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DEVELOPING THE NOTION OF *UBUNTU* AS AFRICAN THEORY FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

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Ubuntu is an African concept referring to humanness. It gives expression to deeply-held African ideals of one's personhood being rooted in one's interconnectedness with others. Social workers seeking to develop an African framework for decolonial social work practice turn repeatedly to ubuntu for aid. But the term has, for the most part, been limited to the idea of mutual aid – people helping each other in a spirit of solidarity. This article endeavours to extend and deepen the ubuntu concept to strengthen its potential as a theory informing social work practice. This is done by interweaving other African ideas with ubuntu in three domains: ethics, sustainable development and ecospirituality

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INTRODUCTION

The African construct *'ubuntu'* has garnered increasing recognition in academic literature over the past years, arguably as part of a broader move towards foregrounding African constructions of the world and unravelling the legacy of colonialism (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). *Ubuntu* has been taken up by a wide range of disciplines, including philosophy (Metz, 2014), theology (Shutte, 2001), nursing (Marston, 2015), psychology (Mkabela, 2015), leadership (Ndlovu, 2016), literary studies (Stuit, 2016) and anthropology (Mawere & van Stam, 2016). It appears that *ubuntu* has a paradigmatic numinosity that appeals not only to African scholars, but also to scholars across the world.

In social work, however, while *ubuntu* is a well-recognised concept (Twikirize & Spitzer, 2019), there has been little work on articulating what *ubuntu* means for this discipline. A Google Scholar search on 1 June 2019 for the terms 'ubuntu' and 'social work' in the title yielded just four publications (Mugumbate & Chereni, 2019; Mugumbate & Nyanguru, 2013; Mupedziswa, Rankopo, Mwansa, 2019; Rasheed & Rasheed, 2011), two of which were published only this year. When *ubuntu* is used in social work writing (e.g. Sekudu, 2019), it is typically used in a rather descriptive way to support the argument that people need to come together in mutually supportive and respectful ways.

There has, however, been little work on developing the conceptual foundation of *ubuntu* in such a way that it begins to constitute a 'theory' for social work practice. Van Breda (2019) argues that theory in social work serves two main purposes: to make sense of the world (explanatory theory) and to guide social work practice (practice theory). It is currently unclear to what extent *ubuntu* could serve either of these purposes. Notwithstanding this lack of theorisation of *ubuntu* for social work, the term and its intuitive meaning have significant credence among social workers in South Africa and across the African continent.

In this article I aim to make a start on theorising *ubuntu* by stretching the concept more widely than it has been to date, not only to focus on present social relations, but also to include a focus on respectful relationships with wider and more diverse groups of others (i.e. ethics), accountability to past and future generations (i.e. sustainable development), and a commitment to the earth (i.e. ecological or ecospiritual social work). While this will not yet constitute a fully-developed practice theory of *ubuntu*, it is my hope that it will serve to deepen, broaden and specify the notion of *ubuntu* in such a way that it gathers together a wider spectrum of social work concerns, thus helping to strengthen its potential as a theory informing social work practice.

INTRODUCING *UBUNTU*

The concept and meaning of the term *ubuntu* have been well documented, such that repeating the information is not warranted in this article. In brief, *ubuntu* is an African concept that refers to humaneness between people within a community (Nyaumwe & Mkabela, 2007). It is summarised in the isiZulu phrase, *'umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu',* which translates as 'a person is a person through other people'. The concept of *ubuntu* is found in most African cultures, though the word differs by language (Mugumbate & Chereni, 2019). It is a concept thought to date back to precolonial days and part of a long oral tradition. The first written use of the word dates to 1846 (Gade, 2012:488).

Contemporary research shows that *ubuntu* continues to play an important role in African society. It is regarded as a key cultural strength of families (Nkosi & Daniels, 2007), emerges as an important

foundation for resilience among the youth (Theron & Phasha, 2015), can shape community responses to disaster (Sapirstein, 2006) and has been used to inform an approach to psychotherapy (Van Dyk & Matoane, 2010).

In possibly the only empirical study on the contemporary meaning of *ubuntu* among South Africa people of African descent (with a sample of more than 50 individuals), Gade (2012) found two distinct clusters of meaning. First, *ubuntu* refers to the moral qualities of a person, particularly features like generosity, empathy, forgiveness and considerateness. Some refer to *ubuntu* as the presence of the divine, directing a person away from bad behaviour towards good. Second, *ubuntu* refers to a pattern of interconnectedness between people, in the form of a worldview or philosophy. Gade (2012) argues from written documents that this second construction of *ubuntu* emerged only about a century after the first, and that the Nguni proverb *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* was used in writing to describe *ubuntu* for the first time in 1993.

In addition, given that *ubuntu* is used to define personhood, Gade (2012) investigated who are considered to be persons (*umuntu*). Again, he found two distinct answers. Some participants indicated that all humans are persons, though not all persons embody the ethic of *ubuntu*. Others indicated that not all humans are persons. Some said only black people are persons, while white people are 'whites' (*abelungu*); others said that one becomes a person through a process of maturation into personhood; and others said that only humans who behaved in a morally acceptable way could be considered persons.

Nyaumwe and Mkabela (2007) provide a vivid account of what *ubuntu* life was like in a traditional community. They acknowledge, however, that this idealised way of life has irrevocably passed, with the modernisation of society, and that what is now required is a new incarnation of *ubuntu* that blends *ubuntuism* and modernisation.

Considering Gade's (2012) study, which shows that *ubuntu* is not a fixed, singular construct, Nyaumwe and Mkabela's (2007) article opens the way for fresh conceptualisations of *ubuntu* to be constructed. A contemporary author may feel duty bound to honour an ancient concept by not introducing new elements. However, within some limits, it appears that there is room to work with *ubuntu* as a living and present construct, fit for our purposes in our time. Metz (2011:536) justifies such actions:

> Some would say that it is fair to call something *ubuntu* only if it mirrors, without distortion, how such peoples have traditionally understood it. However, I reject such a view, for two reasons. First, analogies with other terms indicate that it can be appropriate to call a perspective *ubuntu* if it is grounded in ideas and habits that were salient in pre-colonial Southern Africa, even if it does not fully reproduce all of them. … Second, there is no single way in which pre-colonial Southern African peoples understood *ubuntu*; there have been a variety of different Nguni (and related) languages and cultures and, with them, different values. One unavoidably must choose which interpretation of *ubuntu* one thinks is most apt, given one's aims.

A BRIEF REFLECTION ON WHITENESS

Gade (2012:486) writes, "before the 1950s, all written sources mentioning *ubuntu* were authored by people of European descent. Similarly, much of the recent literature on *ubuntu* has been authored by non-Africans." He makes this claim based on an exhaustive survey of written texts on *ubuntu* from 1846 to 2011 (Gade, 2011). It is thus ironic – or perhaps unsurprising – that this article is authored by a white man (*abelungu*). Yet another article about *ubuntu* from a white perspective! A reflection on my whiteness is thus appropriate.

My whiteness (Müller & Trahar, 2016) and white privilege (Kindle & Delavega, 2018) have given me numerous opportunities in life – nutritious food from infancy, excellent health care, solid (Western) education, opportunities to see other parts of the world, freedom from fear and anxiety, and so on. For the most part, whiteness is invisible to white people; I am no exception, however much I endeavour to be self-aware. But in the context of writing about African ideas and practices and about decoloniality,

my whiteness is a major limitation. As a child, I did not grow up hearing about *ubuntu*, I did not live in a communalistic culture and I was not immersed in African spirituality.

I thus come to this topic as an 'outsider', perhaps not even as a 'person' (*umuntu*). Writing this paper is particularly daunting, as I am taking an African concept and stretching it. I recognise that I have no right to work with an African concept in this way; it does not belong to me. I have endeavoured to do this work in a respectful and humble way, by drawing on other African concepts to inform the stretching. Thus, my methodology has been to use African concepts to expand an African concept, rather than to use white concepts to expand an African concept. It is only after having done this that I attempt to link these expanded concepts to ideas that have emerged in the Western literature.

I am mindful that my method is itself 'white' (Müller & Trahar, 2016:5). I use language "to analyse, systematise and order" African concepts, values and mythologies. I have learned to value this approach to the academic project and to knowledge development. But this obsession with "order and categorisation" is a peculiarly 'white' phenomenon. It is an academic expression of the need to be in power, to control, to colonise.

Because I am aware of these challenges, I have held back from writing this paper for some time, feeling I do not have the right to write it. But I have since decided to write it for a few reasons. First, I believe that we need African concepts that can powerfully inform social work thinking and practice, and that *ubuntu* has great promise. I am committed to its ethic and write this paper in its spirit. Second, I believe I am proposing fresh ways of thinking about *ubuntu* that have not been written about in this way, and that these may contribute to further writing on the topic by African scholars. And third, I believe I am a person, who has a voice, and thus offer this paper, albeit humbly and with some trepidation, for consideration by other people.

UBUNTU IN THE SOCIAL WORK LITERATURE

Mupedziswa *et al*. (2019:21) are among the few to explicitly endeavour to make *ubuntu* central to social work. They aim to explore its "potential as a philosophical framework for social work practice in Africa". *Ubuntu* is regarded by these and other authors (e.g. Mugumbate & Nyanguru, 2013; Sekudu, 2019) as consonant with the values and ideals of social work, notably "human solidarity, empathy, and human dignity" (Mupedziswa *et al*., 2019:29). *Ubuntu* is regarded as a key concept in the broader context of indigenisation, Africanisation or decolonisation of social work in Africa (Osei-Hwedie, 2014).

Ubuntu's emphasis on human relationships, and the notion that 'a person is only a person through these relationships with other people' resonates with the ecological or person-in-environment (PIE) perspective in social work (Weiss-Gal, 2008; Mbedzi, 2019). The PIE has long been argued to be central to and even definitive of social work as a distinct discipline and profession (e.g. Strean, 1979). However, *ubuntu* in social work goes further than most Western understandings of PIE, in that PIE tends to still focus on the individual (in their social context), while *ubuntu* focuses on the relationships. It has much in common with the African maxims, "It takes a village to raise a child" (Mugumbate & Chereni, 2019:28) and, "your neighbour's child is your own [child]" (Mugumbate & Nyanguru, 2013:86). *Ubuntu* thus decentres the individual as the prime unit of analysis, and centres rather the relationships between people. Van Breda (2018:8) emphasises this when he writes, "Relationship-centred resilience aligns well with African *ubuntu* values, which emphasise social connections as the crucible of personhood."

This principle of relatedness is now strongly embedded within the global social work statement of ethical principles (IASSW, 2018:1), which states, "Far from being autonomous and independent beings as constructed by liberal theory, as human beings we are all embedded in societies and dependent on their socio-political, economic and cultural structures and conventions". This extends to a clause on confidentiality that recognises the emphasis on communitarianism in some cultures, such as African society: "In some cultural contexts, characterized by we-centred, communitarian living, social workers

respect and abide by the people's right and choice to shared confidentiality, in so far as this does not infringe on the rights of individuals" (IASSW, 2018, section 6.5).

Mugumbate and Chereni (2019) emphasise this by showing that individuals are part of a family, families are a part of a community, and communities are part of the environment, which is part of a larger spiritual community. These nested relationships, like Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological framework, turn our attention towards the relationships between the levels, which is a key focus of *ubuntu*. Drawing on a range of *Shona*-language terms, Mugumbate and Chereni (2019) construct a life-cycle model of human development and an ecological model of the responsibilities of different layers of the ecosystem for the development and wellbeing of a child. All of this, they argue, is rooted in *ubuntu* philosophy.

Mupedziswa *et al*. (2019:30) write about "the concept of community as an organising principle". While not disregarding the individual or small group, the authors emphasise that "community practice has become a natural method of social work" in Africa because of its alignment with *ubuntu* philosophy. Mugumbate and Nyanguru (2013:95) similarly emphasise that the focus is on communal living, underpinned by values of "cooperation and collaboration". The notion of 'community' is not an impersonal structure or system, but a living collective or network of people, whose wellbeing and functioning are inextricably intertwined. There is thus a commitment to addressing macro issues in a way that is beneficial to all members of the community; an approach that is consonant with developmental social work (Midgley & Conley, 2010).

Ubuntu is also associated with the core social work value of social justice, which refers to "an ideal condition in which all members of a society have the same basic rights, protection, opportunities, obligations, and social benefits … [and] is also about ensuring that resources are equitably distributed" (Patel, 2015:147). Mupedziswa *et al*. (2019) argue that *ubuntu* similarly is vitally concerned with the dignity and worth of individuals and communities. According to *ubuntu*, no individual's rights are greater than another's; thus every individual in a community, including both children and adults, for example, is important and should be heard and respected. *Ubuntu* emphasises norms for interpersonal relationships that contribute to social justice, such as "reciprocity, selflessness and symbiosis" (Osei-Hwedie, 2014:109).

Ubuntu also connotes generosity, consideration and humaneness towards others (Mugumbate & Nyanguru, 2013; Sekudu, 2019). Generosity requires people to be aware of and attentive to the needs of those around them, rather than focusing only on their own needs. It shares much in common with the strengths perspective's emphasis on "caring, caretaking, and context" (Saleebey, 2013:20). Writing for an American audience, Saleebey emphasises that this principle requires shaking off "the treasured value of rugged individualism" that is typical of American society. African society, however, is far less individualistic, and care for and generosity to others are far more central. In the African context this translates most strongly into young people taking care of the elderly (Mugumbate & Nyanguru, 2013).

The importance of *ubuntu* for African life is emphasised by Dziro and Rufurwokuda (2013:274), who argue that children in residential care in Zimbabwe are enculturated into a Western paradigm that does not centre on *ubuntu*. As a result, when they age out of care, they struggle to fit in with cultural patterns of interaction and are perceived as being "culturally immoral". Similarly, Moodley, Raniga, Sewpaul, (2019) argue that young people transitioning out of care need to be assisted, in line with *ubuntu* principles, to be interdependent rather than the more typical focus on independence.

In summary, the literature on the place of *ubuntu* in social work has, to date, emphasised that *ubuntu* centres on interdependent human relationships, favours community or macro practice, champions social justice, fosters generosity and has implications for professional ethics. In the rest of this article, I wish to open out three new areas for consideration. First, I interrogate the notion that *ubuntu* champions human relationships, social justice and relational ethics. Second, I expand the reach of *ubuntu* in time, to include both ancestors and descendants, to make the argument that *ubuntu* is vital for sustainable

development. And third, I draw on creation mythology to argue that the earth itself is part of the *ubuntu* community and thus central to the self.

UBUNTU-INFORMED ETHICS

Ubuntu is often thought of in idealised ways, suggesting that all Africans love each other, being united by a common value system. In truth, experience shows that this is not the case. Ethnic genocide in Rwanda (in 1994) and xenophobic violence in South Africa (particularly in 2008 and periodically since then) are just two among numerous examples of anti-*ubuntu* behaviour in Africa (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2011). Sekudu (2019, section 6.1) argues that "the breakdown of *Ubuntu* can still be seen across communities in Africa today, including South Africa". I suggest that such patterns of exclusion, violence and degradation are unethical and antithetical to true *ubuntu* humanism.

The causes for such a breakdown can arguably be attributed to two main factors: colonialism (Nyaumwe & Mkabela, 2007) and apartheid (Sekudu, 2019; Maphosa & Keasley, 2015). Both epochs contributed to the profound devaluing and marginalisation of African ways of thinking and being, and the imposition of Western, capitalist ways, particularly individualism. Both resulted in the fragmentation and polarisation of families and communities, through the Group Areas Act, forced removals, pass laws and the establishment of tribal homelands. While no longer legislated, these divisive dynamics continue to reverberate in contemporary South Africa (Ray, 2015). They point to the ways in which centuries of cultural violence have led to the "dehumanisation" of both the self (Biko, 2004:28) and the other (Maphosa & Keasley, 2015:33-34).

It now seems apparent that when *ubuntu* is expressed in contemporary post-colonial South Africa, it is within groups, rather than between groups. Maphosa and Keasley (2015:42) refer to this as "a dangerous and damaging kind of rainbow nationalism". Paradoxically, therefore, strong in-group *ubuntu* can result in strong out-group hostility, resulting in persistent and deepening fracturing of society.

This dehumanisation of other people is termed 'othering' (Brons, 2015). Othering divides the world into in-groups and out-groups, as a way of building the self in relation to inferior others. Van Breda (2012:181) explains: "We insiders are viewed as good and virtuous, while those outsiders are bad and evil … They are less than us, … less than human, and less than worthy". Benton (2008:316) writes, "This is us – and they are not us". While othering is considered to be an inherent part of all societies (Cromer, 2001:191), contributing in potentially positive ways to identity, it does so at the expense of others: "Clearly, a society does not simply discover its other/s. It creates them."

What is then required is a construction of *ubuntu* that recognises the full humanity of every person, not only those who are like us or part of our in-group. "This … is achievable only if people consciously refuse to perpetuate the prejudices that are held against them, embracing the *ubuntu* ideals of connection and compassion over selfishness and revenge" (Wilkinson, 2016:40). Similarly, Maphosa and Keasley (2015:34) refer to the importance of imagination in opening creative thinking spaces that allow one to be curious about the other and imagine that they may be both pleasingly similar and interestingly different. They write that "rehumanizing must occur … in order to achieve the humaneness urged in *Ubuntu* thinking".

Such a process of expanding *ubuntu* to be inclusive of all humanity, rather than just my clan, is not a simple task, particularly given the generations of investment in dividing South African society. Maphosa and Keasley (2015) provide some guidelines for this, and Rogerian encounter groups, used with good effect in the apartheid days, could continue to be beneficial today (Spangenberg, 2003). Metz (2011) provides strong conceptual and philosophical grounds for *ubuntu* as the basis for morality and human rights in contemporary South Africa.

However, the social work theory point is that *ubuntu* requires a strong ethic of commitment to eliminating division and othering, and to championing unity across diversity (in terms of race, language, culture, religion, gender, sexuality, age and so on). Such notions are, idealistically, embedded

within the ethic of *ubuntu*, and thus are not alien to it or imposing on it. However, in the everyday expression of *ubuntu*, dehumanising and othering are all too easy and require conscious, deliberate and moral decisions to avoid this and rather champion an inclusive social justice and human rights foundation. Engaging with people in this way is, fundamentally, ethical. This is a community ethic informed by *ubuntu.*

UBUNTU-INFORMED SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

In the previous section I argued for a widening of the *ubuntu* community in space, that is, to include people from other communities, countries and continents, as well as those who look or live differently from ourselves. In this section I argue for a widening of the *ubuntu* community in time, that is, to include those who have gone before us and those who are yet to come. I will link this to sustainable development, because the word 'sustainable' refers to the maintenance of something over a long time.

Most literature on *ubuntu* speaks about people in the here-and-now, with no or only passing mention of the ancestors. In African spirituality, the ancestors (our forebears who have died) are regarded as part of the living community (Mndende, 2016; Nyaumwe & Mkabela, 2007). African spirituality and African Traditional Religion hold that the human spirit continues beyond death, that the deceased remain part of the family circle after death, and that they mediate between the living and the Creator. Ancestors are thus part of everyday present life and are included in all rituals and celebrations, particularly life transitions. They play an important role in "protecting, healing, rewarding and punishing the living" (Mndende, 2016:188).

The respect African spirituality shows for the ancestors enables the present generation to be mindful of their historical roots, of where they came from and of what was sacrificed to get them where they are. In South Africa, where countless lives were lost in the struggle for freedom from colonialism and apartheid, veneration of the ancestors is particularly poignant. Such rootedness in the history of one's clan can increase the sense of responsibility for those living in the present. One must live up to the expectations of those who have gone before. On the other hand, those, such as myself, whose ancestors colonised, enslaved or oppressed the original occupants of this land, need to engage in critical discourse with our ancestors and find mindful ways to contribute to the undoing of the harm they have done.

However, not only are the ancestors, who represent the past, central to the present, so too are those yet to be born. Mbiti (2015:104) explains:

> Marriage is the meeting-point for the three layers of human life according to African Religion. These are the departed, the living and those to be born. The departed come into the picture because they are the roots on whom the living stand. The living are the link between death and life. Those to be born are the buds in the loins of the living.

Since the unborn are regarded as family members who are merely residing "in the loins of the living", they are a vital and present part of the family. The present generation thus has a responsibility not only to themselves and their ancestors, but also to future generations. One's present life must be lived in a way that honours and ensures the wellbeing of those yet to come.

Behrens (2017) applies this argument about past and future lives particularly well to environmental conservation (which will be a greater focus of the following section). Among the various reasons Western thought might not be interested in future generations is the belief that these future beings do not yet exist. But African philosophy is quite clear that the unborn do already exist. Wiredu (as cited in Behrens, 2017:50) writes,

> The rights of the unborn play such a cardinal role that any traditional African would be non-plussed by the debate in Western philosophy as to the existence of such rights. In upshot there is a two-sided concept of stewardship in the management of the environment involving obligations to both ancestors and descendants which motivates environmental carefulness.

The land, then, is a shared resource that belongs collectively to the ancestors, the presently alive and future generations (Behrens, 2017). From a Western perspective, this would be framed as the land being ceded as an inheritance to successive generations, thus passing from one generation to the next. From an African perspective, however, all generations (including past and future) are currently present, and thus ownership does not pass through the generations, but is currently held by all generations simultaneously. Wiredu's use of the term 'stewardship' is thus appropriate, because it means that the earth is only temporarily in one's direct physical care; we are not owners, but caretakers.

Ubuntu, then, relates not only to present community, but also to preceding and following communities, that is, to ancestors and descendants. My personhood is through not only my present relationships, but also my relationships with my ancestors and with my family members who are yet to be born. This applies not only to the environment (as in the case example drawn above from Behrens's work), but also to the whole of life, including the economy, politics, society and personal health and wellbeing.

Such a construction of *ubuntu* links well with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (United Nations, 2015). Sustainable development was defined by the United Nations in the Brundtland Report (1987:54) as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." This definition emphasises that present actions have an impact on the future, implying that present behaviours should be checked or moderated by future possibilities.

the 2030 Agenda (United Nations, 2015:3) envisages a world free of poverty, hunger, disease and want, where all life can thrive; free of fear and violence; a world with universal literacy, equitable and universal access to quality education at all levels, to health care and social protection, where physical, mental and social wellbeing are assured.

It is a wide-reaching, inclusive document, with 17 sustainable development goals and 169 targets, to be achieved over a 15-year period (from 2015-2030). The 2030 Agenda focuses on three main domains of life: economic, social and environmental, all of which are crucial. Lombard (2015) has neatly shown how the Global Agenda for Social Work (IASSW, ICSW & IFSW 2014) aligns with the 2030 Agenda, thereby placing social work at the core of the large global project.

Ubuntu can significantly enhance social work's understanding of, and promote the achievement of, sustainable development through the recognition that our embeddedness in the human community is not merely in the present community, but also in both past and future communities. While Western notions will regard these latter communities as remote, African *ubuntu* philosophy regards them as immanent. An *ubuntu*-informed sustainable development would, therefore, have significantly greater leverage in interventions focused on promoting social, economic and environmental development.

UBUNTU-INFORMED ECOSPIRITUAL SOCIAL WORK

In the previous two sections I endeavoured to expand the *ubuntu* community in both space (a larger and more inclusive definition of community) and time (incorporating both ancestors and future generations). In this section I extend this further by arguing that *ubuntu* has the capacity to incorporate the earth itself as part of its community. To make this argument, I draw primarily on African creation mythology.

Mbiti (2015:36) argues that African Traditional Religion believes that there is a God who created the universe, including the earth. Many African people consider the earth to be a "a living being, and call it 'Mother earth', 'the goddess earth', or 'the divinity of the earth'". Mbiti continues to explain that some societies perform rituals to pay their respects to the earth, and during times of natural disasters (such as a drought) may make sacrifices to the divinity of the earth. He also notes that earthly objects (such as a mountain or river) may be ascribed divine respect. Within the realm of African spirituality, therefore, the earth is a divine person, comparable to a human person.

There are a variety of African myths about the creation of humankind. In some, people were created in the sky and lowered to the earth; in others, people were formed on a tree, like fruit, and then fell off (Mbiti, 2015). But the most prominent myth, particularly in eastern and southern Africa, is that people came out of the earth. In some, the Creator shaped people from clay, in others, people were created in a river and pulled out onto dry land, and in still others, people were created in the ground and then emerged from a hole in the ground up onto the earth. In almost all creation myths, the Creator made a male and female, that is a reproductive couple or a community.

According to Mbiti (2015:44), African Traditional Religion sees humanity as being at the centre of the created university. The earth is seen as having been created for the good of humankind. However, humans are "not the master of the universe; [they are] only the centre, the friend, the beneficiary, the user". Thus, a balance must be struck between the earth and humankind, so that neither suffers at the hands of the other. "Therefore, [people have] to preserve nature and use it wisely, indeed mercifully, for [their] own and its survival."

These creation myths are important, not for providing facts about the origins of the universe, but for gaining insight into how traditional African spirituality constructs the place of humans on the earth and the relationship between people and earth. Despite their differences, these myths unanimously point to an intimate and reciprocal relationship between humans and earth, with humans often being created out of earth, and sometimes being given birth to by the earth, emerging from it as if from a womb. Furthermore, the view of the earth as a living or divine being makes it easier to think about the world as a person with whom humanity has a relationship.

Given the widespread influence of both Christianity and Islam in Africa, and the extent to which many contemporary African people have spurned African spirituality in favour of Christian or Muslim orthodoxy, it is worth noting the similarities between African, Judeo-Christian and Islamic creation mythologies. The Bible and Qur'an are in broad agreement that God/Allah created everything – the universe, the earth and finally humankind – and that humanity was created from the earth/mud/clay and that a male-female couple was created. The Bible adds that the first humans were instructed to take care of the earth and to enjoy its fruits, an echo of "stewardship" previously mentioned (Wiredu, as cited in Behrens, 2017:50).

Considering the convergence of African, Judeo-Christian and Muslim thought about the earth and the earthy origins of humanity, it seems reasonable to say, "We are persons through the earth" or "We are because the earth is". In other words, it seems reasonable to regard the earth as a member of the community of persons and thus part of *ubuntu*. In as much as *ubuntu* is expressed in generosity, dignity, humaneness and mutuality towards other people, it is similarly expressed towards the earth itself or herself.

Care for the earth (through reducing pollution, decreasing our reliance on plastics, reducing water and electricity usage, ensuring sustainable farming methods, etc.) is not only about stewarding the earth out of respect for our ancestors and for the benefit of future generations (as argued in the previous section on *ubuntu*-informed sustainable development). It is also about treating the earth as a member of our clan, as one of us, deserving as much respect and care as our mother or cousin.

There has, relatively recently, been a growing consciousness of the environment in social work (Gray, Hetherington & Coates, 2013). While social work has, since its earliest days, considered the social environment, there has been little attention given to the natural environment, and even less given to the natural environment as a client system in its own right. This has, since 1994, begun to shift with the rise of environmental or ecological social work (Besthorn, 2015), also known as green social work, deep ecological social work and ecospiritual social work. These approaches seek to decentre humans from our understanding of the world, viewing humanity as merely one member of a larger collective. They are also critical of the ways in humanity, particularly through unchecked industrialism and capitalism, exploits natural resources and the majority world for the benefit of small numbers of wealthy

individuals (Ferreira, 2010). They are particularly consonant with indigenous perspectives on the earth and its people (Coates, Gray & Hetherington, 2006).

Ubuntu offers fresh and potent ways to advance ecological and particularly ecospiritual social work in Africa, by drawing on indigenous ways of understanding the interconnectedness of people and earth, and by contemplating the earth as a person who is a member of our community, not merely an inanimate object to be exploited.

CONCLUSION

Ubuntu, regardless of the extent to which it actually exists in modern Africa, has traction among the people of Africa. This is true also for me as a white person and may well be true for most white people who have been raised in Africa. It is, arguably, a value system that has the potential to cut across and unify races and ethnicities, class and gender (Rasheed & Rasheed, 2011). It causes deep resonances in us for the kind of world we want to live in, the kind of world we imagine our ancestors enjoyed, and the kind of world we'd like our descendants to enjoy. It has been much written and spoken about and appears in a growing body of social work literature. But its meaning and utility for social work theory and practice remain underdeveloped. There is a tendency to settle with *ubuntu* referring merely to being generous to our neighbours, when *ubuntu* has the potential to be a far more foundational and impactful conceptual framework or "organising principle" (Mupedziswa *et al*., 2019:30) for social work in Africa.

In this article I have worked to expand *ubuntu*'s potential as an explanatory theory for social work. That is, I have endeavoured to show that *ubuntu* can help us make sense of, interpret and even explain societal functioning in ways that are both authentic and innovative. I have endeavoured not to impose new, foreign meanings onto a 'hallowed' construct, but rather to dig more deeply into the inherent implications of *ubuntu* within a broader understanding of African cosmology and spirituality.

Through this, it becomes apparent that *ubuntu* has important social work implications for three areas of African life. First, *ubuntu* calls us to embrace the whole of humanity as part of our global community or clan, not only those who are related to us or those who are like us. This has particularly important implications for addressing xenophobia and genocide, as well as for nation building. I've constructed this as *ubuntu*-informed ethics, because it informs the ways in which we engage respectfully and generously with those who are 'other'.

Second, *ubuntu* calls us to consider our history (in our ancestors) and our future (in our descendants) and to live our lives in the world in a way that honours the former and ensures the wellbeing of the latter. African worldviews, unlike Western worldviews, see both ancestors and descendants as present beings, not merely memories and hopes. They are actual persons, who are immanently present, though not usually visible. Such a view of our lineage inspires greater commitment to the sustainability of human and socioeconomic development.

Third, *ubuntu* calls us to consider the earth as a member of our community, both because we are made from earth and because earth is a divine being with whom we have a reciprocal relationship. These ideas, which are rooted both in traditional African and in Judeo-Christian and Islamic perspectives, contribute significantly to the requirement that we take care of the earth, not only for future generations, but also for the earth's own sake, and out of respect for our interconnectedness with earth. Such a view reinforces ecological and ecospiritual social work perspectives.

These three fresh extensions of *ubuntu* help to widen the footprint that this concept has in human life in this world, thereby deepening its relevance for social work practice. These ideas do yet not constitute practice theory; *ubuntu* is not a method of social change. But they do constitute a more robust theoretical framework, providing conceptual and paradigmatic material that can be used to inform and develop practice theory for social change practices, thereby enriching indigenous, African and decolonial approaches to social work.

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