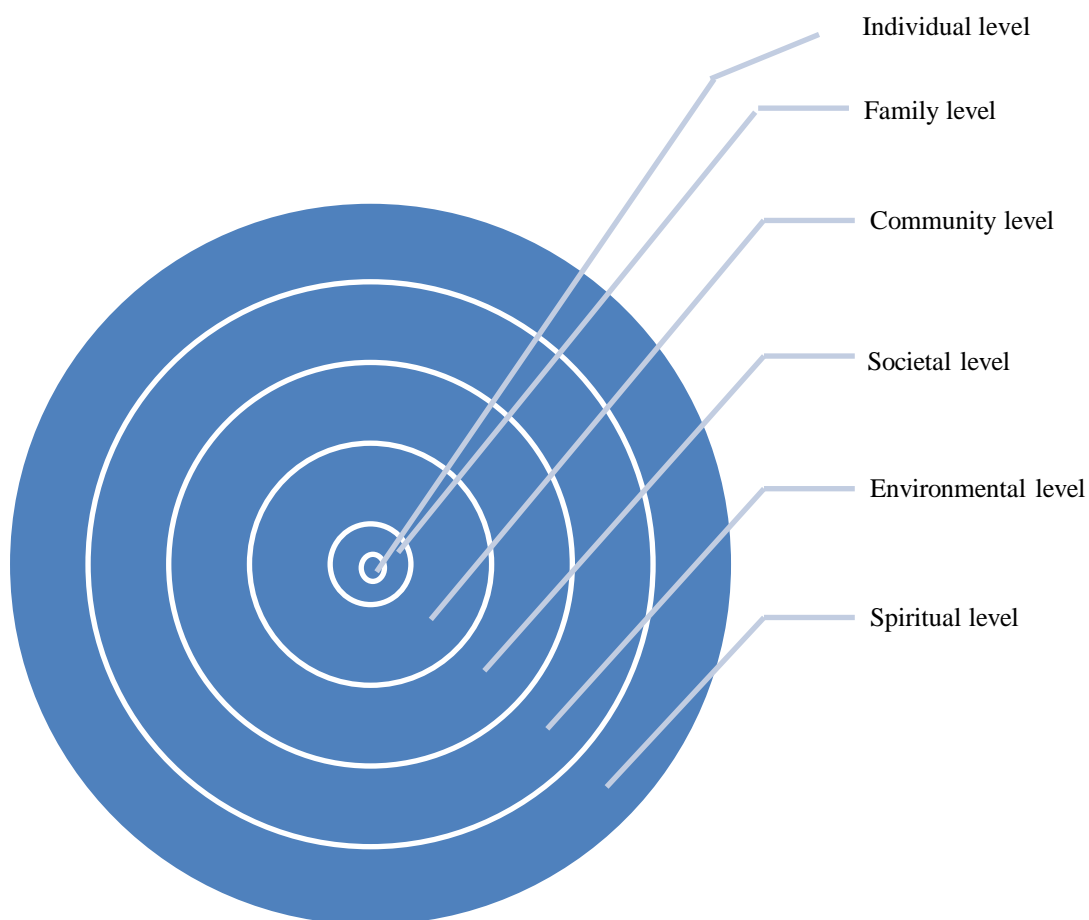
The decolonial framework of ubuntu

Supported by various authors, this framework looks at ubuntu as a tool to decolonize social work knowledge, thinking, research, writing, reflection, practice, learning and teaching. Supporters of this framework are inspired by works of liberation movements in Africa who used ubuntu to decolonize (Mugumbate and Nyanguru, 2013). Authors like Mupedziswa, Rankopo and Mwansa (2019) argued that as European social work is based in western ethos, African social work ought to be Afrocentric. In their criticism of child institutionalisation, Dziro and Rufurwokuda (2013) called for ubuntu as a replacement of western values that are used in children's homes in Zimbabwe and many other African communities. In essence, to use ubuntu is to decolonise social work. As Samkange and Samkange argued, due colonialism African learners were taught that their ancestors had no teachings of their own yet they had lived experiences of ubuntu teachings to the contrary (Samkange and Samkange, 1980).

An integrated framework of Ubuntu (Mugumbate and Chereni, 2019)

Looking at all the views on ubuntu presented under the different frameworks discussed, it could be summarised that ubuntu exists at six levels: the individual, the family, the community, the society, the environment and the spiritual. Figure 7 illustrates these levels.

Figure 7: An integrated framework of Ubuntu



1. *Individual*: the sanctity of human life and human wellbeing, for example, *where a person is made to choose between wealth or power and human life or wellbeing, he/she ought to choose the latter* (Samkange and Samkange, 1980). This is the intrapersonal according to Maphalala (2017). This is about

the body, the mind, knowledge, possessions and inventions. These are personal or they belong to the individual but they are only meaningful insofar as they contribute to the betterment of self together with others. The human body belongs to the person’s soul, to society and to the spiritual world.

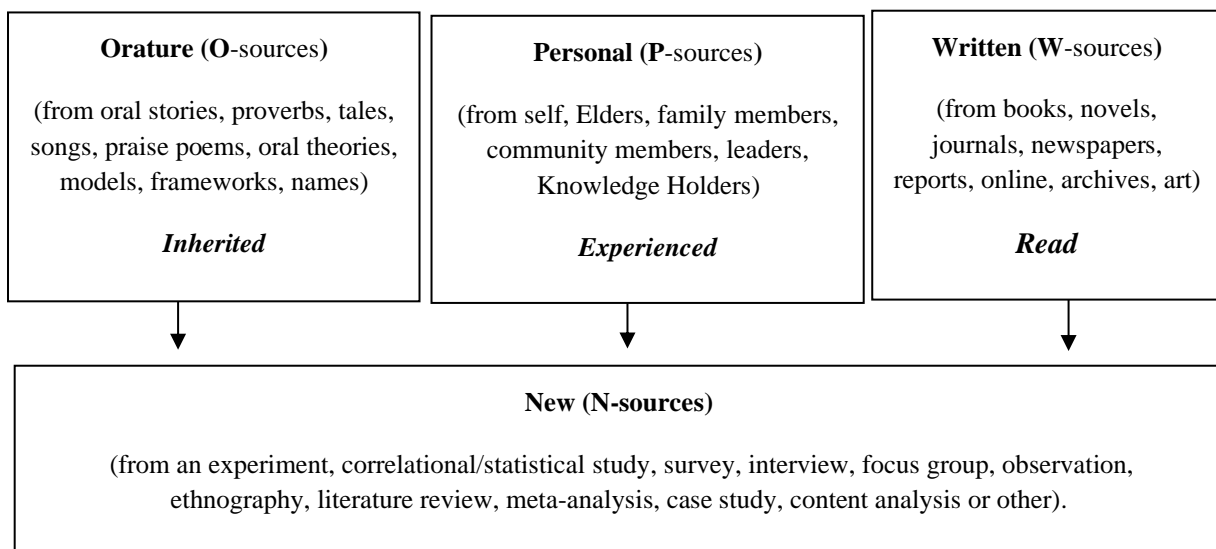
2. *Family/relational*: this is about relations or *ukama*. An individual person belongs to a family, that is bound together through family rules and identity. Family does not only refer to one’s spouse and offspring, but all relatives (Samkange and Samkange, 1980).
3. *Communal*: this is about people forming communities or *ujamaa*. the relationships that exist between human beings, that is, *being human because of others* (Government of Botswana, 2016; Whitworth and Wilkinson, 2013) This is the interpersonal according to Maphalala (2017).
4. *Societal*: The relationships that exist in society are social, economic or political.
 - a. Social: acceptable cooperatives, morals, laws, ethics, leadership and values like justice (Rankopo, Osei-Hwedie and Modie-Moroka, 2007; Council of Social Workers Zimbabwe (CSW), 2012). Harmonious relationships ought to exist between and within societies (Samkange and Samkange, 1980; Government of Botswana, 2016).
 - b. Economic – economic transactions are more than economic, they are also about creating stronger relationships (Mupedziswa, Rankopo and Mwansa, 2019; Mertz, 2016; Tshoose, 2009)
 - c. Political – for example, the saying a leader is a because of the people under him expresses the kind of leadership that is good for society (Samkange and Samkange, 1980; Mugumbate, 2020).
5. *Environmental*: also referred to as the ecological, this includes natural features like land, oceans and sky (van Breda, 2019; Mugumbate and Nyanguru, 2013).
6. *Spiritual*: this includes supernatural elements such as ancestors and God. Manifests through the individual person, community and the environment (van Breda, 2019; Mugumbate and Nyanguru, 2013).

In summary, the individual is part of a larger group, the family. In turn, the family is part of a larger community. The community exists in an environment which in turn is part of a larger spiritual world.

SOURCES OF KNOWLEDGE THAT WE PROMOTED IN THIS SPECIAL ISSUE

In making this special issue, we were cognizant of the fact that oral sources and personal experiences were going to be quite useful, so we prioritized them. We also accepted articles informed by written sources as well as those that resulted from a process of scientific inquiry. The different sources (four) that we promoted are shown in the journal’s framework in Figure 8.

Figure 8: AJSW Framework for Classification of Sources of Knowledge (AJSW, 2019)



Also referred to as the OPW-N framework, Figure 1 is used by the AJSW to revalue and promote use of oral, personal and written sources of knowledge. This is important for African writers who are continuously seeking to decolonize social work knowledge. The decolonization objective is often difficult because of limited written knowledge, hence the need to acknowledge all the sources of knowledge in an African context. The framework can be used to collect, classify sources, review and report sources.

ARTICLES IN THIS SPECIAL ISSUE

We did receive more articles than we anticipated. After careful scrutiny, we rejected some but still accepted what we thought was a large number. We had to extend the editorial time. At the end, we were able to publish 20 articles (see table of contents on page xvi) that focused on:

- Expanding the theory of ubuntu
- Lived experiences
- Ubuntu inspired child protection, welfare and policy
- Ubuntu in maternal health
- Ubuntu and peace building
- Ubuntu, refugee protection and migration
- Ubuntu and community health
- Ubuntu and social development
- Ubuntu and substance abuse
- Ubuntu and disability
- African business models

Contributors have come up with insightful articles from several countries including Botswana, Malawi, Zambia, South Africa, Australia Zimbabwe, Canada and Australia. This call was for short but original pieces but you can also expand your previous works or ideas already presented by others. We want to encourage you to take time to read articles in this special issue and to use concepts, values, ethics, approaches, theories, examples or models learnt in your teaching, learning, writing, research, fieldwork, practice and reflection.

CONCLUSION

Indigenous philosophies, theories and practices like *ubuntu* are often relegated in favour of colonial or foreign approaches that are easily accessible. Where *ubuntu* is used, its weaker values like forgiveness and sharing are emphasized at the expense of tenets of justice and decolonization. However, ubuntu frameworks are quite useful in assessing needs of children, evaluating programmes, critical analysis of interventions, promoting collaboration and participation with communities, developing ethics and research strategies. In this editorial, we have highlighted major frameworks useful in social work as a precursor to more than 20 frameworks presented by authors from different countries. As you read through the wonderful articles presented here, think of how you could apply ubuntu ideas in your teaching, learning, writing, research, fieldwork, practice and reflection.

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