

# Communitarianism and Communitarian Bioethics

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(SA Fam Pract 2005;47(10): 51-53)

## Introduction

Communitarian means *pertaining to or characteristic of a community*. It is the perspective that recognises both individual human dignity and the social dimension of being human.<sup>1</sup> According to the Concise Oxford Dictionary, communitarianism and communalism are synonymous.<sup>2</sup> Communal means *relating to or benefiting a community*. Communalism is a political theory advocating a society in which all property is publicly owned and each person is paid and works according to his needs and her ability. According to the Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy, *communitarianism is a model of political organisation that stresses ties of affection, kinship, and a sense of common purpose and tradition*.<sup>3</sup> The meaning of community varies from exclusively the political state to smaller communities and institutions and to the family.<sup>4</sup>

## Discussion

At the heart of communitarianism is the view that the individual is embedded in a context of social relationship and interdependence, but never an insulated person. The core advocacy is the politics of the common good. Peace, harmony, stability, solidarity, mutual reciprocity and sympathy are the social values upheld by communalism. Generosity, compassion, solidarity, and social well-

being are the ethical values communitarianism has at heart. Communitarianism challenges the individualist liberal concept of a common good and stresses the significance of social bonds and the balance between individual rights and social responsibilities. It is not an exaltation of the group. The community is not and should not reign supreme; instead, social order and liberty should be mutually supportive and reinforcing. Communitarianism promotes persuasion rather than coercion in the quest for pro-social behaviour through counselling, conflict resolution, communication, pluralism, and consensus through dialogue. It is not majoritarian. It recognises that some matters are not subject to majority rule (e.g. freedom of speech, the right to vote, the right to a fair trial by peers) as opposed to some duties that are (e.g. to pay taxes, to have a valid driver's license, to refrain from abuse).<sup>1</sup> It could thus be said that communitarianism is the opposite of a society functioning on the basis of the social contract that regards society as a cluster of individuals who determine the governing principles of the political order of their choice.<sup>5</sup> As opposed to communitarianism, the social contract theory centres on the basic rights: the right to life, the right to liberty, and the right to property. Rights and obligations are established by contract. In the

West, the communitarian movement that arose in the 1990s is committed to creating a new moral, social, and public order based on so-called *restored* communities (i.e. the medieval European society). The focus is to put emphasis on the awareness about and the commitment to responsibilities to other members of the community.<sup>5</sup>

Communalism has been and is still (partially) the structure of the traditional African society and its socio-economic life based on the principle of common ownership of land (the equivalent of the so-called *commons* in European medieval times). Land was a communal property. The right to land was simply the right to use it. The chief is the custodian. Only cattle and the proceeds of the land are private property.<sup>5</sup> As emphasised by Segun Gbadegesin, "this social practice is only partly an outgrowth of solidarity. More importantly it is due to the absence of machinery and technique to operate large areas of land. It is a life of give and take: in giving up one's interests one is also sure that one's well-being will be the community's concern".<sup>6</sup> In other words, (European medieval and African) communitarianism is (at least partly) a pragmatic and prudential system where it pays to be good.

## African communitarianism

African communalism is expressed in

Joseph Mbiti's coinage of the African world-view: "I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am". I exist because the community exists.<sup>5</sup> This is what is meant by *ubuntu*. The question arising from this world-view is whether a person is *wholly* constituted by social relationships, as radical/unrestricted/ extreme communalism maintains. Moderate or restricted communitarianism argues that this position rejects the values of the individual such as autonomy and the capacity of free choice.

*Radical* communitarians such as Joseph Mbiti and Ifeanyi Menkiti in Africa (as well as Michael Sandel, Charles Taylor, and Alasdair MacIntyre in the West) claim that: 1) the community defines a person as person (and not some isolated property like rationality and free will); 2) personhood is acquired (i.e. an individual's moral achievements earns him or her the status as a person, a full member of the community); and 3) personhood

is something at which an individual can fail.<sup>5</sup> In this perspective, priority is given to the duties, which individuals owe to the community because the common good is a priority. Individual rights are given a secondary status.

Kwame Gyekye, a moderate communitarian, argues that radical communalism exaggerates the normative status and the power of the community at the expense of the complex nature of the individuals who constitute the community. He maintains that extreme communitarianism insulates a community from other historico-cultural groups by burrowing into its own particularities. This carries the risk of particularism, the view that a thinker of one culture cannot understand the thought produced in another culture. Furthermore, extreme communitarianism leads to the inability to distance oneself to evaluate, criticise, and revise one's community's values and practices. The greatest danger, Gyekye claims, is that it may

and has led to political intolerance, authoritarianism, and even tyranny.<sup>4</sup>

*Moderate* communalism, as promoted by Léopold Sédar Senghor and supported by contemporary philosophers such as Kwame Gyekye, Kwesi Wiredu, and Segun Gbadegesin, claims that communitarianism stresses more on the group than on the individual.<sup>7</sup> It sees society not as an aggregate but rather as a community of individuals. Personhood, on this view, is not wholly defined by membership to a community. Emphasis is placed on sensitivity to the interests and on the well-being of the community. This is not necessarily detrimental of individual rights. Rights and responsibilities have equal status. The view on responsibilities to others is rooted in the consideration of their needs rather than their rights. Rights are given attention but equal attention is given to other values of the community that, in certain cases, may be regarded as overriding. The

individual is both autonomous and a communal being. It is recognised that besides being a social being by nature, the individual also possesses rationality, moral sense, capacity for virtue, and capacity for free choice. This has the advantage of keeping the individual's ability to take a distanced view of the practices and the values promoted by one's community.<sup>5</sup> And this is indispensable for moral progress.

### Communitarian bioethics

Usually, strong views make the pendulum switch in the opposite direction. Strong or (arguably) excessive emphasis on autonomy leads to the mitigated stress on autonomy. In this perspective individual rights take a backseat and the common good receives prominence. Personal rights such as the right to health care are regarded

in a communal context. As recommended by Daniel Callahan, the right question to ask is "What is most conducive to a good society" rather than "Does it violate autonomy"?<sup>7</sup> The concepts of public health, distributive justice seen as solidarity or a collective duty to take care of all citizens, equal access to health care, involvement of the family in decision-making, and shared consensus about public policies are expressions of this world-view. The appeal is that it sounds more satisfactory and humane to live in an organic community rather than alienated in an aggregate of autonomous individuals. But, says Judith Jarvis Thomson, "the bee-like creatures of our hive-like world are not in fact kind to each other".<sup>9</sup> And, as pointed out by Beauchamp and Childress, "The major reason for the prominence of rights is that they stand

as a shield against communal intrusion by governments".<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, the thrust on communal values and attention to others are needed to balance the excesses of rights rhetoric. This is an alternative to the mainstream theory of medical ethics known as principlism that is worth considering. ♡

**See CPD Questionnaire, page 56**

### References

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