

African ubuntu can deepen how research is done

September 21 2022, by Obaa Akua Konadu-Osei



Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

Many academic studies have been centered on Western theories and methodologies for a long time. This approach to research is broadly defined as "[universalist](#)." It assumes that "one-size-fits-all" and set norms can be applied across cultures. For example, Western ideas about identity revolve around the individual. That shapes how research is conducted: it focuses mainly on the individual and [emphasizes analysis at the individual level](#). Using Western approaches in non-Western contexts misses out on contextual issues such as power relations between an individual and their community.

But over the past few years there has been [increasing discussion](#) in research circles about the need to draw on—and apply—more diverse theories of knowledge and approaches in generating knowledge.

"Contextualized" methodologies have been offered as the alternative. This involves taking a region's particular cultural, demographic, geographical and socio-economic realities into account when conducting research. There's [a challenge](#) with this approach, too. It may mean that academic research is within the reach of a limited group of people and becomes disconnected from broader academic engagements.

In a recent paper, [we argue](#) that researchers' decision along neatly divided lines—to choose either universalist or contextualized methodologies—is a false dilemma. We argue that, in researching non-Western contexts such as sub-Saharan Africa, researchers need to fuse conventional Western theories of knowledge and local theories of knowledge. This enables researchers to gain from the rigor associated with conventional methodologies while approaching research from a culturally sensitive philosophical basis.

In our paper, we focus on [ubuntu](#). This South African concept embodies the collectivist way of life of many societies in sub-Saharan Africa. The value of ubuntu goes beyond human conduct. It also offers researchers a relational way of knowing that accommodates knowledge of the context that is being studied as well as participants' values.

We argue that ubuntu can contribute to the way research is carried out, by complementing universalist methodologies. This approach is gaining ground in research circles. For instance, Canadian academics used it to conduct [health research](#) in Mozambique.

The complementary use of ubuntu helps to remove colonial or oppressive lenses from academics' work. It offers a way for research participants' values and realities to be recognized and means they are actively involved in creating knowledge about themselves and their contexts.

Shaping research

We identified four practical ways that a complementary use of ubuntu can positively shape how research is done.

The first centers on the research agenda. This should be community-based and community-centered. Researchers need to interrogate what their research aims to achieve, in whose interest do they conduct research, and who the research outcomes intend to serve. Bagele Chilisa, a professor of research methodologies, [points out](#) how efforts to address the AIDS pandemic in many sub-Saharan African societies failed because the research agenda, methodological and analytical tools were driven by donor agencies. Community-centered research allows participants to be equal partners in knowledge generation.

Then there's access. Accessing the "field" (communities) must be done

tactfully. In collectivist societies, a researcher should be aware that consent may go beyond the individual. This may mean seeking the permission (usually verbal) of the individual's immediate family or community leader. Research may be targeting an individual but it may also be important to obtain consent from their family, for example. Doing so can secure the individual's full participation: they are given indirect permission to draw examples of their experiences from their community.

The third is power relations. Unequal power relations between the researcher and participants may not be completely eliminated by our complementary approach. But it is a valuable way to remind researchers that their work ought to hinge on ubuntu principles like respect and harmony. This can ensure that research is conducted in a less exploitative and more collaborative manner that values participants' knowledge and knowledge systems.

Finally, context-sensitive methods are key. Researchers focusing on sub-Saharan Africa should explore and adopt alternative, culturally appropriate knowledge systems and methodologies. Knowledge in collectivistic societies is usually embodied in and transmitted through performative communication modes such as folklore, taboos, totems, and cosmological beliefs. These knowledge modes may not be easily accommodated by Western approaches. Using local knowledge and ways of knowing will expose research to criticism. This can enhance its value and significance.

A complementary approach

Our paper contends that there is no "either or" at play when considering how best to study non-Western contexts. The importance of decolonizing research and research [methodology](#) does not negate the usefulness of conventional, Western methodologies. Rather, knowledge generation

should be approached through the lens of the context under study.

This article is republished from [The Conversation](#) under a Creative Commons license. Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: African ubuntu can deepen how research is done (2022, September 21) retrieved 14 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2022-09-african-ubuntu-deepen.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.