Ubuntu and Values Underlying the Vatsonga Culture: Implications for Developmental Social Work with Children

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Abstract

The development of the social work profession in Western countries is criticised as being irrelevant to the African context. Although developmental social work was introduced in South Africa to align the profession with African contexts and adopted in some southern African countries, the acknowledgement of African indigenous knowledge systems remains a neglected area. In this article, we present the findings of the study that explored the use of Vatsonga indigenous knowledge in child protection. By using a qualitative study as the basis, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with 40 Vatsonga elders who were keepers of their indigenous knowledge. The research findings indicate that beliefs and practices based on the African principles underlying ubuntu have a strong focus on enhancing the well-being of children, including orphans and vulnerable children, and could relate to the central goal and the concepts underlying developmental social work. We conclude that there is a strong association between the principles of ubuntu and developmental social work interventions that focus on the well-being of children.

Keywords: ubuntu, developmental social work, indigenous knowledge, Afrocentric world view, Vatsonga people, child well-being

Introduction

The development of the social work profession from a Western perspective is a contentious issue raised by numerous social work scholars (Schiele 2017, 15). Critics agree that a Western perspective to social work, associated with colonialist and patronising systems, is not relevant to the African context and prevents the delivery of culturally responsive social work services and sustainable social development in Africa (cf. Schiele 2017, 15; Twikirize and Spitzer 2019, 1–2). With regard to child welfare, services developed from the Western perspective adopt a narrow focus on parental incompetence or irresponsibility without considering the influence of macro-level problems such as poverty and deprivation (Conley 2010, 31–33, 39).

Although South Africa adopted the developmental approach to social work in the 1990s to be more relevant to the African context, there is concern that indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) and their possible contribution to social development are still being overlooked (Midgley 2010, 12; Patel 2015, 138). Given the inclusion of "indigenous knowledge" in the global definition of social work, the profession should explore African cultural values and practices that can promote the well-being of individuals, communities and countries (Kreitzer 2019, 49; Shokane and Masoga 2018, 2).

The aim of this article is to explore the relevance of indigenous knowledge (particularly regarding ubuntu) of the Vatsonga people of southern Africa to a developmental social work approach for social work with children. A brief literature review on developmental social work, Afrocentric social work, ubuntu and the Vatsonga people form the background to the presentation of the research findings.

Developmental Social Work

Developmental social work is one of three widely recognised perspectives to social welfare: the residual, institutional, and developmental perspective (Kirst-Ashman 2013, 7; Patel 2015, 124). Whereas the residual approach or medical model focuses on people's problems and deficits, the institutional approach views social problems as a normal part of life, affording people the right to benefits and services provided by society and governments. More recently, the developmental approach to social welfare was developed to deal with the human development needs of poor nations after independence from colonial rule and to enhance people's social well-being, their social conditions, and economic development (Kirst-Ashman 2013, 7; Patel 2015, 18–22, 29; Zastrow 2013, 305).

Social work in the Global South has been criticised for following the remedial approach that was introduced during colonialism (Midgley 2010, 6). In reaction, South Africa adopted a developmental approach to welfare services to promote the human rights and well-being of all its citizens – an approach subsequently adopted by other African countries (Lombard 2019, 48; Patel 2015, 84). Developmental social work is

characterised by constructs such as promoting social change, human well-being and development, social justice and equality, resilience, empowerment, capacity building, strengths-based interventions, sustainable livelihoods, poverty alleviation, and the self-determination and participation of service users (Lombard 2019, 48, 50–51; Midgley 2010, 12–13). From this perspective, Midgley (2010, 14) emphasises that "social workers should recognise the assets – rather than the deficits – of poor communities . . . avoid the 'pathology' approach and seek instead to build on local assets and resources by enhancing community capacity".

To ensure their relevance to local cultures and contexts, social work scholars advise that IKS and indigenous problem-solving approaches be integrated into developmental social work practice and education (Patel 2015, 138; Twikirize and Spitzer 2019, 2). Indigenous knowledge refers to "the cultural traditions, values, beliefs, and worldviews of local peoples, as being distinguished from Western scientific knowledge" (Shokane and Masoga 2018, 7). IKS are the systems that contain the indigenous knowledge of a specific group of people. People's world views, ie their perceptions and understandings of their reality, depend on their culture and IKS (Mabvurira 2020, 422). IKS therefore guides local-level decisions related to people's social life, healthcare, education, agriculture, and management of natural resources, among other factors (Ossai 2010, 2).

The Afrocentric World View and Afrocentric Social Work

The Afrocentric world view denotes the African people's understanding of their reality, as informed by their cultural beliefs, values, and practices and is distinct from the Eurocentric world view (Mupedziswa, Rankopo, and Mwansa 2019, 21; Nwoye 2017, 46; Thabede 2008, 233–234). Core cultural traits have been maintained despite colonisation and characterise the African (Black) ethnic groups such as the Zulus, Xhosas, Sothos, Tsongas and Vendas (Thabede 2008, 233, 238).

The term "Afrocentricity", introduced by Asante (as quoted in Makhubele, Matlakala, and Mabvurira 2018, 97), "literally means placing African ideas at the centre of any analysis that involves African culture and behaviour". To interpret psycho-social situations from an Afrocentric perspective and find relevant strategies for social change, social work scholars recommend an Afrocentric approach to social work (Bent-Goodley, Fairfax, and Carlton-LaNey 2017, 1). An Afrocentric perspective affirms African knowledge and prevents it from remaining on the periphery (Makhubele, Matlakala, and Mabvurira 2018, 97).

Schiele (as quoted in Mabvurira 2020, 421) notes three key assumptions of the Afrocentric perspective: the collective identity of the person, the importance of spirituality, and the validity of an effective approach to knowledge. The Afrocentric perspective proposes interventions towards acknowledging the fundamental goodness of people; the importance of family, community, and collective functioning; acknowledging the interdependence of people; and understanding the key role of

spirituality (Bent-Goodley, Fairfax, and Carlton-LaNey 2017, 3). Afrocentric social work focuses on African values and ethics, strengths-based interventions, and the self-determination of service users (Harvey as quoted in Hollingsworth and Phillips 2017, 50).

The African Philosophy: Ubuntu

African societies share a set of values, principles, and protocols for acceptable standards of behaviour. The ethical principles assumed by society towards its members are what constitute ubuntu (Mkabela 2014, 284). Ubuntu has its origin in sub-Saharan Africa, symbolises the world view of the Black populations in the region, and is transmitted from one generation to the next (Mugumbate and Chireni 2019, 28). Although the term differs in different African languages, there is general agreement on and adherence to the underlying philosophy of ubuntu (Mupedziswa, Rankopo, and Mwansa 2019, 22; Van Breda 2019, 439).

Ubuntu is associated with humanity and respect and is "recognized as a social pillar in all societies" (Hlongwane et al. 2018, 55). The concept can be defined as a "social ethic" that emphasises "the collective spirit; the importance of community, solidarity, caring and sharing" (Mkabela 2014, 285). Moral values central to ubuntu include humility, modesty, empathy, generosity, conformity, hospitality, and mutual care and support to others (Mafumbate and Magano 2016, 29–30; Mkabela 2014, 284). Ubuntu signifies respect for humanity in its totality, endorses peaceful coexistence among people, and promotes commitment to sharing available resources to the benefit of all (Chigangaidze 2021, 276–277).

Ubuntu contains the knowledge and wisdom of the ways in which African children are raised in their families and communities (Mugumbate and Chireni 2019, 28). The values of ubuntu indicate that a person can only become their true self and achieve personal dignity by respecting the interrelatedness and solidarity with others (Mkabela 2014, 284–285). The African view of personhood is represented by the proverb "Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu", meaning that a person is a person through others (Nwoye 2017, 44). An individual becomes a moral person through a humane way of life, support and care for others, communal relationships, and solidarity with others (Mafumbate and Magano 2016, 29–30; Mkabela 2014, 286). Ubuntu is valued for its unifying power and for creating cooperation among the people of a community (Mkabela 2014, 284). This view of personhood differs from the individualistic view held in Western contexts (Nwoye 2017, 49).

The concept of ubuntu is not foreign to social work and is, for example, included in the South African White Paper on Social Welfare of 1997 and the Code of Ethics of Social Workers in Zimbabwe (Mugumbate and Chireni 2019, 30). In recent years, there has been a considerable focus on the relevance of ubuntu to social work; however, the focus was more on theorising the concept than on empirical information (Chigangaidze

2021, 276; Van Breda 2019, 439–440). With this article, we attempt to link the concept of ubuntu, as found in a study on the Vatsonga IKS, to concepts underlying developmental social work, with a focus on child well-being.

The Context of the Study

In this study, we focus on the IKS of the Vatsonga, an ethnic group that lives mainly in southern Africa (Joyce 2009, 84). The Vatsonga people consist of several tribes that adopt a specific cultural identity (Maluleke 2019, 2–3). Their history and IKS are not widely documented, but available information indicates that the Vatsonga people stemmed from two groups, namely, the Tsongas (or Rhongas) and the Shangaans, and these terms are often used interchangeably (Malaza 2012, 7; Maluleke 2019, 5). The study was motivated by an interest in exploring child protection in an indigenous African community, with the focus on the Vatsonga people, as one of the authors belongs to this ethnic group.

Theoretical Framework

In this study, we adopted two theoretical frameworks. First, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory provided insight into the influence of culture, thus of IKS, on people's entire ecological environment. The ecological levels include the microsystem (the immediate environment such as the home, school, peers and neighbours), the mesosystem (the connections and interactions between microsystems), the exosystem (the broader social settings that can involve formal and informal support systems), and the macrosystem (the outermost layer which includes aspects such as government, culture, laws and policies) (Berk 2013, 27–28; Henderson and Thompson 2016, 46). The influence of culture is associated with its position in the outermost ecological level that "blankets all of those interacting levels" (Henderson and Thompson 2016, 46). An ecological approach is appropriate to social work in indigenous contexts in which a communal perspective and belonging at the community level are valued (Walker as quoted in Lombard 2019, 399).

Second, social constructionism explains that social and cultural contexts inform people's world view because of their interactions with others in their sociocultural environment (Makhubele and Qalinge 2008, 158; Moore 2016, 475).

The study therefore aimed to explore the perceptions and practices based on the world view of the Vatsonga people with regard to child well-being and protection. Moore (2016, 475) notes that the two theories complement each other, as social constructionism explains the influence of the sociocultural context described by the ecological systems theory.

Research Methodology

Research Approach and Research Design

The researcher followed a qualitative research approach to collect extensive verbal data to gain insight into the IKS of the Vatsonga people (Fouché and Delport 2011, 364–365). Qualitative research is relevant to constructionism and enabled the researcher to explore some beliefs, values, and practices of the Vatsonga people (Mabvurira and Makhubele 2018, 16–17; Makofane and Shirindi 2018, 31). The instrumental case study as research design was appropriate to obtain in-depth information on the IKS of the Vatsonga people, a topic about which little information exists (Nieuwenhuis 2016b, 82).

Population, Sample and Sampling Method

The study population consisted of Vatsonga elders who are keepers of Vatsonga IKS and who have extensive knowledge thereof (Makofane and Shirindi 2018, 35). Mabvurira (2020, 426) emphasises the "paramount importance for social work researchers in Africa to engage traditional leaders and the elderly in generating knowledge . . . as they have been found to provide valuable insights in Afrocentric studies". The researcher obtained permission from the local authorities in two rural Vatsonga communities in the Chiredzi district in Zimbabwe and the Chokwe district in Mozambique, respectively, to conduct the research. A total of 40 Vatsonga elders, 23 males and 17 females, were recruited using key informant and snowball sampling (Strydom and Delport 2011, 393–394). Most of the participants were in the age groups 70 to 79 years (12 participants) and 60 to 69 years (11 participants). Six participants were above the age of 80 years, with the oldest being 85 years old. A total of 11 participants between the ages of 36 and 59 were also knowledge bearers of the Vatsonga IKS.

Data Collection and Data Analysis

The researcher collected data by employing semi-structured interviews together with an interview schedule to obtain rich information on the research topic (Greeff 2014, 351–352). Bent-Goodley, Fairfax and Carlton-LaNey (2017, 3) explain that African-centred researchers are committed to promoting the voice of the participants, an approach that aligns with the face-to-face interviews used for data collection. The interviews were conducted in Xitsonga, the home language of the researcher and first author, with the help of a colleague who is proficient in different Xitsonga dialects. The colleague signed a confidentiality agreement. The interviews were audio-recorded with the permission of the participants (Greeff 2011, 359).

The data were analysed through the iterative process of thematic data analysis (Creswell as quoted in Nieuwenhuis 2016a, 109). This method was relevant for identifying central themes in the data. It is important that the presentation of the study findings provide a true reflection of the participants' views and prevent researcher bias. The researcher ensured trustworthiness by implementing strategies such as the meticulous

implementation of the research methods, reflexivity, peer debriefing, and thick description of the research findings (Lietz and Zayas 2010, 195; Nieuwenhuis 2016a, 123–125).

Ethical Considerations

The researcher strictly adhered to the applicable ethical considerations (Strydom 2011, 113), namely, voluntary participation and informed consent, privacy and confidentiality, avoidance of harm, and no deception. The study emphasised voluntary participation as the research participants from African indigenous communities must experience a sense of control in the research process (Mabvurira and Makhubele 2018, 17). In following African values, the researcher conducted the interviews with due respect for the status of the elders (Mupedziswa, Rankopo, and Mwansa 2019, 26). In reporting, the study uses pseudonyms in place of the participants' names. The Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Humanities of the University of Pretoria in South Africa conducted an ethics review, and the study was approved on 25 May 2017 (Ethics approval number GW20170520HS).

Research Findings and Discussion

Four themes emerged from the data analysis: (1) cultural beliefs and values in the Vatsonga IKS; (2) the centrality of child well-being in the Vatsonga culture; (3) the Vatsonga family and kinship system as a safety net for children; and (4) the practice of communal care.

Theme 1: Cultural Beliefs and Values in the Vatsonga IKS

The participants described their culture as being part of all aspects of Vatsonga life, informed by the values transmitted through their IKS. Two participants said the following:

> Vatsonga IKS constitutes . . . our economic activities, political system, and belief system. (Miyeto)

> Even our art and crafts like making hats, mats, pots, and many tools of the Vatsonga . . . huts and settlement patterns, all that is part of our heritage. (Miyelani)

Four prominent cultural values were identified in the research data: generosity, respect, relatedness, and integrity, and are reflected in the following quotes:

> It is about instilling values of Vatsonga in them [children] and making sure that a generous, honest, and hardworking man is [raised]. (Murisi)

> Respect and integrity; [the Vatsonga] are trustworthy people . . . Love and care . . . above all, respect is central to the ubuntu aspect. (Hlamula)

Our relationships were so deep that they translated into concrete concern for each other. . . . It was impossible to see someone in my extended family suffering and then just ignore [it]. (Hanyani)

The encompassing influence of the Vatsonga culture is evident in the above quotes. The values in the Vatsonga IKS reflect a world view of humanness, as found in the principles of ubuntu. Mangaliso (as quoted in Mupedziswa, Rankopo, and Mwansa 2019, 26) describes ubuntu as "a pervasive spirit of caring and community, harmony and hospitality, respect and responsiveness that individuals and groups display for one another". Ubuntu prescribes acceptable standards of behaviour and a collective spirit on which there is general agreement in African societies (Mkabela 2014, 284–285). The overlap between the principles of ubuntu and those of developmental social work supports the relevance of this social work approach in societies that adopt an Afrocentric world view.

Theme 2: The Centrality of Child Well-Being in the Vatsonga Culture

As prescribed by their IKS, the Vatsonga people value their children. Humul explained that "Every element of Vatsonga culture, in it is the well-being of children because we value children". Children's basic and emotional needs were therefore met. Two participants said the following:

Well-being is when children get food, clothes, water, and have a place to stay . . . Child well-being includes the child getting shelter, food, clothes, and love and care from the family and the extended family. (Hlengani)

The mother played a bigger role in providing emotional support to the child. (Makasani)

Children are socialised to promote the well-being of their younger siblings. Hlamaliso explained that "The older siblings take full responsibility to provide care, love, and support to their younger siblings; children take care of each other and learn from each other". He gave an example of the way in which this responsibility would contribute to children's well-being:

The Tsonga system of seniority among the children was so unique and enhanced the well-being of our children. When having meals and these meals were shared meals, one plate of relish and another plate of 'sadza' [a thick porridge], then all the children would eat from the same plate. It is the eldest child who picked the portion of the meat first and the youngest was the last to pick. . . . Thus, even as an older child, you were still hungry . . . the younger child was supposed to eat until they are satisfied, such was our practice.

In collectivist cultures, older siblings help to care for, support, and socialise the younger ones (Mupedziswa, Rankopo, and Mwansa 2019, 22), a role that differs from that of the older siblings in Western cultures, in which interaction with younger siblings takes place in the context of play. In the African context, the tasks of the older siblings are culturally

defined and include feeding, toilet training, guiding, and comforting the younger sibling (Louw and Louw 2014, 229). In this way, the principles of ubuntu are instilled from a young age. Shutte (2001, 106–111) notes that, for every child, ubuntu is the "first curriculum" in the "school" of the family and community.

The value placed on children is furthermore promoted by Vatsonga children being regarded as ancestors incarnate. This is echoed in the following quotes:

> In Vatsonga culture children are our ancestors incarnate. . . . Such a child was accorded respect that was befitting to an ancestor. We would not be harsh to such children because ill-treating such children is tantamount to ill-treating the ancestors. (Hlumulo)

> The children, being incarnated ancestors protected them from any potential harm because perpetrators feared that by harming such a child one was harming the ancestors and . . . they would face serious consequences from the ancestors. (Mukachana)

As evident in the above views, spirituality, including a belief in the ancestors who are seen as ever-present in people's lives, forms a core aspect of the Afrocentric world view and the concept of ubuntu (Bent-Goodley, Fairfax, and Carlton-LaNey 2017, 3; Thabede 2008, 233). Children would not be mistreated as the disdain from the ancestors would result in misfortune and ill health (Nwoye 2017, 47), a belief that contributed significantly to the well-being of children in Vatsonga communities. The centrality of child well-being in the Vatsonga beliefs and practices reflects the aim of developmental social work, namely, to enhance the rights and well-being of all people (Lombard 2019, 48; Patel 2015, 84). The principles of ubuntu are instilled from a young age, thereby establishing inherent personal and moral capacities that align with the strengths-based focus of developmental social work and contrast with the remedial social work focus on deficits; an aspect for which social work in the Global South has been criticised (Midgley 2010, 6, 14).

Theme 3: The Vatsonga Family and Kinship System as a Safety Net for Children

The social structure of the Vatsonga family is central to the well-being of children. Strong kinship ties, in which the child belongs to the entire family, are characteristic of family life and reflect the principles of ubuntu. Two participants said the following:

> We have a thriving extended family and kinship care system that does not only take care of the children but all the vulnerable in the community including the disabled, the elderly, and the sick. The extended family has stood the test of time, colonisation failed to dismantle it. (Pekapeka)

> A family in Vatsonga is not just your father, mother, and siblings; a family is a whole clan, and the extended family [members] are the ones close to you. So, once there were problems in the family the extended family was readily available to take care of the child. (Tsotsowani)

Grandparents play an integral role in the family. They are involved in the socialisation of children and are the most preferred caregivers in the absence of parental care. Two participants had this to say about grandparents:

> Our school was through storytelling. . . . Children would gather around the fire during the night and an elderly adult would tell various stories that were full of meanings. Some stories would end by [the elders] asking the children what they have learnt. (Makanani)

> In instances of death, we have a robust system. Once both parents were dead the grandparents took over. (Shalati)

Members of the immediate family network were responsible for providing emotional support and guidance to children through the vigorous Vatsonga mentoring system for children, the "kulaya":

> Our children were cultured through the 'kulaya' practice [where] children received advice and guidance from their aunties ('hahani') and uncles ('malume'). A child was free to approach these people for advice and mentorship. (Lisimati)

> Our family counselling system, the 'kulaya', is so helpful. It is the duty of aunties and uncles to from time to time sit down with children at various stages of their life and teach them what life entails and offer advice on various issues concerning life. (Hanyani)

The "kulaya" system provides informal social support networks – safety nets that are still found in African societies (Mupedziswa and Ntseane 2013, 85, 89). Research findings on non-parental adults who mentor adolescents indicate positive outcomes for the adolescents (Ssewamala et al. 2014, 10).

Furthermore, Vatsonga IKS task members of the extended family with looking after the well-being of children when parents were unable to provide sufficient care. Owing to a sense of obligation to do good to others, as proposed by ubuntu, kinship ties form strong supportive networks in collectivist societies (Dolamo 2013, 4; Hlongwane et al. 2018, 60; Mkabela 2014, 288):

> To us, a family is bigger, it includes the aunties, uncles, cousins, and grandparents including the aunties, uncles, and cousins of the grandparents. . . . Thus, children could not be easily harmed or be neglected, neither would they go without food, shelter, and clothing among other necessities. When their nuclear family fails to do so, the extended family chips in and provides parenting and all the needs of the child. The child would be treated as if they were the biological child. (Chiremba)

> The extended family is a haven for all children who might be less privileged and have poor parents. The extended family takes care of orphans and provides for those families who have poor parents or sick parents. . . . If a child within our extended family comes with a need to me, I . . . address it in a way I do with my biological children; such is how strong is our kinship ties in this area. (Njakeni)

> The extended family [member] . . . normally was not a strange person to the child, this was an already known somebody to the child. (Tinyiko)

Noteworthy is that vulnerable children would be treated as biological children and would be cared for by family members who are already known to them. Vatsonga IKS therefore promote non-discriminatory approaches to caregiving, which can be linked to values central to ubuntu such as empathy, generosity, hospitality, mutual care and support (Mafumbate and Magano 2016, 29–30; Mkabela 2014, 284) and to developmental social work principles such as human well-being and equality (Lombard 2019, 48; Midgley 2010, 12–13). Some participants explained the way in which these caregiving practices would benefit orphans and vulnerable children:

> Even when misfortune strikes, the child was never admitted to some children's home as is the case nowadays, but they were absorbed within the extended family and got care and protection from that family. (Titsvalo)

> Even up to today, if you go to our town in this area, you do not see a destitute child and those children sleeping on the streets . . . because those in need are taken care of through the extended family. (Masingita)

> I use the word 'orphan' sparingly because I do not believe that in Vatsonga a child is orphaned because they have parents in the extended family, the community, and the traditional leadership. (Makanani)

Based on ubuntu principles, several practices of the Vatsonga family system ensure the care and well-being of children. In sub-Saharan Africa, the extended family forms the most effective support network when families experience crises (Mupedziswa and Ntseane 2013, 88; Mupedziswa, Rankopo, and Mwansa 2019, 26), pointing to the sustainability of indigenous practices over time. Belonging to the family or clan is a significant element in the Vatsonga IKS and ubuntu, and kinship care supports child well-being by instilling their sense of belonging (Mkabela 2014, 284). Keeping children in their community aligns with the practice of developmental social work with vulnerable children that prioritises community-based interventions rather than institutional care (Conley 2010, 31). This reflects the developmental social work goal of "facilitating the integration of social work's clients into the community and promoting normal community living" (Midgley 2010, 15).

Theme 4: The Practice of Communal Care

Within the wider community context, every member of the Vatsonga community would keep an eye on children and take responsibility for the well-being of every child in the community:

> Another good practice is that IKS dictated that a child belonged to the whole community and the whole community bore the responsibility of bringing up the child. In

reciprocation, the child was duty-bound to respect every adult in the community, which brought cohesion. (Usiwana)

In my culture, the good thing is that every child belongs to everyone. (Hlengani)

The above quotes demonstrate the collectivist world view of traditional African societies and endorse values such as solidarity, mutual support, and sharing (Magano 2018, 234; Makhubele 2008, 43). Non-relatives such as neighbours, teachers, "other mothers", and members of the whole village take responsibility for the well-being of children (Magano 2018, 236; Nwoye 2017, 57). Community members will also discipline children, which has to be done in a dignified manner (Mupedziswa, Rankopo, and Mwansa 2019, 25).

Magano (2018, 236) sees the communal responsibility for children as the reason that at-risk children are a rare phenomenon in traditional African communities. The community would act as guardians of every child (Mafumbate and Magano 2016, 30) and create protective environments for children, which relate to the emphasis on prevention within developmental social work (Conley 2010, 31). Communal networks create strong relationships and collaboration between the child's microsystems, thereby strengthening the mesosystem, which is especially important for child well-being in poor socio-economic contexts (Berk 2013, 27; Rapholo and Makhubele 2018, 315).

Implications for Developmental Social Work

The findings of this study have a bearing on developmental social work. A central theme in the research findings is the strong emphasis on ubuntu and the values in the Vatsonga culture with regard to children's well-being. Similarly, a key tenet of developmental social work is to "enhance the well-being of individuals, families, groups, and communities in their social context" (Patel 2015, 127). The research findings indicate the way in which the ideals of ubuntu translate into local-level decisions and strategies to enhance human well-being rather than ubuntu remaining an abstract ideological concept. The values underlying ubuntu point to a holistic view of child well-being, including the individual, family, community, and environment, and are transmitted from generation to generation (Mugumbate and Chireni 2019, 20). Reflecting on the findings on ubuntu and the values of the Vatsonga people, we discuss implications for developmental social work with children. We focus on the implications of three broad themes, namely, cultural beliefs and values of the Vatsonga people, the value placed on Vatsonga children, and the community's collective responsibility for child well-being, which have implications for developmental social work.

First, the study reveals that the Vatsonga IKS comprise their beliefs and value system that inform childcare practices and the promotion of child well-being. Developmental social work is renowned for its regard for the local cultural context. Social work should therefore strive to promote positive beliefs and the value system of its clients as opposed

to an indiscriminate dismissal of local culture as harmful to child well-being. Promotion of research on local cultures and IKS would give impetus to the integration of IKS in the conception and execution of developmental social work. Mupedziswa, Rankopo, and Mwansa (2019, 34) note that there are many commonalities between the values of social work and the principles underlying ubuntu and suggest that the principles of ubuntu be integrated into social work education and practice in the African context. The findings of the study therefore imply the necessity of integrating IKS into social work services for children.

Second, the research findings highlight that children are valued in the Vatsonga culture and that caregiving practices serve as a means for enhancing child well-being. The well-being of individuals, groups and communities is a central goal of developmental social work (Lombard 2019, 48; Patel 2015, 84). The principles of ubuntu instil a form of social capital for all members of society. Social capital is defined as social networks and relationships of trust such as family, kinship networks, neighbours and friends that provide social and material support and access to resources and contribute to sustainable livelihoods, relating to one of the strategies of developmental social work (Patel 2015, 294). However, if unchecked, the emphasis of the Vatsonga people on basic needs may lead to neglect of children's protection and participation rights; implying that social workers working in Vatsonga communities should strive to sensitise them to the indivisibility of child rights. While cherishing the Vatsonga people's strength on provision rights, there should be an understanding that child rights and child well-being include the other rights.

Third, the study establishes the robust role of informal social networks such as the family, extended family, kinship care, and community care systems among the Vatsonga people. The findings call for using informal support networks as safety nets for children in line with the tenets of developmental social work. In this regard, strengthening informal support networks through funding to support the extended families caring for orphans becomes imperative. Creating a link between the informal and formal support systems would reflect the strengths-based perspective of developmental social work. With regard to orphaned and vulnerable children, ubuntu and the values embedded in the Vatsonga IKS align with the developmental social work perspective of community-based rather than institutional care for children found in need of care and protection (Conley 2010, 31; Midgley 2010, 15). The principles of ubuntu are evident in caregiving where vulnerable children are treated the same as the biological children in the family, and consequently experience a sense of dignity and belonging to family and community. In the African context, care by members of the extended family has proven to be an effective support network when families experience crises and need a safety net for orphans (Mupedziswa, Rankopo, and Mwansa 2019, 22, 26).

Conclusion

Ubuntu entails numerous positive values that inform the world view of the Vatsonga people, guide their beliefs and practices, and lead to local-level decisions about people's lives. Integrating the underlying social values of ubuntu into social work service delivery to children can promote social work that is locally relevant and sustainable in the African region. The values underlying ubuntu point to an ecological approach to child well-being, including the individual, family, community, and environment, as well as spirituality, whereas the transmission of IKS from generation to generation shows the sustainability of the values of ubuntu over time.

In promoting mutual support and connectedness, ubuntu can contribute to social capital and result in positive influences on the welfare of individuals, families and communities (Chigangaidze 2021, 278); thereby creating environments that are conducive to the well-being of children. Communal networks create a robust mesosystem (Rapholo and Makhubele 2018, 315) that can support child well-being and prevent childhood adversity.

The corresponding principles underlying ubuntu and developmental social work shows the relevance of developmental social work in the African context – in the case of this article specifically to social work interventions with children. The fact that indigenous knowledge is included in the international definition of social work and that ubuntu is included in key social work documents in South Africa and Zimbabwe, show promise for the social work profession to adopt IKS and ubuntu.

We conclude that principles underlying ubuntu are not foreign to developmental social work and can guide the social work profession towards an African perspective that acknowledges African values, ethics, strengths and self-determination (Bent-Goodley, Fairfax, and Carlton-LaNey 2017, 1; Hollingsworth and Phillips 2017, 50). These principles can also strengthen the developmental social work goal of promoting the well-being of individuals, communities and countries (Kreitzer 2019, 49; Shokane and Masoga 2018, 2).

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