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Ubuntu and forced migration: reflections for social work engagement with older refugees in Canada

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ABSTRACT

As an African philosophy, Ubuntu, anchored in our humanness and interconnectedness, holds a lot of promise for social work research and practice with older refugees. It can potentially make communal care and mutual support between older refugees and host communities a lifestyle that can address the peculiar needs of older refugees. This article synthesised literature linking Ubuntu to social work and refugees using a desk review. The reviewed literature illustrates Ubuntu's significance in social justice, respect for the dignity and worth of refugees and improving their integration into society. Ubuntu was also found to help refugees develop resilience and strength, especially when they support other refugees. It moves away from the pathological view of refugeeism to understanding refugees as people who also provide support. However, despite Ubuntu being a lifestyle in Africa, many Africans seem to have abandoned this, as evidenced by various social issues affecting refugees in Africa, such as xenophobic attacks. This paper makes a case for adopting Ubuntu in social work practice and research with older refugees through the development of communal support systems of care.

KEY TERMS: inclusion; older refugees; research; resilience social justice; social work practice; Ubuntu

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INTRODUCTION

Despite Ubuntu's emphasis on humanity, dignity, mutual concern and interconnectedness, it is yet to become a salient tool for social work practice and research with older refugees. In this review, the application of Ubuntu philosophy in refugee research is explored to reveal how its notions of caring and protecting can cater to the needs of older refugees and subsequently inform social work research and practice with refugees. This is important given the need for social connections which improve recovery, resilience, coping, and reduce stress, isolation, and the impact of trauma and loss in the lives of older refugees. This desk review starts by providing a background to Ubuntu and refugees in the Canadian context for a better understanding of the arguments. The methodology adopted for the desk review will then be described. The results will show the interconnection between Ubuntu, social work and refugees, illustrated under social justice, respect for the worth and dignity of refugees, strength and resilience, and integration. The results will end by highlighting concerns about the continued existence of 67 xenophobia in the face of Ubuntu. In the discussion, given the paucity of literature on the topic, we make a case for adopting Ubuntu in social work research and practice with older refugees in Canada.

BACKGROUND

The term Ubuntu is most directly translated to 'humanness'. Although the term is a Zulu/Xhosa word, its practice is widespread in Africa under different words and/or phrases (Kuvoro, 2019). For instance, the people of Malawi refer to it as *U-Mutu*, Zimbabweans call it *Unhu* (Gade, 2012), it is also referred to as *ubuntunse* by the Bemba people of Zambia (Kaunda, 2019), *utu* by Swahili-speaking people (Kresse, 2011), *Ūmūdū* by the Kikuyu people of Kenya (Kamwangamalu, 1999) while some ethnicities have more than one term for it. For example, the Igbo-speaking people from Southeast Nigeria use two terms- *Igwebuike* and *onye anyana nwanne ya* to describe Ubuntu. This shows that the philosophy and its underlying principles and values cut across and apply in various African contexts. Ubuntu is a salient tool for community support and growth guided by principles of dignity, empathy, community commitment, generosity, reciprocity and mutualism (Tutu, 1999). Thus, the survival of African communities depends on Ubuntu's values, which include care, forgiveness, equality, empathy, compassion, respect, tolerance, and harmony with others (Mayaka & Truell, 2021).

The Nguni expression '*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*', which translates to 'a person is a person through other people', best conveys the idea of Ubuntu (Okyere-Manu & Konyana, 2018, p. 1). Ubuntu is an awareness of how each person's humanity is expressed in relationships with others and an understanding of individuals' mutual responsibility towards others (Mayaka & Truell, 2021) as underpinned by the three pillars of interpersonal values, intrapersonal values and environmental values. The philosophy was made more popular by the late president of South Africa, Nelson Mandela and the late Archbishop, Desmond Tutu, as a guide for the South African Truth and Reconciliation process when Black South Africans gained political independence (Tutu, 1999).

Embodied in the African culture and lifestyle, Ubuntu manifests human interconnectedness that gives room to critical thinking, non-domination and seamless development of human relationships (Letseka, 2011; Mbigi, 1997). It is considered the essential quality of *Umntu/motho* (humanity) and gives us a purpose (Mnyaka & Motlhabi, 2005). Ubuntu understands the roles of the 'I' in the 'we', which entails the mutual relationship between a person and their community, which benefits the individual and the community (Mayaka & Motlhabi, 2005). This communal and mutual sharing is divergent from the Western model of community, which is individualistic and views communal living as an intrusion on personal privacy (Ramose, 2005). The idea of Ubuntu entails a genuine concern for the well-being of others in the community, transcending individuals' selfish ambitions (Maringe et al., 2017; Mhlanga, 2020). Ubuntu is not an act of kindness towards another, as many have misconceived; instead, it is a way of life expressed through communality and mutuality of interests (Mayaka & Motlhabi, 2005).

Based on the foregoing, Ubuntu is a tool for community support premised on dignity, empathy, community commitment, generosity, Justice, reciprocity and mutualism for strengthening the community (Tutu, 1999). The concept of Ubuntu has also been applied to various fields, including the management of effective classrooms (Maphalala, 2017), disaster management and communal coping (Mugumbate & Nyanguru, 2019; Tutu, 2013), decolonising research (Seehawer, 2018), law and jurisprudence (Mokgoro, 1998), bioethics (Ewuose & Hall, 2019) and human rights studies (Metz, 2011). Contrary to the individualistic model of care that characterises Western support to vulnerable populations (Humphrey & Bliuc, 2022), Ubuntu is premised on the principle of communal support, hospitality and harmony, and expression of the fundamental interconnectedness of human existence through respect and responsiveness (Mayaka & Truell, 2021; Ramose, 2005).

In migration research and practice, proponents of Ubuntu, such as Mugumbate and Nyanguru (2019), have criticised the Western interventions for being reactionary, providing support after crises have occurred and less concerned with strengthening the family, community and preventative interventions. In contrast, Ubuntu focuses on strengthening the community as true unity limits crises and is a primary source of support when crises eventually occur (Mayaka & Truell, 2021) and ensure adequate, effective and timely responses.

Canada has been a refugee destination, taking in an estimated 30,083 refugees in 2021 alone (United Nations High 113 Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2022). The country is guided by the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act 2001, which grants protection to persons who are persecuted, displaced or in danger (Department of Justice, 2006). Refugees come to Canada either through seeking asylum or through the UNHCR. Older immigrants comprise 30% of older adults in Canada and face social isolation problems due to limited civic and community participation (Government of Canada, 2022; Guruge, 2019) and diminished social networks and support (De Jong et al., 2015; Ekoh et al., 2022). This is worse for older refugees who typically migrate from countries where community support influences well-being (Shemirani, 2006). Studies by Ahmed (2020), Shemirani (2006) and Taylor (2005) sampled older refugees in Canada. They highlighted that migration losses have led to increased poverty, isolation, depression and difficulties in daily living, and they advocated for the inclusion of community networks in intervention processes. Thus, this review makes a case for adopting Ubuntu as a practice model and a research epistemology with older refugees in Canada.

METHODOLOGY

A desk review of the literature was adopted for this study. Databases such as PubMed, Abstracts of Social Work and Google Scholar, African Journals Online (AJOL), African Studies, and Africa Wide Information-EBSCO were searched using the following keywords: “Refugees AND Asylum Seekers AND Forced Migrants”, “Forced Migration AND Ubuntu”, “Refugees AND Ubuntu” Asylum Seekers AND Ubuntu”, “Forced Migrants AND Ubuntu”. The inclusion criteria are shown in table 1. The search produced 1321 results. Article titles and abstracts of articles found were first reviewed to evaluate their appropriateness for the review. 1212 articles were eliminated after the abstract and title review. Then the full texts of the remaining 109 articles were reviewed. Only 12 articles which met the inclusion criteria were included, and the critical data in the included literature were synthesised and presented in themes. Given the limited empirical articles on the topic, the inclusion was broadened to include nine theoretical papers, two empirical papers and one book chapter, as shown in table 2.

Table 1: Inclusion and exclusion criteria for study selection

Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
Discussed Ubuntu and refugees Available in English	Focus on Ubuntu without its implication for refugees Does not focus on refugees (e.g., asylum seekers, immigrants, displaced persons)
Empirical studies, theoretical literature, book chapters Full text available	

Table 2

Characteristics of included literature

First author's last name	Year of publication	Region	literature type	Study type	Publisher
Bilotta	2021	Kenya	Empirical	qualitative	Sage
Fasselt	2011	Africa	Book chapter	NA	Brill
Kaungu	2021	South Africa	Theoretical	NA	Cambridge University press
Kavuro	2015	South Africa	Theoretical	NA	AJOL
Kavoro	2019	South Africa	Theoretical	NA	SIHMA
Lenette	2017	Australia	Theoretical	NA	Taylor and Francis Online
Maringe	2017	South Africa	Theoretical	NA	Taylor and Francis Online
Mhlanga	2020	Africa	Theoretical	NA	AJOL
Spiegel	2022	Zimbabwe	Theoretical	NA	Wiley
Mwansa	2022	Zambia	Empirical	Mixed	Scientific Research Pub Inc
Sebola	2019	Africa	Theoretical	NA	AOSIS
Wamara	2022	Uganda and Zimbabwe	Theoretical	NA	Springer

It is important to emphasise that this is not a scoping review that involves mapping literature on the topic or a systematic review that entails assessing the quality of studies. This review characterises literature on Ubuntu, refugees and social work to underscore the unique potential Ubuntu has in social work practice and research with older refugees in Canada.

RESULTS

Ubuntu and social work in the context of refugees

Social work is concerned with the well-being of individuals, families, groups and society (Mhlanga, 2020). Generally, the profession of social work and its underpinning values and principles align with the principles of Ubuntu and the 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention to support the protection of refugees. The Ubuntu principle of accepting non-indigenes is connected to the social work principle of acceptance and the UN refugee protection principle of non-refoulement, which ensures refugees are not expelled from their country of refuge (Mhlanga, 2020). Although, some of the concepts within the principles are different in some respects, such as the discrepancy between the social work principle of individualisation and self-determination and Ubuntu's focus on communal and group determination. However, these three concepts are unified in their humanistic, communal and socialist view of refugee intervention, emphasising respect for the worth and dignity of refugees. Discussed below are some significant areas of intersection between Ubuntu, social work and refugeeism.

Social justice, migration and refugeeism

Social workers' inherent responsibility is to promote social justice, which is essential for human fulfilment. To adequately address social exclusion, deprivation, and poverty, social workers seek social justice through fair and equitable distribution of resources and fair and equal treatment of people (Mhlanga, 2020). Kavuro (2015; 2019) highlighted the prevalence of social injustice, which led to the exclusion of refugee students in South Africa from student financial aid. These articles hinged on the principle of Ubuntu to argue for a distributive justice system where the most vulnerable members of society would have access to resources and opportunities for their optimal living. The author maintained that the principle of Ubuntu entails collaborative and communal efforts towards assisting refugees in their recovery from trauma and the stress of migration, achievable through educational justice, which recognises refugees as different from international students and provides them with educational aid and assistance. The authors' argument is well presented in the quote below:

Assisting refugees for them to recover from trauma, misery, shocks and stresses is a matter that requires solidarity or cooperation at national and international levels. At national level, solidarity can, in the South African context, be equated to the principle of 'ubuntu' (Kavuro, 2015, p. 188).

A South African article on education for refugees by Maringe et al. (2017) drew on the theory of Ubuntu and social justice to argue that there is a discrepancy in theory and the practice of integrating refugee students. The authors maintained that students in South Africa should be treated equally, recognising their individuality and differences, and refugee students should be prioritised in the distribution of resources like education and financial aid to reduce re-traumatization and increase positive resettlement experiences.

Similarly, educational justice for refugees was also a concern in the empirical cross-sectional study by Mwansa (2022) with refugees residing in the Mantapala refugee settlement in Zambia. The author found that education was essential for the socioeconomic integration of refugees in Zambian society, arguing that educational justice inspired by the principles of Ubuntu aided refugees' transition from socio-economic dependants to socio-economic assets. The author cross-tabulated education by its help in getting employment and found that the degree of relationship indicated by Cramer's V was .437. The analysis results gave a Pearson chi-square value of 14.497^a and a significant asymptomatic score of .006. Again, a cross-tabulation analysis between education and engaging in income-earning activities showed a statistically significant relationship of .003. With a chi-square value of 36.441^a. The results show that a higher level of education increased the likelihood of getting employed or engaging in income-earning activities. This was enabled by Zambian refugee policy amendments in creating favourable measures to access work by making the certification of qualifications affordable for refugees.

Beyond social justice for education, Spiegel and Mhlanga (2022), when researching resettlement barriers, revealed how the abandonment of the principle of Ubuntu has resulted in the neglect of refugees in African countries.

Citing Swanson (2015), the authors argued that global injustice against refugees could be addressed through the idea of collectivism, which disfavors the individualistic Western epistemology through respect for the social and ecological well-being of all. The authors further argued that Ubuntu could contribute to the social justice-influenced refugee policies on voluntary repatriation, local integration and resettlement underpinned by the need to ensure social justice for refugees through the recognition of Ubuntu's ideology of humanity and enjoyment through others.

Respect for the worth and dignity of refugees

Social workers are ethically bound to respect the inherent dignity and worth of all people (including refugees) in their practice and research endeavours (International Federation of Social Workers [IFSW], 2018). In a Kenyan study on ethical practices with refugee communities by Bilotta (2021), the participants perceived research as disrespectful because of its lack of engagement in a reciprocal relationship; researchers were seen as individualistic, exploitative, and less concerned with the well-being of the community. A participant was quoted as saying:

What [RYP4] is saying is that he wants one thing from research. [RYP4] is a human being; even if a refugee and homeless, somebody needs to care. If [RYP4] shares information with somebody, [RYP4] wants to get some feedback...all of the researchers have shown no feedback...these researchers are not respecting [RYP4] as a human (Bilotta, 2011, p. 6).

The study and other previous studies (Sambala et al., 2020; Seehawer, 2018) subsequently recommended that the principles of Ubuntu should guide research, shift moral ethics in decision-making and be more reciprocal and collaborative.

Wamara et al. (2022) also highlighted the importance of Ubuntu in work by social workers at the refugee camp, acknowledging the refugees as dignified persons - which further motivates community members to treat refugees with respect while providing care and sharing resources with them. In a theoretical article by Sebola (2019), African countries were criticised for neglecting the philosophy of Ubuntu in their treatment of refugees and are encouraged to apply Ubuntu in safeguarding refugees. By recognising the Ubuntu principles, Kuvoro (2019) contended that the African ethics of Ubuntu is essential for securing a better life for refugees.

Strength and resilience

Ubuntu spirit does not teach communal and cooperative living only for the benefit of the community; it instils this consciousness in Africans because of the benefits and sense of fulfilment received by individuals who live by its principles (Mhlanga, 2020). Lenette et al. (2017) highlighted this in the digital story narratives of refugee women in Australia. The women in the study used the term Ubuntu, contextualised as togetherness, to lace their stories, revealing how it contributed to communal living and sharing, gave them a sense of purpose, identity, healing, resolution, hope and social interconnectedness in contrast to pathologising of refugee experiences in research. The authors further highlighted how incorporating Ubuntu in refugee research allows for listening and getting complete stories instead of bits of narratives designed to provide answers to predetermined research questions, thus, ensuring researchers have room to think differently about refugee research. This also shows how Ubuntu contributes to intersectional and narrative approaches to research by not working with *single stories*. The authors' synopsis is exemplified by the quote below:

Henna, weaving, and Ubuntu may seem an unlikely trio of concepts to inform refugee studies, but in another sense, they represent the value of listening to and inquiring about whole stories, rather than just 'slices' of experiences or answers to questions (Lenette et al., 2017, p. 83).

Maringe et al. (2017) further revealed that despite the problematic odds faced by refugees, many have shown resilience and succeeded. They revealed how opportunities to network within the community, central to Ubuntu, provided refugees with the resources needed to overcome barriers and succeed. This looks at resilience beyond the individual style of coping with difficult situations to the importance of community networks in building and nurturing resilience (Maringe & Jenkins, 2015)

Integration of refugees

Social workers have a crucial role in the resettlement and integration of refugees into mainstream society. For instance, Mhlanga (2020) reflected on social work and Ubuntu in the protection of refugees and suggested that social workers advocate for the flexible movement of refugees and increased interaction with host communities in countries where refugees are in camps. Similarly, Maringe et al. (2017) proposed that efforts should be made to integrate refugee students into mainstream society and ensure that they are not excluded from education and economic opportunities as part of a more sustainable healing and recovery. This follows the Organization of African Union's (1969) recommendation that granting asylum to refugees is a peaceful and humanitarian act rooted in Ubuntu (Sebola, 2019) and complements the rights-based model by enabling integration in society and not in camps, i.e., Ubuntu in action.

In a comparative theoretical paper by Wamara et al. (2022) on refugee integration in Uganda and Zimbabwe, the authors identified that the abandonment of the philosophy of Ubuntu is responsible for the poor treatment of refugees in Zimbabwe. They recommended re-educating the host communities on Ubuntu's values, which are premised on solidarity and the critical roles it has played in the survival of African communities. Mutual concern and community solidarity should provide relief to refugees facing the challenges of poverty, hunger and social isolation in the host communities. The spirit of Ubuntu can also inspire local companies to demonstrate social responsibility by providing resources that can help in the resettlement of refugees. Wamara et al. (2022) concluded by stating: *"both Zimbabwean and Ugandan governments should provide and encourage language support, micro-credit facilities, and programs to facilitate social harmony and mitigate conflicts [between refugees and host communities]"* (p. 175).

Ubuntu and xenophobia

In an article by Fasselt (2011), they noted that the notion of African humanity had been used as a tool to cover the fraught relationship between South Africans and refugees from other African countries. Lenette et al. (2017) further revealed that xenophobia was a significant concern for African refugee women in Australia, with one of the participants stating that 'xenophobia engulfed Ubuntu' because of her experiences in South Africa, where her family was terrorised in a manner that was anti-thesis of Ubuntu (p.79). Maringe et al. (2017) also recognised xenophobia as one of the challenges facing refugee students in South Africa who lived in constant fear of unjustified attacks by locals. Considering these select experiences, xenophobia is a challenge for refugees (Fasselt, 2011; Lenette et al., 2017; Maringe et al., 2017). However, in understanding xenophobic attacks towards other black foreigners as a human rights challenge in South Africa, Kaungu (2021) suggests that Ubuntu could provide an antidote to xenophobia and Afro-phobia if made the foundation of immigration and refugee policies in South Africa. He stated: *"given Ubuntu, such targeted attacks on black Africans by black South Africans are unexpected. This is because Ubuntu places an obligation on South African nationals to be hospitable and welcoming"* (p 154).

DISCUSSION: ADOPTION OF UBUNTU IN SOCIAL WORK RESEARCH AND PRACTICE WITH OLDER REFUGEES IN CANADA

From synthesising the studies on Ubuntu, social work and migration, our results show a paucity of Ubuntu principles in social work migration research in Western societies. Again, despite older refugees being more attached to their culture (Ekoh et al., 2022; HelpAge International, 2018) and Ubuntu being a philosophy that underpins many African cultures, limited publications have linked migration, Ubuntu and older refugees. Nonetheless, it is essential to note that this non-existence of Ubuntu and ageing in refugee research may be attributed to the lack of scholarly attention on older refugees (HelpAge International, 2018). Forced migration increases the need for mutual support (HelpAge International, 2018). Variables like social networks and support are essential to the survival and well-being of older refugees in Western countries like Canada (Vinokurov, 2019). Social networks, including one's social ties and contacts, describe the interconnectedness promoted by Ubuntu, while social support highlights Ubuntu's mutual caring and sharing premise. Therefore, social networks and support discourse in research and social work practice with older refugees in Western countries can benefit greatly from a broad understanding of Ubuntu. This is especially important because Ubuntu pays more attention to community ties and support than family ties. Many older refugees might have lost their families and friends to events leading to forced migration. Factors like age, frailty, and loss of authority may make it more challenging for them to recreate these lost social networks (Cummings et al., 2011). Therefore, Ubuntu's consciousness can be adopted in building new social networks of support for older refugees in the community and systems like faith-based organisations.

As shown in the reviewed articles above, Ubuntu helps refugees cope and build resilience post-migration. Giving and receiving communal support brings renewed hope and helps in coping and building resilience. The

information, resources, and hope shared within communal living help older refugees access resources needed to cope with the difficulties of forced migration and improve their overall quality of life (Correa-Velez *et al.*, 2020).

The losses associated with forced migration have left many older refugees with limited authority and agency (Poudel-Tandukar *et al.*, 2021) through inadequate service provision and less attention to their perceived needs (HelpAge International, 2016; International Centre for Evidence in Disability at London School of Hygiene [ICEDLSH] & Tropical Medicine and HelpAge International [TMHI], 2018). These actions amount to discriminatory practices and seemingly oppose the social justice, respect and dignity fostered by Ubuntu. Embracing Ubuntu in social work practice and research would ensure older refugees are respected as integral members of the community and their peculiar needs recognised as a concern for everyone involved.

Finally, the Canadian refugee policy is designed to integrate and resettle refugees, making Canada the country with the highest rate of refugee access to citizenship in 2018 (The Canadian Encyclopedia, 2020). This sense of hospitality is aligned with Ubuntu's recommendation about treating refugees, as it discourages placing refugees in camps and promotes the integration of refugees into mainstream society (Sebola, 2019). Social workers also have crucial roles in building these inclusive societies for refugees. However, Yan and Chan (2011) found social workers less prepared for this responsibility. Therefore, the findings and recommendations of this review contribute to the continued growth of social workers as practitioners and researchers in their responsibilities toward the integration and resettlement of refugees.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In line with the findings of the review and discussion, we make the following recommendations:

1. Social work scholars and practitioners should pay more attention to the peculiar needs of older refugees. This can be achieved through research that exposes the specialised challenges of older refugees, leading to more evidence-based intervention for their social needs.
2. Social work interventions with refugees should rely on the principles of Ubuntu in building support systems for older refugees in Canada and other Western societies. Hence Ubuntu should guide planned interventions for network and community building.
3. Research with older refugees can benefit from the epistemology of Ubuntu as it does not only look at older refugees in the context of their society but ensure a reciprocal relationship between researchers and participants.
4. Ubuntu's social justice and dignity component should guide social work research and practice with refugees in Canada. The inclusion of Ubuntu's social justice and dignity values in social work education can make it a guide for social work research and practice with older refugees.

CONCLUSION

This article examined the use of Ubuntu in social work research and practice with older refugees. The data search and review showed a lack of documented scholarly work on using Ubuntu in research and practice with older refugees. The article provided a conceptualisation of the philosophy of Ubuntu. It further unfolded the connections between Ubuntu, social work and refugees and how it promotes resilience and coping, social justice, respect for the worth and dignity of refugees, and improves integration and resettlement efforts. This paper makes a case for adopting Ubuntu with practice and research with older refugees in Western contexts like Canada and calls for further research in this area.

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