Ubuntu and COVID-19 in South Africa: Surviving the Pandemic through Community Solidarity

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Abstract

This article investigates the relevance of the African philosophy of *ubuntu* in the South African context during the COVID-19 pandemic. Data is drawn from the available academic literature and analysed using the elements of *ubuntu* as a theoretical lens. A systemic review was adopted as a methodological approach for the selection and review of scholarship that fosters unity and solidarity in times of crisis. The discussion delineates the impact of COVID-19 in South Africa and the significance of *ubuntu* in building community solidarity and resilience. It further demonstrates the universal nature of *ubuntu* with its intention of upholding togetherness and unity in times of crisis and renewal. Community solidarity ensures social protection and belonging, thereby propagating *ubuntu* as a way of navigating the global pandemic. Despite the contestations of the meaning and application of *ubuntu*, the findings of this study postulate that *ubuntu* is essential in times of crisis and renewal.

Keywords: *Ubuntu*; Social Protection; Community Solidarity; COVID-19; South Africa

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Introduction: Understanding *Ubuntu*

The African philosophy of *ubuntu* has attracted increased attention during the COVID-19 pandemic to attest to its significance, which is often evoked in times of crisis. Authors see this as a strengths approach in social work that brings in unity in the community by focussing on strengths and mobilizing, and honouring the resources, wisdom, and knowledge within the community (Pulla, The late South African Anglican Archbishop, Desmond Tutu, who was the winner of the 1984 Nobel Prize for Peace, is often credited for upholding and re-imagining the guiding principles of *ubuntu* in post-1994 South Africa. He is particularly acclaimed for charting a course to align *ubuntu* with reconciliation during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 1994 (Murithi, 2009). Informed by his Christian and cultural values, Tutu (2009) maintains that central to the concept of *ubuntu* is what it means to be human.

The word '*ubuntu*' is a Bantu word which is a combination of two words *ubu*, which means 'being' and *ntu,* which is the materialisation of being (Ramose, 2002). This acknowledges that our actions have an influence and impact on others. As Tutu (2009) puts it, "my humanity is inextricably bound up in yours. We belong in a bundle of life" (p. 34). Seen in this way, *ubuntu* compels us to act in a manner that is considerate of the common good. This is further encapsulated in one of the isiZulu maxims, that is, *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu,* which translates as "I am because we are." This notion suggests that it is through others that one attains personhood. A deeper meaning of this maxim is exemplified in the work of Ramose (2002) who asserts that "to be a human be-ing (sic) is to affirm one's humanity by recognising the humanity of others" (p. 37). If one's personhood centres on recognising the humanity of others, this ostensibly calls for sustained relationships and fellowship in co-existence with others. Using the metaphor of "walking together," Gilbert (1990, p.1) regards social groups as plural subjects with shared joint goals as emphasised in "we" to "create a sense of group membership"

(p. 10). Plural subjects (two or more persons) are bound together to momentarily forego individual wills for the common good.

While *ubuntu* is conceived as a humanistic-existential framework that is likely to contribute to community building and resilience during COVID-19, there is no clear consensus on its meaning. Given that the concept is not easily distilled into a methodological procedure compounds the problem. Rather, *ubuntu* is "a bedrock of a specific lifestyle or culture …that seeks to honour human relationships as primary in any social, communal or corporate activity" (Dandala n.d. cited in Nussbaum, 2003, p. 2). Seen in this way, *ubuntu* is a lived experience as portrayed in everyday practices.

Hence, the existing scholarship on *ubuntu* is highly contested due to different meanings, understandings and applications of the concept. The fact that there is no consensus on the origins of *ubuntu* contributes to this quagmire. While *ubuntu* appears in Western literature as a global phenomenon (see Gade, 2011, 2012; Praeg, 2008; Nussbaum, 2003), some scholars view it as an African practice and philosophy (see the work of Ramose, 1999). Gade (2011) writes about those who mostly interpreted *ubuntu* as a general human quality, while Africans regard it as a way of life, a worldview, and a philosophy. However, some scholars insist that *ubuntu* is neither neutral nor static, rather it is ideological and dynamic. Against this backdrop, van Binsbergen (2001) regards *ubuntu* as a social construct that primarily aims to legitimise the interests of the powerful. As such, the scholar questions the authenticity of *ubuntu* and views it as a "contemporary academic construct, called forth by the same forces of oppression, economic exploitation, and cultural alienation that have shaped Southern African society over the past two centuries" (p. 62). In the same vein, Matolino and Kwindingwi (2013) maintain that *ubuntu* is incompatible with contemporary life as it seeks to 'return' Africans to a hypothetically perfect former way of life, while ignoring glaring structural inequalities. Thus, *ubuntu* is dismissed as a basis for promoting injustices. Similarly,

Marx (2002) critiques *ubuntu* as a phenomenon that enforces conformity in the community as the individual ranks below the community, which places undue pressure on the person. Taken together, these scholars question the authenticity and applicability of *ubuntu* to contemporary society. They argue that *ubuntu* is institutionalised, top-down and exogenous in its approach to development (Marx, 2002; Matolino & Kwindingwi, 2013). In turning the spotlight on the contradictions in the conceptions of *ubuntu,* the scholars caution against the perpetual exploitation of communities. Taking cognisance that ubuntu is not tension-free, this article extrapolates lessons learned from examples of *ubuntu* during COVID-19 in 2020 and 2021. In this sense, communities are examined from the appreciative inquiry as espoused in the philosophy of *ubuntu*. An esteemed South African philosopher and thinker, Professor Ramose, has written extensively on the philosophical tradition of *ubuntu*. His notable work entitled "*African Philosophy through Ubuntu*" (Ramose, 1999) integrates the epistemology of justice, harmony, and ethics to promote humanness. Central to humanness are elements of interdependence, sharing, solidarity, and spirituality. In the work of Ramose, spirituality is a recurring theme that features as pervasive in the life of *ubuntu*.

This article reflects on observations and lessons learned during the pandemic in the South African context. The discussion begins with an outline of COVID-19 and its impact on the country, then presents the interface between *ubuntu* and COVID-19. Thereafter, it explains the methodology that was followed in reviewing the available literature. The findings illustrate the key role of *ubuntu* in building social protection through community solidarity in times of crisis and recovery. The final section navigates the significance of *ubuntu* to build a case for it.

The Impact of COVID-19

At the onset of the novel coronavirus, devastating effects across the globe were revealed. In Africa, the first confirmed case was reported in Egypt. Within a short period, the virus spread throughout the continent, and most African countries began to experience rapid community transmission. Fears of the devastating effects of the virus grew rampant, especially for a continent that was largely characterised as poor and lacking in necessities to combat and control the virus. At the height of COVID-19 in the 2020/2021 period, South Africa was able to implement measures to ensure that the healthcare system could provide safe and quality services (Wilkinson et al., 2020). However, like in many countries across the world, the coronavirus has had a detrimental effect on people's social and economic wellbeing in South Africa. This was more evident during the national shutdown in April 2020. The 'new normal' meant strict measures were adopted, and the closure of public events, schools and churches had a negative impact on people's spiritual and social wellbeing. This was attributed to the fear of contracting the virus, and many homes were closed to visitors and family members. People could no longer socially interact and engage with friends and family through regular visits. Social or physical distancing was proposed as a strategy to mitigate the transmission and spread of the coronavirus by reducing the levels of face-to-face interactions. The potential success of virus containment through physical distancing has now been documented (Ainslie et al., 2020). However, the detrimental effects of COVID-19 restrictions have been identified, including poor mental health due to isolation (Mulaudzi et al., 2022).

The pandemic has also amplified the rate of poverty levels. Primary, secondary and tertiary sectors of the economy have been negatively affected globally through declines in turnover and price decreases (Nicola et al., 2020; Lenzen et al., 2020). The adverse economic effects of COVID-19 are more pronounced in lower-income countries. These countries could not sustain prolonged lockdowns as they compounded the existing high levels of poverty (Alon et al., 2020). Results from a South African survey indicate that COVID-19 restrictions led to increases in the lack of income (up to 15.4%) by the sixth week of the national shutdown due to businesses closing down, and the proliferation

(up by 7%) in levels of hunger (Statistics South Africa, 2020). This survey utilised convenience sampling, prohibiting the generalisation of the entire population. However, the results indicate that the respondents who reported the worst outcomes were the historically disadvantaged African population. Despite the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, human compassion was still evident, as shown in subsequent sections.

The Interface Between *Ubuntu* and COVID-19

Shortly after the first case was reported in South Africa on 5 March 2020, the country went into a total nationwide lockdown for 21 days, effective from midnight 26 March to 16 April 2020. All South Africans had to stay at home to curtail human interaction, except for medical attention, the purchase of food and other supplies, as well as the collection of social grants (Republic of South Africa, 2020). Thereafter, measures to combat the spread of COVID-19 were implemented in varying degrees until 4 April 2022. Social protection became essential in times of disaster and great distress. The government had to shield people from the pandemic through the implementation of social protection measures. In addition to 11.45 million individuals who rely on social grants in South Africa, between 4.4 and 6.1 million benefitted from the special COVID-19 social relief grant of 350ZAR until December 2020 (Republic of South Africa, 2021). The special grant for social relief of distress is intended for South Africans who have no other form of social benefit. This development is applauded for fostering people's economic wellbeing, although the amounts are significantly less than the food poverty line of 624ZAR per person per month (Statistics South Africa, 2021a).

South Africa has been challenged by incidences of xenophobia which have soured relations between South Africans and Africans from other countries. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, *ubuntu* has bridged the divide between the two opposing forces. For instance, a community of Somali refugees has joined hands with South Africans in the fight against COVID-19 (Pond, 2020). The spirit of unity was further observed in

the work of the KwaZulu-Natal Natal Christian Council (KZNCC), a fraternity of church ministers from different denominations in the province of KwaZulu-Natal. It brought together people from diverse racial, ethnic and national backgrounds for the provision of basic necessities including, *inter alia,* food vouchers for refugees, asylum seekers, migrants and homeless people who were not able to access the social relief grant provided by the South African Government (KZNCC, 2020). In Ethiopia, for example, Estifanos et al. (2020) recognise that strategies to combat COVID-19 should be based on togetherness since it is at the core of *ubuntu.* It is further observed that successful measures to combat the pandemic should include social cohesion in resource-constrained settings (Estifanos et al., 2020; Getaneh et al., 2020). There is also evidence of communities in Nigeria coming together to help one another as a result of failed government assistance (Igwe et al., 2020). These studies echo the significant role and place of *ubuntu* during COVID-19.

The behavioural interventions to combat the COVID-19 pandemic are grounded in *ubuntu* in the sense that the health and wellbeing of the wider community are acknowledged and recognised. However, ensuring reduced risks relies on all community members acting in a manner that will protect themselves and others. Thus, solidarity and connectedness are essential components of practising common humanity as a way of navigating through the global pandemic. In the context of *ubuntu,* the term social distancing was a misnomer, due to the human interconnectedness presented by *ubuntu*. Despite the need for physical distancing, *ubuntu* advocated for social solidarity amidst social distancing. Community awareness campaigns were based on the principles of *ubuntu* to promote health and safety precautions (Ngondo & Klyueva, 2022). This is portrayed through the wearing of masks, maintaining physical distancing, handwashing, sanitising, and vaccination. All these strategies call for being considerate of other people's needs in the time of COVID-19. This ensures our wellbeing and those of others while recentring the concept of *ubuntu*. The world-renowned

South African professor and former advisor to the President's Task Team on COVID-19, Salim Abdool Karim, states that *ubuntu* will be the key to South Africa's defeat of COVID-19. He echoes that the key is in the maxim *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu,* thereby implying that the safety of community members safeguards the individual in the context of COVID-19.

Methodology

A systematic qualitative review was conducted using the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) as espoused in Page *et al.* (2020). As a methodological guideline for systematic reviews, PRISMA ensures that the literature search is carried out logically and objectively to synthesise the findings.

Search Strategy

An electronic database search retrieved a total of 240 relevant journal articles from ScienceDirect, Ebscohost, Google Scholar, Scopus, and Sabinet. The keywords and concepts for the search were *ubuntu,* COVID-19, South Africa, community development and COVID-19 in South Africa, community projects during COVID-19 in South Africa, and communities helping one another during COVID-19 in South Africa.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The inclusion criteria are comprised of South African studies. COVID-19 has played itself out in various ways across the world and each country has specific regulations and policies tailor-made for its context. This justifies focusing on the South African case in the application of *ubuntu* during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Out of the 180 articles screened for significance, 160 were excluded as they were theoretical with no empirical evidence of *ubuntu*. Articles published pre-COVID-19 were also excluded.

The selected articles (n=5) met the following inclusion criteria: 1) South African case studies; 2) indexed in peer-reviewed DHET[1]-accredited journals; 3) published in English; 4) published between 2020 and 2022; 5) focused on the application of *ubuntu* during COVID-19, and 6) only qualitative studies. Articles that discussed COVID-19 out of the community context were excluded as they were not consistent with the overarching objective of the study.

A total of 60 articles were removed before the screening. The search excluded letters to the editors, opinion pieces, book reviews, duplicates and newsletters that are not peer-reviewed. Thereafter, the titles and abstracts of 180 articles were screened for relevance. A further one hundred and sixty (160) articles were removed. Only 18 articles were assessed for eligibility. In the final analysis, a sample comprising five articles met the inclusion criteria. Figure 1 summarises the methodology.

The conceptions of *ubuntu* as outlined in the preliminary section are adopted as a theoretical lens to guide the analysis of the systematic review. The elements of *ubuntu* are rooted in values of consensus-building, spirituality, togetherness, harmony, mutual respect, sharing, and giving (Ramose, 1999). Table 1 summarises the five journal articles that were included in the sample.

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[1] Department of Higher Education and Training (South Africa)
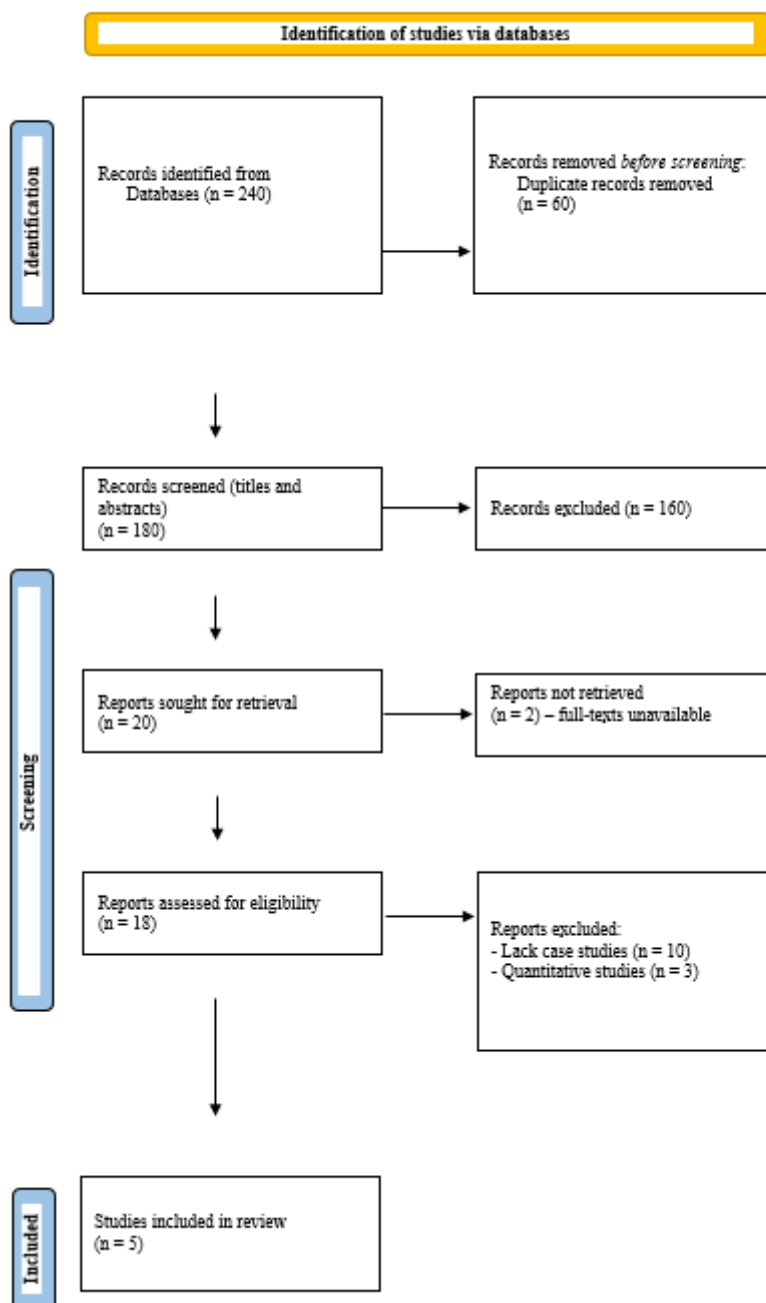
Figure 1: Study Methodology Based on PRISMA
Source: Authors

Table 1: Application of *Ubuntu* during COVID-19 in South Africa				
Author(s) and date	**Aim**	**Relevant case(s)**	**Data source**	**Key Conclusion**
Ngondo & Klyueva (2022)	To understand the interplay between human values and human behavior in the formulation of health problems and development of solutions	The vaccination campaign in Limpopo province	Literature review	It is time for *ubuntu* to play a significant role in health communication approaches and theories. *Ubuntu* emphasises sharing during hard times. In so doing, the suffering is diminished.
Jamieson & van Blerk (2022)	To understand what works in pandemic times by examining the nuanced experiences of young people living in socially and spatially diverse families and locations	The Bulungula Incubator in the Eastern Cape and Community Action Networks in Johannesburg and Cape Town.	Literature review (National Income Dynamics Study: Coronavirus Rapid Mobile Survey)	Immense display of *ubuntu* during COVID-19; where communities across the country have rallied together to protect the most vulnerable. Vital safety nets include, among other things, a culture of *ubuntu* in rural and peri-urban communities.
Mulaudzi, Anokwuru, Du-Plessis & Lebese (2022)	To explore people's perspectives on the effects of the restrictive visitation policy during the first and second waves of the COVID-19 pandemic	Caregivers and patients (area not identified)	Interviews	The restrictive visitation policy compromised the practice of *ubuntu*. *Ubuntu* is integral to the notion of caring because it maintains that a person is a person through others.
Speiser & Speiser (2022).	To investigate how the creative industry is adapting to COVID-19	Lefika La Phodiso Community Art Counseling and Training Institute in Johannesburg	Interviews and observations	*Ubuntu* builds the capacity of artists to tell collective and collaborative stories. This is deemed suitable for social unity and belonging. Artists are learning anew what it means to be human by staying connected to people and places.
Kaya & Chinsamy (2021)	To investigate the role of indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) in combating the pandemic	IKS holders from different parts of the country	A survey and interviews	*Ubuntu* in the time of COVID-19 is regarded as an opportunity for change and comprehensive people-centric healthcare systems that incorporate IKS. It inspires individuals, communities and families to work together.
Source: Authors				

The next section discusses the findings of the study.

Social Protection Through Community Solidarity in COVID-19 Times

As previously mentioned, the South African government implemented several social protection measures in the 2020/2021 period to

protect the citizens against the effects of the pandemic. However, the government, community-based organisations, and churches were not available to communities during the total national shutdown in 2020 due to the fear of contracting the virus and as part of adhering to the physical distancing protocols. Neighbours and friends had to step in to help one another as portrayed in the case of artists who had to support one another during a very difficult time in the creative industry (Speiser & Speiser, 2022). Artists are essentially self-employed and the closure of industries had a negative impact on their businesses. They found themselves compelled to stay connected to one another, thus relying on the existing strengths and resources within the social group (Pulla, 2017). As shown in Speiser and Speiser (2022), the challenges imposed by COVID-19 have improved relationships among artists who have gained new meanings of what it means to be fully human. This suggests that a lot of unlearning in this period is happening, and this challenges core beliefs. Ultimately, COVID-19 demonstrates that communities possess local knowledge and solidarity networks that can either replace or complement government services in times of crisis. The artists had to use their voices and neighbourliness to curb the impact of the pandemic.

This is further illustrated in the work of Jamieson and van Blerk (2022), who write about community support networks consisting of neighbours and faith- and community-based organisations that worked tirelessly to assist families in need. Given that the impact of COVID-19 involved job losses and hunger, the scholars note that no one was allowed to go hungry as this was viewed as anti-social and taboo. Community support networks safeguarded those who lost their incomes by sharing what they had with them. Similarly, in the study conducted by Speiser and Speiser (2022), it was established that, despite economic hardship, individual artists were still concerned about the wellbeing of their peers. Community-based approaches were employed to assist community members who lacked basic needs and social interaction (Jamieson & van Blerk, 2022).

In the case of the Limpopo province, health promotion through the COVID-19 vaccination campaign is a typical example of what happens when development approaches are people-driven and culturally relevant (Ngondo & Klyueva, 2022). Limpopo is characterised by a high incidence of poverty where 11.5% of the households are reported to be living below the poverty line (Statistics South Africa, 2021b). Despite this, Limpopo's vaccination campaign is the most successful in the country. As of June 2021, 66% of its residents over 60 years of age were registered to be vaccinated. In understanding how a low-income community in a rural environment came to lead the vaccination campaign, Daniel (2021) indicates that the health system in Limpopo bypassed the national self-registration plan to devise its strategy. Community members collaborated with the provincial government, thereby working directly with healthcare workers. A total of 9,000 community healthcare workers were trained and equipped with smartphones to register the elderly. Ngondo and Klyueva (2022) maintain that *ubuntu* played a major role in building trust, particularly among those who were hesitant to be vaccinated. Church leaders and traditional leaders were also involved in encouraging people to vaccinate while allaying fears about the pandemic. This exemplifies *ubuntu*'s values of "inclusivity, tolerance, and transparency" (p. 35). In such cases, communities were able to rely on their assets (neighbours, leaders, and skills) to escape adversity in times of crisis. It is reported that this level of interdependence has restored trust and social cohesion in the community while at the same time renewing hope.

Building a Case for *Ubuntu*

Ubuntu values the interconnectedness of life and hence, it provides an essential framework as a way of life in times of crisis and renewal. The concern within the philosophy of *ubuntu* goes beyond the needs of the individual to include caring for others as well. Given that the philosophy and practice of *ubuntu* create an awareness that "I am because we are," emerging data demonstrate that it has gained renewed

interest in the COVID-19 recovery phase. The studies under review indicate that *ubuntu* is what the world needs, and it is not confined to being an African (Ramose, 2002). It is based on being human, transcending any racial or cultural grouping across time and space. *Ubuntu* helps individuals to recognise their humanity in others and, as a result, there would not be a perceived burden in assisting their fellow members.

The emerging insights in this article can be adopted to build a case for *ubuntu* in the time of COVID-19 and beyond. While there have been several critiques of the concept, this article demonstrates that *ubuntu* which is people-centred builds community solidarity and resilience at a time when it is most needed. With no institutional support from faith- and community-based organisations, and the government during the lockdown period, communities strongly relied on their internal resources. Moreover, the closure of public institutions such as schools, hospitals and churches had implications for social cohesion and spirituality, thereby compelling communities to ask new questions concerning what it means to work, study and worship in home spaces. As illustrated in Mulaudzi, Anokwuru, Du-Plessis and Lebese (2022), COVID-19 restrictions that prohibited hospital visits compromised the practice of *ubuntu*. According to the scholars, *ubuntu* implies caring for others. However, healthcare workers, patients and their families were denied this privilege during the lockdown. This led to "moral anguish, mental instability, and erosion of trust between health practitioners, patients and their families" (p. 7). In such contexts, affected families had to find solace in their communities. The power to improve their wellbeing during COVID-19 lies within the community itself through the spirit of *ubuntu*.

All studies under review acknowledge that COVID-19 has changed how we view the world and concede that human relationships should be privileged above all else. COVID-19 has portrayed a sense of urgency for community building and demonstrated what people can achieve when they rally around a common cause. Communities healed holistically by supporting one another. *Ubuntu,* in the context of the pandemic, presents a typical example of endogenous bottom-up community-driven development. The pandemic revealed that the spirit of *ubuntu* is still active and alive in communities that were able to stand in solidarity against the pandemic.

Conclusion

This study is based on a systemic literature review to investigate the application of *ubuntu* during the time of COVID-19 in South Africa. As a theoretical framework, *ubuntu* demonstrates that all human beings are one in suffering and hope. Hence, those who have more are called upon to share if a neighbour is in need so as to encompass the spirit of *ubuntu*. Archbishop Desmond Tutu reiterates the importance of giving and sharing when he states that *ubuntu* speaks of the very essence of being human. This is more evident when people share what they have in times of distress. Through solidarity and connectedness to one another, a person can feel supported and not alone. This enables people to navigate through the pandemic and mitigate its effects. This is exemplified in cases that portray how communities stood in solidarity in the 2020/2021 period. Community support networks have provided swift relief for those in need of food and other related necessities, particularly at the time when the country was in total national lockdown. Overall, the findings reiterate that *ubuntu* is the core of human relationships as it appreciates the interdependence of all humans. Therefore, it can be argued that COVID-19 re-affirmed the significance of *ubuntu* as a fundamental philosophy and practice for building community solidary and resilience in times of crisis.

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Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest to declare.

Author Contribution Statement

Both authors conceptualised the study at the height of COVID-19 in 2020. Learning was ongoing as the pandemic evolved over time in the South African context. The first author drafted the original manuscript and the finalisation and editing of the final version involved both writers. The submitted manuscript was reviewed and approved by both authors.

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