
PART 7

**APPLYING UBUNTU TO
TRANSFORMATIVE LEADERSHIP**



22 *Transformative disability leadership in the Global South: Insights from ubuntu philosophy*

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Overview

This chapter argues that considering able-bodiedness as 'normal' is a problematic social construct that has made it impossible to advance a transformative vision of disability leadership from the Global South. The African philosophy of ubuntu offers an indigenous epistemology that challenges dominant discourses of disability. John Mbiti's (1969, p. 215) phrase, 'I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am' is used to summarise the African traditional philosophy of ubuntu and what it is to be human. An implication of such an ideology is that personhood and humanity are interconnected. Using two case studies of transformative disability leadership, this chapter offers a new approach to bringing about social justice for those living with disabilities in the Global South.

Introduction

There is an excess of literature that focuses on the multifaceted nature of neoliberal leadership and the threat of a crisis in leadership in the Global South (Gill, 2011; Longo & McMillan, 2015). Less has been said, however, about the complexities and nuances of an authentic transformative disability leadership that is firmly embedded in indigenous epistemologies. People living with disabilities are constructed along the margins of the 'other' by the ubiquitous compulsory able-bodied discourse and narrative. Societies have for centuries been entertained by the idea of a body centred on compulsory able-bodiedness (McRuer, 2006), which involves the essentialist assumption that an able body is the one that is 'normal', and what Thomson (1997) refers to as the 'normative body'. Inahara (2009, p. 47) unpacks this further and states that '[i]t implies that all human beings are represented by only one body which is able'. The macrocosm of compulsory able-bodiedness is far-reaching and intersects with other constructs such as race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, class, and indeed, leadership. This chapter explains how the African philosophy of ubuntu offers a way of understanding disability and the actions needed to ensure social justice outcomes for those living with disabilities.

Background and methodology

This chapter emerged from a PhD thesis, which focused on the narratives of inclusion, exclusion, and 'disclusion' of learners with physical and learning impairments studying at four Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges in Johannesburg. To get a critical view of the present state of disability inclusion in TVET colleges in South Africa, an integrative literature review (Torraco, 2005) of courses on disability studies in education was carried out. This critical approach to literature reviewing goes beyond conventional approaches that only organise, synthesise, and integrate literature, and analyse methods and theoretical frameworks. The integrated review further synthesised new knowledge on the topic of disability studies in higher education using critical realism and the radical person-centred methodology as alternative frameworks. The researcher's main objective was the advancement of the collective understanding of important educational issues in the field of inclusion of students with disabilities.

The exclusion of people living with disabilities is so complex that no single study could unpack all the important themes surrounding disability inclusion and exclusion. The integrative literature review revealed several unresolved themes in disability scholarship from the Global South. Such cognitive dissonance is common among scholars involved in critical disability research, as there is pressure to strike a balance between the impetus to speak for the 'other', and speaking with the 'other' in an alliance where all actors have the same levels of urgency and power.

Definitions of terms

The reviewing process illuminated the deliberate silencing of disability leadership from the Global South. Just as the South is portrayed as fragmented, without law and without purpose, a veritable 'heart of darkness' (Conrad, 2012), there is also an attempt from the West to bring into disrepute and overlook indigenous styles of disability leadership. The intentions are to establish the West as the protagonist and a place of inception for disability rights. Yet, the lives of millions of indigenous people with disabilities are constructed around imperialism, colonisation, and conquest. There is therefore a need to see colonisation for what it is: not just a metaphor for the subjugation of indigenous civilisations, but as the force that created debility in the first place.

The politics of nomenclature (the process of naming things) is a vital component in critical disability studies, as it establishes the epistemological standpoint. There is therefore a need to define what it is to be a transformative disability leader – a seemingly elementary yet difficult task. This is because the terms disability, transformative, and leadership are often thought to be contradictory or working

against each other by an ableist society that stubbornly refuses to entertain the idea of persons living with disabilities assuming positive leadership roles.

Disability and handicap

The World Health Organization's (WHO) tool for classification, the International Classification of Impairments, Disabilities, and Handicaps, currently offers a biopsychosocial definition of disability that uses a threefold typology of impairment, disability, and handicap. Thus, impairment, according to Oliver and Barnes (2012, p. 13), refers to 'any loss or abnormality of a psychological, physiological or anatomical structure or function'.

Disability denotes 'any restriction or lack (resulting from an impairment) of the ability to perform an activity in a manner or within the range considered normal for a human being'. Handicap is defined as 'a disadvantage for a given individual, resulting from an impairment or a disability that limits or prevents the fulfilment of a role that is normal for those individuals' (WHO, 1980, cited in Oliver & Barnes, 2012, p.13).

From these definitions of disability, it is clear that some attempt has been made to place disability within a social context by incorporating the range considered normal for a human being. This socialisation of disabilities and impairments is imperative because, according to Oliver and Barnes (2012, p. 14):

The social world differs from the natural world in (at least) one fundamental respect: that is, human beings give meanings to objects in the social world and subsequently orientate their behaviour towards these objects in terms of the meanings given to them.

However, critical philosophers of disability studies make a point that disability should not only be socialised but also be pushed into the politics of minorities (Swain & French, 2000; Thomson, 1997; Wendell, 1996). People with disabilities have maintained a unique identity and belonging that qualifies disability rights to be human rights, on a par with race, gender, and sexuality politics. Understanding disability rights as political is crucial in this chapter, as it immediately establishes the connection between leadership and disability.

Transformative disability leadership

Disability leadership is defined as the involvement and influence of persons living with disabilities in person-directed services and in organisations and systems that shape disability services and policies (Powers et al., 2002). Person-directed services in these instances are synonymous with independence, urgency, authority, capabilities, self-advocacy, and transformation. Transformative leadership, on the other hand, is defined as an all-encompassing leadership

style that surpasses organisational contexts to address broader societal, political, socioeconomic, material, and ethical dynamics (Swartz, Chapter 1, this volume). From these loose definitions, transformative disability leadership can therefore be interpreted as the involvement of people living with disability in holistic social justice emancipation of people living with disabilities. Wendell (1996) uses the term 'disabled heroes' to describe transformative disability leadership that is ingrained in the total heroic control of all the odds stacked against people living with disabilities through reaffirming the possibilities of overcoming the body. Stephen Hawking and Oscar Pistorius come to mind as good examples of this. The disabled heroes are often imagined in a Westernised lens, receiving media attention for accomplishing things that are exceptional and unusual even for the able-bodied. This chapter, however, seeks to deconstruct the image of the privileged disabled hero who has access to extraordinary social, economic, and physical resources that are not available to most people living with disabilities in the Global South. It seeks to exonerate the Global South disability hero who rises despite limitations of the body and resources.

Transformative disability leadership from the Global South has been said to be elusive, fragmented, and underfunded (Kandasamy & Soldatic, 2019). Matshediso (2007) attributes this fragmentation to the dilemma of competing rights in new democracies and the construction of disability rights as benevolence and not actual human rights. This chapter argues that rather than being fragmented, transformative disability leadership from the Global South is well and awake. The problem arises when researchers attempt to frame and universalise all disability leadership from a Westernised paradigm. Time and time again, transformative disability leadership rises from the Global South, claiming its epistemic urgency of being rooted in indigenous pathways that revere charisma and a genuine connectedness with the lived experiences of people living with disabilities. Two examples are used as case studies in this chapter: Kate Jagoe-Davies from South Africa and Jairos Jiri from Zimbabwe.

Towards an ubuntu philosophy of disability leadership

Menkiti (1984, p. 171) borrows from John Mbiti's phrase 'I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am' to sum up the African traditional philosophy of ubuntu or what it is to be human. The implications of such an ideology are that personhood and, subsequently, what it means to be human and disabled, are interconnected and follow a linear progression. Menkiti (1984, p. 172) terms this 'the processual nature of personhood'. Menkiti satirically refers to the Western world calling babies 'it' to illustrate the ontological progression of what it means to be human. The inhabitants of the ancestral underworld have more depth of personhood, and he chooses to call them 'the living dead', or *vadzimu* in Shona and *madhlozi* in isiZulu/isiNdebele (Menkiti, 1984).

There is a growing body of literature that focuses on African traditional thoughts on disability and what it means to be human. Ubuntu philosophy provides a contextualised, uniquely African understanding of social phenomena, social consciousness, and disability inclusion (Berghs, 2017; Gwaravanda, 2021; Menkiti, 1984; Mosalagae & Lukusa, 2016; Ngubane-Mokiwa, 2018). Ubuntu philosophy has also been explored as a possibility for an African feminist disability theology (Chisale, 2020). Very few articles have, however, explored the implications of ubuntu philosophy for global disability leadership. The assumptions have been that ubuntu philosophy is highly contextualised and speaks exclusively from the subaltern African context (Mosalagae & Lukusa, 2016). The flow of knowledge has always been denoted as originating in the north, flowing southwards, and never vice versa. However, as proven by the exceptional and charismatic leadership styles of disability activists such as Jairo Jiri and Kate Jagoe-Davies, the Global South can offer some credible insights into what transformative disability leadership should look like to the rest of the world.

Closely linked to the decolonial project's concept of coloniality of knowledge is the African traditional thought of disability. Decolonial scholar Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013) realised the value of alternative forms of knowledge in decolonised emic (insider's perspective) approaches to understanding the Global South. He does not, however, specify what these forms of alternative knowledge might look like when it comes to disability inclusion. Menkiti (1984), Berghs (2017), Mji, Gcaza, Swartz, MacLachlan, and Hutton (2011), Chataika, Mckenzie, Swart, and Lyner-Cleophas (2012), Opini (2016), and Ngubane-Mokiwa (2018) provide a glimpse of what this indigenous knowledge system might look like through a disability lens. Menkiti (1984) insists that questions on ontology should emanate from the 'communal world' rather than individual life, thus deviating from neoliberal Eurocentric idealism.

What is noteworthy about ubuntu philosophy is that it is present in many African cultures and almost every African language, with the principle of shared humanness always the same.

Zimbabwe: Unhu/ubuntu

In Zimbabwe, the concept of *unhu* in Shona and *ubuntu* in isiNdebele is used on a broad level to recognise a person's dignity, value, and respect (Mapaure, 2011). People with disabilities are also accepted as part of this shared humanness, which is illustrated in Shona proverbs such as *munhu, chirema chinotungamira nzira* (a human being is a human being; even a disabled person can lead the way on a journey) (Gwaravanda, 2021).

South Africa

In South Africa, the term *ubuntu* is loosely shared mostly among the Nguni-speaking tribes including Zulu, Swati, and Ndebele. It is translated as *botho* among the Sotho and Tswana tribes, as, *vhuthu* in Venda, *bunhu* in Tsonga, and *umntu* in Xhosa. Although ubuntu is interpreted differently due to ethical differences and the impact of Apartheid, there is a central concept of sharing one another's well-being and reciprocating kindness (Ngubane-Mokiwa, 2018). This reciprocity of humaneness is summed up by the isiZulu saying *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* (a person is a person through other people).

People living with disabilities in Zulu culture have often been referred to as having a spiritual nature, and they often become *sangomas* (traditional healers). Ubuntu philosophy, therefore, does not only reside on the ontological and epistemological levels; it is also an ethical code of conduct, a way of being deeply entrenched in African culture.

Zambia

Zambia's cultural perception of people with disabilities is mixed and varies from region to region. What is notable, however, is that the culture of *umuchinshi*, Zambia's interpretation of ubuntu, has been lauded for informing the mindset of leaders who show a high regard for the law and ethics (Pertersson & Kachabe, 2021). In a comparative case study of Swedish and Zambian leadership styles, the findings highlight that ethical leadership in Zambia is synonymous with ethical practices expected from everyone. Examples are when kinship groups care for the well-being of their members, and elders are given the important task of advising on village affairs (Pertersson & Kachabe, 2021).

Accountability for human life, suffering, and productivity is also a highly regarded virtue in Zambia's leadership culture. This is demonstrated by the fact that 'Zambia is one of the stable countries in Africa with successful multiparty democratic elections held every five years' (Pertersson & Kachabe, 2021, p. 41).

Implications of ubuntu philosophy on disability leadership: Two case studies

Ubuntu philosophy is a wide-ranging concept capable of being interpreted differently across many cultures and ethnicities. It makes sense therefore to expect its implications and contributions to global disability leadership to be intrinsically multifaceted and layered. Two very different disability leaders from the southern African region, but both bound by the ethos of ubuntu, are described in the next section.

Kate Jagoe-Davies (South Africa)

One of the best known charismatic disability activists to come out of South Africa was Kate Jagoe-Davies. Davies was a person with an adult-onset disability, being paralysed from the shoulders downwards, and living with chronic renal failure. She became one of the notable faces of disability leadership and resistance towards an ableist and racist Apartheid South African government in the 1980s. What is noteworthy about Davies is that she was a woman living with disabilities who defied an unjust system by advocating for disability inclusion in higher tertiary settings, pioneering a Disability Rights Unit at the University of the Witwatersrand in 1986. Davies transcended all disability scholarship of her time by connecting the dots of intersectionality and acknowledging that disability rights are human rights. Davies understood that disability rights were intertwined with racial, gender, and sexuality rights, long before critical theories of intersectionality began to trend in South African social justice discourses. She became an avid supporter of the anti-Apartheid movement led by the then-banned African National Congress (ANC). Among many other acts of resistance and social justice solidarity, her most notable were when she snubbed the then South African President P. W. Botha for racial oppression in a paper that was meant to address disability inclusion issues exclusively, and at another time, being arrested for owning soundtracks from two films made by the then-banned ANC as well as an outlawed book (Beresford, 2009). Davies was surely ahead of her time in terms of the transformative and ethical disability leadership she enacted and personified.

Jairos Jiri (Zimbabwe)

In what was then Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), another charismatic disability leader who exuded transformative leadership premised on indigenous knowledge was Jairos Jiri. Jiri was commonly referred to as the 'father of education for people living with disabilities' in Zimbabwe, because he founded the Jairos Jiri Association in 1950 that provided education and training for over 13 000 people with disabilities each year (Farquahar, 1987, cited in Chataika, 2007). This established the association as the largest of its kind in Africa. Jiri recognised early in his life that people like him, who were living with a disability, Black, and living in rural Zimbabwe, had little chance of receiving any formal education under the colonial regime. Jiri's opening of a leather shop for training people living with disabilities marked the birth of a Black-owned TVET training centre for people living with disabilities in Zimbabwe. Jiri would go on to open more than 20 sites of education and training exclusively for Black people living with disabilities across Zimbabwe. Trades taught in these colleges included leather processing, arts, and crafts. Since its inception, the Jairos Jiri Association has been celebrated as exceptional among scholars of the philosophy of inclusion.

Ubuntu as a philosophy of leadership and inclusion

There have been numerous disability leaders from the Global South who have worked on transforming their society, often with limited financial and social resources. For example, Dr Victor Pineda from Caracas, Venezuela, launched World Enabled in 2003 to support companies and governments with the implementation of legal mandates for inclusion and diversity. Eddie Ndopu was one of the new generation of transformative disability leaders to come out of South Africa, and is one of 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals Advocates. When interviewed by a journalist from *Global Citizen*, a leading online news outlet that celebrates young influential people from Africa, Ndopu attributed his stature to his humble beginnings and the spirit of ubuntu. This is highlighted by his remarks:

We need to be able to say that we need one another...Ubuntu isn't just this buzzword that we use. It's a philosophy and it is a public policy practice that needs to be integrated into everything that we do because we need interdependence in the world.

(cited in Mlaba, 2020, para. 15)

Transformative leadership from the Global South, therefore, is not as fragmented as one might think. What then is so exceptional about disability leaders coming from the Global South? What critical notions of leadership do they embody that is worthy of analysis?

In 17th-century Europe, the surge of the industrial revolution and capitalism served to demarcate between 'productive' and 'unproductive' human resources. Cheap labour was in demand and having a 'healthy' normative body was revered for serving the productive purpose of working in the factories. Having a flawed body – in other words, any form of disability – was instantly construed as being a personal tragedy. This eventually ushered in a rise of political disability movements such as the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation in the 1970s in the United Kingdom, and the civil rights movement in the 1980s in the United States of America.

In the Global South, on the other hand, the colonial system provided the landscape for understanding the lived experiences of people living with disabilities, who make up 80 per cent of people living with disabilities in the world (UN DESA: Disability, n.d.). Through the violence and aggressive nature of colonialism in the Global South, disability was constructed (Grech, 2015), and disability resistance and leadership arose.

Attributing the rise of disability consciousness and leadership to the turmoil of capitalism and colonialism can, however, pose some serious challenges. First, if economic power acts as a catalyst for social consciousness in society, how then

do we explain social responsibility and the charismatic leadership portrayed by Kate Jagoe-Davies and Jairos Jiri? These leaders, living with disabilities, lived in a time and place that has been depicted as the ‘heart of darkness’ and the ‘third world’. Some of these leaders, such as Jairos Jiri, never had any formal education. Perhaps a credible starting point for interrogating the different styles of disability leadership stemming from the Global South would therefore be in the vast indigenous knowledge systems that had always informed leadership in the past.

There is an old proverb among the Shona people which states ‘*Wanzwa musoro kutema handiro dambudziko. Chapa musoro kutema ndiro dambudzo*’. (An aching head is not the actual problem. Rather focus on what caused the headache in the first place.) In applying this outlook, rather than focusing on the so-called lack of transformative disability leadership in the Global South, colonialism and capitalism should be seen for what they truly are: not just metaphors of conquest, but brutal acts that brought disability and disfigurement in the first place (Grech, 2015). This challenges the Global South disability scholar to engage with critical scholarship that deconstructs and unlearns the way we have come to think about disability and leadership.

Ubuntu as a philosophy of transformative inclusion

Much has been said by disability leaders, scholars, and activists about the dynamics of the exclusion of people living with disabilities from mainstream society. On the other hand, the ubuntu philosophy of disability enables us to view disability activism and scholarship in terms of the dynamics of inclusion. The shared humanness intrinsic to the ethos of ubuntu is holistic and encompasses the spiritual, biophysical, and ecological worlds (Berghs, 2017). Therefore, difference and all its axes (disability, sexuality, gender, ethnicity, religion, and so forth) are celebrated under ubuntu. A celebration of ‘being different together’ is also the cornerstone of critical diversity literacy (Steyn, 2014). The implications are that people living on the margins of the ‘other’, such as those with disabilities, are included in the centre of what it means to be human, for example, in politics, education, access to better health plans, sports, and leadership.

Ubuntu as a theology should be reviewed entirely in its uniqueness. Its implications for the ethos and values of leaders should be viewed in terms of restoration, identity affirmation, mediation, reconciliation, and nation-building as opposed to conquest, assimilation, and shame.

Challenges and criticism

Critics have been quick to highlight that an ubuntu philosophy of disability does not magically guarantee a non-ableist view of disability, nor does it neatly develop into transformative and ethical leadership. This has been used to

discredit African leadership styles and justify the leadership crisis emanating from the Global South.

Ngubane-Mokiwa's (2018) research on 'the archaeology of ubuntu' in the KwaZulu-Natal province of South Africa unearths negative perceptions by people in traditional communities towards people with disabilities. Examples include the birth of a disabled child being regarded as a curse, and the stigma associated with marrying a disabled person. The research findings expose the intricacies of thinking within an ubuntu philosophy of disability, which does not always guarantee positive perceptions of people with disabilities among community members.

Ubuntu philosophy is also said to be dying (Matolino & Kwindigwi, 2013). Arguments put forth are that there has been a failed narrative of a return to an authentic African renaissance that focuses on social and political transformation. The narrative of 'return' is therefore seen as counterproductive, as it has given birth to a 'tyrannical dictatorship developed in the pursuit of one-party states' (Matolino & Kwindigwi, 2013, p. 198) to suppress certain political and marginalised voices. Matolino and Kwindigwi (2013) cite the rise of social unrest such as xenophobic attacks, and the increasing polarisation of nationalism and nativism in southern Africa, to highlight the death of humanity and social consciousness. Although they do not mention the implications of the narrative of return to disability inclusion, this critique can be useful in guiding transformative disability leadership on the dangers of essentialising disability experience to certain disabilities at the expense of others. For example, physical disabilities have had the limelight in claiming disability identity, while disabilities such as intellectual and learning impairments remain invisible.

Proponents of ubuntu philosophy, however, are quick to point out that, contrary to mainstream thought, the philosophy is very much alive; we should not rush to conflate philosophy and methodological procedure, or ethics with practice (Chimakonam, 2016; Koenane & Olatunji, 2017; Metz, 2014).

Critics have also implied that ubuntu philosophy consolidates group dynamics at the expense of individual needs and criticism. According to these critics, ubuntu is similar to social models of disability that operate in favour of the community but at the expense of the individual, leaving little room for restorative justice and a clear demarcation of 'victim' and 'perpetrator'. This claim is, however, not accurate; as Berghs (2017) reiterates, to conflate the two theoretical frameworks is to perpetuate the primary epistemic fallacy – that is, of generalising ontological knowledge of 'being' in a Westernised mindset. The ubuntu philosophy of disability is a uniquely African perspective of being and it should remain as such.

Conclusion

Ubuntu philosophy in the Global South is not dead. It is not only flourishing, but has also branched out into other disciplines to influence a culture of transformative disability leadership that is based on social justice, humanity, and a code of ethics, rather than a materialistic leadership balanced on economic and social privilege. More empirical research needs to be carried out to explore the implications of indigenous epistemologies on questions of ontology, such as what it is to be human, which lives are dispensable, and what the rejected bodies are. The literature review process used in this study was useful in exposing some of these issues. However, a more thorough unpacking of these critical issues can only be achieved through empirical methodologies that highlight the lives of the millions of people living with disabilities in the Global South.

#UbuntuTransformativeDisabilityLeadership

Ubuntu can contribute to dismantling an ableist view of disability and leadership. The Global South can take the lead in transformative leadership to provide social justice for those living with disabilities.

Questions for discussion

1. What challenges do people in the Global South experience when trying to lead on the issue of disability?
2. In what ways does an ubuntu philosophy of disability contribute to dismantling ableist views of disability and leadership in disability?
3. What do you understand by the concept of transformative disability leadership? How is it helpful for the just inclusion of people living with disabilities?

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