

Curmudgeon article including reports of two recent African Psychology studies on Covid-19

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Abstract

COVID-19 offers new opportunities for confrontation and transcendence of the givens of life, Christopher.isike@up.ac.za including illness, suffering and death. These givens also bring humanity's greatest gifts, such as joy and compassion. This article reports on two recent African psychology studies on COVID-19. The first study on local rural Zulu persons' COVID-19 coping experiences provides a contemporary context for the second study on universalising and indigenising the meaning and practice of love after COVID-19. Five main points are made. First, African psychology is original psychology. Second, it refers to psychology in, of, for, and from Africa, on, by and for Africans. Third, it has much to offer psychology in other continents. Fourth, the Greek philosophy of love has considerable African origins. Fifth, the concept of Ubuntu both relates to and extends the notion of agape or unconditional love, through its emphasis on human relationships, which require extra compassionate care during and after COVID-19.

Introduction

Bland (2020) has contributed an excellent existential-humanistic psychological study on COVID-19 using four dialectical existential givens of life/death, community/isolation, freedom/determinism, and meaning/absurdity – as a guiding framework to explore USA life imbalances. The study reflects on habits and experiences with the potential to spark revitalising intentionality. Bland specifically indicates how COVID-19 offers opportunities for individuals to transcend inadequate ways of being, embracing ambiguity and tragedy; reconciling under actualised human capacities, healing false dichotomies and becoming more capable of living fully, authentically, and flexibly. The paper contains a focused critique of (the ineffectiveness of) the U.S. cultural narrative, with its predominantly individualistic, mechanistic, capitalist and Calvinist orientations. It concludes that COVID-19 provides opportunities for the collective co-creation of a cultural narrative involving evolution toward enhanced consciousness and caring.

Despite the value and applicability of Bland's (2020) argument, it is specifically directed at the USA, which may be described as a preeminent example of a Western, Educated, Industrial, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD) country (Henrich Heine & Norenzayan 2010). In contrast to the individualistic, personal orientation of WEIRD countries, the African psychological sense of personhood, agency, and morality has been described as polyvocal, multilingual, multicultural and pluriversal (Adjei 2019). Ratele (2017) has defined African psychology as psychology *in*

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Africa, *of* Africa, *for* Africa, *from* Africa, *on* Africans, *by* Africans, and *for* Africans. Such a definition is based on the view that psychology with a distinctly African ontology and epistemology can enrich theoretical visions and methodological strategies and extend disciplinary frontiers in both Africa and WEIRD settings (Adjei 2019). Central to such an African Psychology is social intentionality of agency and morality as epitomised by *Ubuntu* consciousness, deeply directed towards the communal good (Adjei 2019).

Local rural Zulu persons Covid-19 coping experiences

African psychology may be viewed as the original version of psychology, reflective of indigenous knowledge systems across planet earth, which have traditionally honoured life as a deeply interconnected whole. Similar to other African communities, Zulu people have long recognised that survival depends on harmonious social and ecological relationships. To prevent disorder and chaos, people are expected to work at maintaining harmony, especially through ancestral consciousness and socially coherent relationships as epitomised in the internationally recognised concept of *Ubuntu*, which ultimately implies that meaning in life is only possible through human relationships. COVID-19 regulations such as social distancing and wearing of masks have certainly impacted on customary relationships characterised by joyous freedom of expression and movement. The research question therefore arose as to how traditional Zulu people would experience coping with COVID-19 if denied normal social relationships, which constitute such an existential pillar and customary way of life.

In order to answer this question a survey was conducted at the University of Zululand and in adjacent rural areas populated by traditional Zulu people (Thwala *et al.* 2020). Participants consisted of nine males and nine females, with a mean age of 46.83, standard deviation of 20.72, median of 46, and range of 15 to 80 years. The survey type questionnaire technique was motivated by the consideration that the consciousness raised by persons considering their coping experiences would be intrinsically therapeutic. Raw data was subjected to three levels of analysis. Firstly, NVivo and MAXQDA analyses provided a coarse sieve for further thematic analysis. Secondly, emerging themes were independently elicited by two researchers. Thirdly, final themes were consensually validated, integrated and relevant examples chosen for report. The final eleven respective, rank-ordered, overlapping coping themes were people, action, culture, time, home, technology, COVID-19, life, family, rules and world. Participants generally indicated resilient, adaptive, coping responses. The COVID-19 pandemic was recognised for its danger and treated appropriately, especially through the adaptation of human, communal, cultural, ecological and spiritual relationships. In addition, participants actively used contemporary resources, communicating via cell phones, enjoying online church services, and continuing studies through learning programmes. Relevant future suggestions were advanced for managing the pandemic.

The research question as to how Zulu people, well known for their communal spiritual culture and traditional beliefs and practices, would experience coping with COVID-19 was well answered. When considering contemporary global population prevalence of stress, anxiety and depression, the Zulu sample generally indicated resilient, adaptive coping responses. The COVID-19 pandemic was recognised for its danger, yet also treated as such dangers had been in the past, especially via family and community. In addition, participants actively used contemporary resources, communicating with others through cell phones, enjoying online church services, and continuing studies through learning programs. Participants' views resonate existential, humanistic dwelling in a sympathetic and empathetic communal world context. Traditional Zulu cultural views of times such as COVID-19 included pollution (*umnyama*) contagion *umkhondo omubi*, and practicing abstinence (*ukuzila*).

Indigenous knowledge systems throughout Africa have long recognised the profound interconnectedness of everything, where plants, animals, humans, ancestors and all creation

interdependently coexist. Such knowledge seems to have been passed on by such giant scholars as Imhotep and Plotinus (Wiredu 2004). This recognition is typically associated with contexts such as communal ceremonies, associated with heightened consciousness, insights, morality and ethical behaviour. The participants in the present study recognized the vital importance of co-ordinated human health action against the pandemic and were actively engaged in appropriate health promotion at various levels of response, ranging from global and national recommendations, though local cultural action, to routine social distancing, wearing of masks and washing of hands.

On universalising and indigenising the meaning and practice of love after Covid-19

As mentioned above, African Psychology is characterised by its social intentionality of agency and morality. *Ubuntu* consciousness is inextricably interrelated with such phenomena as respect and love. Although respect has been recently investigated (Mbele *at al.* 2015), there appears to be a dearth of African Psychological research into the phenomenon of love. In order to contribute to knowledge, universalise and decolonise love constructs, with special reference to honouring indigenous African and Zulu views, a study on love explored the following question: What contributions do African, particularly Zulu, cultural views make to the theory and practice of love after COVID-19? The African renaissance, combined with the colour wheel theory of love, provided theoretical frameworks for epistemic emancipation (Nxumalo, & Edwards 2020).

The argument had six premises. First, converging lines of evidence from such scientific disciplines as genetics, linguistics, palaeontology and archaeology point consistently to Africa as the human cradle of civilisation. Second, the history of the largest southern African ethnic group of Zulu speaking people is immersed with that of the Bantu, the Nguni collective noun for 'people', who emigrated from the forests along the Nile River Valley in today's Egypt (Wiredu 2004). It is this connection to the Nile River Valley in which many Greek philosophers such as Pythagoras, Herodotus, Plato and Aristotle spent a considerable amount of time being taught mathematics, science and philosophy by African philosophers and thinkers (Anakwe 2017). Third, equity and redress require universalisation of knowledge, irrespective of its place of origin and/or context. Fourth, indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) across planet earth have traditionally honoured life as a deeply interconnected whole. Similar to other African communities, Zulu people have long recognised that survival depends on beneficial relationships. Fifth, African ancestral consciousness and reverence for respected senior clansmen, living and dead, forms the essential foundation for most wisdom and cultural traditions. Six, Africa has also readily embraced wisdom and cultural traditions from other continents and regions.

Agape as expressed through Zulu cultural traditions

Agape (universal love) is free from desires and expectations and exists regardless of human imperfections. In the Zulu culture, the concept of *Ubuntu* both relates to and extends *agape*. Zulu speaking people live by and practise *Ubuntu*, which finds expressions in many iZulu proverbs and traditions. In one such proverb, '*isisu somhambi asingakanani, singangenso yenyoni*' (the traveller's tummy is not that big, it is as big as the bird's kidney), Zulu people are encouraged to extend *agape* to strangers in the form of shelter, food and other amenities that they might need. Another useful proverb is '*akudlulwa ngendlu yakhiwa*' (you never go past people building a house) which encourages the spirit of assisting those that are in any form of difficulty (such as in the case of those affected by COVID-19) or hard labour. In communal life, when there was physical labour to be accomplished such as tilling of the soil or building a house, traditional beer was brewed, basic food prepared and community assisted in *ilimo*. Nowadays, African people metaphorically practice *ilimo* in different forms. Since most Zulu-speaking people do not have large pieces of land to farm, in the spirit of *ilimo*, people assist without expecting any pay. In some rural areas, it is common to find villagers standing together in their demonstration of *agape*.

COVID-19 poses various social and economic challenges to people. Specialised skills and knowledge are in demand. Financial support for many relief funds set up by different agencies and governments to alleviate hunger and poverty caused by sanctioned lockdowns and job loss, are some of the limited examples of how agape is extended to those affected by COVID-19. *Ubuntu* holds even greater relevance today in a world where there are diminished levels of all forms of love through threats of a Third World War, nuclear weapons, rising levels of conservatism, right-wing populism and incendiary rhetoric. Intuition indicates widespread rediscovery of *Ubuntu* and all related practises such as appreciation, gratitude, care and love after COVID-19.

Conclusion

Life is replete with existential givens, such as chaos, injustice, unfairness, pain, disloyalty, freedom, death, isolation, meaninglessness and suffering. However as Richo (2005) notes, these givens also bring humanity's greatest gifts, such as joy and compassion. In the era of COVID-19, many people have suffered high levels of stress and mental health problems. Frankl's (2006) theory of self-transcendence provides a promising framework for research and intervention on how to achieve resilience, wellbeing, and happiness through overcoming suffering and transcending the self. He also spoke of tragic optimism, optimism in the face of tragedy, which at its best allows for: (1) turning suffering into human achievement and accomplishment; (2) deriving from guilt the opportunity to change for the better; and (3) deriving from life's impermanence an incentive to take responsible action. Tragic optimism typically features at African memorial services through shared joy as well as grief.

Ubuntu is the ultimate theme of all the caring, helping professions such as nursing, medicine, psychology, social work and theology. Embracing essential humanity, as well as love as an ultimate essential, it forms a foundation for most academic and professional disciplines, from biochemistry through law to sociology. Where such knowledge has become too differentiated, specialised, and abstract, it needs to be revitalised and humanised again through the authentic practice of *Ubuntu*, especially in *masihambisana* (coherent communication and synchronous collaboration). Through its emphasis on essential humanity and human essentials, *Ubuntu* is ultimately concerned with fundamental structures of being human, without which our human species could not survive in its present form, that is the giving, receiving and sharing of human care, dignity, respect, support, companionship, help, healing and love. It clearly honours African indigenous values such as "*maat*" with its many more abstract connotations such as reality, truth, justice, integrity, beauty as well as the interconnectedness of everyday life, which requires extra compassionate care in present COVID-19 days.

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