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Virtuality and subjective realities: A freedom-based *ergon* for the modern African parent†

Thando Nkohla-Ramunenyiwa

Department of Computer Science, UNISA, South Africa
Correspondence: thandonkohla@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT: Schmidt introduces the Aristotelian term "koinonia" as denoting a political community which aims to achieve a common good for society as a whole. A good that promotes the flourishing of every party involved. In addition, Schmidt adopts further insight about the term by engaging more thoroughly in discourse about it, realising that this easily extends to the term taking on tenets of communities such as a family. Within family, the terms address even more specific relationships, such as husband and wife, parents and children, sibling relationships, etc. Essentially, Aristotle's premise of common good persists even in these specific relationships, so much so that Schmidt highlights the pillars which sustain the pursuit of the common good. These pillars are justice, fairness and reciprocity, all grounded in good will and fellowship. This goodwill and fellowship among African parents in a community is to assist each other in raising children in the community and ensure they are grounded in African values, hence the African proverb "a single hand cannot raise a child". In fact, biological parents may draw from the knowledge of the elderly in the community who can assist in instilling values in the youth. The importance of this is that the elderly in African communities are valued not only as those who sustain order in the community, but are also the custodians of African value systems which younger generations should ideally be grounded in. With the introduction of technology, the digital divide seems to be presenting a challenge when it comes to the solidarity of African parents, as a village, raising their children. Hence, a strategy is required for modern African parents to not abandon this solidarity afforded by their cultural values. The communal way of raising their children should persist in order to preserve the African value of parental solidarity in raising children, even in the midst of what technology and the digital divide presents to the African community.

KEYWORDS: African communities, agency, child, freedom, parent, subjective realities

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Introduction

The typical structure of an African family is bigger than the nuclear family with two children and two adults, namely a mother and father. The African family extends beyond this. It quite often includes relatives, extended family, and the community at large. Nonceba Mabovula (2011) mentions Waghid et al. (2005, p. 108) and draws attention to the phrase "your child is mine [and] my child is yours" as the premise of African parenting. This emphasises the collective parenting of an African child. To clarify, in African society, the community raises the child, not just the child's biological parents. The community as a whole has the responsibility of ensuring that children in the community become adults who will make a positive impact in society, which echoes the sentiments of Aristotle's "koinonia" in its aim to address human flourishing, as mentioned by Schmidt (1986). The responsibility to achieve this should stem from the home with parents, how parents raise their children and what kind of values they instil in their children. Further, these values are instilled by the extended family, relatives and the greater community. These values in African communities are mentioned by Mabovula (2011, p. 38) as being founded on an "ethic of reciprocity", "intersubjectivity", "cooperation", "collective existence", and "collaboration and solidarity", among other terms. These values have created a reality for Africans and embrace proximity as a necessary and practical condition to live according to these aforementioned values. With the digital divide, the parental solidarity and value of raising African children as a village could potentially be in a compromised position. This is because the digital divide brings a division with a divide that challenges the solidarity of the African community's parenting value. A value that forms a huge part of how the African community functions. In addition, this functioning is indicative of a solidarity among the individual parts which make the whole community function. In the parent/child relationship, the parents as individual parts of the whole function in solidary as they raise their children communally. The word used by Geschiere (2020) to illustrate parts contributing to the functioning of a whole is the word kinship, where the interrelatedness of individuals in home and community are a sum of the whole society, a sum of the whole contributing to the African community as a functional system.

Botha et al. (2018) highlight that the individual parts that make this whole function need to develop themselves and have a healthy existence as they continue to contribute to the whole system of family and the community at large.

This functionality is a known reality which has served as a primary reality for African parenting which now co-exists with a virtual reality brought on by technology. Further, this virtual reality is real in its own right by virtue of being accessed and experienced. Horsfield (2002) defines virtual reality as an intricate space that is immaterial and intangible, but human beings can engage in it, for example, through social media. To further elaborate on virtual reality is Pierre Levy (1998), who states that virtuality is instead a different kind of actuality, because its intangible nature allows it to stretch its realm beyond the confines of space and time which characterise tangible reality. Horsfield and Levy's rendition of reality translates to the idea that reality cannot be boxed into tangibility; it can be defined outside of that box. The importance of this view is that it encapsulates the idea that something is real not necessarily because it is tangible, but more so because one is able to access and experience it.

For this reason, the African and virtual community are real on the grounds of access and experience. Human beings access and experience these communities because of shared interests and values, which is essentially what makes both spaces communities. Introna and Brigham (2007) articulate a Heideggerian inspired notion of community, which is that it is a space entered by individuals with the intent to have shared interests and values founded on shared objectives and meaning, and regular engagements with each other. Correspondingly, Jenkins (2019) mentions a communal engagement of living life, a common sharing and participation of life in the community, a collective effort (in raising children as well) in living with each other, a rendition of koinonia which speaks to this. In addition, it is a shared sense of belonging that encompasses individuals in that community, caring for each other and being concerned about each other's well-being (Block, 2018).

Hence, the shared values, interests and objectives of African communities are not the same as those of virtual communities. African communities, like other communities, have a shared history and culture which could assist with shared values and interest of community dwellers. Virtual communities, on the other hand, do not have members who share a history or culture that informs their value system. It is literally a global village which does not specifically cater for a specific society's values and interests, but allows a flexibility for those who are able to access it. The challenge of such a setting is that grey areas arise when it comes to accountability. With diverse backgrounds coupled by sometimes unknown intentions for accessing and engaging in a virtual community, being accountable to a common interest of care to attain and sustain a healthy, functional community becomes questionable.

Further, the access to this virtual community is impacted by the digital divide, which in its nature includes and excludes. If this happens on a parental level where, in solidarity, adults are raising children, some African parents will be included, and others excluded from guiding their children in virtual space (a space where most children spend their time, as revealed in the fieldwork by Nkohla-Ramunenyiwa, 2017. As a result, this defeats the purpose of solidarity that parents want to achieve in their communal parenting. Consequentially, this potentially raises how the co-existence of (and access to) both of these communities can create challenges in how African parents raise their children in solidarity. It becomes challenging for a village to raise a child if the village is digitally divided. Thus, the next section will discuss more thoroughly the digital divide and its impact on African parents' parenting founded on solidarity and unity in their child(ren).

Digital divide

Michael Gurstein (2003) defines the "digital divide" as the divide between the haves and have-nots, the skilled and the unskilled, those in rural areas and those in the suburbs, the literate and the illiterate, male and female, and those literate in English when it comes to technology. Echoing similar sentiments, Van Dijk (2016) provides a more refined definition, adding that the gap between the haves and have-nots raises ethical concerns regarding social inclusion and exclusion when it comes to access to information and communication technology. Consequently, inequalities in society arise because of this access, or lack. In addition, the definitions of the digital divide formerly mentioned address mainly the societal and socio-economic dimensions. Correspondingly this divide can be addressed from a generational and digital literacy level in society, and especially within the family. With the introduction of technology, terms of categorisation based specifically on generations and digital literacy are digital natives, and digital strangers denote a divide. Judd (2018) traces these terms to Prensky (2001), who made these terms popular, where Prensky defines digital natives as children and teenagers who are born into technological development, and hence in general have a more natural and instinctual manner of using technology, making them competent in their digital literacy. Digital immigrants/strangers on the other hand were born into a world that is not as technologically advanced and hence have fewer natural means of using technology, making them not so competent in their digital literacy. By comparison, there are exceptional cases where there are digital natives who are not digitally literate, and digital immigrants and strangers who are digitally literate. Nkohla-Ramunenyiwa (2017) mentions a professor in the field of Information Systems who has access to and knowledge about virtual space but is indifferent to it all.

This divide between generations in the household is unnatural, not only because it is afforded by technology, but also because if there are divisions in parts that make a whole, then how will the whole function? John Mbiti (1969) articulated how this functionality in African families and communities is reliant on proximity and collectiveness, embracing the idea that each member of the community is an individual that makes part of a whole. Hence, being divided and excluded from the whole can be an infringement on an individual's growth and development.

Keller et al. (2005) traced this in the Nso people in an African community in Nigeria. In this community, proximity is an important element for the mother and infant among the Nso community in particular. From infancy, this culture views the mother and infant relation through the following proximity cornerstones: "primary care, body contact and body stimulation" (Keller et al., 2005, p. 174). This mother and infant proximity is not exclusive to the Nso people; it is also encouraged in hospitals in South Africa when a mother gives birth. After birth, the baby is placed on the mother's chest as first body contact for the baby. Consequently, this first bodily contact marks the introduction

of proximity for human beings, proximity meant to create security, a powerful loving bond, and a space of growth and development for the baby. In addition to this, Adjei et al. (2016) state that (social) proximity is essential to create trust between family members, hence creating a durability and security in the relationship. Accordingly, proximity becomes an essential and natural feature of human relatedness and complements the tenet of koinonia about human flourishing.

The discussion of the digital divide requires a particular focus and elaboration on the important areas. This will be discussed in the following sections.

Access and technology

Access based on socio-economics and identity is what causes the digital divide. The "have-nots" do not have the same kind of access to technology as the "haves". Further, parents with particular levels of education cannot access employment that will give them access to certain kinds of technology. Annika Bergstrom (2015) confirms this by stating that educated citizens have a higher chance of using the internet than citizens who are not educated. In addition, white-collar workers use the internet at a higher rate than blue-collar workers. It follows from this that among parents (digital immigrants and strangers in broad terms), there is a digital divide which allows the compromise in the solidarity of African parents (raising their children as a village).

Parents who are white-collar workers also have higher purchasing power and are better able to access the virtual space that their children are constantly engaging with using top-of-the-range information communication technology (ICT) devices. Such parents can use this access as a means of enlightening themselves about what needs to be done when it comes to parenting a digital native. The opposite is true with a blue-collar worker parent, who will not be empowered to guide their own child or children in virtual space, but will also fail to help a neighbour with raising a child. If they do access virtual space, it will be through an ICT device that does the bare minimum. In developed countries, however, Gopaldas (2019) reveals that access to technology is incorporated into the daily lives of citizens almost to a point where that is expected to be the case. This expectation for technology to be so incorporated into the daily lives of developed countries ironically conforms to a technology unity that African communities would appreciate for parents to raise their digital natives together.

With the digital divide being more prevalent and aggressive in developing countries, the simultaneous divisions in both communities and among parents raising their children as a village needs to be addressed. Moreover, Balistreri and Liberati (2020, p. v) mention scholars such as Alberto Romele and Dario Rodighiero who emphasise how technology reduces the subject to the fate of "personalization without personality", yet this fate translates into a subjective reality for each parent because of access and the kind of experience they derive from that. For instance, these subjective realities do not only mean that the solidarity is further compromised because of access, but it also means that the element of agency from the parent's side should be considered.

Agency and subjective realities

The definition of agency which best fits the notion of subjective realities experienced by parents with regard to access and technology is by Quante (2004). Quante shares Hegel's philosophical view of agency, stating that agency premised on a "subjective will" (2004, p. 7). This "subjective will", for Hegel, is an essential criterion for one to be classified as an agent that performs a particular act. When a "will" is subjective, it is important to understand that the discretion lies with an individual person about the choice of action chosen from other actions. This subjective will presents itself within the subjective reality of parents when it comes to virtual space in particular, as it is created by access and technology.

Access and technology are fundamental in creating a structure within which a parent uses their agency. With the digital divide being based on the socio-economic standing of an individual, in this case a parent, it is based on conforming to a classed society. A divide of such a nature would not thrive in an economy which does not have a huge gap between the rich and the poor. Dornan (2002) emphasises how the resources of an agent (in this case access and technology) either empower or disempower the agent. In a classed society, the agency of a parent with higher income is enabled by their resources, while the agency of the lower-income parents is circumscribed by lack of resources, which binds them in the class social structure (Dornan, 2002).

It becomes concerning when parents who are not empowered technologically are discriminated against and excluded from the virtual access which could assist them in guiding their children in the virtual space that is constantly accessible to the children. What is important is that being blue- or white-collar workers should not place a binary experience of virtuality for parents, but rather show that there they are virtual realities within this binary, just like any other space and with any other agent. Karp and Masolo (2000) state that agents are culturally shaped by factors which have an influence on one's perception of the world, such as particular rights, abilities and responsibilities. These rights, abilities and responsibilities for parents pertain to their parenting, and an integral element to add to this is freedom. Without freedom, the parental solidarity needed to raise a child as a village continues to be compromised.

Freedom and responsibility

Rights, abilities and responsibilities are better attained when the agent is free. Hegel's concept of agency encourages one to draw from his concept of freedom. In keeping with Hegel's concept of agency as requiring a "subjective will", his concept of freedom speaks to this "subjective will". According to Baynes (2002, p. 2), Hegel's concept of freedom is articulated as "being at home with oneself in another". This freedom touches on the subjective nature of agency, as "being at home" is a subjective experience. For instance, freedom in this sense embraces the self in unity with the other, which embraces the solidarity of African parents raising each other's children as a village. Technology yet again compromises the solidarity of African parenting by challenging this notion of freedom. With a digital divide prompted mostly by access and socio-economics, freedom becomes personal, and not a concept unifying the self with the other. It is personal in the sense that access is based on what each person as an

individual has access to and what their socio-economic status can do for them individually.

Even so, this personalised freedom defined by access will not provide a sufficient grasp on the responsibility that parents have regarding their children navigating virtual space. A personalised freedom produces a personalised responsibility. If the responsibility of a parent is personalised, then it may not stretch far enough to unify with the responsibility of the child. This unity of responsibility is needed, especially in the context of African value systems premised on communitarianism. Sadlier and de Beer (2014) argue that modern-day children have become digital natives/citizens, so the unity of the parent's responsibility is to familiarise themselves with this digital space. They must also teach their children to be responsible citizens in this space. Typically, their responsibility should be met by the responsibility of their child to take on the teaching of the parent and apply it.

This perception of responsibility echoes Levinas' view on responsibility mentioned by Campbell (1994), which places the existence of a human being as being reliant on the being of the other, a responsibility which exists by virtue of the responsibility towards the other. Responsibility is not valid until a moral agent sees themselves in the other and therefore assumes responsibility for the other (Campbell, 1994). In African parenting, this responsibility for the other is not just extended to their own biological children, but also to the children of their relatives and neighbours in the community. Conversely, portraying this extended responsibility into virtual spaces is restricted by the digital divide where access can either make the responsibility easier or more difficult to achieve. With the introduction of technology and virtual space, this responsibility of parents extends simultaneously with the extension of the realms of society from tangible, physical African community to an intangible, virtual and/or digital community.

Analysis: The co-existence of two realities

The reality of the digital divide is that it affects both the tangible African community as well as the intangible, virtual, digital community. Levy's statement about both communities being different kinds of reality is seen in this. For the intangible community to mirror this socio-economic division evident in tangible space is quite telling. The exclusion that the digital divide has created for blue-collar worker parents is based largely on access and socio-economics, both in tangible and intangible spaces. The Industrial Revolution that placed Europe ahead in terms of the economy eventually reached the shores of Africa and introduced a classed society that still poses a challenge to the communitarian value system. Accordingly, there is no encouragement of an ethic of relatedness. Instead, an opportunity made itself available which caused a division, based on class in particular, to materialise. This introduction to a classed society led to the introduction of technology, consequently creating a comfortable reception for the digital community into Africa.

The solidarity of parents in the African community is instituted on the common objective and value of parenting children in the community as a village, in line with the African value system. This has been a generational establishment with the elderly in African communities as the custodians of this value system, and who have passed these values down from generation to generation. Conversely, digital communities such as social media are not established on a generational formation, but on the design of an engineer or software developer who has no vested interest in the well-being of the digital community except monetary gain. In addition, the value system of Africa is based on the pillars mentioned by Ndegwah and Kroesen (2012). They claim that African parenting is centred on three pillars: respecting elders; belief in a higher power; and community-centred life, all of which sustain and maintain the order in the community. Social media platforms have users who can easily do as they please because the "value system" is based on monetary, capitalistic agendas. Migone (2007) confirms this by stating that one of the goals of capitalism (including social media) is based on ensuring that consumers increase their consumption. The more social media users consume time in that virtual space, the more capitalists benefit financially. Increased consumption is what maintains this "order" of capitalism. Children as digital natives are usually the consumers who dominate in numbers when it comes to consumerism. This socially removes African children from their communitarian setting and affects their function in the bigger picture of how African communities maintain order and sustain themselves.

Jerald Hughes and Reiner Lang (2003) state that the digital community entails an interchange between humans via information transmitted electronically. Bearing in mind its nature, which is electronic/digital, Hughes and Lang (2003) reveal how the digital community allows for a different set of values which are not necessarily used in the real world and hence influence their behaviour. For example, the normative values in the real, tangible world are accompanied by the face-to-face encounters with the other. That face-to-face encounter starts in a human being's infancy when their first point of contact is the secure and loving touch of their mother. This alone is not only a substantial difference, but a difference exposing that this first physical touch with the mother has a fundamental meaning and power in the human-to-human physical contact that technology cannot live up to. Adjei et al. (2016) state that (social) proximity not only creates an environment of security and trust, but is essential for a functional community. When individual parts which make a whole are in proximity, then that becomes essential to create trust between family members. The result of this creates a stability and security in the relationship. Accordingly, proximity becomes an essential feature of human relatedness and complements the tenet of koinonia about human flourishing.

Seeing the face of the other would require more respect for the other than not seeing the face of the other at all. The digital community can be an environment which can breed values against respect, creating a different set of values which have no regard for the dignity of the other, such as the disrespect that is found in the ill-treatment of others in the digital community. Disrespect in this environment comes with the idea that there is no physical, embodied experience which can make a badly behaved child be accountable or responsible for their actions. This leads to a consideration of the architecture of the digital community.

Zizi Papacharissi (2009) emphasises that the unconventional architecture of digital communities is what has given room for human beings to behave the way they do when navigating that space. She mentions how the architecture of social networks, including anonymity, permits a user to freely express himself or herself and probably not fear the ramifications as their identity is protected by the structure of social media platforms.

Unlike the digital native, digital immigrants and strangers who were not born into this kind of technological development have to find a way to adjust and incorporate this into their parenting style. This is the challenge that comes with parenting modern children. This clearly suggests an altering of African parenting, especially because the digital community that modern African children are engaged in does not complement the African value system. Moreover, this altering is also prompted by the subjective realties introduced to modern African parents which have compromised the solidarity of parents raising their children as a village.

Jonas (1984) understood the nature of technology and how it comes with altered human action which necessitates an altered ethics that will move with the times. In the case of the modern African parent, this involves being responsible in parenting children both in their capacity to navigate their African society and also morally navigate the virtual space that does not have a form of authority that will monitor the behaviour of their children. To remedy the compromise of parental solidarity, the modern African parent needs to find a way to preserve parental solidarity in the midst of the digital divide. In fact, this digital divide prompted by access affects the freedom in the agency of parents who are less educated and with lower incomes.

The way forward: A freedom-based ergon

Amartya Sen (1999) identifies a crucial starting point to achieve freedom for developing countries, such as those countries in African and Asian continents. Being so immersed in poverty and social injustices such as child labour, Sen realises that social ills in developing countries serve as a bondage for human development. Terjesen (2004, p. 345) says that such bondage could be identified as an "unfreedom", as it lowers or even hinders the ability for human beings to thrive in life, essentially becoming "capability depriv[ed]" (p. 346). In an attempt to provide an intervention to address phenomena which enable capability deprivation, Sen argues that economic intervention for developing countries would not do sufficient justice to dealing with the problem. The intervention required, according to Sen, is a holistic development of human beings that will free them to be capable of living a life where they are able to achieve their dreams. This holistic development involves government creating "political freedom", "economic facilities", "social opportunities" and "protective security", to name a few (Terjesen, 2004, p. 345). Ultimately this is how Sen arrives at his theory "development as freedom".

The importance of Sen's recognition that development is required as a starting of a freedom beyond financial freedom is compelling, even in the light of the ruthless digital divide that constantly feeds off the many "unfreedoms" in developing countries in particular. The "unfreedoms" of lack of social opportunities and limited access to technology in poor, rural areas and low-income homes has excluded a large number of Africans out of some economic participation and development. This digital divide that continues to discriminate against the poor majority in African goes beyond socio-economics, exposing the non-economic "unfreedoms" which continue to affect Africans to the core of their value systems. The digital divide instead creates subjective realities for parents based on access informed by socio-economic backgrounds.

The complexity of subjective realities is that they challenge a common starting point to preserve the parental solidarity which has been part and parcel of African communities for many generations, mainly because these subjective realities create an "unfreedom" for parents who have limited or no access to technology when it comes to their responsibility as parents with children navigating virtual space/ digital communities. Addressing the "unfreedoms" feeding the digital divide will enable African parents to obtain the freedom to not only place African solidarity parenting in virtual space, but most importantly doing so in a manner that addresses subjective realities created by socio-economic inequality. When these subjective realities are addressed, African parents will all have reasonable access to technology that will allow for parental solidarity to exist in virtual space as well. This suggests that the co-existence of the intangible and tangible spaces that their children are confronted with on a daily basis will be founded on the same value system.

The unexclusive co-existence of these two realities that modern African children engage in call for an additional act from the parent. Spreading the concept of African parental solidarity is a starting point, especially considering the importance of "development of freedom" to arrive at that point, as mentioned previously. An acknowledgment needs to be made about how parenting in two co-existent communities simultaneously is a relatively new situation which has altered the status quo and needs an "altered ethic", as mentioned by Jonas (1984), to address this new normal. What is needed from the modern African parent is their function as modern parents in light of this situation.

To address this, Aristotle's function/ergon argument needs to be considered. Aristotle's inquiry about what the best thing is for human beings inspired the conception of the ergon argument. Baker (2015) states that upon this inquiry, Aristotle realised that it would be a strenuous task to list what human beings collectively think is the best thing for human beings. It would be challenging for human beings to reach a consensus about what is best for human beings. In his quest to tackle this conundrum, Aristotle apprehends that what sets human beings apart from other species is their ability to reason. If that is what sets human beings apart, then they might as well excel in reasoning, and from that comes living well. That would make reasoning well an ongoing activity for human beings (Baker, 2015). This, for Aristotle is achieving the highest good, which is the function of human beings. This is why Baker (2015, p. 1) presents Aristotle's "ergon argument" as (literally translated as) the "function argument".

As a modern African parent, functioning well means that reasoning well as an ongoing activity is important to keep up with parenting children exposed to two different communities. Parents need to pay attention to both communities. With addressed freedoms, the financially well-off parent will be freed from non-economic freedoms, and the parents with who experience financial "unfreedom" will be freed from that. From there on, the solidarity of modern African parenting is functional in co-existing communities where all their children require guidance. Even so, the parents' function also incorporates preserving their freedoms to enable them to balance investment needed in both spaces where their children are active. This will be a freedom to restore African solidarity of modern African parents in raising their children and also attain "koinonia"

– which is the human good for both parents and children in the modern African community.

Conclusion

Aristotle's vision of the human good "koinonia" is an inspirational ideal for any community. In line with Aristotle's articulation of this concept, good will and fellowship are seen to be praised in the parental solidarity of African parenting. Complimentary to koinonia, African communitarian values aim for the common good for all in society and that is entrenched in the communitarian values. Even in African parenting of parents raising their children as a community speaks to this. When technology introduces subjective realities based on access informed by socio-economics, the common good for society at large becomes compromised. Instead, it is the goal of capitalism to thrive at the expense of the generational value system which has been in existence in Africa. The goal is also for capitalists who create social media in virtual spaces to make children consumers of these platforms from an early age. The addition of the screen can then possibly start from an early age. When children have so much access to digital communities, they can easily find it a more reliable space at any space and time. Further, parents are pressured to be as easily available and accessible to their children in the same way that technology is to them. This is why the role of the African parent in discourse about their children using ICT to access virtual space becomes so important.

Without leaving out the importance of addressing the digital divide that comes with a lot of complexity for the African community and hence African parents, the digital divide in Africa affects the value systems in Africa more than realised. It comes with a number of "unfreedoms" which affect achieving the common goal in the community, especially with regard to African parenting of children as through an outlook of parental solidarity. Consequently, Sen's (1999) "development as freedom" is necessary to address these unfreedoms, then Aristotle's "ergon argument" is essential in addressing the common good for society. The combination of the two establishes a perspective that combines freedom and functionality for parents as a possible means to address the problem.

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