Infusing *Ubuntu* as a Principle Towards Improving Social Development: A Social Work Perspective

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Abstract: The South African government has adopted services standards access, courtesy, information, openness and transparency, redress and value for money as principles of accelerating service delivery. Yet *"Ubuntu"* is an African philosophy that is internalised amongst the African people to beef up optimal social interaction, development and the welfare of the society. Infusing *"Ubuntu"* as a basic principle to enhance social service delivery is of paramount importance and in the interest of social development for the South African people. The study sought to describe the infusion of *"Ubuntu"* as a principle towards the improvement of social development amongst social work professionals in gearing the Integrated Social Service Delivery Model in the social services sector. The qualitative approach, descriptive design, convenient sampling, semi-structured interview schedule and thematic analysis were used to systematically assess the study about infusing *"Ubuntu"* as a principle towards improving social development amongst social workers. The study revealed that to incorporate *"Ubuntu"* as a principle towards gearing service delivery is in the interest of the society as it enables people in different spaces to work collectively. Furthermore, the study revealed that infusing *"Ubuntu"* allows people in different positions to see themselves as equal human beings in order to set social solidarity and justice. The study concluded that infusing *"Ubuntu"* strengthens the delivery of services to the communities by social workers with other stakeholders as part of the social development landscape. It was recommended that the South African government should infuse *"Ubuntu"* as a major principle towards gearing social development.

Keywords: Infusing, Social development, Social work perspective, *"Ubuntu"*

1. Introduction

The expression *"Ubuntu"* is derived from a Nguni (isiZulu) aphorism: *Umuntu Ngumuntu Ngabantu,* which can be interpreted as "a person is a person because of or through others" (Moloketi, 2009; Tutu, 2004). As an African philosophical underpinning, *"Ubuntu"* can be described as the capacity in African culture to express compassion, reciprocity, dignity, humanity and mutuality in the interests of building and maintaining communities with justice and mutual caring (Khoza, 2006; Luhabe, 2002; Tutu, 1999). Bearing in mind the capacity and potential force that it has amongst African people, the philosophy of *"Ubuntu"* is an asset and strength for the society to collectively address social problems. In the social services delivery sector, South African professionals carry this from their families as an asset to relate with others outside the family. The concept "Ubuntu" is factored to enhance brotherhood and sisterhood amongst the South African people interacting in different social landscapes. To African people, this is a basic principle taught at home to enhance optimal social interaction amongst individuals, groups and communities. Therefore, it is important to infuse

"Ubuntu" as a principle towards the improvement of social development in social work practice in gearing the Integrated Social Services Delivery Model. The South African government has adopted eight Batho Pele Principles to kick start the transformation of service delivery. Hence, the researcher raises the infusion of *"Ubuntu"* as a common principle known to African people from their families to relate well with others. Surprisingly, this core and value-based African philosophy tends to be overlooked by the South African government, especially as a core principle which other principles are expected to beef up in order to enhance service delivery.

The *"Ubuntu"* personality is a reference to the ideal human being as it is manifested in the living of ancient values (Broodryk, 2006). A person living through *"Ubuntu"* virtues reveals values such as kindness, generosity, harmony, friendliness, modesty, helpfulness, humility and happiness towards others. Another important value that shows humanness within a person is to treat people equally irrespective of their environments (Lefa, 2015). The "*Ubuntu*" application is pervasive in almost all parts of the African continent. Hence, the "*Ubuntu*"

philosophy is integrated into all aspects of day-to-day life throughout Africa, and is shared by all tribes in Southern, Central, West and East Africa amongst people of Bantu origin (Rwelamila, Talukhaba & Ngowi, 1999). Letseka (2011) contends that *"Ubuntu"* is the soul force that drives almost every facet of societal life in African societies and creates relationships within African communities. Lefa (2015) argues that in society *"Ubuntu"* emphasises principles such as respect for people through cooperative human activities, and recognition of human vulnerabilities, and seeks individual and communal good to enhance the prosperity of others, the self and the community where a person is a person through other persons. Broodryk (2006) states that *"Ubuntu"* relates to communities that fully embrace and value humanism, understood as "Ubuntu". It is assumed that persons in such communities would strive to treat others with a sense of "Ubuntu", which entails treating them with fairness. Practising the *"Ubuntu"* philosophy unlocks the capacity of African culture in which individuals express compassion, reciprocity, dignity, humanity and mutuality in the interests of building and maintaining communities with justice and communalities (Poovan, Du Toit & Engelbrecht, 2006). Respect and love amongst community members play an important role in an African framework. *"Ubuntu"* is the basis of African communal cultural life as it expresses the interconnectedness, common humanity and the responsibility of individuals to each other (Koster, 1996; Nussbaum, 2003).

The South African government instituted eight Batho Pele Principles, including consultation, services standards, access, courtesy, information, openness and transparency, redress and value for money. Though these principles are adopted for implementation as a guiding lens for service delivery, clients are ill-treated and sometimes lodge complaints against employees in government institutions. In some cases, these institutions are sued due to ill-treatment perpetuated by employees towards the client system. Therefore, the researcher submits that there is a need to infuse *"Ubuntu"* as a core principle towards improving service delivery for government employees to interact with the society where the philosophy of *"Ubuntu"* fits squarely for optimal and effective social interaction in the services delivery sector. Public service delivery by the South African government is under scrutiny as South African citizens are up in arms fighting for their rights for quality and efficient services, which is evidently confirmed by various protests

in the country (Shokane, Makhubele, Shokane & Mabasa, 2017). Makhubele, Mabasa and Mogorosi (2018) state that the philosophy of *"Ubuntu"* has diminished and everyone is left to fend and care for themselves, hence there are cases of children on the streets. Regarding the delivery of social welfare services, the point is that social welfare service practitioners have equally lost the essence of cultural capital, and are guided by, and apply Eurocentric worldviews in their interventions (Makhubele, Mabasa & Mogorosi, 2018). Government must train their employees in accordance with the Batho Pele Principles. Although most employees know these principles, they lack the determination to implement them. Apart from the eight principles, *"Ubuntu"* must be added as the ninth principle. Incorporating *"Ubuntu"* in the Batho Pele principles will be beneficial to both government employees and members of the community to understand the concept and to implement it amongst themselves to accelerate service delivery. The incorporation of *"Ubuntu"* as a core principle is of paramount importance to enhance social justice to serve the interests of the people through service delivery. *"Ubuntu"* is also an important principle with potential to enhance human dignity, freedom, fairness and equality in order to improve service delivery and social development amongst South Africans. Broodryk (2006) states that the values of "*Ubuntu*" and human dignity follow the practices of compassion, kindness and respect. Section 1 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa provides that South Africa is a sovereign and democratic state founded on the values of human dignity, the achievement of equality, and the advancement of human rights and freedom. The value of human dignity towards service delivery is addressed by socio-economic rights as presented in the Bill of Rights, which requires *"Ubuntu"* to accelerate service delivery by creating positive relationships amongst stakeholders. Section 10 of the Constitution provides that everyone has the right to inherent dignity and to have their dignity respected and protected. To enhance social development, sections 26, 27 and 29 of the Constitution provide that everyone has the right to have access to adequate housing, health care services, sufficient food and water, social security, and basic and further education. The study sought to describe the infusion of *"Ubuntu"* as a principle of improving social development amongst social work professionals in gearing the Integrated Social Service Delivery Model in the social services sector. The objectives of the study were to determine the

foreseeability of applying *"Ubuntu"* as a principle towards the improvement of social development and assess the collective use of *"Ubuntu"* in gearing the Integrated Social Services Delivery Model in the social services sector.

2. Theoretical Perspective

The ecosystems theory was used to gain insight into the infusion of *"Ubuntu"* towards the improvement of social development through service delivery in the South African context. The ecosystems theory has a long history in social work, and can be traced back from the beginning of the profession as a concern for characters and circumstances for people and environment (Siporin, 1980). Consequently, in the early 1970s, social work theorists began stressing the importance of this theory or the person-in-environment perspective in the traditional social work knowledge base and practice (Pardeck, 1988). The ecosystems theory is an integration of certain fields of study such as system and ecology theories (Meyer, Moore & Viljoen, 2008). The theory served as the overarching theoretical framework to understand and reflect on the concept of *"Ubuntu"* towards social development and social services delivery. It is a theoretical framework that guides us in the understanding of the person in a situation to bring about the desired change through appropriate intervention strategies (Ambrosino, Heffernan & Shuttlesworth, 2008). The theory helps social workers to enact the social purpose of the study by helping people and promoting responsive environments that support human growth, health and satisfaction in social functioning (Germain & Gitterman, 1996; Zastrow, 2006). In this study, the theory gave the researcher an opportunity to determine how people know and understand the world around them (Meyer *et al*., 2008). The infusion of *"Ubuntu"* is foreseeably an opportunity to determine how people know and understand the world of service delivery around them. The ecosystems theory also encouraged the researcher to grasp the problem within the person-in-context and to contribute to the problem intervention process (Compton, Galaway & Cournoyer, 2005).

The theory helped the researcher to understand constituent elements by integrating the concept of *"Ubuntu"* in the context of service delivery to enhance social development. It could be used to analyse the integration of *"Ubuntu"* into contemporary work ethics, culture and practice by being congruent, considering unconditional positive regard and empathy (Kirst-Ashman, 2017) as important attributes or concepts of bringing about change in the service delivery landscape. The use of "*Ubuntu*" in work ethics, culture and practice requires government employees to be genuine and face reality when rendering services to the clients. The principle of *"Ubuntu"* to effect change in the service delivery landscape requires government employees to accept and take care of their clients. For service providers in government institutions to integrate *"Ubuntu"* to enhance contemporary work ethics, culture and practice requires them to deeply understand the subjective world of service users. The infusion of *"Ubuntu"* in the current work landscape needs government workers to promote human dignity, human rights, social justice and freedom. The actions oriented towards change by *"Ubuntu"* is a call for government employees to transform work ethics, culture and practice by upholding equal participation, building relationships and welcoming social views (Laher, Fynn & Kramer, 2019).

3. Research Methods and Material

The qualitative approach, descriptive design, convenient sampling, semi-structured interview schedule, and thematic analysis were used to systematically assess the study about infusing *"Ubuntu"* as a principle towards the improvement of social development amongst social workers. Yates (2004) states that, "qualitative research explores how the individual or group members give meaning to, and express their understanding of themselves, their experiences and/or their world". The qualitative approach is mostly associated with words, language and experiences rather than measurement, statistics and numerical figures (Burns & Groves, 2003). On the other hand, Denzin and Lincoln (2003) contend that qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. Neuman (2006) states that qualitative researchers borrow ideas from people that they study and place them within the context of a natural setting. The qualitative research enabled the researcher to gather data which is derived through spoken words presented by the participants and to gain an in-depth understanding of *"Ubuntu"* as a principle towards the improvement of social development amongst social workers. Babbie and Mouton (2012) define a research design as "a blue print of how you intend conducting the research". The descriptive research

design in this study helped the researcher to describe verbal narratives derived from interviews (Bless, Higson-Smith & Sithole, 2013). Babbie *et al.* (2012) state that, a study population is the abstract idea of a large group of many cases from which a researcher draws a sample, and to which results from a sample are generalised. The population of this study comprised of social workers, community development practitioners, South African Social Security Agency administrators and community members. The researcher used the convenient sampling technique, where only participants who were available and ready to participate formed part of the study (Gray, 2009). The sample comprised of five social workers, two SASSA Officials, two community development practitioners and three community members. The sample size was 12 participants. Semi-structured interview schedule as a data collection tool permitted the researcher to learn new aspects by assessing in detail the descriptions provided by participants (Bless *et al.*, 2013). The schedule also supported the researcher to clarify concepts and to facilitate the construction of more highly structured interviews (Bless *et al.*, 2013). Thematic analysis was used to enable the researcher to seek for themes (Creswell, 2009). There are different methods of thematic analysis. The researcher thematically transcribed data following Creswell's (2009) method of data analysis such as organising and preparing data, developing a general sense of the data, coding the data, describing and identifying themes, representing findings and interpreting data.

4. Results and Discussion

The following are themes drawn from the findings presented by the participants:

4.1 Foreseeability of Applying "*Ubuntu*" on Service Delivery

To determine the foreseeability of applying *"Ubuntu"* as a principle towards improving social development, some of the participants indicated the following:

"There is potential of infusing *"Ubuntu"* to improve service delivery as the concept is commonly practised among South Africans".

"Ubuntu" can improve service delivery as employees will express themselves in Xitsonga *Munhu I munhu*

hi van'wani vanhu, which literally means "a person is a person because of or through others".

Amongst the interviewees, seven participants concurred on the potential of infusing *"Ubuntu"* as a principle towards improving social development. Five participants shared the same view that *"Ubuntu"* can improve service delivery as employees will develop the spirit of a person is a person because of or through others. In *Lee v Minister of Correctional Services* (2013), the Supreme Court of Appeal held that the obligation of *"Ubuntu"* has potential if applied towards the delivery of services. The concept of *"Ubuntu"* is capable of enhancing service delivery in the social services sector as it signifies equal footing in terms of treatment amongst employees and the client system. Foreseeability denotes reasonable and possible thoughts of predicting circumstances and consequences of actions (Quadri & Gagnon, 2008). It is foreseeable, reasonable and possible to incorporate "*Ubuntu"* as a principle for transformation to gear service delivery to contribute meaningfully to social development. In *Deacon v Planet Fitness Holdings* (2014), the court held that the foreseeability of public policy informed by the concept of *"Ubuntu"* is an important claim of improving service delivery.

4.2 Collective Use of "*Ubuntu*" in Gearing the Integrated Social Services Delivery Model in the Social Services Sector

Some of the participants indicated the following:

"Ubuntu" enforces collective means towards serving other people to solve social issues".

"Letshema" (Pedi) or "*Tsima"* (Xitsonga) is a concept that embraces collective efforts towards performing a task without payment".

On this theme, four participants agreed that infusing *"Ubuntu"* as a principle enhances collective efforts of performing a task to accelerate service delivery. Thus, eight participants concurred with the view that *"Ubuntu"* enforces collective means towards serving other people to solve social issues. African life is communal and hinged on the "*Ubuntu"* philosophy as opposed to the individualistic nature of Western life (Mabvurira, & Makhubele, 2018). The values of *"Ubuntu"* should underlie corporate decision-making and is further bolstered by findings of the highest court in *Port Elizabeth Municipality v Various Occupiers*

(2005), which suffuses the whole constitutional order as it combines individual rights with a communitarian philosophy. The scrutiny of the interface between folklore and social welfare should be limited to the philosophy of "*Ubuntu",* mutual co-existence (symbiotic relationship), *letsema*, sharing and togetherness (Makhubele *et al*., 2018). Makhubele *et al*. (2018) contend that human needs should be met within people's social contexts and situations. In this context, human needs and services should be delivered within people's social contexts in which *"Ubuntu"* fits. *"Letsema"* is important in government departments in order to embrace the collective efforts of the use of *"Ubuntu"* towards improving service delivery by performing a task as a collective with stakeholders, including communities.

4.3 "*Ubuntu*" as a Principle

Some of the participants said that:

"*Ubuntu*" should be a principle taught to employees to improve service delivery which should be considered as a policy or rule/law".

"Ubuntu" must be added as the ninth principle for both government employees and members of the community in order for them to understand and implement it amongst each other to accelerate service delivery".

Nine participants agreed that providing education or training to employees about "*Ubuntu*" as a principle will improve service delivery, and should be regarded as a policy. Three participants agreed that *"Ubuntu"* must be added as the ninth principle amongst the existing Batho Pele Principles, which the researcher argues is of paramount importance to do. This theme is value- or rule-based, and therefore it is important to refer to judicial precedents on the concept of *"Ubuntu".* In *S v Makwanyane* (1995), the court held that "*Ubuntu"* advocates for social justice and fairness. In *Pharmaceutical Society of South Africa and Others v Tshabalala-Msimang and Another NNO*; *New Clicks South Africa (Pty) Ltd v Minister of Health and Another (*2005), the court described *"Ubuntu"* as a relationship of mutual respect. In a similar vein, in *Koyabe and Others v Minister for Home Affairs and Others (Lawyers for Human Rights as Amicus Curiae)* (2010), the court held that *"Ubuntu"* is a general obligation to treat people with respect and dignity, to avoid undue confrontation and to give reasons for administrative decisions.

5. Implications for Practice

As noted by Thabede (2008), it is not surprising for a Western oriented social worker to experience cultural shock in Africa, which may compromise his or her ability to practise effectively. Afrocentric methodology has a potential to propel the indigenisation of the social work profession, and is relevant for social service delivery (Mabvurira *et al*., 2018). The application of the ecosystems theory and its definition of key variables is blended within the use of positive social work attributes such as empathy, congruence, collaboration, acceptance, social justice, freedom, relationship building, participation, self-determination, human dignity and people's rights in clients' settings. The application of the theory is based on analysis of the social service delivery implementation from an Afrocentric point of view. The Afrocentric perspective on social welfare philosophy and policy is predicated on a collective, cultural and morally affirming idea of societal relations, government and individual or social responsibility that advocates enhanced educational opportunities, guaranteed minimum income, universal health care coverage and workplace friendly and cooperative atmospheres (Schiele, 1997). The Afrocentric paradigm has identical principles with *"Ubuntu",* which in Africa exemplifies African values and ethics in the service of humanity, which has a potential to improve work ethics, culture and practice in the African context for social service delivery (Mungai, 2015). The indigenisation of social work practice by infusing *"Ubuntu"* as a principle towards improving social development to gear the Integrated Service Delivery model is in the interest of clients, and imparts social workers with knowledge and skills to be culturally competent and sensitive. Mabasa (2018) argues that there is a need for appropriate interventions to allow social workers to be culturally sensitive and culturally competent. Mabvurira *et al*. (2018) assert that the Afrocentric methodology recognises the importance of empathy, which entails that social workers should put themselves in clients' world. Through the incorporation of *"Ubuntu"* towards improving social development and service delivery, social workers advocate clients' human existence and optimal social functioning with the use of empathy to promote humanness. The Afrocentric methodology is a critical pillar towards the indigenisation of social work in South Africa and the entire African continent to be based on the philosophy of *"Ubuntu"* (Gray, Kreitzer & Mupedziswa, 2014). The Afrocentric methodology of *"Ubuntu"* advocates that, as with every member of the family,

children "develop personhood through other persons," which means that they must "prize communal and harmonious relationships with others" (Metz, 2016). In the social services sector, social workers advocate for communal and harmonious relationships with others.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

The concept "*Ubuntu*" is an African philosophy that is internalised amongst the African people to beef up optimal social interaction, development and the welfare of the society. The South African government has accepted the services standards, access, courtesy, information, openness and transparency, redress and value for money as principles of fast-tracking service delivery. Therefore, the incorporation of *"Ubuntu"* as a basic principle to enhance social services delivery is in the interest of the people in order to improve social development and service delivery. *"Ubuntu"* as a principle is in the interest of the society to enable them in different spaces to work collectively to enhance service delivery. Furthermore, *"Ubuntu"* allows people in diverse situations to see themselves as equal human beings to set social solidarity and justice. *"Ubuntu"* strengthens the delivery of services to the communities by social workers with other stakeholders as part of the social development landscape. The recommendation to the South African government is to add *"Ubuntu"* as a major principle towards gearing social development and improving service delivery.

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