
Democracy & Education

A Call for More Literature and Deeper Data

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Abstract

This review provides a critical appraisal of Kubow and Min's paper. It teases out their conception of *liberalism* and argues that the classical notion of liberalism as a political theory that advocates individual liberty based on assumptions of the unencumbered autonomous individual has lost currency. This is because over the years liberalism has mutated into a multiplicity of new forms, and there is no single view that can be said to define what it means to be a liberal. The paper raises methodological questions with respect to the use of focus group interviews. It implores researchers to first ask themselves whether they can tell what a person *really* believes on the basis of a few questions put to him in an interview.

This article is in response to

Kubow, P. K. & Min, M. (2016). The Cultural Contours of Democracy: Indigenous Epistemologies Informing South African Citizenship. *Democracy and Education*, 24(2), Article 5. Available at: <http://democracyeducationjournal.org/home/vol24/iss2/5>

THIS PAPER SERVES as a review article of Kubow and Min's (2016) paper, "The Cultural Contours of Democracy: Indigenous Epistemologies Informing South African Citizenship." Kubow and Min examined the epistemic orientations toward individual-society relations that inform democratic citizenship and identity in South Africa. They drew on the concept of *Ubuntu* as their main theoretical lens to "examine the ways in which South African schoolteachers in a township outside Cape Town's city center view democracy and the role of formal schools in educating for democracy" (Kubow & Min, 2016, p. 1). Kubow and Min argued that the "public-private epistemological binary stems from a liberal tradition that envisions society as affording individuals opportunities to fulfil their goals through individual freedom, property ownership, and privatization with minimal governmental interference" (Kubow & Min, 2016, p. 2). The link among *Ubuntu*, education, liberalism, democracy, and

citizenship in South Africa cannot be overemphasized (Enslin & Horsthemke, 2004; Nkondo, 2007; Waghid & Davids, 2014; Waghid & Smeyers, 2012). South Africa has only recently just emerged from a sordid history of apartheid, which was marked by an ideology of racial discrimination, segregation, institutionalized privileging of the minority White populations, and institutionalized exclusion

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of the majority African peoples from all forms of opportunity. In 1996 South Africa adopted a constitution that has been hailed worldwide as “a model liberal democratic constitution that has few peers in the world community” (Jordan, 1996) and that bears “the hallmarks of liberal democracy” (Dugard, 1998, p. 23; Enslin & Horsthemke, 2004, p. 552). Moreover, the constitution “is widely hailed as liberal and egalitarian” (Deveaux, 2003, p. 162) because “it values human dignity and frames human rights at its heart” (Robinson, 2012, p. 2).

In this review article, I provide a critical appraisal of Kubow and Min’s (2016) paper. I start with an appraisal of Kubow and Min’s contribution to the debate on *Ubuntu*. But I also highlight absence of the literature that has defined the contours of scholarship in *Ubuntu* and added to our understanding of the concept (Keevy, 2008, 2009a, 2009b; Letseka, 2000; Louw, 2001, 2006; Mokgoro, 1998; Ramose, 1999, 2002a, 2002b; Teffo, 1994; Waghid, 2014a, 2014b; Waghid & Davids, 2014; Waghid & Smeyers, 2012). Second, I tease out Kubow and Min’s conception of *liberalism*, which, I argue, is premised on classical notions of liberalism that view the individual as an unencumbered autonomous self. I shall argue that this view of liberalism has lost currency. Over the years, mainly due to the unintended consequences of colonialism and imperialism, liberalism has mutated into new forms such that there is no single view that can be said to define what it means to be a liberal. Rather, there are “many liberalisms” (Rawls, 1996, p. 223), “a multitude of liberalisms” (McKay, 2000, p. 627), and “a family of liberalisms” (Simhony, 2003, p. 283). Lumumba-Kasongo (2005) argued that liberalism “is not the monopoly of Western society as struggles outside the West have shaped its content and contributed to its redefinition” (p. 7). Third, I touch on Kubow and Min’s research methodology. I shall argue that there is a taken-for-granted assumption that data derived from focus group interviews is valid and/or conclusive and that there is therefore no need for any further methodological justifications. But as Kidd & Parshall (2000) cautioned, “individuals in groups do not speak or answer questions in the same way that they do in other settings” (p. 294). In the same vein, Merton (1987) pointed out that focus-group research gets misused for quick-and-easy claims about the validity of the research while treating plausible interpretations deriving from qualitative group interviews “as though they had been shown to be reliably valid for gauging the distributions of response” (p. 557). In the fourth and final section, I provide concluding remarks.

Appraisal of Kubow and Min’s Paper

In this section I offer a brief appraisal of Kubow and Min’s (2016) paper. I shall highlight areas in their contribution to the debate on *Ubuntu* that I think are commendable. For instance, their acknowledgement of *Ubuntu*’s feature of African communal interdependence, as well as their rich and detailed use of verbatim expressions of their interview respondents. But I shall also show that their paper has serious shortcomings that warrant critical responses. To start with, Kubow and Min’s contribution to the debate on *Ubuntu* in South Africa is timely and welcome. South Africans continue to grapple with the challenges of a new and emergent society that was forged through a tense and protracted process of political

negotiations by diverse parties that were, at the time at war with each other. On the one hand, to the majority of the historically marginalized African peoples, the negotiation process, known at the time as the Convention for a Democratic South Africa (CODESA) held hope for the creation of a new nation that would be marked by non-racism, non-discrimination, and non-sexism. Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu called this new nation the Rainbow Nation. Herman (2011) wrote that the notion of Rainbow Nation envisioned a new nation marked by “peace, harmony and the co-existence of all citizens” (p. 1). On the other hand, to the historically privileged White minority populations, especially the Afrikaners, CODESA symbolized political, cultural, and economic capitulation and doom. The negotiations marked capitulation by the then ruling Afrikaner Nationalist Party to Black radical liberation struggle movements that were feared and perceived as communists and *swart gevaar* (Afrikaans word for “Black danger”). The liberation struggle movements that fought for the eradication of apartheid—the African National Congress (ANC), the Pan African Congress (PAC), the South African Communist Party (SACP), the Azanian People’s Organization (AZAPO), and the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM), to mention a few—were all lumped together by the minority Afrikaners as terrorist and communist organizations. This was not unusual, given that apartheid ideology was anti-Black and anti-communist. Indeed, in 1950 the then apartheid regime passed the Suppression of Communism Act. The act outlawed “the Communist Party and used a very broad definition of communism (any attempt ‘at bringing about political, industrial, social or economic change within the union by promotion of disturbance or disorder’) and to declare other organizations that opposed government policies unlawful” (Durkheim, Mtose, & Brown, 2011, p. 5). Thus, to most Afrikaners, CODESA represented the Afrikaner National Party’s capitulation to terrorist and communist organizations.

Post-apartheid South Africa has been described as a “Two Nations” (Mbeki, 1998). On the one hand is the majority Africans, who are underprivileged and poor and live under conditions of a grossly underdeveloped economy. This section of society hoped that CODESA would give birth to a new and better nation in which peoples’ fundamental human rights and freedoms would be enshrined in a constitution that strives for a non-racist, non-discriminative, and non-sexist society. On the other hand is the minority Whites, who had access to a developed economy and enjoyed relative prosperity. This section of society feared that the country would slide into a bloodbath orchestrated by perceived ruthless terrorists and communists who would only be delighted to erode all forms of White privilege. During the hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu, chairperson of the commission, implored all those who came to testify to embrace the philosophy of *Ubuntu*, which is grounded on forgiveness and respect for human dignity. In his book, *No Future without Forgiveness*, Tutu (1999) wrote:

A person with Ubuntu is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good; for he or she has proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she

belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed, or treated as if they were less than who they are. (p. 35)

This brief exposition is necessary in that it links *Ubuntu* in South Africa with proceedings of the TRC. To their credit, Kubow and Min (2016) acknowledged this in their reference to Bishop Tutu's assertion that "an individual is not simply an independent, solitary entity in the African worldview, but 'human precisely in being enveloped in [the] community of other human beings, in being caught up in the bundle of life'" (p. 2). They wrote that *Ubuntu* signifies a process or state of perpetual becoming, and that it denotes a being that is in a continuous process of becoming. Kubow and Min equated *Ubuntu* with *humanity* or *humanness*, as captured in the Nguni proverb *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*, whose English translation approximates "a person is a person through other persons." Thus, for Kubow and Min, individuals are not created by or from themselves, nor do they exist for their own selves. Rather, men and women come from and exist within a social network—a community. This view confirms a crucial aspect of *Ubuntu*, namely the notion of African communal interdependence. African communal interdependence finds expression in the African conception of the family, as the extended family, and can be found in the writings of several African scholars and philosophers in Southern and Eastern Africa. For instance, Kenyan theologian and philosopher John S. Mbiti, who is regarded by many as one of the pioneers of African philosophy, coined the maxim "I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am." Verhoef and Michel (1997) argued that the "we" of the African ethos "is a shared experience, a body of collective experience, an understanding that one's experiences are never entirely one's own" (p. 396). In his seminal book, *African Religions and Philosophy*, Mbiti (1989) posited that in Africa, "the individual cannot exist alone except corporately. She owes her existence to other people, including those of past generations and her contemporaries" (p. 106). Concomitantly, "whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual" (Mbiti, 1989, p. 106). In the same vein, commenting on the Kikuyu peoples' way of life, former Kenyan President Jomo Kenyatta (1965) wrote that "according to Kikuyu ways of thinking, nobody is an isolated individual. Rather, their uniqueness is a secondary fact about them; first and foremost they are several people's relatives and several people's contemporaries. People are closely interconnected with one another in a lifestyle oriented to the other" (p. 296).

Regarding the family Lauras-Lecoh (1990) contended that "worldwide Africa is seen as one of the sanctuaries of the extended family. It is the continent where the nuclear family, reduced to a couple and their offspring, is still a rarity" (p. 480). For Ayisi (1992, p.16), the extended family forms the *raison d'être* of all social cooperation and responsibility. Mbiti's (1975, p. 176) view is that the extended family is a microcosm of the wider society. It embodies a broad spectrum of personal associations among great-grandparents, grandparents, fathers, mothers, uncles, aunts, children (sisters, brothers, cousins, nephews, and nieces), a host of maternal and paternal relatives, as well as the departed members.

For Gyekye (1997), "one outstanding cultural value of the traditional African society that is a feature of ever-present consciousness of ties of kinship is the emphasis on the importance of the family—the extended family" (pp. 292–293). Thus, in African cultures, the extended family can be regarded as the medium for the concrete and spontaneous expression of communal values such as love, caring, cohesion, solidarity, interdependence, mutual sympathy, responsibility, and helpfulness.

One of the shortcomings of Kubow and Min's (2016) paper is the absence of key role players in the discourse of *Ubuntu*. However hard and repeatedly I read through the paper, I couldn't help noticing that there is no reference to some of the most influential scholars on *Ubuntu* in Southern Africa. These are scholars who have defined the contours of scholarship on *Ubuntu* and contributed to our understanding of debates on the concept (Keevy, 2008, 2009a, 2009b; Louw, 2001, 2006; Mokgoro, 1998; Ramose, 1999, 2002a, 2002b; Teffo, 1994; Waghid, 2014a, 2014b; Waghid & Davids, 2014; Waghid & Smeyers, 2012). If I were to single out a few from the above list, it would no doubt be Ramose's (1999) book *African Philosophy through Ubuntu*, Teffo's (1994) *The Concept of Ubuntu as a Cohesive Moral Value*, and Waghid's (2014) *African Philosophy of Education Reconsidered: On Being Human*. These are some of the landmark works on *Ubuntu* that anyone writing about the concept can ill afford to omit from the literature.

Finally, there is a sense that Kubow and Min's (2016) take on *Ubuntu* might be viewed as reductionist in that it appears to reduce *Ubuntu* to a South African context instead of viewing it as an ancient African worldview. *Ubuntu* has a much wider import to Southern and East Africa than Kubow and Min made it out to look. For instance, among the Bantu language speakers of Southern Africa, from Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, South Africa, Swaziland, to Zambia and Zimbabwe, *Ubuntu* is variously referred. As Tambulasi & Kayuni (2005, p. 148) pointed out, in the Chewa language of Zambia, *Ubuntu* is known as *Umunthu*; among the Yao speakers of Malawi, it is known as *Umundu*; among the Tsonga peoples in South Africa, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, and Swaziland, it is known as *Bunhu*; among the Shona-speaking peoples of Zimbabwe, it is *Unhu*; among the Sotho-speaking peoples of Lesotho, Botswana, and South Africa, *Ubuntu* it is known as *Botho*; and among the Venda speakers of South Africa, it is known as *Vhutu*. Among the Nguni-speaking peoples of South Africa—Xhosas, Zulus, Ndebeles, and Ndwandwes—it is known as *Ubuntu*, while among the Swazis of Swaziland, it is known as *Buntfu*.

Kubow and Min's Views on Liberalism

I should hasten to mention that Kubow and Min (2016) only mentioned the word *liberal* once in their paper. Nonetheless, that single occasion is crucial in that it speaks to perceptions of creation of citizens (Callan, 1997). Kubow and Min drew on Cohen's (1982) book *Four Systems* to argue that

in the West, the concept of citizen is associated with the public realm and the individual with that of the private sphere. This public-private epistemological binary stems from a liberal tradition that envisions

society as affording individuals opportunities to fulfill their goals through individual freedom, property ownership, and privatization with minimal governmental interference. (Kubow & Min, 2016, p. 2)

However, this view of liberalism as purely individualist and unencumbered is outdated in that it ignores the simple fact that due to colonial conquest and the spectra of imperialism the notion of liberalism has mutated and undergone transformation and indigenization. As a result, it is no longer plausible to speak of liberalism as if the concept has been frozen in time and space to retain its classical Western connotations. As Ware (1992) reminded us, “the ‘exporting’ of liberal democracy to ex-colonies or to regimes which were conquered militarily, but which had no previous history of liberal democracy (such as Japan), transforms liberal democracy” (p. 140). It is Ware’s (1992) contention that “there are today quite distinct types of liberal democracy” (p. 137). The literature shows that a country like Japan is a useful example of a non-Western liberal democracy that has successfully imported external Western cultures and indigenized them to suit the needs and aspirations of the Japanese people (Fukuyama, 1992; Huntington, 1993, 1996). Commenting on the specific case of South Africa, Enslin (1999) pointed out that “the new democratic order in South Africa and its education system presuppose some central distinguishing features of liberalism” (p. 175). It is therefore unsurprising that some contemporary liberal theorists now acknowledge that there exists “a family of liberalisms” (Simhony, 2003, p. 283), “a multitude of liberalisms” (McKay, 2000, p. 627), and “many liberalisms” (Rawls, 1996, p. 223).

An *Ubuntu*-oriented view of liberalism would therefore be one that recognizes individual rights, but within the framework and guiding principles of a community. There is tacit knowledge among some liberal theorists that “liberalism is itself a form of community” (Galston, 1991, p. 43), in which members “excel in liberal virtues and as a consequence, flourish in a distinctively liberal way” (Macedo, 1991, p. 278). Other liberal theorists have suggested that “liberalism supplies the best interpretation of a political community” (Dworkin, 1989, p. 480); that “the lives of individual people and that of their community are integrated” (Dworkin, 1989 p. 491); and that “the critical success of any one of their lives is an aspect of, and so is dependent on the goodness of the community as a whole” (Dworkin, 1989 p. 491). Thus, “the inseparability of rights and community is a consistent liberal position” (Simhony, 2003, p. 271). Abbey and Taylor (1996, p. 3) contended that “it is possible for someone to have communitarian or holist ontology and to value liberalism’s individual rights.” In my view, Mulhall (1987) was spot-on in his observation that the liberal “need have no difficulty in accepting the constitutive role of community membership” (p. 275). He argued that “liberals must indeed affirm that the political community’s institutions embody a vision relating to *personhood*, that is, they must affirm that such institutions protect that capacity which makes an individual citizen a human agent and so refer to a capacity which every citizen is supposed to possess if he is to be seen as a person at all” (Mulhall, 1987, p. 275).

Kubow and Min’s Research Methodological Shortcoming

Kubow and Min’s (2016) paper is based on a qualitative study involving focus group interviews of 50 Xhosa teachers at 7 primary and intermediate schools on the outskirts of Cape Town in the Western Cape Province, South Africa. In total, their sample comprised 34 females and 16 males. Kubow and Min told us:

The lead author conducted focus group interviews at the schools, which ranged in length from 45 to 75 minutes. The interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed verbatim. The resultant empirical data, combined with a review of scholarship regarding ubuntu and democracy, constitute the main sources of evidence for this case study. (2016, p. 5)

Kubow and Min explained that the participants comprised a mixed bag of relatively inexperienced (two months) teachers to highly seasoned teachers with 30 years of teaching experience. When Kubow and Min’s sample is disaggregated by age, the participants’ ages ranged between 20 and 69 years. There seems to be an implicit presumption in Kubow and Min’s paper that merely stating that “focus group interviews with 50 Xhosa teachers from all seven primary and intermediate schools” (Kubow and Min, 2014, p. 3) were conducted is sufficient justification of the reliability of the data obtained, and by extension sufficient justification for the inferences thereof which the authors made. Hammersley (2003) called this “the ‘romantic impulse’ which treats open-ended interviews as capturing the ‘genuine voices’ of interviewees” (p. 119). In the 1950s, Dean and Whyte (1958) asked a simple question: “How do you know if the informant is telling the truth?” They noted that “those who ask the question seem bothered by the insight that people sometimes say things for public consumption that they would not say in private. And sometimes they behave in ways that seem to contradict or cast serious doubt on what they profess in open conversation. So the problem arises: Can you tell what a person *really* believes on the basis of a few questions put to him in an interview” (p. 34)? Crucially, Dean & Whyte cautioned that “the informant’s statement represents merely the perception of the informant, filtered and modified by his cognitive and emotional reactions and reported through his personal verbal usages” (Dean & Whyte, 1958, p. 34). From this analysis, they argued that the interview merely yields “the informant’s picture of the world as he sees it. And we are getting it only as he is willing to pass it on to us in this particular interview situation” (Dean & Whyte, 1958, p. 34).

Lunt (1996) warned that the decisions and rationale behind the use of interviews “often remain implicit with the research presenting the findings as if no choices had been made beyond that of using focus groups in the first place” (p. 80). In the case of Kubow and Min’s paper, their data is further complicated by the seeming imbalance between female and male respondents. For instance, the fact that female respondents (34) are more than double the number of male respondents (16) is neither problematized nor unpacked further. Instead, it is taken as a given or a self-explanatory research methodological phenomenon. It is a

serious methodological flaw on Kubow and Min's part that the potential for their data to statistically privilege female voices over male voices in the articulation of the cultural contours of democracy is neither unpacked nor probed. Finally, the question whether interviewing 50 teachers in a township with a population of 50,000 is representative justification of "the cultural contours of democracy" in that township is left to the reader's imagination. In cases like these, a footnote declaring that the findings of the study should not be regarded as sufficient to generalize on the nexus between *Ubuntu* and democratic citizenship in Cape Town in particular, and in South Africa in general, would have sufficed.

Conclusion

What I have attempted to in this review article is to provide a critical appraisal of Kubow and Min's (2016) paper "The Cultural Contours of Democracy: Indigenous Epistemologies Informing South African Citizenship." I acknowledged the value-added contribution of Kubow and Min's paper to the debate on *Ubuntu* and education for democratic citizenship in South Africa. I showed that South Africa has only just emerged from a sordid history of racial discrimination, segregation, institutionalized privileging of the minority White populations, and systematic exclusion of the majority of the African peoples from all forms of opportunity. Post-apartheid South Africa is still grappling with the challenges of managing the gains of the 1994 democratic processes that were forged through political negotiations between opposition parties that were at war with each other. Attaining democratic citizenship in this fragile sociopolitical and cultural environment requires a new mindset that is imbued with *Ubuntu* moral values and principles. I commended Kubow and Min's paper as a timely and welcome contribution to the debate on *Ubuntu*. But I also demarcated the paper's weaknesses, which I argued call for critical responses. For instance, I showed that the paper is thin on the important literature that defined the contours of scholarship on *Ubuntu* and contributed to our understanding of the concept. Methodologically, I highlighted Kubow and Min's uncritical dependence on focus group interviews. I pointed out that during interviews, informants' statements merely represent their perceptions, which are filtered and modified by the informants' cognitive and emotional reactions and reported through their personal verbal usages. I raised questions of validity in terms of whether statements made by 50 teachers during focus group interviews can be regarded as representative of views of 50,000 residents of the township in which the study was conducted. I suggested this could have simply been remedied by a footnote declaring that the findings of the study should not be regarded as generalizable.

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