

THE INTERNATIONAL FEDERATION OF SOCIAL WORKERS



THE Ubuntu Practitioner: Social Work Perspectives

EDITED BY BERNARD MAYAKA, CONSOLÉE UWIHANGANA,
& ADRIAN D. VAN BREDÁ



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This book contains a blend of academic and practice-oriented contributions. Readers will see different styles and approaches to writing. This has intentionally been adopted to maximise contributions.

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Ubuntu & Human Rights: Contributions of an Indigenous Philosophy to the Training of Portuguese Social Workers

Teresa Escabelado Martins and Antonela Jesus

Contact

Teresa Escabelado Martins Faculty of Human Sciences – Universidade Católica Portuguesa

Antonela Jesus, Faculty of Human Sciences – Universidade Católica Portuguesa; Católica Research Centre for Psychological, Family and Social Wellbeing (CRC-W)

Biography

Teresa Escabelado: My name is Teresa Escabelado, I'm from Lisbon, Portugal. Right now, I'm finishing college in Universidade Católica Portuguesa with a degree in Social Work. In my 4 years of college, I was always interested in other communities with different cultures than mine and always wonder what was like to practice professionally with them, side by side. I knew that Social Work wouldn't be the same and, by that logic, I couldn't be the same professional. And as a future Social Worker I knew that I needed to expand my knowledge. And this work reflects that.

Antonela Jesus: My name is Antonela Jesus, I'm from Madeira Island, Portugal. I have been a social worker for about 10 years, with experience in different contexts of action. Today, as a PhD in Social Work, I teach the subject of International Social Work. Issues of indigenisation, imperialism and universalism are addressed. Equally, I have been involved in recent years in work related to Social Work, Human Rights, and Intercultural Relations. Finally, I am Portuguese. I therefore assume responsibility in the formation of

the following generations in the attention to the legacy left by our colonial path.

Abstract

In a time when global politics has shown a growth of governments with oppressive ideologies, Ubuntu highlights the interdependence of all people and their potential in co-constructing more dignified social realities. Through the realization of focus groups with Social Work students and new graduates, we intend to demonstrate (i) the alignment of Ubuntu with SW' central values; (ii) the understanding of current Portuguese Social Work undergraduate and graduate students about indigenous knowledge; (iii) the integration of these meanings in readings of social reality, the contributions and limits associated with such philosophy; finally, (iv) the participants' reflection around the influence that social structures associated with imperialism bring to life trajectories. Contributions are given around education and practice in Social Work with a proposal to review and update community Social Work under the Ubuntu philosophy.

Keywords: Ubuntu, Indigenization, Human Rights, Social Work, Imperialism

Resumo [Portuguese – authors' native language]

Numa época em que a política global tem mostrado um crescimento de governos com ideologias opressivas, o Ubuntu destaca a interdependência de todas as pessoas e o seu potencial na co-construção de realidades sociais mais justas e dignas. Através da realização de grupos focais com estudantes de Serviço Social e recém-licenciados, pretendemos demonstrar (i) o alinhamento do Ubuntu com valores centrais à profissão; (ii) a compreensão dos atuais estudantes portugueses de Serviço Social de licenciatura e recém-licenciados sobre o conhecimento indígena; (iii) a integração destes significados nas leituras da realidade social, as contribuições e limites associados a tal filosofia; finalmente, (iv) a reflexão dos participantes em torno da influência que as estruturas sociais associadas ao imperialismo exercem sobre as trajetórias de vida. Contribuições são dadas para a

formação e prática em Serviço Social, com uma proposta de revisão e atualização do Serviço Social comunitário sob a filosofia Ubuntu.

Palavras-Chave: Ubuntu, Indigenização, Direitos Humanos, Serviço Social, Imperialismo

Introduction

The demand to build a Social Work adapted to the different social, political, and cultural contexts in which it intervenes, referring to a culturally sensitive practice, has increased in recent years. In this context, today more than ever, a conscious and non-oppressive intervention is expected from Social Work (SW), always considering the specificities of the person-context relationship, in this case, person-cultural context.

The effort that has been made aims at a multicultural intervention and an intervention predominantly with the indigenous population which requires a careful look, due to cultural and even moral and ethical differences. It has been a challenge because there are cultural differences that distinguish Western Social Work from Indigenous Social Work. These differences represent obstacles in the intervention with the indigenous population.

Ubuntu is a concept that has been highlighted in the 2020 to 2030 Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development. According to Mayaka & Truell (2021), Ubuntu has represented a global message through the Social Work profession. It has been configured as a current theme, as it is not only aligned with the same ideals of Social Work - such as social solidarity and social justice - but also by the very valorisation of indigenous wisdom (IFSW, 2020) and, finally, also because it brings benefits to Social Work practice, related to the assurance of a more human vision, respect, and preservation of a sense of community.

With all this in consideration, this paper seeks to explore the relationship between Social Work-Human Rights-Ubuntu by putting the topic under discussion with students and new graduates in Social Work.

Ubuntu: Principles of a humanistic philosophy

Ubuntu is linked to the relationship created between people and their interdependence - "I can only be a person through other people". A concept with a humanistic character as there is a logic of collective rationality behind it (Mabota, 2019:187). The same states "whatever happens to the whole group, happens equally to the individual" (Mabota, 2019: 188).

Ubuntu is a manifestation of African philosophy (cf. Mabota, 2019: 187) and emerged in the context of apartheid (Gil, 2010: 17). According to Nyaumwe & Mkabela (2007, in Breda, 2019: 439), Ubuntu is a concept that refers to humanization among people in a community. However, according to John Volmink (in Ubuntu Leaders Academy, n.d.), "(...) the Ubuntu philosophy has deep African roots, but (...), it extends beyond borders".

Ubuntu, as a philosophy, is based on values of justice, responsibility, equality, collectivity, reciprocity, love, respect, caring, trust, integrity, altruism, and social change. There is a notion of "community" that is important when we are referring to this philosophy. Community is not an impersonal structure or system, but rather a collective, a network of people, whose well-being and functioning are intrinsically interconnected (Breda, 2019, p. 442).

Ubuntu can be referred to as a pattern of interconnectedness between people (Breda, 2019, p. 440). It emphasizes that people's identities are constantly developed in the context of their reciprocal relationships. It focuses on the inclusion of everyone within a community, co-responsibility, and the well-being of the environment, with the aim of ensuring the success of current and future generations.

Social Work, Human Rights and Ubuntu: A perfect triad

The proximity of Social Work to Human Rights is not only recognised through the global understanding of the profession that exists today (IFSW & IASSW, 2014). In 1992, with the *Manual Human Rights and Social Work*, the United Nations recognised that SW places in a position to influence the promotion and protection of Human Rights:

"The fact that the activity of these professionals focuses on human needs reinforces their conviction that the fundamental nature of these needs demands that they be met, not as a matter of choice, but as an imperative of basic justice. Thus, Social Work is moving towards considering human rights as the other organising principle of its professional practice. The passage from an orientation focused on needs to an affirmation of rights was becoming necessary since important and tangible needs had to be met. A substantive need can be translated into an equivalent positive right, claiming the enjoyment of that right before the State and other entities". (p. 22).

Therefore, besides the history of linking this profession to human rights, also the "target groups" reflect the various human rights conventions, namely the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and also the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights.

Staub-Bernasconi (2018) when proposing the Triple Mandate Theory comes to tell us that in addition to the mandate to support and control, we have a third one composed of several elements: the commitment to a scientific basis; a guiding code of ethics where human rights are the basis of its legitimation:

"Human rights also form the basis for an independent critical analysis of national and international law" (Niehoff, 2022: 106).

However, the current state of human rights education has been perceived as imposing a cultural approach focused on individualizing principles,

privileging competitiveness, and meritocracy, which has contributed to disinterest on the part of indigenous communities:

“The indigenous communities perceive human rights as a paradigm that marginalises indigenous values and a monoculture that is gradually eliminating their way of life” (Metz, 2011).

With the aim of reversing this dominant view led by Western countries, Western institutions historically led mainly by men, Ubuntu emerges as a potential ethical guide for human rights education, guided by moral values such as humility, conformity and empathy. In the indigenous African context, the individual's sense of duty and responsibility is more primordial to the notion of individual human rights. As such, the adage “I am because we are” emphasises the importance of the individual-community relationship, since this is also rooted in the principle of solidarity and in ensuring the well-being of others (Lim *et al.*, 2022; Mkabela, 2007).

Research design

This article arises from a work previously started within the scope of a 4th year subject of the bachelor's in social work of a Portuguese University. This is a subject which addresses international issues in its course, based on a commitment to local-global dialogue. In this sense, the concepts of Indigenization, Universalism and Imperialism are addressed.

To give substance to the work, we followed a qualitative methodology, of an inductive nature, by means of a focus group composed of three groups of students: 2nd, 3rd, and 4th year undergraduate students of Social Work “of this” University, as well as three recent graduates. For all the above reasons, this article is a case study.

We opted for this type of sampling because we considered, on the one hand, that in these years of training there is already a more solid presence of these contents in a more transversal number of subjects. On the other hand, by

involving “new Social Workers” we could count on “fresh” perspectives that would allow the bridge between higher education and recent entry into the labour market.

The choice of focus groups is related to their potential as a qualitative data collection technique, where the emphasis is on the explicit use of group interaction to produce data and insights that would be less accessible without this interactive process (Morgan, 1988).

Here, the interviewer-researcher's main task is to prevent individual participants or partial groups from dominating the interview and, consequently, the group. It is also his/her task to encourage the more inhibited participants to engage in the interview and give their opinion, as the aim is to obtain answers from the group, allowing for a greater comprehensiveness to the topic (Flick, 2011; Patton, 2002). Indeed, we defined the objectives of the focus groups as explore and analyse the level of apprehension about (i) the origins and foundations of Ubuntu, (ii) its alignment with values central to Social Work; (iii) the understanding of current Portuguese undergraduate Social Work students about indigenous knowledge, crossing with their own definition and with what they learn during their training; (iv) the integration of these meanings in readings of social reality, the contributions and limits associated with such philosophy; finally, (v) to problematize the different levels of oppression, stimulating participants' reflection around the influence that social structures associated with imperialism exert on personal and cultural life trajectories.

Data processing involved all the steps inherent to a content analysis process, from transcription of the focus group to the creation of categories of analysis.

Findings and Discussion

The data presented in this section emerges from the content analysis process undertaken. It is organized according to the identified categories, which is listed below.

Bringing to the table the debate and reflection around an indigenous philosophy requires, in our understanding, debating themes within the triad Imperialism-Universalism-Indigenisation. In fact, while Social Work seeks to maintain a common identity, efforts to internationalise SW raise challenges to universalisation, which are compounded by international efforts that quickly become imperialistic, depending on what is presented or proposed as “universal”.

So, the first category of analysis derives from the discussion around the updating of the international definition of Social Work in which the support of indigenous knowledge, allied to the knowledge of SW theories and social sciences, was introduced, and from the reflection around the global understanding and the proposal of global standards for Social Work education: are we facing a contradiction?

I. Updating the international definition of Social Work: Social Work underpinned by indigenous knowledge

Most of the participants revealed the acknowledgement of Western countries domination in the (re)construction of perspectives on the Person and Society. Hence, reference was made to the importance and urgency of adapting the reading and the orientations of these lines of thought to the contexts:

“in practice with certain groups we should learn about the culture of that population” (RL1); “each intervention should be designed to the local culture (...) there is no universal model” (RL2); “different cultures deserve different looks (...) and not with that colonialist look “this is how it has to be” (E1).

Effectively, Social Work education in Portugal is - naturally – dominated by Eurocentric knowledge, theories, and beliefs, that led us to a one-sided narrative ¹.

II. A universal understanding of the profession?

On the proposal of a global understanding of the profession, there seem to be two lines of interpretation, which apparently generate some contradiction: on the one hand, there is a discourse based on the recognition that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was proposed and constituted by organisations from the "Global North", led by white men, which seems to have implied a certain superiority of Western countries over the others. Thus, the UDHR itself seems to refer to a utopian horizon when it considers in its very 1st Article that *"All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights"*. Merging the Ubuntu philosophy with this thought, we can consider that the struggle against colonisation in African countries comes from a people who defend and reaffirm their right as a group to autonomy and freedom.

On the other hand, we saw reference to the importance of the global definition of SW not remaining closed or sealed and that it should be open to future revisions and inclusion of perspectives, as this is *"the only way to build something truly universal"* (RL1).

III. The knowledge of indigenous philosophies: understanding Ubuntu

In general, we can say that study participants revealed that the concept of Ubuntu are well known to participants. In fact, Ubuntu was the only indigenous philosophy that the participants referred to know. They associate it with the sense of community, with the construction and reconstruction of dialogue within and with the community - *"who I am for the community, how my life and decisions influence the community"* (E1). Here we seem to present a

¹ Similar to what Chinwe U. Nnama-Okechukwu & Hugh McLaughlin (2022) found in their study about social work education in Nigeria.

theorization of Social Worker intervention close to a systemic and ecological approach, which does not seek to change the system, but rather the influences of individuals and environments within the system (Mullaly & Dupré, 2019). However, they attribute weaknesses to this engagement, which appears to be closer to the individual-level view of the social problem –

"a person has a problem, but because they live so much in a community, the community thinks they have to solve it (...) and, maybe, it doesn't go so much through working in a community but working with the person in question" (RL2).

Proximities are established here with the thoughts of Reasons & Perdue (1981) presented by Mullaly & Dupré (2019):

"poverty and crime, for example, are blamed on some defect of the person and what emerges is a biographical portrait that separates the individual from society" (p. 8).

This recognition of Ubuntu arises tied to three reasons: (i) alignment of training with the international definition of the profession and the very celebrations of the International Day of Social Work in 2021 - *"Ubuntu: I am because we are. Strengthening social solidarity & Global Connectedness"*; (ii) efforts at changing the dominant narrative, i.e. a commitment to reversing a reproduction of individualistic discourse according to the neoliberal context that presents itself to us - *"in 2019 all the controversy with the Amazon (...) the greed of the material was beyond a people (...) we were putting Human Rights on the table and we found that most people do not consider them"* (E3); (iii) the context of the Covid-19 Pandemic, which showed us that *"we could not be doing well seeing others doing badly"* (RL2). Also, it is important to note that was already in this context that Ubuntu assumed itself as a reason to celebrate the international day of the profession.

IV. Indigenous knowledge in Social Work education

Since Ubuntu is configured as an indigenous philosophy, it seems appropriate to question the presence of these aspects in SW education. So, we asked about the presence and learning of concepts related to indigenisation, universalism, and imperialism during their education in Social Work. The response managed to be positive among the participants. However, there seems to be a diffuse understanding of them, namely between colonialism versus culture versus ethnicities versus social minorities, let us see:

"Working with a Gypsy community is very different in terms of process" (E1);
"We are all different, but we are all equal, we all deserve rights, but the way we are going to act is going to be different from culture to culture" (E3).

Bringing the Gypsy ethnic group into the discussion can seem agreeable to us because they are an ethnic minority, and here we find space for a "co-existence" of anti-oppressive practices. However, indigenous people have been considered to be a vulnerable group in the context of globalisation and climate change. They continue to be forcibly evicted from their ancestral lands, persecuted and intimidated, racialized, and excluded. Also, talking about indigenous peoples implies talking about European colonization, an historical process allied to the transatlantic traffic, responsible for the construction of racialized and subjugated identities (Damasceno, 2021).

Different levels of oppression are evident here - individual, cultural, and structural - not forgetting that each of these levels influences and reinforces the others (Mullaly & Dupré, 2019). Therefore, it seems evident to us that we are calling for clarification and perhaps greater depth and understanding of such concepts, which will organically call for a political position of the social worker that will contribute to a counter-hegemonic way to unequal policies and ideals of coloniality as power:

"(...) Social Work was constructed over the years, so for there to be Social Work there had to be something before that helped to construct it (...) it is important not to have a colonial perspective that Social Work is a Western thing" (RL1).

Returning to Ubuntu, in our understanding, ignoring the Ubuntu philosophy will mean rejecting a way of life that has sustained the vanquished indigenous peoples in processes of colonization.

V. Lessons from the non-imperial south

The last question launched for the group was from a thought by Santos (2016), asking them to reflect on its meanings, namely "To overcome the epistemological condition of the Global North it is imperative to go South and learn from the South, not the imperial South (which reproduces in the South the logic of the North taken as Universal), but the anti-Imperial South" (p. 42). The discussion took course right from the very conception of human rights: *to what extent are they universal since the organizations that established them are from the dominant North?*

Notwithstanding such questionings, one cannot fail to note concerns between the influences of the colonizing capitalist North on a "Global South":

"I think we still think that it is the countries of the North that have to impose (...) access to health (...) I saw a study that in Cape Verde country only now 80% of the people were vaccinated with the first dose of the vaccine for covid" (RL3); "(...) poverty in Africa is a product of years and years of exploitation and exploitation by the more advanced countries of the colonies (...) if we want to change the status quo we have to think of different strategies than those that are established, of what is "usual and normal" (RL1).

"The reproduction of a capitalist society, guided by mercantile ideals, seems to be another idea (...) the countries of the North want to make a photocopy for the South and we are going to lose the precious culture of a sense of people" (E3),

a statement which seems to be in line with Santos' concept of the Global South:

"The South is rather a metaphor for the human suffering caused by capitalism and colonialism at a global level, as well as for the resistance to overcome or

minimize this suffering. It is therefore an anti-capitalist, anti-colonialist, anti-patriarchalism and anti-imperialist South. It is a South that also exists in the geographical North (Europe and North America), in the form of excluded, silenced, and marginalized populations, such as undocumented immigrants, the unemployed, ethnic populations or religious minorities, and victims of sexism, homophobia, racism and Islamophobia" (Santos, 2016, p. 18-19).

Final Reflections: contributions to Social Work practice

The Ubuntu humanist philosophy involves a set of principles such as interdependence and co-responsibility, combined with values of respect, mutual help and which, from a Social Work's point of view, brings the ideals of social solidarity, social cohesion, and social justice.

It emerged from a context of segregation and hatred and brought a vision of reconciliation and a more cohesive and human world. Nowadays it is used with the same objectives, to unite cultures, regions, and the various countries of the globe, by advocating living in community, which means living for each other, instead of living only for oneself. In so doing, it seeks to break down barriers whether cultural, racial, or ethnic, so that the world can come together as one and, at the same time, that all people have the same rights and opportunities.

Considering this, we can list clues for education and practice in Social Work at two levels:

- 1) The data show us the importance of reinforcing the exploration of these concepts in undergraduate Social Work. We consider that in the case of Portugal, this theme is urgent given our colonial heritage. Within the scope of the social worker's political practice, it is our commitment to contribute to the discussion and definition of social policies that compensate for years of exploitation, violation, discrimination, and insufficient political participation. The European Union itself should give more prominence to the situation of these communities in its foreign policy, especially in its dialogue with third countries on human rights, cooperation, and development agreements.

- 2) Contributions of the Ubuntu philosophy to Social Work intervention, not only of an ethical nature but also of the intervention strategies themselves. Social Work practice on the Western side of the world focuses on individualism, values the person, his/her capacity, and potential to make his/her own decisions and to act autonomously. However, a Social Work practice under this philosophy will in turn have a focus on the collective, the good of the community and doing for and with the community. Self-determination may be limited, as decisions will not be taken by the "person alone". Parallels are thus established with the intervention of Social Work with groups and communities, putting its premises back on the table.

If until the 30/40's of the 20th century Social Work valued group and community intervention programmes, the truth is that in the post-war period, with the creation of the European social welfare systems, individualised intervention, close to a therapeutic method, became a priority. Therefore, our proposal is to take up again the legacy of the pioneers and theoreticians of Community Social Work and articulate it with Ubuntu, since the latter can emphasise the vital importance of taking the 'We' seriously. In practice, this would mean a multiplicity of dialogues between cultures and traditions that promote an intercultural philosophy for the improvement of mutual understanding and the defence of human life.

Furthermore, Social Work education needs to be contextually oriented (Nnama-Okechukwu & McLaughlin, 2022). So, rather than depend only on Western theories and models, we have the duty to take part in the cooperation between Western ideologies and indigenous knowledge. This can be a way of decolonizing social work education and opening horizons for "privileged" Social Work students and practitioners.

To conclude, if we assume practices committed to Human Rights and human dignity, we must remember them as unquestionable, inviolable, regardless

of each person origin, gender, social and economic position. It should be enough to "Be" for such an ideology to be realized.

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