

Review

The Deployment of Ubuntu in Social Work Practice in Zimbabwe: Promise and Pitfalls

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Abstract: The Ubuntu philosophy is a guiding and central philosophy underpinning human life for most Bantu people who are found on the African continent and now spread across the globe due to migration. It defines accepted and unaccepted behaviour. Its principles of care, love, and honesty have been extended to social work, education, management, political science, and even health care in most African countries. The Ubuntu philosophy resonates very well with social work values, principles, and ethics and certain theories such as ecological perspective, biopsychosocial model, and developmental approaches that focus on strengthening individual, community, and social networks. This article used conceptual analysis, available literature, and authors' observations to critically evaluate the utility of the Ubuntu philosophy in social work practice in Zimbabwe. The central question was: What are the prospects and challenges of deploying ubuntu philosophy in contemporary social work practice in Zimbabwe? Ubuntu has been employed in various practice contexts in Zimbabwe ranging from child protection, poverty alleviation, HIV/AIDS and statutory practice. The utility of the Ubuntu philosophy has recently been widely celebrated, with comparatively little critical attention paid to its limitations. Major setbacks levelled against Ubuntu include tension with individualistic models, risks of reinforcing oppressive cultural practices, and ambiguity among other factors.

Keywords: Ubuntu philosophy, social work, challenges and prospects, Ubuntu social work, Zimbabwe

1. Introduction

Social work as a profession is believed to have been shaped by religious philosophy, mainly from Christianity (Racovita-Szilagy & Diaconu, 2016). The church in England mainly shaped the evolution of modern day social work (Kate et al, 2008). Early do-gooders were motivated by religious beliefs to help needy members of society. Models and techniques of western social work were exported in a healthy way to African contexts during colonialism. However, through academic breakthroughs, scholarly revelation and cognitive shift, it is now realised that non-Western and non-religious philosophies can shape effective social work practice in different settings, in both developed and developing countries. One such philosophy is the Ubuntu philosophy. The Ubuntu philosophy has been described in an African ethno-philosophy that places importance on group or communal existence as opposed to individualism (Mangena, 2016). Although there were helping systems in early European countries, there were also systems in place for vulnerable members of African communities. These systems are reflected in African proverbs, beliefs, folktales, and the communal nature of traditional societies all shaped by and shaping the Ubuntu philosophy. This article used contextual analysis, literature review, and authors' observations to critique the deployment of Ubuntu in social work practice in Zimbabwe. It discusses and conceptualises the Ubuntu philosophy and shows how its values fit in contemporary social work practice before giving a critical evaluation of its utility in Zimbabwe.

2. Conceptualising Ubuntu Philosophy

Ubuntu has been and remains the anchor of acceptable behaviour among African communities. It is an African philosophy that refers to humanity among people. It is summarised in the African adage *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*, which means that a person is a person through other people. The sense of being of a person cannot be detached from the social context in which they exist. The Ubuntu philosophy is found in most African societies, though its terminology varies from one language to the other. The term Ubuntu (or cognate terms) is found in most Bantu languages of sub-Saharan Africa. This was affirmed by Mugumbate and Nyanguru (2013) who argued that Ubuntu is attributable to the blacks of Africa, especially sub-Saharan Africa. It is a long held tradition that has stood the test of time among most African people. For Mupedziswa, Rankopo, and Mwansa (2019), African people have

always viewed phenomena from the vantage point of an African world view which is informed by the African culture. Gade (2012) cited by van Breda (2019) identified two clusters of meaning of Ubuntu (i) it refers to the moral qualities of a person; generosity, empathy, forgiveness, considerateness and many others; and (ii) it refers to a pattern of interconnectedness between people in the form of world views and philosophy. Both clusters will be referred to in the current paper. For Mugumbate and Nyanguru (2013), Ubuntu relates to acceptable ideals and deeds. The humanity of each individual is expressed through his relationship with others.

Ubuntu has been adopted by many disciplines and professions, including human service professions such as social work (Mugumbate & Nyanguru, 2013; Author, 2020; Van Breda, 2019; Mugumbate & Chereni, 2020), nursing (Downing & Hastings-Tolsma, 2016) and psychology (Hanks, 2007; Wilson & Williams, 2013). The philosophy has also been advanced in management sciences (Mbigi, 1997; 2005; Luchien & Honorine, 2005; Lutz, 2009), education, politics, law, and many other professional fronts. Van Breda (2019) argues that Ubuntu is a paradigmatic numinosity that appeals to Africa and the world at large. However, according to Tutu (1999), Ubuntu is difficult to render in Western languages and for that reason it has maintained its name outside the African continent. Ubuntu is the essence of being human, and it is part of what Africa can give to the world (Tutu, 1999).

Ubuntu has been the backbone of many African societies and is the fountain from which many attitudes and actions flow. However, Mayaka and Truell (2021) acknowledge that Ubuntu was suppressed as a body of knowledge through the colonisation processes. Unlike Western cultures that are geared towards individualism and competition, Ubuntu promotes communalism and cooperation. For Hailey (2008:4), Ubuntu means “a persuasive spirit of caring, community harmony, hospitality, respect, and responsiveness”. Ubuntu values the preservation of human life at all costs. This is supported by Samkange and Samkange (1980), who note that when faced with a decisive choice between preservation of life and wealth, a person should choose preservation of life. Mugumbate and Nyanguru (2013) give a list of words that describe qualities of Ubuntu; sympathy, compassion, benevolence, solidarity, hospitality, generosity, sharing, openness, affirming, kindness, caring, harmony, interdependence, obedience, collectivity, and consensus. These values go in sync with the fundamental concepts of social work, such as non-discrimination, empathy, respect, and many others. Ubuntu is a bundle of these cherished values in African societies (Ndondo & Mhlanga, 2014). Ubuntu means avoiding all detrimental acts to the human race, as does social work which aspires to see a healthy and socially functioning society. According to Bolden (2014), Ubuntu expresses the value of collaboration, cooperation, and community, as well as the ethos of care and respect for others and importance of solidarity in the face of adversity. Professional social workers also participate in inter- and multidisciplinary teams during the provision of services to clients. Interagency cooperation has been of late the norm in service provision to individuals, groups, and communities. Several professionals or agencies can team up to provide a service(s) to an individual or group.

In the spirit of Ubuntu, the title of a human person is not attributed unless they live up to that expectation. Zulu (2018) argues that being human is not necessarily about the ontology of a person per se, but rather about humane behaviour in one’s inter-subjective relationships. This means that for an individual to qualify to be a person (*munhu*), they should exhibit certain socially acceptable behaviour (*hunhu*). In the Shona language of Zimbabwe, it is common to hear phrases such as *haasi munhu* (he is not a person) or *munhu* (he is a person). The determination of whether an individual is a person or not depends on the character and behaviour of the person. It is therefore common to find phrases such as *ticha uya munhu* (that teacher is a person) or *nesi uya haasi munhu* (that nurse is not a person), depending on whether a person has behaved in a socially acceptable way or not. A social worker working in a particular community should therefore behave in a socially acceptable way, otherwise they risk social disapproval by the community. The social norms found in these African cultures are sanctioned by tradition held over long periods of time. However, it is important to note that these may not be favourable for everyone. For example, unmarried women have historically suffered subjugation (Maluleke, 2012), and sexual minorities have been discriminated in Africa (Abaver & Cishe, 2018).

The personhood of each individual is expressed through interaction with other people in a manner that promotes the welfare of everyone. According to Ndondo and Mhlanga (2014), societies that emphasise individualistic normalcy produce societal members who are egoistic and have no feeling for their fellow community members. Mupedziswa et al. (2019) argue that Ubuntu is predicted on the *quid pro quo* mantra, which emphasises reciprocity, a spirit of sharing, and a belief that one earns respect by respecting and empowering others. They also note that Ubuntu is concerned with equitable distribution of resources and the promotion of social justice. For Lutz (2009), an African is not a rugged individual, but a person within a community. The ethics of a community does not mean that a person sacrifices their own good in order to promote the good of others, but recognises that they can achieve their good by promoting the good of others. Ubuntu disapproves antisocial, disgraceful, inhumane, and criminal behaviour (Rankopo & Diraditsile, 2020).

3. Ubuntu and Social Work

Some social work scholars converge on the view that Ubuntu is in agreement with the values and ideals of social work (Mugumbate & Nyanguru, 2013; Van Breda, 2019). Mugumbate and Chereni (2020) define Ubuntu social work as social work that

is theoretically, pedagogically, and practically grounded on Ubuntu. Ubuntu philosophy emphasises on human relationships, the same applies to social work which values importance of human relationships. Harmony with the social environment in which a person lives is one of the critical aspects of Ubuntu philosophy. Others matter a lot in some traditional African communities, so a person is not considered a person without “others”. This is in congruence with the person in environment model in social work. The person in the environment believes that a person shapes and is shaped by the environment in which they live. In the same manner, the Ubuntu philosophy values the environment in which a person lives. An individual should be in harmony with the environment in which they live for them to be socially acceptable and function optimally. This environment consists of the family, community, societal institutions, laws, and policies. Ubuntu philosophy aligns strongly with other social work theories such as the ecological perspective, biopsychosocial approach, and the developmental approach. However, it is important to note that scholarship on Ubuntu philosophy has not engaged much with social divisions such as class, gender, and sexuality. It has generally been silent on issues of classism, racism, and sexism.

The International Federation of Social Workers affirmed the importance of Ubuntu by celebrating the World Social Work Day 2021 under the theme “Ubuntu, I am because we are”. The main idea was to promote social solidarity and global connectedness among all people of different races and creeds. The Ubuntu philosophy challenges the neoliberal philosophy, which places individual rights over collective interests. Neoliberal policies have been associated with growing inequality and the consolidation of power and wealth by a few individuals (Ornellas, Engelbrecht, & Atamturk, 2020). The recognition of Ubuntu philosophy therefore comes at the right time to rescue the social work profession and promote the welfare of all. Ubuntu may also be viewed as an arm for professional decolonisation. Decoloniality is at the centre stage in social work due to the critique of professional universalism. Social work should be culturally relevant and recognising Ubuntu in social work can promote decolonial practice.

Some countries are considering Ubuntu as part of the value base of social work. The Zimbabwean Social Workers Council ethics code is Ubuntu as one of the core values of the profession. The code defines Ubuntu as the stipulations of the philosophy that places emphasis on values of human solidarity, empathy, human dignity, and humanness in every person and that holds that a person is a person through others. In South Africa, the White Paper for Social Welfare has Ubuntu as one of the principles underpinning the provision of social welfare. It states that the principle of caring for each other’s well-being will be promoted and a spirit of mutual support will be nurtured. The humanity of each individual is ideally expressed through his or her relationship with others and, in turn, his or hers through a recognition of the individual’s humanity. Therefore, social workers in Zimbabwe and South Africa are expected to deploy Ubuntu as they carry out their duties. Ubuntu also acknowledges both the rights and the responsibilities of every citizen in promoting individual and societal well-being (Johnson & Quan-Baffour, 2015).

There is a symbiotic relationship between Ubuntu and social work. Ubuntu has enormous potential to serve as a framework for social work in Africa (Mupedziswa et al, 2019). It provides a locally grounded framework that resonates with Zimbabwean communities. If grounded in Ubuntu, social work interventions become more acceptable and meaningful to clients. The guiding principles of social work and Ubuntu are close to similar. According to Mupedziswa et al. (2019), the profession of social work shares a great deal of its vision, mission, values, and principles with the concept of Ubuntu. Ubuntu emphasises a community approach to raising children and helping vulnerable members of the society, and this resonates well with the ecological and family systems theory in social work. More importantly, the Ubuntu philosophy promotes indigenous knowledge systems and community participation. The community approach is supported by the saying “It takes a whole village to raise a child”. This implies that other community members play a role in making sure that the welfare of a particular child is met. Traditional community labour practices such as *nhimbe* were based on the spirit of the Ubuntu support community work method in social work.

Furthermore, Mupedziswa et al. (2019) argue that the use of group work and community work methods in social work is in tandem with the recognition and celebration of the power of collective action in the Ubuntu philosophy. Social work and Ubuntu as a philosophy have adopted the concept of community as a context for seeking solutions to social problems. In Africa, a person not only lives for himself, but also for others. A point to note may be bereavement social work in which a qualified social worker provides counselling services to an individual or families that would have lost a loved one. In African communities, motivated by Ubuntu, a close relative (s) is requested to stay with the bereaved family or individual for a month or so comforting them. The community approach is also seen in the care of the elderly in some rural communities in Africa. Community members help the elderly and disabled by working in their fields to ensure that they are food secure. They do this from planting to harvesting and even helping them with daily household chores. Community practice has thus become a natural method of social work and resonates well with the notions of Ubuntu. Mupedziswa et al. (2019) further note that the bedrock of social work is the promotion of social justice which is related to the concept of Ubuntu.

Among the factors leading to challenges and experiences of teaching geographical maps, opportunities also merge in as explained by (Hazen et al,2020) Such value of interdisciplinary, creativity in advancing learning goals, efforts to enhance classroom interactions, and technological instructional materials improve teaching approach. Vojteková et al (2022) believe that for learners

to understand map work, innovative approach to explanation and presentation should be prioritised. Similarly, Shakhislam et al (2025) shows that teaching of mapwork foster students' spatial thinking, creativity, and information literacy.

Various studies (Safaraliyeva et al,2019) reveal that teaching maps in countries such as Azerbaijan, Hungary and United Arab Emirates bring opportunities such as practical, multidisciplinary teaching, acquisition or practice of knowledge. Further, introduction of new technologies and use of atlases contribute positively to society. Scholars like Kidman and Chang (2023) conducted a study on Maps and geographical education to encourage learning. Results shows that teachers map work knowledge have utility beyond geographical classroom, from wayfinding to planning and military purposes. How can these challenges and negative experiences be reduced and lead to opportunities for learners in geography education? Studies from Schaab et al (2020) report that some of opportunities for learners on learning mapwork can bring potential awareness and reduce misinterpretations. Thereof, teaching geographical maps should be well emphasised to learners and teachers should be prepared to think spatially to bring a broad view on such content and its impact on society.

4. Interface between Ubuntu and Selected Social Work Values

According to Van Breda (2019), Ubuntu is in agreement with the ideals and values of the social work profession. Social work is grounded on values which include, but are not limited to; service, importance of human relationships, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, integrity, and competence. These values resonate well with the Ubuntu philosophy. The selected values are discussed below.

4.1. Service

The value of service implies that the main goal of social work is to assist people in need and to address social problems. Social workers provide services to clients above their own interests. They are expected to provide some of their skills and time to pro bono services. Pro bono implies that social workers volunteer part of their time and skills without expecting remuneration. In the same vein, Mupedziswa, Rankopo, and Mwansa (2019) argued that Ubuntu may be a driving force behind volunteerism. In most traditional African communities, individuals and communities have contributed goods and services to ensure the survival of fellow community members. Inspired by the Ubuntu philosophy, Africans have always supported each other wholeheartedly in times of need. Traditional leaders, for example, chiefs, would look after orphans and other homeless people in their homesteads without expecting anything in return. Another area in which service to humanity is demonstrated is that of traditional healers. The sole intention of traditional healers/Indigenous medical practitioners was to serve humanity, hence their services were very cheap and in most cases the patient would pay after healing. This may be illustrated by a vignette in the following:

In one community where I stayed, a boy was bitten by a snake and went to a sangoma (traditional healer/ herbalist) for treatment. The sangoma treated him and stayed with him for 3 days at his house. After discharge, the sangoma would visit him to cheque on how he was doing. After total healing, the sangoma asked the boy to look for money to pay him or bring a hen as payment.

It can be seen from this case vignette that the intention was not to make profit but to save life. Payment for sangomas could either be done through money, which was very cheap anyway, or any other items that the client would have, like grain, livestock, or household utensils. In most cases, especially in the developing world, social work services are free and their intention is to restore social functioning among vulnerable members of the society. Ubuntu therefore has a great potential to strengthen community intervention projects by social workers.

4.2. Importance of Human Relationships

Creating positive and meaningful relationships is at the heart of the social work profession. The value of the importance of human relationships notes that human relationships can be a useful vehicle for creating change. Ubuntu emphasises human relationships, and the notion that a person is a person through other people resonates well with the value of the importance of human relationships. For Van Breda (2019), Ubuntu treats an individual as a unit of analysis and focuses on the relationship between people. Ubuntu has an assumption that individuals are part of the family, which is part of the community and ultimately the community is part of the broader society. Belonging is the cornerstone of Ubuntu be it to family, clan, or community. Others are social capital upon which an individual rides among traditional African communities. People rely on relatives and other members of the community in happiness and during adversity. As a consequence, maintaining a good relationship with others remains paramount. In modern world, the others may stretch to include neighbours, members of religious communities, clubs, friends, and workmates, and a social worker should consider all these when providing services to a client. However, the communal nature of African life contrasts much with the individualistic nature of life in Western communities.

4.3. Social Justice

Social workers challenge social injustice and push for change on behalf of vulnerable groups in society. They fight for equal opportunities and participation, although this has not always been the case in some African countries like Zimbabwe where violation of human rights by the ruling government is a common phenomenon. For Van Breda (2019), Ubuntu seems to be concerned with the equitable distribution of resources. Resources should be equally shared among members of the community. This is attestable in traditional rural areas of Zimbabwe, where every member of the community was allocated land by traditional leaders without discrimination. All people were also given equal access to natural resources like water sources, wild fruits, and hunting rights in wild forests. In cases of crime against humanity, the cases were heard and tried by a community court in which community elders helped the traditional leader to pass judgement. All community members are free to attend traditional courts to ensure transparency and that justice is served. Women, elderly, orphans, and other disadvantaged members of the community were given equal access to resources and treated with respect. People actually command more respect as they age, hence discrimination and maltreatment of the elderly was believed to attract misfortunes.

4.4. Dignity and Worth of the Person

Social workers respect the inherent dignity and worth of each person and treat each individual with due respect. They are cognisant of individual, cultural, and ethnic differences. According to Mupedziswa et al (2019), Ubuntu is concerned with the dignity and worth of individuals and communities. Van Breda (2019) opines that no individual rights are greater than another, that every individual in the community, whether a child or an adult, is important and should be heard and respected. This dignity and worth of a person is supported by various African proverbs. For example, among the Shona people of Zimbabwe, there is a proverb which goes “Murombo munhu haavigwe ari mupenyu” which literally means that a poor person is also a human being that cannot be buried alive. What this proverb means is that every person should be respected and treated with dignity despite their circumstances. A person is treated with dignity from the day they are born to the day they die. Even upon death a person continues to command respect among some traditional African communities as the dead are deemed to know what will be happening in the land of the living.

5. Prospects of Ubuntu in Contemporary Social Work Practice

Understanding the Ubuntu philosophy may further help social workers in several ways as shall be alluded below.

5.1. Ethical Decision Making

Social workers face complex situations that require ethical decision making as they perform their duties. These ethical dilemmas require them to make careful decisions to avoid harming the clients, themselves, or putting the profession or their agents to jeopardy. As social workers conduct thoughtful reflection and critical thinking, they may make use of Ubuntu philosophy. The author (2020) argued that principles of Ubuntu philosophy are compatible with western ethics theories such as deontology, utilitarianism, and virtue. According to Author (2020:75), an ethically correct decision girded by the Ubuntu philosophy should have the following qualities:

- Consider the good of the majority (community) over the personal good,
- The course of action taken should treat affected individuals fairly,
- There should be respect and care for all parties involved,
- The course of action should cause the least harm to the parties concerned.

Social workers may therefore consider Ubuntu as a reference framework for ethical decision making. They may do so best by establishing ways in which it blends best with existing frameworks.

5.2. Team Spirit

As alluded to earlier, togetherness in Ubuntu spirit has great potential to promote team spirit among human service professionals around the world. Risk Financial Study Association (2018) has it that Ubuntu leads to unity within a group or team and allows meaningful discussion between all members. Various African proverbs support teamwork. A good example is a Zimbabwean proverb which says “Rume rimwe harikombi churu”, literally meaning that one cannot surround an anthill. This proverb and many others encourage teamwork and collaboration in solving particular problems. Inter- and multidisciplinary collaboration is critical among some human service professionals. One particular client might require the services of a social worker, psychologist, medical practitioner, and psychiatrist for her or his problem to be addressed. Ubuntu philosophy has therefore great

potential to promote team work among these different, interdependent professionals. The ability to connect with others is a competence that social work graduates should have as networking is significant. It is common to find various organisations working in one particular community to solve a community problem.

5.4. Community Consultation

In the spirit of Ubuntu, community consultation is very important when addressing a particular problem, whether individual or community problem. An individual is intertwined with other community members and, as a result, such community members may play a significant role in solving her/his problems. In addition, community members can provide information that helps a practitioner in diagnosing an individual problem. For example, community members can help a psychiatric social worker by providing information on the behaviour of a mental patient. Although life is mostly individualistic in most Western countries, certain problems may remain affecting the entire community and may require the intervention of some community members. Social workers may therefore use some Ubuntu values when working with the community.

5.5. Management of Social Work

Management of social work remains a crucial function in the provision of social services. Social workers play managerial roles like any other manager. Ubuntu has appeared in management literature especially in South Africa (Mbigi, 1997; 2005; Luchien & Honorine, 2005; Lutz, 2009). Ubuntu has been introduced as a management concept to improve the coordination of personnel in organisations. Ubuntu management encourages employee participation and open communication between managers and their subordinates. Inclusive decision making and unity of purpose are crucial in Ubuntu management. Ubuntu promotes a good working collegial relationship in an organisation. Social workers playing supervisory and management roles may therefore adopt the Ubuntu management concept which has its roots in South Africa.

5.6. Education in Social Work

The education fraternity has not been spared by the influence of the Ubuntu philosophy. Several scholars have argued for the adoption of Ubuntu in education. For Mahaye (2018), Ubuntu in education begins with school leaders when they treat all learners equally, creating an environment conducive to teaching and learning, ensuring safety of learners and staff. Teaching staff should respect and care for themselves, as well as care for the learners irrespective of their circumstances. Teaching staff should not discriminate learners based on their background.

6. Notable Case Examples in Zimbabwe

Social workers in Zimbabwe have, in many ways, deployed Ubuntu in their practice. As alluded to earlier, Ubuntu is a core value of social work practice in Zimbabwe as spelt out by the Social Workers Code of Ethics (By-Laws of 2012). Few examples will be shared here. Social workers in Zimbabwe have supported community development projects, informal social safety nets such as mukando (revolving funds), especially among women. Several non-profit organisations in Zimbabwe, such as Plan International, World Vision and Care International, Hand in Hand Zimbabwe, Catholic Relief Services, and many others have been supporting savings and credit unions as well as revolving funds in rural communities.

Mostly guided by Ubuntu and the human rights frameworks, there have been several projects to support vulnerable children. Services rendered by social workers have ranged from educational support and general care of vulnerable children, especially orphans. Social workers in Zimbabwe have promoted community based child care as opposed to institutionalisation of vulnerable children. Members of the extended family system, as well as community members, are encouraged to support needy children through the community fostering system. This approach was helpful during the peak of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, which left many children without adult caregivers. Social workers working in Organisations such as Child Protection Society, SOS Children Village, Hope for a Child in Christ, Zimkids Orphan Trust, and many others including the Department of Social Development have fronted efforts to promote community care of vulnerable children.

Social workers are also actively involved in family mediation and conflict resolution. Through organisations such as Musasa Project, Family Support Trust, social workers have been actively involved in family building projects. In carrying out their duties, social workers place an emphasis on restoring relationships and reconciliation. In so doing, they are guided by Ubuntu principles of restorative justice, harmony, and relational identity. Social workers working in the justice system actively support the reintegration and rehabilitation of offenders. They support community acceptance of ex-convicts. Those working as pre-trial diversion officers are supporting the diversion of young offenders from formal justice system and providing rehabilitation instead of punishment. Restitution and reconciliation are also prioritised.

Social workers who work with HIV/AIDS patients have applied the ubuntu principles of compassion and mutual care. They encouraged the formation of peer support groups and community volunteerism. In addition to assisting infected individuals, this has helped fight the stigma and discrimination associated with HIV/AIDS. In addition, social workers have been active in promoting community rehabilitation for people with disabilities. Active organisations include the Jairos Jiri Association, Leonard Chesire, National Council of Disabled Persons of Zimbabwe, Danhiko Projects and many others. Inclusion and recognition of human worth have been their main principles.

Social workers working for the Department of Social Development, the key social welfare arm in Zimbabwe, are at the forefront in deploying Ubuntu during practice. Their key programmes include Assisted Medical Treatment Orders, Basic Education Assistance Module, Cash Transfers, Child Protection, and support for persons with disabilities, administering social relief programmes. Since June 2020, the Department of Social Development, which is the primary employer of social workers in Zimbabwe, has shifted from a remedial to a developmental approach to social welfare. The developmental approach resonates with Ubuntu by focusing on empowerment and considering a broader social context in addressing the root causes of vulnerability.

7. Pitfalls of Ubuntu in Social Work

Though Ubuntu philosophy has been widely praised and celebrated, it has also been criticised on a number of grounds. Financial Study Association Groningen (2018) criticised the Ubuntu philosophy for imposing the feeling of community on the expense of individual freedom. It challenged the “vagueness” of the concept. The concept is ambiguous and lacks professional operationalisation frameworks. There are no guidelines on how practitioners should implement them in practice. Although several Zimbabwean scholars have written on the concept, none of them have dared to craft actionable practical guidelines on how it should be implemented in real social work contexts. Ubuntu social work lacks structured tools and measurable outcomes. It is unable to acknowledge the value of individual freedom as it promotes groupthink and silences individual voices. It is also important to note that social work practice in Zimbabwe is still based on Western individualistic models that contradict Ubuntu principles and values. It may therefore not be compatible with the ideals of individual freedom found in liberal societies. For Financial Study Association Groningen (2018:2) “It is a vague term whose meaning can be filled with anything that revolves around the importance of interpersonal connections. This can lead to different interpretations not only of the word itself, but also of how it should be achieved”. This was corroborated by Moqutu (2018:8), who notes that “The concept of Ubuntu is difficult to translate into English because it has many meanings associated with it that do not convey its true meaning”. There are no clear guidelines on how ubuntu should be applied in social work, and it runs the risk of being a vague moral slogan rather than being an actionable framework. Metz (2011) criticised Ubuntu philosophy for being limited to traditional small-scale cultures and not suitable for large scale industrialised modern societies. In urbanised and globalised contexts, communal life is often fragmented and applying community-centric values may be difficult. Applying some principles of Ubuntu may be difficult for social workers working with younger generations, as they may resist collective obligations.

Ubuntu philosophy may be criticised for clashing with individual rights and self determination which are core tenets of the social work profession. This is because Ubuntu prioritises the collective over the individual, and this may result in suppression of the rights of minority groups. Ubuntu philosophy is romanticised as an idea and universal philosophy ignoring diversity, complexities, and inequalities within African communities. The voices of marginalised groups may therefore be silenced when social workers adamantly follow the Ubuntu philosophy. Full consideration of Ubuntu in Zimbabwean social work practice may be negatively impacted by economic constraints. The high levels of poverty in Zimbabwe reduce people's ability to help one another. In addition, rural-urban migration and economic individualism on the rise in Zimbabwe weaken support systems based on Ubuntu.

8. Conclusions

The Ubuntu philosophy is an effective way of life that has and is still shaping human life among Africans. It has great potential to inform social work practice as its principles are consistent with social work values. It can also be seen that Ubuntu has potential to influence several social work aspects in Zimbabwe, and these include, among other things, ethical decision making, social work management, community consultation, and social work research. It has been deployed in many practice contexts in Zimbabwe. However, Ubuntu philosophy is not without its share of criticism. It has been criticised on a number of grounds. Some scholars feel that it is vague and lacks rigour as a theory or concept. It is also criticised in that it requires some kind of groupthink, majoritarianism, or extreme scarification for society which is not compatible with the value of individual freedom that is among the most promising ideals in a liberal tradition. Despite these criticisms, the Ubuntu philosophy has great potential if it is included in the social work curriculum. Social workers should develop a transparent framework on how the Ubuntu philosophy should be used in their profession.

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