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Confronting Social Work Worldviews: Ubuntu and Procedural Research Ethics with Persons Experiencing Refugee Status

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Abstract

Social work's ethical principles prioritize the inclusion of worldviews from across the globe. Indeed, the current theme of the Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development is the sub-Saharan African philosophy of *Ubuntu*. In general terms, Ubuntu emphasizes communal relationships and collectivity over individuality. Recent scholarship recommends that social work academia decolonize the profession by applying Ubuntu to decenter its mainstream, often White, Eurocentric ideologies. However, few studies have explored the ways that social work researchers utilize Ubuntu within the context of academic neoliberalism and social work's Western-influenced research ethics. That is, as evidenced by the requirements of Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) and their privileging of procedural ethics in

research (e.g., informed consent, confidentiality) over relational ethics (e.g., respect, reciprocity, reflexivity). The lack of intersections between procedural and relational ethics in social work research impedes social work researchers' ability to implement Ubuntu in their own research praxes. While recommending that social workers apply Ubuntu in all their work and research globally, this article focuses on social work researchers working with persons experiencing refugee status in the Global South. Specifically, it details three approaches social workers can use to move closer to respectful Ubuntu research ethics: (a) privileging Ubuntu ways of knowing; (b) merging procedural and relational ethics; and (c) confronting neoliberal guiding frameworks of social work research.

Keywords: Refugee status, ethics, decolonization, research, reciprocity

Introduction

Contemporary discourse on social work's ethical principles prioritizes theories and worldviews from formerly colonized contexts (e.g., the Global South). Such approaches privilege the ontological, epistemological, and axiological positioning of Indigenous worldviews in social work theory (Rowe et al., 2015). Indeed, the current focus of the Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development is the sub-Saharan African philosophy of *Ubuntu* (Mayaka & Truell, 2021). In general terms, Ubuntu emphasizes collectivity over individuality, the interconnectedness of human beings, and communal relationality (Mugumbate & Chereni, 2019). Ample scholarship recommends that the field of social work decolonize (Ibrahima & Mattaini, 2019; Rasool & Harms-Smith, 2021) and indigenize (Mogorosi & Thabede, 2018) the profession by applying Ubuntu (Chigangaidze, 2021; Mayaka & Truell, 2021) to decenter the mainstream, often White, Eurocentric methods, theories, and values that continue to dominate social work in the academy and in practice. However, Ubuntu's meaning and applicability to social work remain underdeveloped (Van Breda, 2019).

More specifically, little research has explored how social work researchers utilize Ubuntu in the context of academic neoliberalism (Hanesworth, 2017) and Western-influenced procedural research ethics. For instance, compulsory procedural ethics in research (e.g., informed consent, privacy and confidentiality, institutional ethical approval) (Clark-Kazak, 2021) are prioritized over relational ethics (e.g., respect, reflexivity, researcher positionality, and reciprocity) (Bilotta, 2020), as evidenced by Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) protocols. However, the central tenets of Ubuntu appear more aligned with relational than procedural research ethics. Considering the lack of intersection between these two ethical approaches to research (Clark-Kazak, 2021), implementing Ubuntu in an authentic and genuine fashion may pose challenges for social work researchers across the globe.

This paper illuminates the ways in which Ubuntu can inform social work research ethics by examining how scholars can respectfully and genuinely apply Ubuntu in our research. Previous work has recommended that social workers globally attempt to apply Ubuntu in all fields of social work (e.g., practice, policy, research) (Mugumbate & Chereni, 2020). This manuscript specifically focuses on opportunities for applying Ubuntu among social work researchers who work with persons experiencing refugee status in the Global South. The reason for this is two-fold: (1) a growing body of research recommends intentionally pursuing locally-driven social work research, particularly research based on principles of Ubuntu, with persons experiencing refugee status in the Global South (Chigangaidze, 2021; Kalyango, 2021; Mhlanga, 2020); and (2) the overwhelming majority of social work research focusing on persons experiencing refugee status is facilitated by Global Northerners who may be knowledgeable only of Eurocentric theories and methods (Palattiyil et al., 2021).

Due to social work's Eurocentric roots, social workers from the Global North are responsible for authentically exploring Ubuntu before implementing it in our work, particularly in cross-cultural settings. A failure to do so may lead social workers from the Global North to romanticize or appropriate the Afrocentric undertones of Ubuntu (Seehawer, 2018) without

recognizing its value for practice and research. By detailing the tenets of Ubuntu and research ethics, social workers may identify contradictions and misalignments between Ubuntu-based theory and principles of mainstream research ethics.

Although Ubuntu and research ethics share similar values, including respect and solidarity (Spitzer & Twikirize, 2014), their meanings vary based on culture and context. Indeed, Sewpaul and Henrickson (2019) assert that the concept of social justice may suggest different meanings in culturally diverse settings. Therefore, social work researchers must critically interrogate both their individual and collective actions to redress the Eurocentric ethics, theories, and methodologies embedded in social work research and practice. Individually, social work researchers should consider decentering themselves in their research, being self-reflexive, and learning about the realities of those who face subjugation (Odera et al., 2021). Collectively, we must push back on the neoliberal confines of social work research (Hanesworth, 2017). Hanesworth (2017) defines neoliberalism in social work education as “academic capitalism” that minimizes substantive critical inquiry in higher educational spaces by privileging evidence-based micro-interventions over macro-oriented knowledge production (p. 42). Furthermore, neoliberalism equates to market-based standards that measure the value of social work academics, including quantity of publications and awarded research funding. Finally, the discipline of social work must reexamine the epistemological implications of its persistent prioritization of procedural research ethics in cross-cultural settings.

To pursue this argument, I first acknowledge my identities and positionalities as another White man writing about Ubuntu. I then summarize the major tenets of Ubuntu and recent social work discourse recommending that social work embrace this theory, specifically in work with persons experiencing refugee status. The paper then unpacks the obligatory procedural research ethics protocols that social work researchers must follow when facilitating research. These investigations expose the misalignment between procedural ethics and Ubuntu as they relate to social work research with

persons experiencing refugee status. Finally, the paper concludes by detailing the epistemological and practice implications for social work researchers invested in incorporating Ubuntu into their research and by identifying next steps. These steps include (a) privileging Ubuntu ways of knowing; (b) merging procedural and relational ethics; and (c) pushing back against the neoliberal guiding framework of social work research.

Post-Colonial Researcher in East Africa

This article is written by a White, heterosexual, educated, cisgender man from the United States who has had the privilege of engaging in social work practice and research with forcibly displaced young people in East Africa. Due to my background, I cannot and do not intend to provide a comprehensive overview of Ubuntu in social work. Instead, I approach this subject as a scholar from a North American settler-colonial context where my ancestors caused unknowable harm to people from the African continent. As such, as a social work researcher anywhere, and particularly in Africa, I run the risk of engaging in professional imperialism (Midgley, 1981). To obviate this risk, I frame my work and experiences in East Africa from what Spitzer (2019) calls the “mzungu perspective” (p. 568), *mzungu* being the Kiswahili term for Europeans or White people.

The mzungu perspective is “deeply inspired by the endeavour to critically reflect on one’s own Eurocentric bias and to avoid the pitfalls of professional imperialism which are too often ignored” (Spitzer, 2019, p. 568). Therefore, I aim to explore Ubuntu in the context of social work with persons experiencing refugee status in the Global South – and particularly East Africa – by walking a fine line between interrogating Eurocentric social work theories and methodologies while not claiming expertise on Ubuntu. Gaining a more holistic understanding and appreciation of Ubuntu’s utility in social work with persons experiencing refugee status demands a collaborative and equitable partnership between social workers from the Global North and Global South.

Ubuntu and Social Work

A comprehensive unpacking of the philosophy of Ubuntu would far exceed the boundaries of this article. Rather, this article offers a general overview of the major tenets of Ubuntu to explore how this philosophy (mis)aligns with common (i.e., Eurocentric) components of research ethics for social work researchers. Broadly speaking, Ubuntu embraces generosity, collectivity, and communal relations (Tutu, 1999). Ubuntu suggests that life is contingent upon the quality of authentic human relationships and the responsibility to one another entailed by our connections (Chigangaidze, 2021; Eze, 2008). Moreover, the Ubuntu philosophy insists that human beings be treated with humanity and dignity in all matters (Sebola, 2019).

According to Dillard (2020), tenets of Ubuntu include: (a) a sense of self-identity that forms through cooperation as opposed to competition; (b) the expansion of Western horizons, emphasizing community, which is deeply rooted in African cultural productions, a deepening of spirituality; and (d) a development of a communal self that requires practice. Broodryk (2008) claims that Ubuntu is rooted in intense humanness, sharing, respect, compassion, and ensuring a “happy and qualitative community life” (p. 17) in the spirit of connectedness. Furthermore, Ubuntu revolves around fairness and justice (Mabvurira, 2020) in interpersonal relationships. This paper unpacks Ubuntu and social work research according to Zimbabwean social work scholar Mhlanga (2020) who states,

Ubuntu refers to a collection of values and practices that Black people of Africa or of African origin view as making people authentic human beings. While the nuances of these values and practices vary across different ethnic groups, they all point to one thing – an authentic individual human being is part of a larger and more significant relational, communal, societal, environmental, and spiritual world (p. 41).

Ubuntu has been examined by a wide range of academic disciplines, including social work (Van Breda, 2019). Within social work, theoretical scholarship has been published on applications of Ubuntu in social work education

(wa Mungai, 2021), practice with children (Mugumbate & Chereni, 2020), and social work ethics (Mabvurira, 2020). Furthermore, social work scholarship recommends implementing Ubuntu in work with persons experiencing refugee and immigrant status, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa (Kalyango, 2021; Sebola, 2019), and such programming, though rare, has proven successful. For instance, following principles of Ubuntu, an organization in Burundi implemented locally relevant methods of conflict management, including ceremonies, and adopted participatory approaches toward conflict-related problem-solving (Spitzer & Twikirize, 2014). Indeed, Sebola (2019) argues that all policy related to forced migration contexts should integrate Ubuntu in the support of forced migrants.

Implementing tenets of Ubuntu in social work would not only benefit persons experiencing forced migration; it would also bring transformative change to social work practice. For example, Mhlanga (2020) posits that instituting an Ubuntu frame with persons experiencing refugee status would require social workers to advocate for an interventionist approach to ending conflicts instead of subscribing to the more common principle of non-interference as relationship building is key in Ubuntu. Crucially, calls for implementing Ubuntu among people experiencing forced migration are also coming from academics in the Global South. Social work academics in Nigeria (Okoye & Aniche, 2021), Kenya (Rono & Ombaka, 2021), Uganda, and Rwanda (Spitzer & Twikirize, 2014) have all advocated for traditional and locally-driven theoretical and methodological approaches to working with forcibly displaced communities in sub-Saharan Africa. To engage in indigenous and locally driven social support systems in these contexts, further research based on non-Eurocentric approaches and philosophies such as Ubuntu are warranted.

Although academic scholarship has explored decolonizing research ethics by applying tenets of Ubuntu (Chilisa, 2012; Seehawer, 2018), minimal attention has been given to doing so in social work research. For several reasons, this paper focuses on potential applications of Ubuntu in social work research with persons experiencing refugee status, particularly in the Global

South. First, given social work's hallmark focus on the person-in-the-environment and anti-oppressive ideologies, social workers should play an integral and more prominent role in supporting persons experiencing refugee status and discourse globally (Palattiyil et al., 2021). Second, although the overwhelming majority of persons experiencing refugee status live in the Global South, social work scholarship remains primarily focused on persons experiencing refugee status in the Global North and primarily facilitated by scholars in the Global North (Gonzalez Benson et al., 2021). Indeed, academics from sub-Saharan Africa authored only one percent of all peer-reviewed social work scholarship, focusing on persons experiencing refugee status, conducted between 1978 and 2019 (Gonzalez Benson et al., 2021).

The dearth of research knowledge emanating from social worker academics in the Global South exemplifies the field's need to address longstanding inequities in knowledge production perpetuated by histories of colonization and racism. Simply put, social work interventions geared toward the Global South still risk prioritizing ideologies and worldviews from the Global North. Examining ways of implementing insights from Ubuntu into the research process – particularly among scholars from the Global North – offers an important means of mitigating disparities in knowledge production around forced migration and social work, specifically in the Global South.

Research Ethics

A way of mitigating these disparities is to reimagine procedural research ethics protocols – the dominant type of research ethics applied to research generated by Global North scholars – within an Ubuntu framework. *Procedural research ethics* include norms, standards, and protocols related to the ethical planning and facilitation of research, including researchers' responsibilities (Hunt & Godard, 2013). For instance, informed consent documents, participants' privacy and confidentiality, institutional ethics applications, the right for participants to withdraw from the research, and dissemination

practices are all considered aspects of procedural ethics. Engaging in such procedural practices assumes that a researcher is “doing no (or minimizing) harm,” “respecting” research participants, and maximizing participants’ “benefits” (Bilotta, 2021). All social work research proposals must be approved by a formal ethics review board (e.g., an Institutional Review Board [IRB] or a Research Ethics Board), and all social work researchers conducting research with persons experiencing refugee status must first receive IRB approval, typically from their home academic institution. For scholars from the Global North who conduct research internationally (e.g., in the Global South), IRB approval is frequently a prerequisite for seeking secondary approval, usually from a national governing body in the country where the research will transpire. Procedural research ethics do not necessarily require researchers to consider how colonialism, power, and inequity may inform the research relationship.

Although procedural ethics are a valuable mechanism to hold researchers accountable in their work, they have not escaped academic critique. Critical studies scholars, particularly with persons experiencing refugee status, claim procedural ethics are Western-centric as they require consent through signed forms that are commonly written in technocratic language (Clark-Kazak, 2021), prioritize Western research methodologies (Mugumbate & Mtetwa, 2019), are primarily concerned with protecting researchers rather than understanding complex intercultural relationships between researchers and participants (Bilotta, 2021), and fail to account for situational ethics that arise during the research project (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). Moreover, IRBs almost always exclude research participants and are instead composed of academics who are far removed from the research (Chynoweth & Martin, 2019), meaning that participants have no opportunity to review or approve the study before it is conducted on them. Finally, as noted earlier, researchers must also obtain governmental ethical approval from the country in the Global South where their research is conducted. However, as found in previous research, the ethics approval from the government of the hosting country in the Global South was granted

primarily in response to IRB approval from the academy in the Global North. In other words, governmental approval in Global South countries hosting those with refugee status simply echo decisions made in Western-centric, Global North institutions, effectively perpetuating the power disparities that continue to affect research and knowledge production in social work (Bilotta, 2019).

Due to the constraints and limitations of procedural ethics, scholars are advocating for a broader implementation of relational ethics, also termed an ethics of care (Clark-Kazak, 2021). *Relational ethics* refer to recognizing value, respect, reciprocity, researcher reflexivity, and the deconstruction of a researcher's power and positionality within the research process (Bilotta, 2021; Chilisa et al., 2017). Unlike procedural ethics, relational ethics privilege the agency of research participants while striving for dignity and connectedness between the researcher and participant (Vervliet et al., 2015). Additionally, relational ethics include collaborating or partnering with community members, guardians, or other actors in participants' lives to assuage the asymmetrical research relationship between powerful researchers and less powerful research participants (Vervliet et al., 2015). Due to the precarity in many forced migration contexts, trust and relationship building between researchers and participants is critical, particularly in social work research, which is why relational ethics must be considered as tantamount to procedural ethics.

Four themes of relational ethics include: mutual respect, engagement, embodied knowledge, and environment (Pollard, 2015). Mutual respect constitutes an interactive and reciprocal process that emphasizes respect and difference. Engagement involves an empathetic sensitivity that engenders an authentic connection between researchers and participants (Drolet, 2014). Embodied knowledge means understanding research participants' values and perspectives to guide researchers' decision-making processes (Pollard, 2015). Environment expands the relational space beyond the interpersonal to the context of the social environment (Tomaselli et al., 2020). Following these themes should lead to relations that are established in an

equitable and empowering way which may in turn lead to more ethical research decisions and actions (Tomaselli et al., 2020).

While relational ethics are critical to culturally sensitive intercultural research practices with persons experiencing refugee status and, more generally, to applying key tenets of Ubuntu in research in the Global South, the research community still treats procedural ethics as the paramount guidelines to follow. As such, there is a clear and urgent need for social work researchers to integrate relational ethics into standardized (i.e., procedural) research ethical protocols (Clark-Kazak, 2021). However, despite the many philosophical alignments between Ubuntu and relational ethics, further inquiry is needed to ascertain how relational ethics are understood and conceptualized locally. This is especially critical for social work research with persons experiencing refugee status due to the damaging implications of colonialism (e.g., Eurocentricity in postcolonial states) and the precarious situation in which many persons experiencing refugee status exist.

Ubuntu-Centered Research Ethics Paradigms

Conceptualizing an Ubuntu research ethics paradigm for social work researchers is necessary to meet the field's own calls to incorporate Ubuntu into intercultural social work. To this end, this section conceptualizes a process for working toward and applicable Ubuntu research ethics for social work with persons experiencing refugee status. After highlighting the need to reconsider social work research ethics practices with persons experiencing refugee status, I describe three approaches that social work researchers working with persons experiencing refugee status can adopt as initial steps toward an Ubuntu-based research ethics: (a) promoting fluidity in research and knowledge production methods; (b) merging procedural and relational ethics into obligatory IRB proposals; and (c) ensuring the individual and collective personal and professional responsibility from social work researchers and the social work discipline at large. However, actualizing Ubuntu-based research ethics in social work research is an ideal to work towards

rather than something than a prescriptive format (Seehawer, 2018). At the same time, it must be recognized that a comprehensive imagining of an Ubuntu-based research ethics for social work must also prioritize persons experiencing refugee status' voices, worldviews, and perspectives as well as those of social work scholars and practitioners from the Global South. Although this paper does not include voices of persons experiencing refugee status or Global South scholars, this paper is still meaningful and useful as it advances the conversation around ethical social work research practice with persons experiencing refugee status.

While all social work researchers have cause to prioritize an Ubuntu research ethics framework, several factors indicate that such a framework would particularly enhance social work research with persons experiencing refugee status. Research with persons experiencing refugee status often prioritizes transactional interactions that produce data and evidence-based knowledge over information about persons experiencing refugee status' proximity to and solidarity with communities (Lokot, 2019). Such a research approach can reduce persons experiencing refugee status to research objects with little agency (Crane, 2021) while casting researchers as the experts on persons experiencing refugee status' lives and complex situations. Furthermore, persons experiencing refugee status in sub-Saharan Africa have claimed that social work researchers are unable to fulfill research participants' expectations and instill false promises (Bilotta, 2021), and initial evidence suggests that this may relate to Eurocentric supremacy and researchers embracing a "White Savior Complex" (Cole, 2012) – both of which are incompatible with a research ethics grounded in Ubuntu. Finally, several social work scholars from sub-Saharan Africa have recommended implementing an Ubuntu perspective in research with persons experiencing refugee status (Kalyango, 2021; Mhlanga, 2020; Sebola, 2019). Global social work scholars would be greatly remiss to ignore this recommendation not only from their colleagues, but from social work professionals who live in the global region with the highest concentration of persons experiencing refugee status.

Ubuntu Methods, Methodologies, and Ways of Knowing

An initial step toward an Ubuntu ethics in social work with persons experiencing refugee status is for researchers to expand what constitutes “traditional” (i.e., Western) knowledge production or “data.” Knowledge generation from an Ubuntu perspective entails a communal and relational process that logically complements participatory and community-based research methods (Seehawer, 2018). Rooting research in Ubuntu methods includes prioritizing participants’ worldviews with bottom-up approaches to generating knowledge, including storytelling, talking circles, extended periods of relationship-building, visual and performing arts, and focusing on oppressive systemic structures that perpetuate inequality (Bozalek, 2011; D’Amico et al., 2016).

Because individual communities have unique methods for acquiring knowledge and constructing “truth” (Mugumbate & Mtetwa, 2019), social work researchers must think beyond standard Eurocentric, positivist epistemological research paradigms. Although common quantitative research methods certainly have utility in research with persons experiencing refugee status, they also require that researchers map out the entire project (e.g., precisely pre-defining research methods and participants) before commencing the study. This predetermined research agenda incorrectly suggests that researchers are the sole experts capable of determining the most effective and “objective” procedure for creating knowledge and obtaining “truth” *from* participants experiencing refugee status – not, in any case, *with* participants. Given that persons experiencing refugee status’ ways of knowing have been marginalized and colonized by discourses (Dorpenyo, 2020) that favor Global North researchers, it is essential that research participants dictate the course of research (Bilotta, 2021). Moreover, social work researchers working with persons experiencing refugee status should consider how standardized quantitative checklists and surveys may appear to participants. For instance, when researchers collect data and generate knowledge solely via quantitative data recorded on documents while

excluding more relational methods, they follow a transactional approach that places the researcher in a position of power to generate knowledge and “truth” about an Othered group. By contrast, relational research methods (e.g., participatory, and community-based approaches to knowledge production) foster a level of depth of understanding that cannot be achieved via quantitative surveys.

Ubuntu research ethics also rejects the idea of a one-off exchange of informed consent documents. Instead, it privileges an “ongoing relational process” (Hugman et al., 2011, p. 663) in which consent is interrogated and navigated throughout the research project. Such ongoing relational processes are especially pertinent for social work researchers working with persons experiencing refugee status. Indeed, as the majority of research with persons experiencing refugee status is conducted by social work scholars from the Global North (Gonzalez Benson et al., 2021), the worldviews and values between researchers and research participants may vary significantly. Thus, engaging in consistent informal check-in sessions with participants regarding research ethics is critical for social work researchers because participants’ ideas and level of comfort may shift throughout the research, and issues of respect and research expectations may gradually change and become more or less clear. Social work researchers must provide a platform for participants to discuss their concerns and adjust the research as necessary. In sum, renegotiating ethical research practices with persons experiencing refugee status during the research project to meet participants’ needs is a useful method for ethically grounding that research project in the principles of Ubuntu.

Similarly, working toward an Ubuntu-based research ethics requires employing dissemination practices that are relevant to and consistent with research participants’ needs. The onus is on social work researchers to learn from persons experiencing refugee status about the specific ways that disseminating research-based knowledge will benefit their unique situation. For instance, researchers publishing manuscripts in an academic journal or

presenting at a national conference may be of little benefit to participants living in forced migration contexts.

Merging Relational and Procedural Ethics

Due to the lack of an intersection exists between procedural (confidentiality, informed consent, research methods, etc.) and relational ethics (reciprocity, integrating equitable power hierarchies in research, etc.), the two approaches to research differ significantly, with the former dominating research with persons experiencing refugee status (Clark-Kazak, 2021). As previously stated, simply the act of obtaining procedural IRB ethics approval implies that researchers have adequately planned to facilitate ethical research. However, standard IRB applications wholly ignore several components of relational ethics, including a self-reflexive account of researchers' identities and positionality, the voices and perspectives of research participants, and a plan to establish a reciprocal relationship between researchers and participants.

An Ubuntu-based approach to research ethics requires researchers to acknowledge relational ethics in the IRB application. For instance, IRB applications should include statements from researchers about how they will navigate the power, privilege, and colonialism that inevitably surface in research with persons experiencing refugee status, because these factors may impact how relationships form and how researchers facilitate interviews and code data. Although a researcher's self-reflexive account of their positionality will not dismantle systemic power inequities, it will force the researcher to interrogate the often-unaddressed structural inequality inherent in research relationships, particularly between social work researchers and persons experiencing refugee status. Additionally, IRB applications should inquire about researchers' plans to foster reciprocal processes with persons experiencing refugee status (e.g., discuss how research will benefit participants), as reciprocity is essential to establishing and sustaining relationships, particularly in contexts where collectivism is emphasized

(Bessarab & Wright, 2020). Thus, researchers must also envision how persons experiencing refugee status will benefit from the study in addition to receiving monetary or material tokens of appreciation or compensation for participating, particularly given the precarity of many persons experiencing refugee status' daily surroundings.

While integrating procedural and relational research ethics may contribute to more equitable research partnerships with persons experiencing refugee status, it is not a panacea for research ethics. For instance, interpretations of relational ethics (e.g., researchers' reflexivity, reciprocity, relationship building) may vary according to culture and context. What is deemed respectful and socially just in the researcher's culture or context may be understood differently in the participant's culture or context (Sewpaul & Henrickson, 2019). For instance, from a Global North IRB standpoint, engaging in respectful research means that researchers will ensure confidentiality and anonymity, provide an informed consent document, and not physically or emotionally harm the participant. By contrast, Bilotta (2021) describes how respect and research-related harm were understood according to persons experiencing refugee status who engaged in previous research projects. In this case, research participants had expectations that their research engagement would bring changes in the substantive areas that the research inquired about (e.g., psychosocial support for single mothers within the camp). The participants claimed their expectations went unmet and that researchers promised to follow up with participants or share their research with international non-governmental organizations to further the research, and ultimately described participating in research as "disrespectful" and "harmful" (Bilotta, 2021). Incorporating components of relational ethics into formal ethics approval processes would help avoid such disjunctions and, more importantly, mitigate negative outcomes among participants resulting from their participation in the research.

Another means of integrating procedural and relational ethics and grounding research in tenets of Ubuntu is to consider the cultural variations between research ethics constructs by collaborating with experts from

formerly colonized contexts (e.g., academics, persons experiencing refugee status, social work practitioners) through authentic and meaningful relationships. In other words, researchers should work to understand how research participants conceptualize “respectful research,” and what steps researchers can take to meet that standard. One strategy for doing so is for social work researchers and persons experiencing refugee status to co-create an ethical contract in which both parties explore and compromise on needs and demands. A co-created document would avoid research protocols that implicitly assert researchers’ critical superiority and authority to control the research so long as they have participants’ signatures as justification, and instead engender a collective and collaborative process aligned with Ubuntu principles. Engaging in such a process would require time and commitment to formulate relationships and build trust.

Individual and Collective Accountability

Until IRB applications require introspective self-reflexive accounts, researchers should facilitate this process individually. In fact, scholars in both social work (Probst, 2013) and research with persons experiencing refugee status (Iosifides, 2018) are already advocating for researchers’ engagement in critical self-reflexive processes. Jefferess (2012) describes critical self-reflexivity as a process of recognizing “structures of inequality and the worldviews that normalize them” (p. 19), including the power hierarchies inherent in almost all research relationships. For social work researchers in forced migratory contexts, this process may include consistent journaling throughout the research project, consultation with colleagues and supervisors, discourse with local academics and social workers, and transparent communication with participants throughout the project lifecycle (Bilotta, 2020). During such processes, social work researchers should explore how sexism, racism, colonialism, oppression, power, privilege, and hegemony impact all aspects of research. At the same time, critical journaling exercises or discussions about power imbalances, privilege, and inequality on their

own are insufficient to generate ethical research. Rather, researchers must be prepared to amend or modify their research agenda and protocols based on their critical self-reflexive process (Iosifides, 2018). Without adjusting research procedures and protocols based on their exercises may imply researchers as self-indulgent or merely navel-gazing rather than actively working to develop their critical self-reflexivity (Probst, 2015).

As previously noted, a critical self-reflexive process may include researchers' exploration of the ways gender, racism, colonialism, power, privilege, and hegemony impact the entirety of the research project, from conceptualization to dissemination. By unraveling these dynamics, researchers may gain insight about how to best adapt their research procedures moving forward. For instance, by engaging in critical self-reflexive processes (e.g., discourse with colleagues and local personnel), a male researcher from the Global North working with women experiencing refugee status from a patriarchal context may determine that it would be more ethically appropriate and culturally sensitive for a woman from a similar context to facilitate the interview. Additionally, a self-reflexive exercise may inspire a researcher to revisit how the research project will or will not benefit the participants. Although researchers should communicate this information to participants during the initial informed consent process, discussing research benefits may require multiple conversations if researchers' or participants' expectations shift. Although participating in self-reflexivity will not ameliorate the effects of centuries of oppression and power, the process can engender research that complies with both researchers' and participants' expectations of ethical and moral integrity.

Neoliberalism in Academia

Despite the potential of these recommendations to support social work researchers' efforts to practice an Ubuntu-based research ethics, implementing these recommendations would require greatly curtailing the neoliberal influences on contemporary academia. The impacts of neoliberalism on the

academy (Berg et al., 2016) and the discipline of social work (Hanesworth, 2017) include obligatorily applying for research funding and assessing scholarly publications based on quantitative output (Morley et al., 2017). Research funding is a primary revenue source in academia, in which tenure-seeking faculty members at research universities are encouraged or obligated to continuously apply for public and private grants (Hanesworth, 2017). With increased neoliberal pressures, many academics consider abandoning time-consuming community-based and participatory approaches in favor of more positivist methodologies, which are more likely to receive funding from traditional research grants (Wehbi & Turcotte, 2007) as community-based studies are usually nongeneralizable across populations. Generally, positivist epistemological research paradigms are highly regarded in many academic contexts in the United States, including social work (Reisch, 2013). Indeed, “feminist scholarship, race/ethnically oriented work, qualitative work, or work that interrogates systems of inequality from a structural perspective” are not as prominent in “top tier” academic journals (Gonzales & Núñez, 2014, p. 11). Among colleagues, the neoliberal and capitalist “publish or perish” mentality often breeds competition among colleagues, individualism, the production of apparent winners and losers, and increased mental health concerns for those engaged (Morley et al., 2017; Wehbi & Turcotte, 2007). All of these are the antithesis of Ubuntu.

Social work research has also been rightly criticized for prioritizing positivist, quantitative, and objectivist methodologies over non-Eurocentric ways of knowing (Hanesworth, 2017). This includes the “uncritical adoption of evidence-based practice” (EBP) as a cornerstone of social work research (Morley et al., 2017; Reisch, 2013, p. 715). Evidence-based practice research usually assesses the effectiveness of interventions designed to address manifestations of systemic problems instead of their structural roots, misaligning with the underpinnings of social work including (Reisch, 2013).

Neoliberalism’s emphasis on outcomes and deliverables is also reflected in tenure requirements at research-oriented universities, which may include stringent requirements about academic outputs, including ranking

publications quantitatively and assessing the relative prominence of their published venues (Lee, 2014). This pervasive culture may lead academics to commodify their scholarship (i.e., primarily thinking about what quantity of publications is needed and how quickly they are needed in order to achieve professional advancement) when considering publication options (Gonzales & Núñez, 2014). Academic tenure requirements for social workers are not universal. For instance, tenure considerations may prioritize teaching effectiveness at teaching-centered institutions and require less formal (i.e., peer-reviewed) publications than research-oriented universities. While this seems more aligned with Ubuntu, they heavy teaching demands often leave little time for research endeavors. Therefore, all social work academic institutions should consider prioritizing community building and long-term relationships with research participants and communities to increase reciprocity and research benefits for all parties. Because Ubuntu and social work principles prioritize these factors over quantitative assessments of academic journal publications, future scholarship should explore how the discipline of social work can reassess current means of valuing scholarly “productivity” and move closer toward an Ubuntu-based research ethics that aligns with the hallmark values of social work.

Conclusion

Although many philosophical underpinnings of Ubuntu parallel core principles of social work (e.g., social justice, relationship building) minimal scholarship to date has examined how Ubuntu is actualized in social work. This paper examined the institutional challenges that social work researchers face when seeking to employ an Ubuntu-based research ethics lens, including IRBs’ prioritization of procedural ethics and pervasive neoliberal influences on social work academia and research. To pursue an Ubuntu-based research ethics in social work research, we are collectively responsible for amending these impediments. As described in this article, three ways to commence this process are: (1) ensuring the inclusion of non-Eurocentric

research and knowledge production methods; (2) merging procedural and relational ethics into obligatory IRB proposals; and (c) speaking to the individual and collective responsibility of social work researchers and the social work discipline.

Because communal relations, mutual respect, engagement, and reciprocity are all integral to Ubuntu (Probst, 2015), embracing Ubuntu is time-consuming, yet leads to authentic, lasting, and meaningful partnerships that publications or research dollars cannot measure. Social work must reconsider what ultimately drives our research as a professional discipline. For instance, are we more concerned about money and professional advancement or genuine change including a restructuring of power inequities? The current state of academic social work fosters environments in which publishing knowledge about persons experiencing refugee status for the sake of publishing as opposed to working toward mitigating research hegemony is too common. If we are serious about “fostering community itself...[as] the agenda in Ubuntu research” (Seehawer, 2018, p. 461), we must reprioritize our norms and behaviors in meaningful and lasting ways.

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