

Ubuntu Philosophy as a Humanistic–Existential Framework for the Fight Against the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Robert Kudakwashe Chigangaidze¹ ,
Anesu Aggrey Matanga¹,
and Tafadzwa Roniah Katsuro¹

Abstract

Ubuntu has been identified by several scholars as a philosophy that provides a framework to fight health disasters such as COVID-19. Ubuntu refers to the African worldview of seeing oneself through others. It refers to the pattern of interconnectedness between people in the form of a philosophy or worldview. Ubuntu explores concerns about cosmic and global context of life. This article stipulates that Ubuntu can provide ways to deal with challenges that emerge with the COVID-19 pandemic. Ubuntu fosters the integrated components of humanity as it appreciates the biological, psychosocial, spiritual, and environmental aspects of life. The article explores several themes such as self-awareness and societal responsibility, holism, spirituality, health promotion, food security, social justice and human rights, generosity, sharing, and teamwork. Others have advanced that Ubuntu is a philosophy to adopt in the fight against epidemics, and we seek to broaden the debate by exploring Ubuntu axiological and ontological humanistic–existential themes. Finally, the article calls for the adoption of Ubuntu philosophy in psychological and social work interventions in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic.

¹Midlands State University Faculty of Social Sciences, Gweru, Midlands Province, Zimbabwe

Corresponding Author:

Robert Kudakwashe Chigangaidze, Midlands State University Faculty of Social Sciences,
P Bag 9055, Gweru, Midlands Province, Zimbabwe.

Email: rkchigs@gmail.com

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Ubuntuism is an African philosophical framework that is characterised by interconnectedness of all things and beings; the spiritual nature of people; their collective/individual identity and the collective/inclusive nature of family structure; oneness of mind, body, and spirit; and the value of interpersonal relationships (Mungai, 2015 as cited in Zvomuya, 2020). The philosophy is known in different languages in Africa including *bomoto* (Congo); *gimuntu* (Angola); *umunthu* (Malawi); *vumutu* (Mozambique); *vumuntu*, *vhutu* (South Africa); *humhunu/ubuthosi* (Zimbabwe); *bumuntu* (Tanzania); *umuntu* (Uganda) to mention but a few (Mupedziswa et al., 2019). *Ubuntu* is rooted in the sayings, “I am a person because you are, I am because I share and participate” and “I am because of others.” There has been a broad consensus among scholars that *Ubuntu* is an African philosophy expressing humanness in the values of compassion, solidarity, harmony, consensus, hospitality, sympathy, and sharing among others (Mupedziswa et al., 2019). *Ubuntu* is considered as a philosophical base for researching indigenous psychology (Mkabela, 2015).

There are calls to adopt the African philosophy of *Ubuntu* as a framework for interventions in the COVID-19 pandemic (Mwansa, 2020; Sambala et al., 2020). *Ubuntu* can create a basis for dialogue and mutually enhancing discourse between global bioethics and indigenous cultures (Chuwa, 2014). There has been an increasing interest in the philosophy of *Ubuntu* regarding psychological and social work practice (Chigangaidze, 2021a; Kurevakwesu & Chizasa, 2020; Zvomuya, 2020). Most African academics who seek to decolonialize psychology and social work practice have depended on the philosophy of *Ubuntu* as a starting point (Hanks, 2008; Van Breda, 2019). The philosophy of *Ubuntu* has been considered in nursing, environmental management, and business ethics (Chibvongodze, 2016; Sambala et al., 2019). *Ubuntu* philosophy has been considered in health promotion and mental health (Chasi & Omarjee, 2014; Engelbrecht & Kasiram, 2012). In appraising the third force of psychology, Hanks (2008) has called for the adoption of the African humanism in the form of *Ubuntu* in psychology. The philosophy of *Ubuntu* has gained momentum in the social work fraternity to the extent that the theme for World Social Work Day 2021 celebrations read, “*Ubuntu: I am Because We are—Strengthening Social Solidarity and Global Connectedness.*” Moreover, Washington (2020) has advanced *Ubuntu* psychology of healing psychic trauma of Africans in America as well as throughout the diaspora and on the continent of Africa. It is in this context that we consider reflecting on the African philosophy of *Ubuntu* as a way forward in

the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. In doing so, we ratify the calls to adopt Ubuntu philosophy in COVID-19 interventions. Utilising philosophical reflection, we also explore the components of Ubuntu that are vital in the management of this pandemic.

The COVID-19 Pandemic

A lion's share of COVID-19 articles has explored the origins, clinical features, prevalence, and psychosocial affect of the COVID-19 pandemic (Fuentes, 2020; Krouse, 2020; Rahimi & Abadi, 2020; Rotham & Byrareddy, 2020). We are indeed in a midst of a devastating crisis, with countries implementing lockdown measures (Amin, 2020; Manderson & Wahlberg, 2020). Socioeconomic determinants such as poverty, high crime neighborhoods, poor access to healthy foods, limited education and skill level, and high unemployment adversely affect health and increase the risks of being infected by the virus (Krouse, 2020). The overwhelming nature of COVID-19 has caught many countries unprepared and has severely exposed social inequalities in global health, economic, and social welfare institutions (Banerjee & Bhattacharya, 2020; Henrickson, 2020). Multitudes of people are affected by this pandemic. Social activities, physical health, economic productivity, and political stability are threatened by this small and invisible pathogen (O'Leary & Tsui, 2020).

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has predisposed many families to excessive food shortages (Reeves & Rothwell, 2020). It has led to increased levels of anxiety as people become extremely concerned about their lives and livelihoods (Thakur & Jain, 2020). Migrants and refugees will be particularly vulnerable during the pandemic due to increased stigma, discrimination, and restrictions on their movements and rights (Krouse, 2020; Sengupta & Jha, 2020). The population density in slums is remarkably high and accelerates the proliferation of the COVID-19 virus (Wasdani & Prasad, 2020). This shows how sociostructural inequalities can exacerbate the spread of the virus. COVID-19 is associated also with an increase in suicidal behavior (Jani, 2020). There has been a call for collaborative interventions to fight the COVID-19 pandemic (Pan American Health Organization & World Health Organization, 2020). The responses to COVID-19 tend to promote "technological" and "scientific" solutions to the extent of overshadowing other approaches, including the social (Gupte & Mitlin, 2020).

Ubuntu as a Humanistic–Existential Approach

Western ethics are rooted in the individual—the autonomous and responsible decision-making individual—but African morality relies on the community.

However, this is not to say that there is no individual viewpoint in Africa, or that the community decides in the name of the subject: it is, rather, a position that views an individual as being nothing without the community, and the community being nothing without the individual (Bidima, 2002). Inasmuch as humanistic–existential theories are Western, their focus is on both the individual and the community (Payne, 2011; Stefaroi, 2016). Likewise, Ubuntu is a philosophy that emphasises the relationality between the individual and the community. The axiom that Ubuntu emphasises, *umuntu ngubuntu ngabantu*, means that a person is a person through other people. Relatedly, humanistic characteristics include human dignity, wholeness, social responsibility, generosity, compassion, stewardship-sustainability, altruism, peace, social, and emotional intelligence (Melé, 2016; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). In the same vein, Ubuntu emphasizes similar humanistic values (Letseka, 2012; Mupedziswa et al., 2019; Van Breda, 2019).

Considering the above, we seek to conceptualize African Ubuntu philosophy as respecting the following components that are significant in fighting the COVID-19 pandemic:

- Holism
- Self-awareness and social responsibility
- Generosity, sharing, and team spirit
- Social justice and human rights
- Health promotion
- Environmental justice and personal hygiene
- Food security
- Spirituality

It is with this understanding that we seek to explore the relevance of Ubuntu philosophy to the COVID-19 pandemic. The following section will explore the above elements and how they relate to the fight against COVID-19 pandemic.

Holism

A “re-examination of indigenous knowledge systems can bring us back to our roots and refresh us with their purity and holism” (Edwards et al., 2004, p. 17). An Ubuntu based healing practice has, as its goal, “personal integration, environmental equilibrium, social harmony and harmony between the individual and both the environment and community” (Kasenene, 1994, p. 2 also cited in Chuwa, 2014, p. 28). Ubuntu is holistic in nature (Hanks, 2008). *Ubu-* in the word Ubuntu specifies a oneness, while *-ntu* specifies a wholeness. Ubu is oriented toward ntu as “being becoming whole” (Tschaepe,

2013). Wholeness is the feature of an African view in its totality and the concept of a person (Msengana, 2006). In Ubuntu, any attempt to effect healing cannot ignore human and environmental healing (Chuwa, 2014). Put simply, Ubuntu fosters the integrated components of humanity as it appreciates the biological, psychosocial, spiritual, and environmental aspects of life. The COVID-19 pandemic is beyond the biomedical approach and requires that spiritual, socioeconomic, psychological, and technological interventions be considered (Amin, 2020; Chigangaidze, 2021b; Rogers & Power, 2020; Wasdani & Prasad, 2020). There is need to address the biopsychosocial, environmental, and spiritual elements of humanity in addressing the problems associated with this pandemic.

Self-awareness and Societal Responsibility

The African philosophy of Ubuntu emphasizes the interconnectedness of self with society (Le Grange, 2011). Ubuntu as a construct is based on the axiom “one’s humanness, one’s personhood is dependent upon one’s relationship with others” (Khoza, 2011, p. 439). This axiom illustrates the need to safeguard others from infection. If it so happens that one has tested positive of COVID-19, they should bear societal responsibility to safeguard others by means of self isolation. Ubuntu’s emphasis on humanity suggests that whatever is good to humanity is good to Ubuntu, and whatever harms humanity harms Ubuntu (Mabvurira, 2020). The philosophy of Ubuntu emphasizes brotherly care and concern for others (Broodryk, 2008; Molose et al., 2018; Mugumbate & Nyanguru, 2013). Ubuntu becomes a safeguarding philosophy in this matter and calls on individuals and groups to protect each other from infection.

Ubuntu is about safeguarding humanity, and any behavior seeking to spread the virus knowingly becomes *umhuka* (being an animal)—the opposite of Ubuntu. In Western communities, this can translate to deviant behavior. Community is one of the inherent values in the philosophy of Ubuntu (Mupedziswa et al., 2019). The concept of social responsibility, in Ubuntu, is engraved in the value of community. In the interests of societal responsibility and safeguarding humanity, when one tests positive or presents with symptoms of infection, they are expected to self-isolate, adhere to lockdown regulations, access medical treatment, and wear a face mask. Thus, it is *umhuka* to knowingly spread the virus to others or to risk doing so by not self-isolating.

Furthermore, Ubuntu promotes the practice of the village taking care of the sick and ensuring their safety. It should be noted that Ubuntu safeguards human life first and emphasises the safety of the community. Using Ubuntu

to promote public health is more important than individual well-being (Sambala et al., 2020). In the same manner, Ubuntu promotes social responsibility in those who are sick. Thus, in Ubuntu, the healthy and those who are sick have a relational mandate to safeguard public health for the greater good of community. Ubuntu promotes one with “normative principles for responsible decision-making and action, for oneself and for the good of the whole community” (Ntibagirirwa, 1999, p. 104). The ethically mature people in Ubuntu do things not because they are expected to do so, but because it is the right thing to do for both themselves and the community (Chuwa, 2014).

Generosity, Sharing, and Team Spirit

Ubuntu reflects the human characteristics of generosity, caring, and consideration toward others (Broodryk, 2008; Mabvurira, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic is severely affecting poor families (Banerjee & Bhattacharya, 2020; Krouse, 2020; Reeves & Rothwell, 2020). Living conditions during the apartheid in South Africa were difficult and marginalized families only survived on account of Ubuntu, as the community responded by sharing with those in need (Mhlaba, 2001). In the same spirit of Ubuntu, communities should provide for marginalized families while adhering to the COVID-19 regulations. Ubuntu calls for extended family members to cater for the welfare of their relatives even in difficult moments. Ubuntu means we are in this together; your problems are also our problems, and therefore we help one another out of a crisis. The African people learn how to survive through brotherly care and not individual self-reliance. Through a collective and collaborative spirit, Africans have developed a shared will to survive. Ubuntu principles are marked by their humanity and advancement of team spirit (Molose et al., 2018). We should insist on the values of international exchange, mutual trust, and mutual help. We can learn from one another and share experience and expertise (O’Leary & Tsui, 2020).

There are calls for developed countries to express gestures of generosity to developing nations, especially those in Africa. The United States of America and China should focus on sharing knowledge, resources, and experiences; collaborate and engage in resource mobilization like they did in the fight against Ebola Virus Disease and help African countries to fight the pandemic (Christensen, 2020). We mourn the decision of the United States of America to withdraw funding to the World Health Organization (Rauhala et al., 2020) at a time of crisis. Generosity and sharing will help lighten the burden of the pandemic, especially in developing nations. We acknowledge that efforts of generosity and sharing should not be hindered by corruption, which is rampant in developing nations. Ubuntu is against selfishness and promotes

considering others (Mugumbate & Nyanguru, 2013). Thus, when gestures of generosity and sharing are expressed, governments and authorities should protect the interests of people and not widen health inequalities through corruption and stealing from the same donations.

Social Justice and Human Rights

“Ubuntu-ness” is a call to put principles in action to practice politics with conscience (Murithi, 2007, p. 285). Ubuntu revolves around fairness and justice (Kgatla, 2016). Ubuntu is about rendering to others what they deserve, respecting human dignity, and ensuring equality and equity. The African philosophy of Ubuntu has the capacity to contribute to the universalism of human rights through “multiculturalization” (Murithi, 2007). It is inherent in the philosophy of Ubuntu to respect human dignity (Akinola & Uzodike, 2017; Broodryk, 2008; Sambala et al., 2019; Van Breda, 2019). The outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic has also seen a rise in racial discrimination, stigmatization, oppression, and domestic violence (Kumar, 2020; Lokot & Avakyan, 2020). Human rights are essential in shaping the pandemic response, both for the public health emergency and the broader impact on people’s well-being (United Nations, 2020; World Health Organisation, 2020). Psychologists and social workers have been called to fight against social injustice and oppression during the pandemic (O’Leary & Tsui, 2020). Thus, Ubuntu is a relational philosophy to promote peace and dialogue thereby enhancing social justice and human rights (Okoro & Nkama, 2018).

Health Promotion

Ubuntu is intrinsically related to the notion of health promotion (Chasi & Omarjee, 2014; Sabone, 2009). Importantly, other scholars observe that:

Through its emphasis on essential humanity and human essentials, *Ubuntu* constitutes our original method of promoting health that is concerned with fundamental structures of being human, without which our human species would not survive in its present form: the giving, receiving and sharing of human care, support, companionship, help and healing. This is the essential theme of all the caring, helping professions such as nursing, medicine, psychology, social work, and theology. It is also the basis of all other academic and professional disciplines, from biochemistry through law to sociology. (Edwards et al., 2004, 19-20)

The above sentiment expresses that *Ubuntu* is fundamentally related to health promotion as it values the virtues of sharing, giving hope and care, help, and healing. Social workers are calling communities and governments to adopt these same virtues during the pandemic and while observing COVID-19 prevention regulations (O’Leary & Tsui, 2020).

Environmental Health and Personal Hygiene

The concept of *Ubuntu* relates not only to human–human relations but also to human–environment relations (Chibvongodze, 2016). *Ubuntu* respects the mother earth and, in this way, essentially reflects some elements of the “Pachamama” concept from Ecuador (Chigangaidze, 2021a). *Ubuntu* emphasizes ecological justice and environmental friendliness, as these also ensure the sustainable survival of humanity on earth. It is from the environment that we attain food, water, and air. *Ubuntu* advocates for sustainable provision of water and sanitation services, which are vital in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. Relatedly, *Ubuntu* emphasizes issues of personal hygiene and cleanliness, which are also essential in the fight against COVID-19 pandemic. One of the lessons drawn from the COVID-19 pandemic is that of regeneration and not extraction: producing in balance with nature, rather than destroying the ecosystems on which humans depend (Brescia, 2020). Increasingly, social work has brought attention to eco-justice issues, especially the need to protect the environment and prevent the proliferation of diseases (O’Leary & Tsui, 2020).

Food Security

The philosophy of *Ubuntu* encompasses the concept of *Zunde ramambo* in Zimbabwe and other parts of Africa. *Zunde ramambo* emphasizes working together to grow food that is kept for distribution to those in need (Mugumbate & Nyanguru, 2013). In line with environmental justice, one of the reasons *Ubuntu* respects nature because it is the source of food and sustenance for human survival (Samkange & Samkange, 1980). The COVID-19 pandemic has also become a threat to food security for many households (Matias et al., 2020; Reeves & Rothwell, 2020). Malnutrition due to lack of food access has also been implicated in the severity of complications associated with COVID-19. It is important that communities, government authorities, nongovernmental organizations, and businesses consider humanitarian interventions that enhance food access during and after this pandemic. *Ubuntu* preserves humanity through ensuring food security as evidenced by concepts such as the *zunde ramambo*.

Spirituality

Spirituality has been conceptualised as a “personal quest for understanding answers to ultimate questions about life, about meaning, and about relationship to the sacred and transcendent, which may (or may not) lead to or arise from the development of religious rituals and formation of community” (Koenig et al., 2001, p. 18). Spirituality in the COVID-19 pandemic is a source of hope, encouragement, and positive energy. Religiosity and spirituality seem to have a pivotal role in the relief of suffering, in health outcomes, and in minimizing the consequences of social isolation (Lucchetti et al., 2020). The theme of spirituality is essential in the management of pandemics. Current interests in spirituality are evident in social science and theological scholarship (Chigangaidze, 2021a; Mabvurira, 2020; Nowakowski-Sims & Kumar, 2020; Van Breda, 2019). Ubuntu emphasizes that it is the African way of life to be spiritually accountable to the welfare of others in the community. African spirituality helps in teamwork, which promotes the advancement of peace building (Masango, 2006) that is pivotal in any response to a pandemic.

Implications

Psychologists and social workers have called for the adoption of Ubuntu in the professions’ theoretical framework and axiology (Chigangaidze, 2021a; Hanks, 2008; Mabvurira, 2020; Mkabela, 2015; Mupedziswa et al., 2019; Van Breda, 2019; Zvomuya, 2020). This article has offered a broadened scope for the use of Ubuntu as a theoretical framework for addressing COVID-19 and other pandemics. It is essential that psychologists and social workers reflect on ways in which the philosophy of Ubuntu affects human behavior in the social environment. Essentially, Ubuntu philosophy appreciates the perspective of the person-in-the-environment, which is beyond the biomedical approach. We have argued that the philosophy of Ubuntu can contribute to an effective framework in the fight against health pandemics. Utilising the reflection on Ubuntu themes, we have addressed the relevance of this African philosophy in eco-spiritual, developmental, clinical, humanistic–existential, critical psychology, and social work, among other fields. Contextualising Ubuntu as a humanistic–existential approach is not to limit its application in other schools of thought such as the biological and behavioral approaches; in fact, Ubuntu can facilitate a biopsychosocial approach. The application of Ubuntu to psychological and sociological scholarship is still in its infancy. There is significant potential in applying Ubuntu within both practice and education.

Conclusion

In this article, we have posited that Ubuntu is a philosophy that is relevant in addressing the COVID-19 pandemic. We have explored several themes of Ubuntu related to the COVID-19 pandemic. We explored the relationship of Ubuntu to holism; self-awareness and social responsibility, generosity, sharing, and teamwork; social justice and human rights; food security; spirituality; environmental health and personal hygiene; and health promotion. We call for the adoption of Ubuntu philosophy in psychological and social work interventions in the fight against COVID-19 pandemic. Ubuntu inherently relates to the humanistic–existential concern with human welfare. Fellow colleagues: the pandemic requires team spirit, holistic service provision, and addressing socioeconomic injustices.

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ORCID iD

Robert Kudakwashe Chigangaidze  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3597-8776>

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Author Biographies



Robert Kudakwashe Chingangaidze is a versatile social work practitioner and scholar. His research interests are in Ubuntu, developmental-clinical social work, human rights, public health and mental health, humanistic social work, and environmental social work. His approach to practice is inspired by sociological imagination and critical theories.



Anesu Aggrey Matanga is a lecturer at the Midlands State University School of Social Work, in Zimbabwe. He is a holder of a master of science in clinical social work and has a keen interest in researching on Indigenous knowledge systems, Ubuntu, drug and substance abuse as well as mental health issues.



Tafadzwa Roniah Katsuro is a practicing clinical social worker in Zimbabwe. She has keen interests in research areas around drug and substance abuse, health, child protection, and environmental social work. She is also an international practitioner registered with Social Work England.