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Short Article

Ubuntu and the child and youth care worker: Belonging as the foundation of professional identity

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Abstract

This short article draws on doctoral research into the practice of child and youth care workers (CYCWs) within South Africa's Isibindi programme. It explores how belonging forms the foundation of CYCW professional identity. The African philosophy of Ubuntu, captured in the maxim 'I am because you are', is used as an interpretive lens. The findings show that CYCWs were absorbed into the family lives of the children and communities they served. They were addressed as 'uncle' or 'aunty', invited to significant family occasions, and credited by community members with shaping who they had become. These accounts suggest that professional identity among CYCWs was not built through role distance or credentials alone. Rather, it developed through their relational integration into family and community life. The article argues that Ubuntu offers a valuable lens for understanding CYCW identity development more broadly. This has relevance for residential child and youth care, foster care, and kinship care practice internationally, wherever a CYCW's sense of self is shaped by the relationships, places, and communities in which they work.

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Introduction

South Africa's Isibindi programme recruits and trains unemployed women and men in rural and peri-urban communities as child and youth care workers (CYCWs). The programme deploys these workers to support vulnerable children and families within their own neighbourhoods rather than in institutional settings (National Association of Child Care Workers, 2011). A doctoral grounded theory study of Isibindi practice was undertaken across three South African provinces. The study generated a theoretical framework named *Inhlanganisela: Integrated patterns of practice*. Within this framework, the African philosophy of Ubuntu emerged as one of three properties underlying the basic social process of embedding spirit in practice (Thumbadoo, 2020).

This article draws on the Ubuntu related findings to address a question at the heart of this journal's 2026 special theme: how does caregiving shape identity and belonging? The data comprised interviews and focus group discussions with CYCWs, the children and young people they supported, and members of their communities. The findings suggest that, for these CYCWs, professional identity was not separate from family and community belonging. Rather, it was shaped by and constituted through these relationships.

The philosophy of Ubuntu: 'I am because you are'

Ubuntu is a philosophy originating among the Bantu-speaking people of sub-Saharan Africa, in which personhood is understood not as something an individual possesses alone, but as realised through relationship with others (Mugumbate & Chereni, 2019). Archbishop Desmond Tutu offered a widely cited articulation of the concept:

> Africans have this thing called Ubuntu. It is about the essence of being human, it is part of the gift that Africa will give the world. It embraces hospitality, caring about others, being able to go the extra mile for the sake of others. We believe that a person is a person through another person, that my humanity is caught up, bound up, inextricably, with yours. When I dehumanise you, I inexorably dehumanise myself. The solitary human being is a contradiction in terms and therefore you seek to work for the common good because your humanity comes into its own in belonging.
>
> (Tutu, 2000)

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This relational understanding of personhood is expressed in the isiZulu maxim *'umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*', usually translated as 'a person is a person through other persons', or, more simply, 'I am because you are' (Mugumbate & Chereni, 2019). The African proverb 'it takes a whole village to raise a child' expresses a related idea. Children belong not only to the family into which they are born, but to their wider community. Adults across that community share responsibility for creating the conditions in which children can realise their full personhood (Hlongwane et al., 2018). Gluckstein (2010) captured the interdependence at the heart of the concept: 'We are set in a delicate network of interdependence with our fellow human beings and the rest of creation [...] Ubuntu is about wholeness, about compassion for life'.

Ubuntu is not a purely abstract philosophy. It is lived through concrete virtues, among them hospitality, generosity, compassion, and a willingness to go beyond what is formally required for the sake of another person (Hlongwane et al., 2018). For CYC professionals, this matters because it locates identity not in the individual practitioner's credentials or role definition alone, but in the quality and depth of their relationships with the people, families, and communities they serve.

Becoming 'uncle Bongani': Findings from the Isibindi study

The study found that CYCWs were, in a very literal sense, absorbed into the family life of the children and young people they supported. One CYCW described how the young people in a household he supported had come to know him:

> Like even now, the children, they call me 'Uncle' [...] I'm included in that family. They'll say, now we have Uncle Bongani. Uncle Bongani is part of our family. Today, we are what we are, because of him.
>
> (CYCW, cited in Thumbadoo, 2020, p. 137)

This CYCW had not simply built rapport with a family. He had been given a kinship title, folded into the family's own account of itself, and invited to its significant occasions, marking him as present in those moments when a family marks and renews its own identity (Thumbadoo, 2020). The young people in that household, who had been heading their own household without an adult present, went on to become a socially and economically stable family, respected within their community (Thumbadoo, 2020).

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Community members corroborated this sense of CYCWs as woven into, rather than visiting, community life:

> It is easy [to build trust] because we are respected in our community, we are respected like we introduce Isibindi to the community. They respect us, they respect our work. So even if I come to any house, I say [...] I'm a child and youth care worker, I work from Isibindi. They trust me.
>
> (CYCW, cited in Thumbadoo, 2020, p. 137)

Others described the practical, unbounded quality of that presence: CYCWs who travelled long distances on foot to reach families, who could be called on at any time, and who continued to work on Sundays because a community member was unwell (Thumbadoo, 2020). One community member put it simply: 'they walk an extra mile' (cited in Thumbadoo, 2020, p. 137). Another reflected on what that presence meant for children whose parents worked away from home: 'they are taking care of our children. I'm at work, my child is coming from school; at home, there is no one, but at the Safe Park, there's the one who can take care of my child' (cited in Thumbadoo, 2020, p. 137).

Belonging as the foundation of professional identity

Read together, these accounts suggest a model of professional identity formation that runs in the opposite direction from more familiar, Western models built on role clarity, boundary-setting, and distance between the professional and the person they serve. Here, professional legitimacy in the eyes of families and communities was earned precisely through relational incorporation: being named as kin, being trusted with a house key or a sick relative, being expected at a wedding or a funeral.

This was reciprocal, not unidirectional. CYCWs described drawing their own sense of achievement and vocation from the transformation of the families and young people they supported, seeing former school drop-outs become teachers, nurses, and police officers, and describing this as evidence of a 'spirited calling' rather than simply a job (cited in Thumbadoo, 2020, p. 137). Young people who had been supported in this way, in turn, described wanting to become youth leaders and to give back to their own communities, extending the same spirit of Ubuntu they had received (Thumbadoo, 2020). Belonging, in other words, did not flow only from community to CYCW; it circulated, with each transformation feeding into the next.

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This has implications for how the sector understands and supports professional identity in caregiving roles more widely, whether in residential child and youth care, foster care, kinship care, or community-based programmes such as Isibindi. If identity is constituted relationally, through belonging, rather than acquired individually, through training and credentials alone, then supervision, support structures, and professional development for CYCWs need to make space for, rather than discourage, this depth of relational involvement. At the same time, the intensity of the relational integration described here, a CYCW walking long distances on a Saturday, always being available, being drawn into family life so completely, also raises a genuine question for the field: how CYCWs are sustained, and how organisations balance the relational depth that Ubuntu calls for against the risk of an unsustainable, unbounded workload. This is not a weakness in the findings; it is an invitation for further research and reflective practice within Ubuntu-informed models of care.

Conclusion

This article has drawn on findings from a doctoral study of South Africa's Isibindi programme to argue that, for the CYCWs in that study, professional identity was not something held apart from family and community belonging. It was built through it. Being called 'uncle' or 'aunty', being included at significant family functions, and being told 'today we are what we are because of him' are not incidental details of practice, but the empirical substance of Ubuntu's claim that 'I am because you are'. For a journal issue exploring how caregiving shapes identity and belonging, the Isibindi experience offers a clear, grounded illustration: that, for at least some CYCWs, belonging is not a by-product of good practice, but the foundation on which professional identity is built.

AI use statement

Generative AI (Claude, Sonnet 5, Anthropic) was used to assist in drafting this article from the author's doctoral thesis (Thumbadoo, 2020), including structuring the discussion from the thesis under the author's direction, and in formatting the references. The author directed the content, reviewed the full draft against the original thesis, and takes full responsibility for its accuracy.

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About the author

Zeni Thumbadoo holds a PhD in child and youth care practice from the Durban University of Technology, South Africa. Her doctoral research developed the *Inhlanganisela* theoretical framework of child and youth care practice from a grounded theory study of South Africa's Isibindi programme.

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