Human relationships revisited in the wake of COVID-19: Reflections of a Nigerian social worker

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Abstract
COVID-19 is arguably the biggest global event and challenge of the twenty-first century. As such, it is changing human attitudes and behaviours thereby challenging the age-long social work profession's value premise of the importance of human relationships. Human relationships through the use of informal helping networks have been a very important resource in social work practice. The measures of self-isolation/quarantine and social/physical distancing being adopted to contain the spread of COVID-19 have led to changes in human relationships and modes of interaction. One wonders what life and the 'new normal' will look like, post-COVID-19. Using the reflective method, this paper looked at my lived experiences at the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria as lessons for critical reflection for future social work practice. The paper concluded that the pandemic will forever change the patterns of human interactions. Lessons learnt as social work practitioners will aid the development of new ways for clients (individuals, families, and social groups) to live and interact with each other post-COVID-19. Inclusion of lasting emotional toll of isolation, unresolved grief, and guilt of not saying goodbye on clients was recommended as part of assessment during social work intervention post-COVID-19.

Keywords: COVID-19, human relationships, reflection, social work

Introduction
The novel coronavirus disease, first called "Severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2" (SARS-CoV-2), due to its genetic similarity to SARS was first reported in December 2019 in Wuhan China as a pneumonia-like disease with an unknown cause. On January 30, 2020, it was declared a Public Health Emergency of International Concern [PHEIC] (World Health Organization [WHO], 2020a; Zhu et al, 2020). On February 11, 2020, the WHO named it "COVID -19" and declared it a pandemic on March 11, 2020 (WHO, 2020b). It is currently a highly contagious disease plaguing and threatening human existence and livelihood globally. Specifically, the European Centre for Diseases Prevention and Control [ECDC] (2020) statistics on COVID-19 reported that from December 31 to 28 August 2020, a total of 24,473,843 confirmed cases of COVID-19 have been reported worldwide including 832, 002 deaths. Out of this, the African continent had 1,221, 212 confirmed cases and 28, 862 deaths while Nigeria has recorded 53,317 confirmed cases and 1,011 deaths.

The COVID-19 pandemic has upended the world order as we used to know it. Globally, there are changes in human behavior as well as social interaction. As effective

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measures to overcome its spread, self-isolation/quarantine and social/physical distancing were advocated in a bid to "flatten the curve" of the contagion. Self-isolation/quarantine entails staying home and self-isolating even with minor symptoms until you recover (WHO, 2019). Social and physical distancing is deliberately increasing the physical space between people to avoid spreading illness. Staying at least six feet away from other people lessens your chances of catching COVID-19. Other examples of social and physical distancing that allow you to avoid larger crowds or crowded spaces are:

- Working from home instead of at the office
- Closing schools or switching to online classes
- Visiting loved ones by electronic devices instead of in-person
- Cancelling or postponing conferences and large meetings (Maragakis, 2020).

These measures, no doubt have undesirable effects on human relationships. The importance of human relationships is one of the six core value premises of the National Association of Social Work [NASW, 2017] *Code of Ethics* and a strong resource in problem-solving. To stress the importance of human relationships to the profession, the International Federation of Social Work [IFSW, 2020] chose "Promoting the Importance of Human Relationships" as the theme for the 2020 World Social Work Day [WSWD]. It is also the fourth and final theme of the 2010-2020 Global Agenda for social work and social development (The Agenda, IFSW, 2012). This was designed by the IFSW, International Association of Schools of Social Work [IASSW], and the International Council on Social welfare [ICSW] to strengthen the profile of social work and to enable social workers to make a stronger contribution to policy development.

According to Jones and Truell (2012), promoting wellbeing through sustainable human relationships implies that people live in communities and thrive in the context of supportive relationships that are being eroded by dominant economic, political, and social forces [especially COVID-19 pandemic]. Amadasun (2020) avers that the pandemic has undermined and in some instances overturned the professional values of social work (service, human rights, and social justice, dignity and worth of the human person, privacy, and confidentiality and [especially] the importance of human relationships).

COVID-19 has no doubt undesirable effects on human relationships (Lawal, 2020). It is a forced betrayal because when people needed their loved ones most, they were left on their own. The fact that anyone who contracts the virus is isolated, suffers alone and if dead, the family cannot take the body for burial is overwhelming. All our age-long social norms and informal helping mechanism which have been forms of emotional support have been windswept. The most depressing experience of COVID-19 in Northern Italy at the height of the scourge was captured by Aaron Ramsey in a *Sky News* documentary of March 20, 2020, when he said, "the helplessness of being unable to be with loved ones in the last moment, and the permanent guilty sense that they had been left alone by the family to die. Even after death, most relatives would not be able to attend the funeral. The emotional scars of such experiences would live with those people all the days of their lives".

Against this background, this paper explored the importance of human relationships through the influences of the special circumstances of COVID-19 using lived experiences with a view of gaining an in-depth meaning for future social work intervention.

Method

The paper adopted the reflective method which utilizes the potentials of the phenomenological thought to construct the meaning of the author's lived experiences of COVID-19 vis-à-vis its impact on the importance of human relationships as a social work value premise. Reflexivity entails "using a critical incident as a basis for knowledge generation… and is presented as a learning opportunity for the future from this selected incident" (D'Cruz, Gillingham and Melendez, 2007). The rationale behind this method is that reflection allows one to engage in a thoughtful relationship with the world-life and thus gain an awake stance about one's lived experiences (Mortari, 2015). In the application of phenomenology, the reflection will be "the practice of a rigorous self-examination, through which to investigate the processes of meaning origination" (Moran, 2000:61). Thus, attention is paid to generate an in-depth meaning from these lived experiences as they relate to social work which is a relationship-based profession.

Lived experiences

1st Scenario

> My daughter got engaged recently and her parents-in-law came to visit my family. In my culture, to show that the guests are welcome to your home, handshaking, hugging, and embracing are a must. However, this was not the case, as we were practicing social distancing. Both families understood the "new normal" that human relationships have taken. This was not easy at all especially given that we are soon to be in-laws

These are inevitably stressful, jarring, disorienting, and isolating to many people. Some of the consequences of these quarantine measures include sudden changes in familiar routines, spending little or too much time with family, friends, and loved ones, among others. Furthermore, the government imposed some restrictions on mass gatherings like burials, weddings, and naming ceremonies with the caveat that if any of these events must hold, only family members may be in attendance. For many Nigerians, these events offer great opportunities to socialize, meet friends, relatives, and acquaintances whom they have not seen in a long while, thereby strengthening human relationships. Similarly, there were total lockdowns in some cities and the prohibition of interstate travels by the government.

2nd Scenario

> This lockdown happened a few weeks before the Easter celebration. I, like other persons, have made plans on how to spend the Easter break visiting my elderly parents, who live in another state different from where I live, and spend time with them, as well as my other relatives. I could not travel because of the lockdown. For elderly persons like my parents, this event has led to extended physical and social isolation from us, their children.

A lot of people rely on informal helping resources which they can access in the form of visits to friends and relatives to collect food stuff and other means of daily sustenance. Over the years, familial relationships have been strong resources in problem-solving in Nigeria. Many older adults rely on their children for social support and formal support is virtually non-existent. The COVID-19 lockdown brought to the fore the need for a sustainable formal source of support for older adults in Nigeria.

3rd Scenario

> A relative called on the phone to inform us that he wants to visit. I had to explain that he cannot visit because of the COVID-19 pandemic. He was shocked and expressed it. He wondered if he was now equated with "Chinese" people who he learnt are the ones spreading the virus. He argued that he had no cough or any form of sickness and so he sees no reason I should not allow him into my home. I felt particularly sad when I had to turn down the request because it is alien to us as a cultural group but ensuring I take care of his safety as well as mine and my family's made me turn down his request.

All these three scenarios got me reflecting:
1. Is the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic going to define the nature of relationships in the future in Nigeria and globally?
2. Will life return to "normal" again and how soon?
3. How will these learnt impersonal modes of interaction be unlearnt?

I wonder if this pandemic will define the nature of relationships in the future and if life will return to normal again and how soon? I know these questions can only be addressed when the COVID-19 pandemic is finally contained, and social work researchers engage in qualitative studies to capture the narratives of people who lived through these harrowing experiences.

Discussion

Notwithstanding the many deprivations as a result of COVID-19 restrictions on peoples' freedom, there have been many positive innovations that have helped people to adapt. One such adaptation was the Zoom family meetings. I had the first experience of attending a Zoom meeting. This was at the invite of my elder brother with all my siblings, their spouses, and children living in the United Kingdom, United States of America, Austria, and Nigeria (Abuja, Lagos, and Enugu) and our parents. It was a very refreshing and bonding experience seeing everyone with their spouses and children. We equally had good discussions with our parents and they confessed that they enjoyed it and wished we could do this more often. These Zoom family meetings have helped me maintain physical/social solidarity and contact with my parents, siblings, and friends.

Apart from family bonding through Zoom, our work was also done through the same means. My husband and I were working from home and were still able to hold meetings and interact with colleagues. In addition, our religious lives were taken care of by watching and listening to the Masses on television. The homilies of the clergy were been rewarding spiritually. Finally, it was a once in a lifetime opportunity for my

husband and me together with our children to have quality family time that we had missed.

One cannot only stress the positive aspects of the times without looking at the negative fallouts. I recognize the fact that all these are uncertain times and not everyone could psychologically deal with these unplanned periods positively. I have experienced some moments of emotional distress during these times. There were times when fear of contracting the virus was overwhelming. This was worsened by the fact that every day seemed the same with monotonous routines, no visit to or from friends, and life, in a nutshell, became very boring. My lived experiences these times, have led me to understand that man is essentially a social being. It is therefore extremely important to foster human relationships by maintaining *social solidarity* while maintaining *physical distance* and not "social distance", as many social scholars posit. Put succinctly by Grobman (2020), "I have adopted the term physical distancing, which I believe is more accurate and reflects the practice of maintaining human relationships while staying at a safe distance physically".

Conclusion

COVID-19 could permanently change the experience of being human. Lessons learnt from these experiences will determine the way people react and how individuals, families, and social groups hack new ways of social interaction to ensure that human relationships are fostered and maintained. For social workers, this will certainly be challenging and calls for creativity and innovation. There is a need for social workers to use the lessons learned from the pandemic to rethink social work practice in the future. We should encourage our clients to find new ways of staying connected with their loved ones as traditional methods of human interaction are being threatened by this pandemic. Finally, social workers should include looking into the lasting emotional toll of isolation, unresolved grief, and guilt of not saying goodbye to our clients as part of assessment during social work intervention post-COVID-19.

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