Ubuntu

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Ubuntu

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Introduction

The concept of *Ubuntu* is an alternative to individualistic and utilitarian philosophies that
tend to dominate in the West. It is a Zulu/Xhosa word, with parallels in many other African
languages, which is most directly translated into English as 'humanness'. Its sense, however,
is perhaps best conveyed by the Nguni expression '*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*', which
means 'a person is a person through other people'.

The origins of *Ubuntu* as a concept can be traced to the Bantu peoples of southern Africa
although the philosophy is now shared across much of the continent. It is perhaps best
understood as a social philosophy based on principles of care and community, harmony and
hospitality, respect and responsiveness that expresses the fundamental interconnectedness of
human existence. It has been described as a philosophy of peace and is perhaps best known as
a guiding concept of the 'African Renaissance', spearheaded by post-colonial and post-
apartheid leaders in South Africa such as Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu and Thabo Mbeki,
in which Africans are urged to re-engage with African values. It has been an important
concept in the reform of education and public services in post-apartheid South Africa and
offered a framework for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that bore witness to the
injustices of the apartheid era from the perspective of both perpetrators and victims.

Whilst the origins of *Ubuntu* are distinctly African parallels have been drawn with similar
concepts in other societies, including the Chinese philosophy of *Jen,* the Filipino philosophy
of *Loob* and the Russian concept of *Obschina*. Similar concepts are also illustrated in the

writings of certain European philosophers such as Emmanuel Levinas and Paul Ricoeur although no comparable word exists in the English language.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu has called *Ubuntu* 'the gift that Africa will give the world' and, along with others, has called for its wider application well beyond Africa. Former US President Bill Clinton has also been a staunch advocate and promoted it through his Foundation as well as in high profile speeches in the USA and UK. The term has also become well known through its use as the name for an open-source computer operating system and even as a brand of fair-trade cola although these are not the focus of this article.

Assumptions and implications

Ubuntu can be considered as both a descriptive account of value systems that operate across much of Sub-Saharan Africa (and hence helpful in understanding and contextualising research and practice in this part of the world) as well as a normative philosophy of how people should relate to one another (of relevance well beyond Africa). Both perspectives comprise a number of assumptions and implications that are relevant to researchers and practitioners from an Action Research perspective. Whilst these points are clearly of relevance to those conducting work with and for Africans they may also offer the potential for reframing the process of research and inquiry elsewhere.

1. Interdependence

Ubuntu is a relational philosophy; its frequent articulation as 'I am because we are' points towards a strongly constructivist ontology in which a person's sense of being cannot be detached from the social context in which they find themselves. It highlights the importance of a subjective and emotional appreciation of human experience rather than privileging objectivity and rationality. In terms of research, an *Ubuntu* perspective calls for an

interpretivist epistemology in which precedence is given to qualitative methods that enable an inductive understanding of how individuals and groups make sense of the world around them. Whilst such an approach is relatively common in the field of action research it stands in stark contrast to the positivist paradigm that dominates much social theory and research.

2. Inclusivity

Ubuntu is collectivist in orientation - expressing the value of collaboration, cooperation and community. It espouses an ethos of care and respect for others and the importance of solidarity in the face of adversity. It is perhaps unsurprising that such an approach has prevailed in a continent that has experienced so much social, political, environmental and economic upheaval, where collective action and mutual assistance have been essential to survival. Whilst some collectivist philosophies have been criticised as oppressive and totalitarian, *Ubuntu* is described as an inclusive approach which calls for dignity and respect in our relationships with others. In research such an approach would suggest a tendency towards participative and cooperative inquiry, where the researcher develops a close relationship with participants and actively engages them in the design, conduct, interpretation and application of research as co-investigators. It is also well suited to asset-based approaches, such as appreciative inquiry, that emphasise the need to recognise and build on strengths rather than focussing on how to resolve weaknesses.

3. Inter-subjectivity

Whilst described as a collectivist philosophy, in practice the concept of *Ubuntu* is inter-subjective in that it focuses on the *relationship* between the individual and the collective, rather than privileging one over the other. Such a perspective may help researchers and practitioners address the 'structure-agency debate' by indicating that it is not a case of either or, but the manner in which independent agents interact with more enduring social structures

that matters. The inter-subjective dimension of *Ubuntu* is further highlighted through calls for greater inclusion of indigenous knowledge in education and organisational practice and even the incorporation of spirituality. From this perspective a detailed appreciation of context and how it influences the subjective realities of different parties is an essential part of the knowledge creation process.

Limitations and critique

Whilst Africans and non-Africans alike have enthusiastically advocated the philosophy of *Ubuntu*, it is not without its challenges.

1. Rhetoric and reality

The first, and perhaps most significant, critique is that in many cases there is a huge gap between the espoused philosophy of *Ubuntu* and the lived experience of people in communities that purport to embrace it. The concept of *Ubuntu*, by its very nature, tends to be most prevalent in societies facing substantial social, political, economic and environmental challenges. Such contexts, however, are often marked by large inequalities in the distribution of status, power and resources that may be perceived as contradictory to the principles of *Ubuntu*. Across much of Africa there is a long history of corruption, coercion and collusion in politics, business and society where those in senior positions benefit at the cost of those further down the hierarchy and the traditional concept of the monarch-chief continues to be influential at local level. Whilst *Ubuntu* has been put to good effect in challenging inequality and injustice during the Truth and Reconciliation process in South Africa it, arguably, has done little to counteract endemic corruption and inequality elsewhere. Indeed, even in South Africa it has been suggested that *Ubuntu*, rather than challenging the status quo, may have been used by those in positions of political power to promote loyalty and respect and to suppress resistance to government-led reform. Whilst similar tensions exist in many societies,

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the challenge for those seeking to advocate a philosophy of *Ubuntu* is how to reconcile such paradoxes without recourse to idealism, manipulation or denial.

2. The limits of interdependence

As a collectivist philosophy *Ubuntu* highlights the importance of interdependence and of people working together in pursuit of shared goals. A question remains, however, over how far this interdependence and collectivity can be extended. The concept of *Ubuntu* developed at a time when African society was still largely organised around membership of tribal groups. Within this context, allegiance and loyalty was to fellow members of the tribe and whilst there may well have been instances of collaboration and cooperation between groups, identity and identification were still largely based on ethnic and family relations. In an increasingly urbanised and globalised society, however, where do we draw the lines between communities and groups? Historically part of the success of *Ubuntu* was in articulating a framework for reciprocal responsibility whereby members of a particular group supported one another and, in so doing, increased the resilience and likely survival of the group. Where identification is extended more broadly and members of a particular group may self-categorise in different ways (e.g. as Africans, Nigerians, Igbo, Lagosians, etc.) the practical implications of *Ubuntu* for the sharing of food, resources, etc. becomes far more problematic. Historically the power of *Ubuntu* has been in forging stronger relationships between people in a particular location – the prospect of its extension to other groups and cultures whilst potentially attractive from an ideological perspective may ultimately lead to its undoing as a practical solution to local problems.

3. The connection between people and environment

A further question raised by some authors is the extent to which *Ubuntu* makes a false separation between people and the environment. Dr Puleng LenkaBula, for example, suggests

that common conceptions of *Ubuntu* (and the synonymous concept of *Botho*) are anthropocentric in that they focus on human relations yet fail to recognise the connection with the physical and natural environment in which such interaction occurs. She calls for an extended notion that incorporates ecological and spiritual concerns that, she argues, are essential elements of a framework for justice and ethics. By limiting our focus to human relations alone, it is suggested, we may inadvertently support harmful environmental practices and deny the spiritual concerns that guide many peoples' lives. By including these additional dimensions, however, we complicate matters, making it hard to achieve consensus or coherence of conclusions.

4. The ontological and epistemological status of knowledge

Finally, the concept of *Ubuntu* raises fundamental questions about the nature and status of knowledge. As a relational philosophy that stresses the interdependence and inter-subjectivity of knowledge and experience it poses real challenges for how any objective or enduring understanding could be constructed. Whilst many advocates of *Ubuntu* call for the sharing of 'indigenous knowledge' it is questionable whether any such knowledge base could be developed or how it could be captured and communicated. All knowledge is culturally contingent and the strongly constructivist nature of *Ubuntu* would suggest that knowledge gained in one context may not be transferrable to other times and places. Furthermore, even if it were possible to develop a coherent body of knowledge it is unclear whether this would lead to beneficial outcomes or simply an 'othering' of the context from whence it came as in some way 'different' and of questionable relevance elsewhere. Alternatively *Ubuntu* and related concepts may become appropriated by non-Africans and employed in ways that may diminish their clarity and potency.

Conclusion

This article suggests that the African concept of *Ubuntu* articulates a relational and compassionate worldview that resonates with many of the principles of action research. It offers a means for expressing the interdependent and inter-subjective dimensions of human experience and calls for an inclusive approach that embraces diversity, collaboration and the co-construction of knowledge. There are, however, some reservations about the extent to which the concept of *Ubuntu* can be extended and employed in different contexts and the risks that this may pose in both ideological and practical terms.

Cross-references

Appreciative inquiry

Collaborative action research

Constructivism

Cooperative inquiry

Indigenist research

Intersubjectivity

Participatory action research

Post-colonial theory

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